

The BRASS / El Pilar Program

The BRASS/El Pilar 1994 Field Season: A Collaborative Experiment

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Introduction

The Belize River Archaeological Settlement Survey (BRASS) has been operating, under the direction of Dr. Anabel Ford of the University of California - Santa Barbara, in the upper Belize River area since 1983. Earlier phases of the project involved investigating relationships between sites and the natural environment as well as spatial patterning among sites in the Belize River valley area. In 1993 the BRASS project undertook the investigation of an ancient Maya center, El Pilar, located on the escarpment just to the north of San Ignacio, Belize.

El Pilar has proven to have a very large site core - more than 100 acres - with a range of monumental architecture and preliminary indications of a long occupation history. It is divided into two major sections, the eastern section in Belize and the western section, Pilar Poniente, situated in the Republic of Guatemala. The BRASS/El Pilar project, under the field direction of D. Clark Wernecke, began a two year site core mapping program in 1993. The 1994 season has seen the completion of the master map which will enable the project to more accurately plan future excavations and park reserve development projects. The long-term goal of the BRASS/El Pilar project is the institution of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve, a park that encompasses in its natural setting more than just consolidated archaeological monuments but also environmental trails and historical educational facilities.

Goals

The 1994 season of the BRASS/El Pilar project was guided by five major goals. These were:

1. The completion of the site core mapping project
2. Continued limited excavation examining structure placement, preservation and lines of communication between plazas
3. Assisting in the development, with the Government of Belize (GOB), of site core of El Pilar
4. Assisting the local community based organization, Amigos de El Pilar, in a program of archaeological/environmental education and the development of local ecotourist infrastructure
5. Continued development of a long-term environmental plan for the El Pilar Reserve.

In pursuing these goals BRASS/El Pilar would like to act as a model for interdisciplinary research projects encompassing a broad spectrum of support, both local and international.

Strategy and Results

Mapping

Site core mapping, directed by Robin Taylor, was primarily aimed at filling in perceived gaps in the substantial mapping data from the 1993 season as well as to map in new structures and plazas revealed in 1994. In the process of mapping this year 15 more structures, two additional causeways and six plazas were added to the core map. The GPS was used at key points in the site center as well as along the proposed boundaries of the reserve, over a 9 sq. km area. In addition, the acquisition of appropriate permits from the Instituto de Anthropologia e Historia of the Republic of Guatemala made it possible to begin mapping the substantial segment of the center which lies across the border. The mapping of this section, Pilar Poniente, was ably taken up by Lic. Miguel Orrego Corzo of the Instituto de Anthropologia e Historia de Guatemala and Lic. Jose Sanchez, Assessor de Patrimonio Cultural for Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidos (CONAP). A map was created in less than two weeks and a proposal for an archaeological reserve was forwarded to the appropriate authorities in Guatemala.

The mapping crews laid out 5 traverses tied to the end benchmark of the ten kilometer BRASS survey transect (BM/BL) as well as a government Interamerican Geodetic Survey benchmark, E10, located in nearby Pilar camp. Elevations and locations were shot on the summits and bases of all structures and at all evident architectural details exposed in collapse removal examinations (corners, rooms, jambs, steps etc.). In addition, points were shot all along defined plaza edges. This detailed surveying, involving more than 300 transit shots this year, has enabled us to fill in previous data gaps and produce a more complete map of the site core.

The addition in 1994 of two Magellan Nav 5000 Pro GPS units enabled the survey team to gather detailed information about important benchmarks, reach inaccessible areas and begin to survey the 9 kilometer reserve boundary through dense secondary growth. GPS points were taken using field averaged positions of up to 500 fixes in 3D mode (using 4 satellites).

Excavation

The 1994 season concentrated on finishing the work begun in 1993 and in excavating units that would aid in understanding the lines of communication between the closely spaced plazas in the northern half of the site. Sixteen excavation units were completed in the 1994 season which, added to the 23 completed during the 1993 season, provides us a good idea of the types and preservation of structures at El Pilar. The attempt was made, not always successfully, to excavate at least two corners of each major structure and, if possible, part of the stairway to assess the structures axis and condition. This technique allowed us to closely examine 14 major structures. With the completion of this program our project architect, John Yust, was able to make preliminary architectural drawings of the eastern half of El Pilar.

Three units probed the suspected aguada area to the east and the large aguada to the west of the site in order to evaluate the feasibility of rehabilitating one or more of them to provide water for future project seasons. The two units to the east established that the area was a bajo and confirmed a suspicion that the area seasonally inundated was smaller than previously assumed. The western aguada unit reached the bottom of the aguada and found it to be a solid lime cement that is probably suitable for rehabilitation. This proposal will be further explored in conjunction with the Hydrology Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Expanding our knowledge of communications, an excavation was placed across the northern balustrade of the western Bryan & Murphy causeway. The balustrade was found to be two meters wide and roughly made. It has been suggested that balustrades, such as these, were quickly built and heavily

plastered. The causeway itself was not definitively probed but has at least two plaster surfaces.

Three discretionary units in problematic structural components were also opened during the 1994 season. One unit explored the structure EP31 which proved not to be a structure at all but a pile of construction stone and debris resting on the unbroken Plaza Copal floor. Another unit was opened where the broken remains of an apparent stela were found in front of the stairway of EP7. It was hoped that a socket would be found in the plaza floor but, despite a 2 X 4 meter unit encompassing the area around the fragments, none was found. The stela was fragmentary and may have fallen from a location on the structure EP7. This unit did produce, however, intriguing low foundation walls where none were expected that will be explored in future seasons. The last discretionary unit was situated on the edge of the site acropolis, the H'menNa. The top of a corbeled arch doorway had been uncovered by looters and a salvage operation was undertaken. The arch proved to be the entrance to a long underground corridor apparently connected the Plaza Imix stairs to Plaza S and used, as one wall, a lower battered platform wall of structure EP19. This unit proved to be filled with fragments of obsidian, ceramics, and lithics - most dating to the Late and Terminal Classic periods.

Falling under the aegis of excavation was the examination and backfilling of looters trenches on site. This program involved the mapping and profiling of 14 looters trenches that threatened the stability of structures and their backfilling. Although the presence of a site guardian, Teo Williams, has reduced the current threat posed by looters, the project is still dealing with the remains of more than 50 minor looters trenches in the eastern half of the site core alone. Only a few structures, particularly EP8 and PP1, have been damaged beyond salvage.

Development of the Reserve

The foundation of the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve has been undertaken with the cooperation of many collaborators; particularly the Government of Belize Departments of Archaeology, Ministry of Tourism and Environment, Forestry, and Lands, Ministry of Natural Resources, the Belize Tourist Industry Association and the Amigos de El Pilar. The boundaries of the Reserve, a 9 sq. km area, have been delineated utilizing the Magellan GPS units and, as the western boundary, the international border. A legal description of the land was drawn up and, along with a map of the Reserve, filed with the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Department of Archaeology. In cooperation with the Lands and Survey Department, official GOB survey markers were placed along the boundaries.

The Reserve rules and a long-term management plan are currently being developed. Of particular interest are the presence of a number of legal

leaseholders within the boundaries as well as several long-standing usufruct agriculturalists. The BRASS/EI Pilar project is continuing to work with these neighbors to improve communications vis-a-vis the development of the park reserve and to find alternative income sources and/or alternative lands for the usufruct milperos. Overall these efforts have met with halting success.

The site caretaker, Teo Williams, has been a direct employee of the BRASS project since 1983. In 1994 he became the official EI Pilar guardian under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment. A second caretaker will also be added to enable them to alternate shifts at EI Pilar.

Architectural plans have been drawn up and the preliminary survey work accomplished for the construction of park reserve support facilities in 1995. Funds permitting, the first structures to be built at the park entrance will be a house for the caretaker, a storage facility, and public restrooms. A solar power and water system have been purchased by the BRASS/EI Pilar project and will be installed along with these first structures.

Community Development

During the 1993 season, BRASS assisted in the formation of a community development organization, Amigos de EI Pilar, in the local village of Bullet Tree Falls. Amigos de EI Pilar is a broad-based community organization made up of men and women (including students) formed around the issues of alternative income-generation and community development. Their wish is to actively participate in the formation of the EI Pilar Reserve to capitalize on the opportunities that the management of the Reserve and the subsequent increase in ecotourism will engender.

This field season, with the assistance of project environmental law consultant David Brennan Esq., the Amigos de EI Pilar moved forward to become an officially registered NGO, a set of bylaws was drafted and the financial and secretarial record keeping was regularized. The organization has applied for several grants that will enable it to continue the process of community education and infrastructure development they have initiated. Amigos de EI Pilar also wholeheartedly participated in the official EI Pilar opening festivities held on May 14th. They provided historical background for the area as well as their village's justly famous folk dancing group.

A cooperative effort between the Amigos de EI Pilar and the Belize Tourist Industry Association (BTIA) was also initiated. The BTIA and BRASS/EI Pilar project staff have undertaken to begin the process of training professional tour guides from Bullet Tree Falls with the goal being the official government registration of the graduates.

A plan was also developed for a vocational training program offered by Amigos de El Pilar and BRASS/El Pilar involving modular concrete housing construction, with the final training to be done on the construction of the park reserve support facilities. A training program in archaeological consolidation is another option. The latter, in particular, is a skill that will be in increasing demand in Belize in the future as the Department of Archaeology grows.

Environmental Planning

It is the hope of the BRASS/El Pilar project that the El Pilar Archaeological Reserve will be more than just an archaeological destination. Its situation on the high escarpment, in a deciduous rainforest and a still-fairly uninhabited area make it an ideal location for an environmental reserve incorporating the protection of and education about the diverse flora and fauna of Belize. To this end the project has gone to great lengths to minimize impacts and included environmental planning into the research design at this early date.

The vegetation at the site is fascinating - an interesting mix of secondary growth, large cohune forests and high jungle vegetation. The '94 field season saw the continuation of a project by Dr. Michael Balick of the New York Botanical Gardens, started at the close of the '93 season. Dr. Balick has cordoned off an area in the north part of the site and is collecting detailed information on the growth and species in the test area. Plans were drawn up this year for another project, to begin in 1996, for a more comprehensive project cataloging species in the Reserve.

With the assistance of the Ix Chel Botanical Research Centre, BRASS project staff members have been identifying and labeling medicinal and economically important species in the site core. The process of identification and detailed information regarding each plant has been extensively videoed for use in further environmental education. Several Belizean and U.S. field staff have been trained in this identification process.

A network of trails incorporating the site core ruins, a selection of smaller outlying ruins, and a range of environmental zones was built. With the help of an Amigos de El Pilar member, Fred Prost of the resort Parrots Nest, these trails now boast beautifully executed signs. In the process of creating these trails many project members were trained in a very selective method of clearing - leaving the important species while only removing common secondary growth.

The project also hosted site visits and discussed schedules for future work by a number of wildlife researchers. Specialists in birds, primates, land mammals, bats, and insects are all interested in research within the Reserve. The BRASS project design calls for a comprehensive survey of faunal life similar to those

underway on flora and it is hoped that several of these projects will begin in 1995.

Conclusion

The 1994 BRASS/El Pilar field season was successful beyond hopes and expectations. The site core mapping and preliminary excavations were completed and a great deal of site core maintenance was accomplished. The El Pilar Archaeological Reserve is a reality and awaits only the final legal paperwork. In addition the community development projects initiated by BRASS in Bullet Tree Falls are beginning to take on a life of their own. The successful integration of many disciplines and project facets has not been without its ups and downs but we believe the final product to be well worth the effort. Future interdisciplinary efforts will continue to focus on the environment of the Reserve as well as efforts regarding the consolidation of site structures. Through careful recording (video as well as written) of the mistakes and triumphs of the project, a future monograph will spell out in detail a new interdisciplinary model for this type of research.

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