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# Lost and Found: (Re)-Placing Say Ka in the La Milpa Suburban Settlement Pattern

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# Contents

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<b><i>Editorial</i></b>	137–138
<b><i>Perspectives on Mesoamerica</i></b>	
Victoria R. Bricker	
A Quarter-Century Of Mayan Linguistics	138–147
<b><i>News and Notes</i></b>	147–152
<b><i>Events &amp; Meetings</i></b>	152
<b><i>Contributions</i></b>	
Brett A. Houk and Jon B. Hageman	
Lost and Found: (Re)-Placing Say Ka in the La Milpa Suburban Settlement Pattern	152–156
<b><i>Recent Publications</i></b>	157–160
<b><i>Impressum</i></b>	160

## Lost and Found: (Re)-Placing Say Ka in the La Milpa Suburban Settlement Pattern

Brett A. Houk and Jon B. Hageman

The site of Say Ka, less than 4 km from the major center of La Milpa, has generated a large degree of interest among researchers in northwestern Belize in part because of its elusiveness. After being recorded by archaeologists in 1990, Say Ka was “lost”; attempts to relocate it failed for nearly a decade (Figure 1). It was fortuitously rediscovered in 1999, and three seasons of excavation began in 2004. This paper considers the history of Say Ka, its rediscovery, the results of initial excavations, and the possible implications of this minor center for studying the La Milpa suburban zone.

### Discovery

In 1988, the creation of the Programme for Belize Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, which encompassed over 200,000 acres of forested land, resulted in renewed interest in the archaeology of northwestern Belize (Ford and Fedick 1988; Guderjan et al. 1991). Thomas Guderjan led surveys in the area in 1988 and 1990 that recorded dozens of sites, including Say Ka (Guderjan et al. 1991). Survey teams reached Say Ka in 1990, describing its location as “4 km west of...the Gallon Jug-Blue Creek road, “approximately 4 km southwest of La Milpa” on a U-shaped ridge (Guderjan et al. 1991: 73). A second courtyard was located some 400 m to the east (“Group B”). Say Ka had been looted prior to its recording, and Guderjan’s teams recovered Tzakol 3 and

Tepou pottery from a structure on the western side of the main plaza (Guderjan et al. 1991: 73).

### “The Lost Site”

In 1992, members of Boston University’s La Milpa Archaeological Project (LaMAP) attempted to visit Say Ka using the site’s reported UTM coordinates and “found nothing notable” (Tourtellot, Everson, and Hammond 2003: 98). LaMAP teams visited virtually every hilltop between 3 and 5 km southwest of La Milpa through 2002 to no avail (Gair Tourtellot, personal communication 2002). Independently, the Programme for Belize Archaeological Project attempted to re-locate Say Ka in 1992 and 1993 by retracing the logging road used by Guderjan’s teams. These attempts also failed, because logging roads open just 2–3 years earlier were obscured by secondary growth. The site remained lost for nearly a decade.

### Rediscovery and Initial Excavations

In 1999, while mapping a 400-meter-wide survey transect from Dos Hombres to La Milpa, Jon Hageman discovered a relatively large courtyard group just off the western edge of the transect, 3.7 km southeast of La Milpa. Hageman’s crews mapped the courtyard and three outlying structures in 2000 and noted extensive looting. Because the group was southeast of La Milpa, rather than southwest, Hageman did not

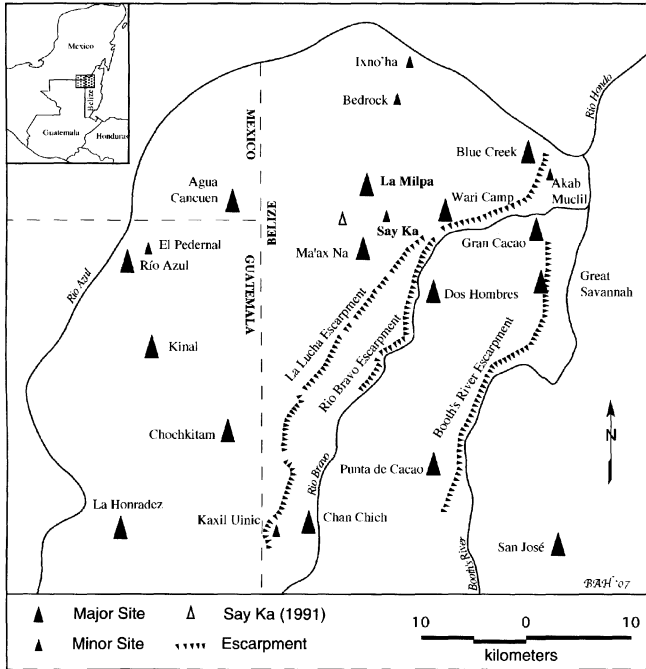


Fig. 1. Map of Three Rivers Region showing the 1991 reported location of Say Ka and its real location.

consider it might be Say Ka. In 2002 he sent a copy of this map to Gair Tourtellot, who made a field visit and confirmed the ruins to be Say Ka.

Houk launched the Say Ka Archaeological Project (SKAP) in 2004 and led two short field seasons to explore and document looters' trenches in structures in the Main Plaza of Group A (Hageman et al. 2006). A third season in 2006 focused on test pitting, continued exploration of structures on the western side of the Main Plaza; and continued mapping of the structures to the south (Aylesworth et al. 2007).

Group A sits on the northern end of a ridge surrounded by *bajos*, or generally level seasonal swamps, to the north, east, and southeast. The ridge gradually diminishes in elevation south of the mapped structures. Guderjan's Group B, about 350 meters southeast of Group A, is on the Dos Hombres-La Milpa intersite transect and was recorded by Hageman in 1999.

Group A (Figure 2) includes 15 structures. The Maya modified the ridge margins and surface by adding boulder- to cobble-sized fill to create a partially artificial platform. Nine buildings tightly enclose the Main Plaza. Other structures include a long and low range building on the eastern edge of the ridge 17 m south of the Main Plaza, a low platform supporting an L-shaped structure some 90 m south of the Main Plaza, and a group of three structures about 150 m south of the Main Plaza. The southern group includes the largest mound at the site, Structure 12, a west-facing range structure of unknown age and function. Structure 12 is approximately 8.1 m high and faces an informal courtyard bordered by two 2-m high mounds on the south. Additional small courtyards were recorded by LaMAP in 2002 south of the area mapped by SKAP (Gair Tourtellot, personal communication 2007).

The Main Plaza covers 1,300 m<sup>2</sup>. Structure 2 forms the southern edge of the plaza and is 7 m high. Structure 4 is 6 m high, and Structure 1 is 5.5 m tall. The remaining mounds around the plaza range in height from 2.25 m to 4.25 m. Most of the buildings in the Main Plaza have been looted (Figure 3).

Many looters' tunnels have collapsed, resulting in further destruction to the buildings. The most severely looted structures are Structure 1, which has been nearly completely destroyed, and Structure 2. Much of the plaza floor is obscured by irregular piles of looters' backdirt. No monuments are known, but it is possible one or more may lie beneath the spoil piles.

### Early Classic Architecture

Data from Structures 3 and 4 indicate initial construction of the Main Plaza in the Early Classic (AD 250–600), though the plaza extended no farther north than Structure 4 (see Figure 3). This suggests that only Structures 1–4 flanked the plaza at this time.

Elements of the Early Classic phases of Structure 4 are visible in two looters' trenches (Figure 4). The earliest documented phase is Structure 4 Sub 2, which is almost entirely covered by Structure 4 Sub 1. The most significant features are two intact modeled stucco elements, visible in the excavation profile. The Early Classic builders at Say Ka covered the Sub 2 phase with Structure 4 Sub 1, which included a stair with five steps (Figure 4). Although the summits of the

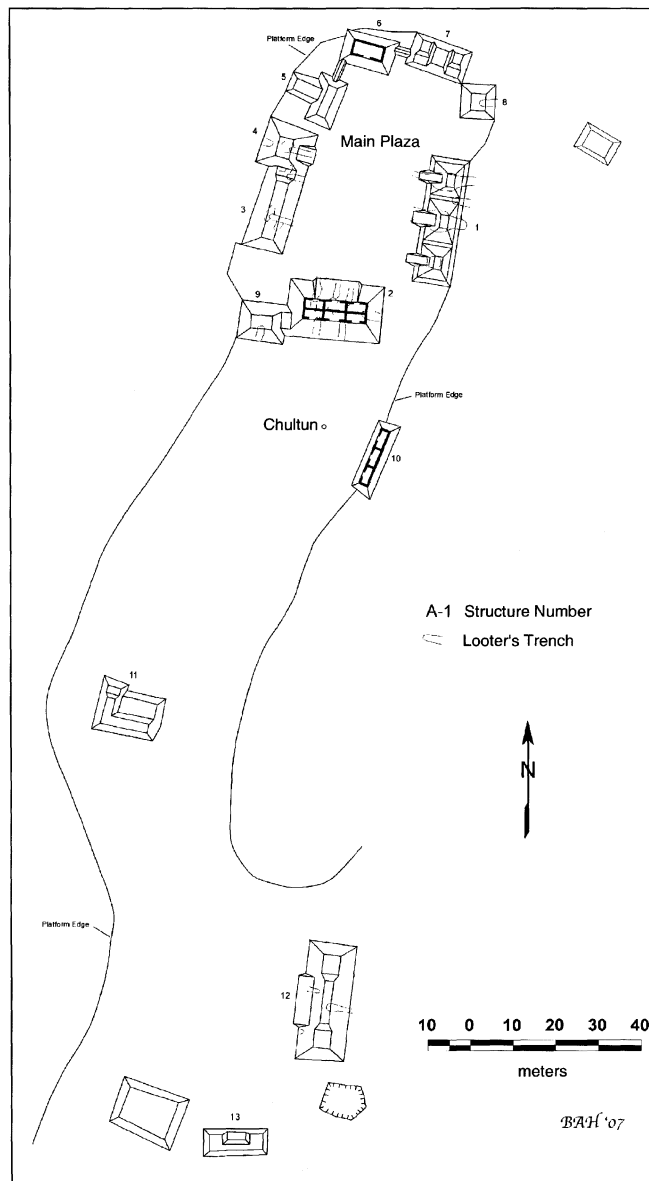


Fig. 2. Map of Group A at Say Ka, using Guderjan et al.'s (1991: Figure 45) structure numbers.

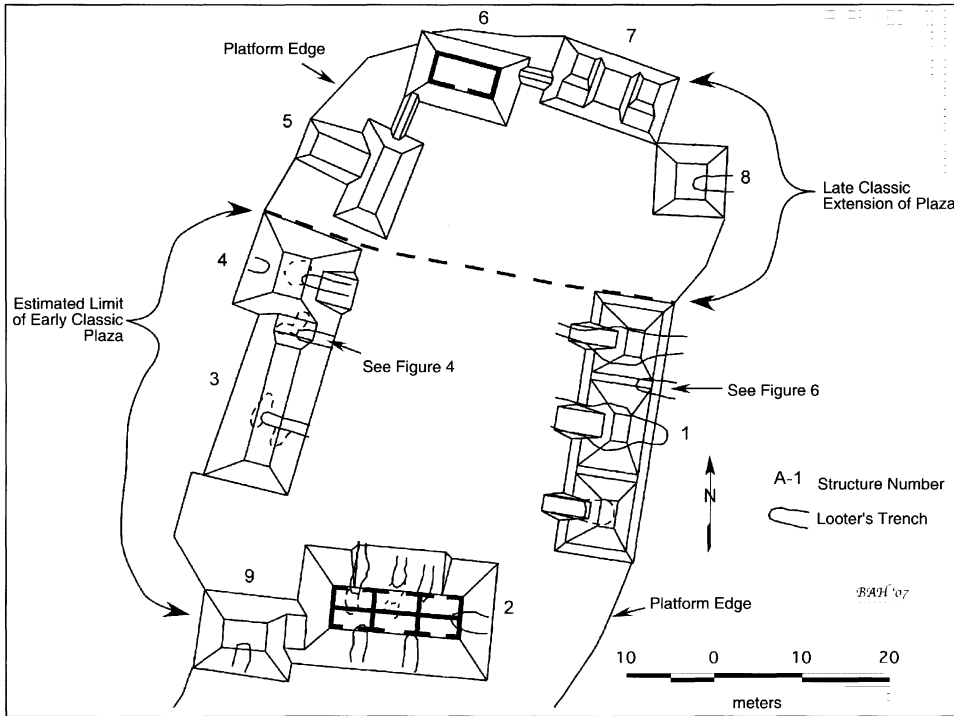


Fig. 3. Map of Main Plaza showing looters' trenches and limits of Early Classic plaza.

earlier phases were largely destroyed by Late Classic renovation, numerous fragments of modeled stucco were found in the construction fill covering the Sub 1 building and in the looters' backdirt. These fragments retain red, orange, and black pigment and apparently came from a panel or mask totally destroyed by later building. Intact fragments of the earlier Sub 2 façade suggest this decoration may have been fairly high up on the building. Early Classic modeled stucco designs, though rare, are known from nearby sites, including El Pederal, Río Azul (Adams 1999), Blue Creek (Guderjan 2005); and La Milpa (Norman Hammond, personal communication, 2007).

Looters excavated six trenches, terminating in tunnels, into Structure A-2 at Say Ka, encountering what may be another Early Classic building. Two lenses of chert were exposed by the tunnels' collapsing at the eastern end of the mound. Similar features are associated with Early Classic tombs in the region at Río Azul (Hall 1986) and Dos Hombres (Durst 1998).

#### Late Classic Construction

In the Late Classic, the ancient Maya remodeled and expanded the Say Ka Main Plaza, completely altering its form and appearance. The northern end of the plaza was created by placing approximately 2 m of boulder- and cobble-sized fill atop bedrock to elevate and extend the architectural platform by 25 m (see Figure 3). Structures A-6 through A-9 were built around the newly enlarged plaza, enclosing the space. Concurrently, Structures 2, 3, 4, and, presumably, 1 were expanded and remodeled. It is likely that Structure 9 was appended to Structure 2 at this time, further restricting access to the plaza.

Structure 1 presumably is Late Classic in age, but may have had an Early Classic antecedent. The 5.5-m high mound was pierced by four trenches, two of which have collapsed, gutting northern and central parts of the structure. The eastern looters' trench shows Structure 1 consisted of a basal platform

supporting three individual temple-pyramids (Figure 6). Prior to the documentation of this trench, Say Ka did not appear to have a pyramid (Tourtellot et al. 2002: 634), and earlier versions of the map depicted the eastern building as a range structure (e.g., Guderjan et al. 1991: Figure 45; Houk et al. 2006: Figure 2).

Structure 2 is a tandem range structure with several vaulted rooms at its summit. A spine wall separating collapsed or infilled rooms on the northern and southern side of the mound is visible in two of the looters' trenches into the mound. Looters clipped the northern end of a crypt in one trench, near the center of the mound. The crypt contained small bone fragments when examined in 2004, but no artifacts were present (Houk et al. 2006). In the Late Classic,

Structure 4 had at least two platform terraces, the lowest of which featured a rounded southeastern corner and an inset stair. This final phase of construction was badly deteriorated, but likely included a third tier and more steps leading to a building on top (Hageman et al. 2006).

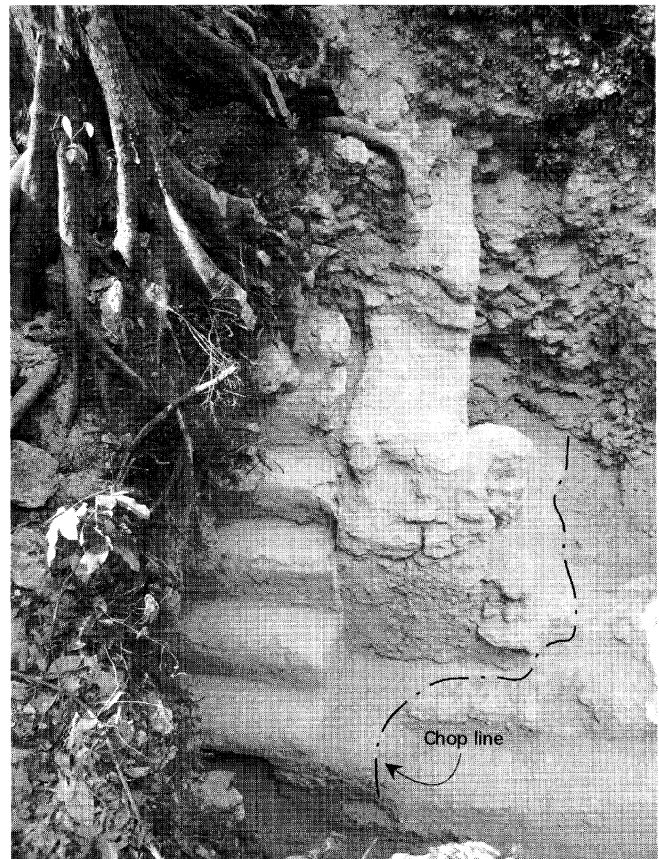


Fig. 4. Photograph of Structure 4 Sub 1 showing Late Classic chop line.

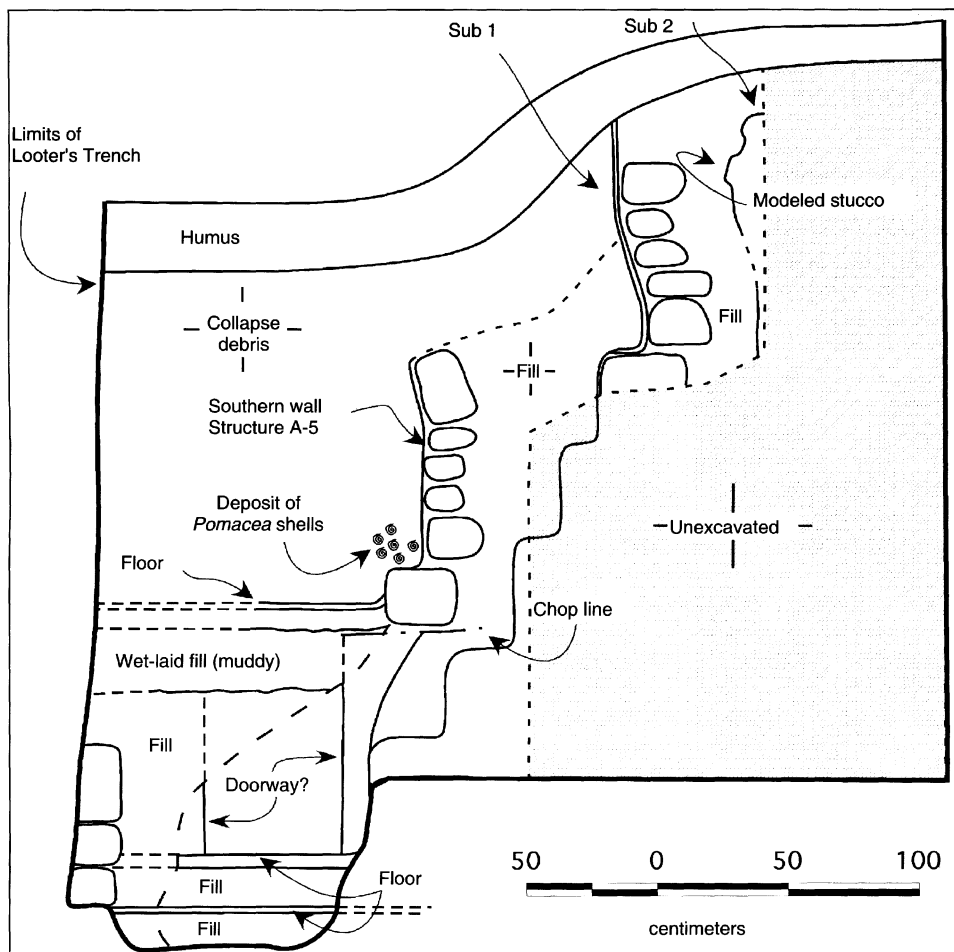


Fig. 5. Profile of western wall 2005 excavations showing Structure 4 Sub 1 and Sub 2.

### Implications

As the one of the largest sites within 7 km of La Milpa Centre, Say Ka is an important component of the La Milpa suburban settlement pattern. Prior to its rediscovery, Tourtellot, Everson, and Hammond (2003: 98) noted Say Ka was “a prime candidate for a secondary administrative center subject to La Milpa,” but its elusiveness prevented further elaboration of this hypothesis. Once Say Ka was re-located, Tourtellot et al. (2002: 634) placed it in “a class of often elegant courtyard groups (‘mini-palaces’) that lack pyramids, which may have been local control facilities at a level below the palace and noble houses of La Milpa Centre.”

We now know Say Ka had three small pyramids on the eastern side of its Main Plaza, elevating it into the class of minor centers, and allowing us to discuss its role as such. Say Ka fits well into a model proposed by LaMAP researchers regarding the Late Classic distribution of middle-level centers within the greater La Milpa suburban zone, which they consider to encompass a 5-km radius around La Milpa Centre (Tourtellot, Everson and Hammond 2003: 97). This model posits the distribution of medium-sized sites and middle-level centers in two concentric rings, spaced approximately 7 and 3.5 km around La Milpa Centre, respectively (Tourtellot, Everson, and Hammond 2003).

Tourtellot et al. (2002: 97) note, “Between 7 to 8 km out from La Milpa...lie three medium-size sites, each with one or two plazas and a temple.” These sites all “fall at a distance equivalent to halfway between La Milpa and its next largest neighboring centers” (Tourtellot et al. 2002: 98). They specu-

late that these sites functioned as intermediaries between the major centers and may have enjoyed a large degree of autonomy (Tourtellot et al. 2002: 98).

The sites positioned on the inner ring, on the other hand, “may trace potentially coherent or regular geopolitical or georeligious patterns on the physical and conceptual landscape” (Tourtellot et al. 2002: 106), and include La Milpa South and La Milpa East, with subsequent research adding La Milpa North and La Milpa West (e.g., Hammond et al. 2003) to the model. We propose that Say Ka, approximately 3.7 km from La Milpa Centre and 1.75 km from La Milpa South, also fits within this ring. As Tourtellot et al. (2002: 106) note, “Middle-level centers are recognized by a congeries of familiar elite components writ small,” occupy prominent locations, and have plazas (rather than simple courtyards), range structures, temples, and monuments. Say Ka, we argue, is actually the best fit for this description of “familiar elite components writ small.” Although no monuments have

been discovered, the three pyramids on the east, a thus-far unique architectural feature in the region, evoke the layout of the Great Plaza at La Milpa Centre, with Temples 1–3 forming its eastern edge.

The function of these middle-level or minor centers ringing La Milpa is far from resolved, but presumably involved important administrative activities related to servicing the expanding Late Classic suburban population and controlling or managing nearby resources. Shortly after its discovery, Guderjan et al. (1991: 73) speculated that “Say Ka was a major La Milpa outlier” with important water control or agricultural functions, situated as it was near “reservoirs.” The limited investigations by SKAP have not investigated the reported reservoirs, although Hageman’s intersite transect survey work suggests they are natural features that may function as water catchments in the rainy season. However, the mere proximity of *bajos* and/or reservoirs suggests that a productive avenue of future research would be to explore the role of Say Ka as a *bajo* specialized community, a category of settlement describing small sites in relative proximity to larger sites but with surprisingly well-constructed structures and high-quality material culture remains (Kunen 2001; Kunen and Hughbanks 2003; Scarborough and Valdez 2003). Scarborough and Valdez (2003) speculate the success of these sites was related to management of productive *bajo* resources.



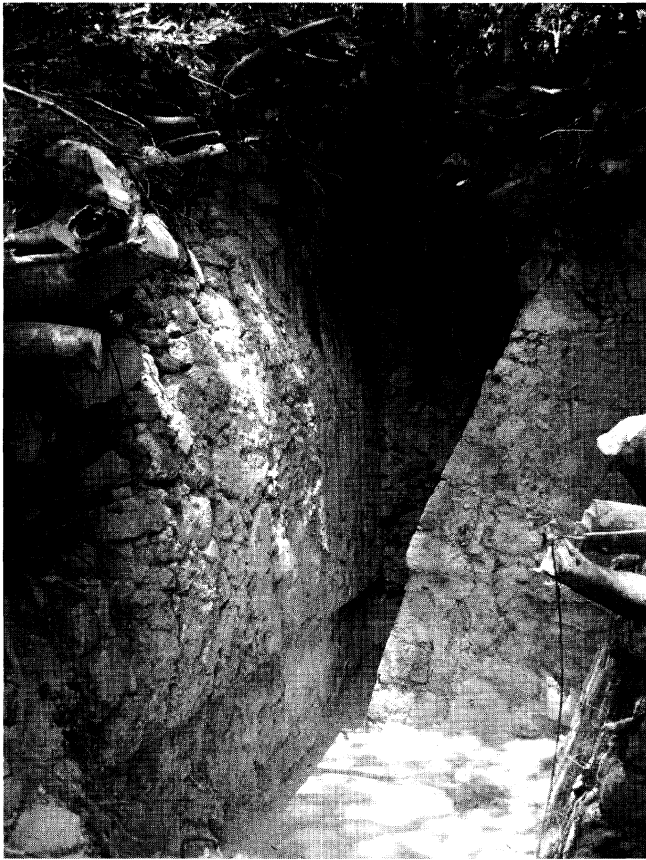


Fig. 6. Photograph of looters' trench on eastern side of Structure 1 showing northeastern corner of central pyramid and southeastern corner of northern pyramid.

### Conclusion

The site of Say Ka, once lost to archaeologists, still figured prominently in regional analyses of the La Milpa area. Following its rediscovery, excavations have shown initial occupation in the Early Classic, significant Late Classic modifications to the site, and abandonment at the end of the Classic period. We can now engage Say Ka in models of local and regional political and economic organization. Preliminary, we find that Say Ka fits well within the pattern of minor-center distribution within the La Milpa suburban zone and that it may qualify as a *bajo* specialized community. Obviously, additional research is needed to explore Say Ka's role locally and in the region, but these preliminary observations offer starting points from which to generate testable hypotheses.

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RESUMEN: Poco tiempo después de su descubrimiento en 1990, el sitio menor de Say Ka cerca de La Milpa, Belice, fue olvidado otra vez. Say Ka fue redescubierto accidentalmente hasta casi una década después. Tres temporadas de trabajo en la plaza mayor han facilitado información sobre la edad y la estructura del sitio, y nos permite a investigar su lugar dentro del patrón de asentamiento suburbano de La Milpa.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Nur kurze Zeit nach seiner Entdeckung im Jahr 1990 wurde das Kleinzentrum Say Ka in der Umgebung von La Milpa, Belize wieder vergessen. Es wurde erst eine Dekade später zufällig wiederentdeckt. Drei Feldkampagnen auf dem Hauptplatz der Fundstätte haben wichtige neue Informationen über das Alter und den Aufbau der Stätte erbracht, so dass Forscher nun die Bedeutung von Say Ka innerhalb des suburbanen Siedlungs- und Einflusses von La Milpa besser verstehen.