

2002 February

Xunantunich, Belize

















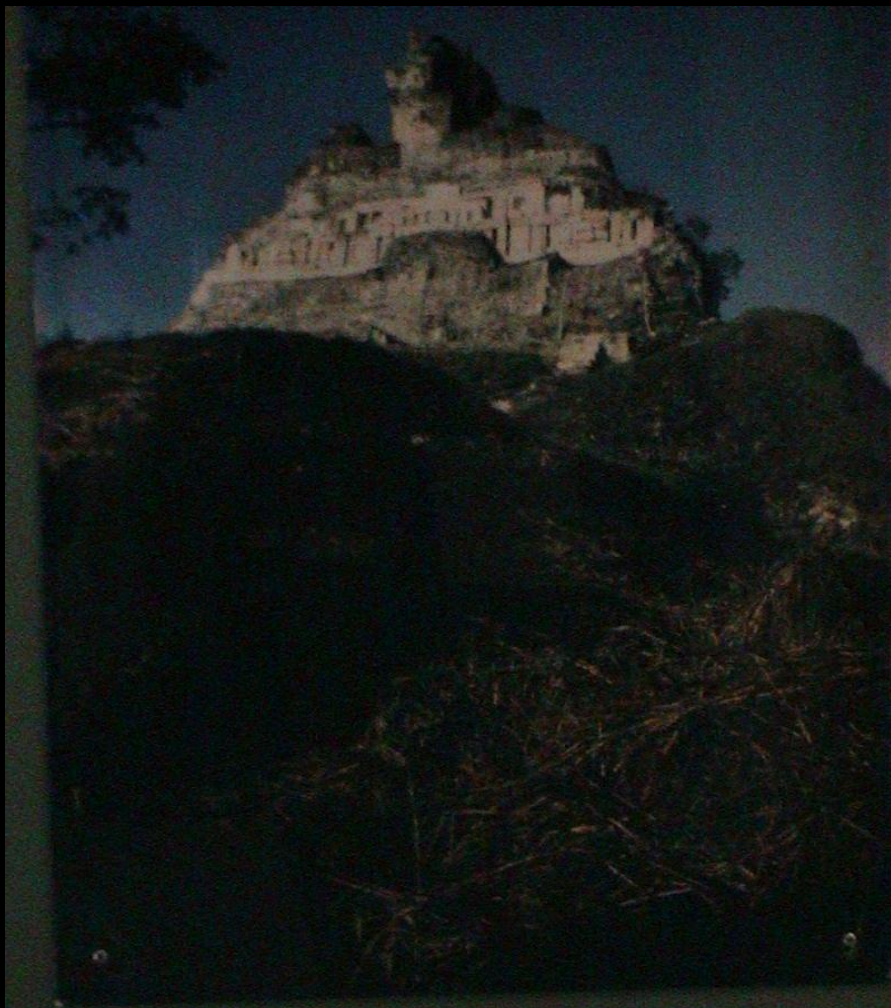












The east side of the Castillo shows the frieze of A-6-2nd and then the later construction on top of A-6-1st. The east side frieze was covered over by the Maya with the construction of the later building.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project



Two major construction phases have been identified on the top of the Castillo. Structure A-6-2nd, built about AD 800, is the building phase associated with the famous Xunantunich frieze. This frieze encircled the building on all four sides and marked the upper part of the facade. A-6-2nd had three doorways facing all four directions. A-6-1st, constructed about AD 900, covered A-6-2nd and its frieze on three sides - the east, west and south. A-6-1st has rooms facing to the north and to the south with a primary focus to the north into Plaza A-I.

A recent tunnel into the Castillo has revealed the terraces of an earlier building, A-6-3rd, although archaeologists are unsure of a date for this earlier construction.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project

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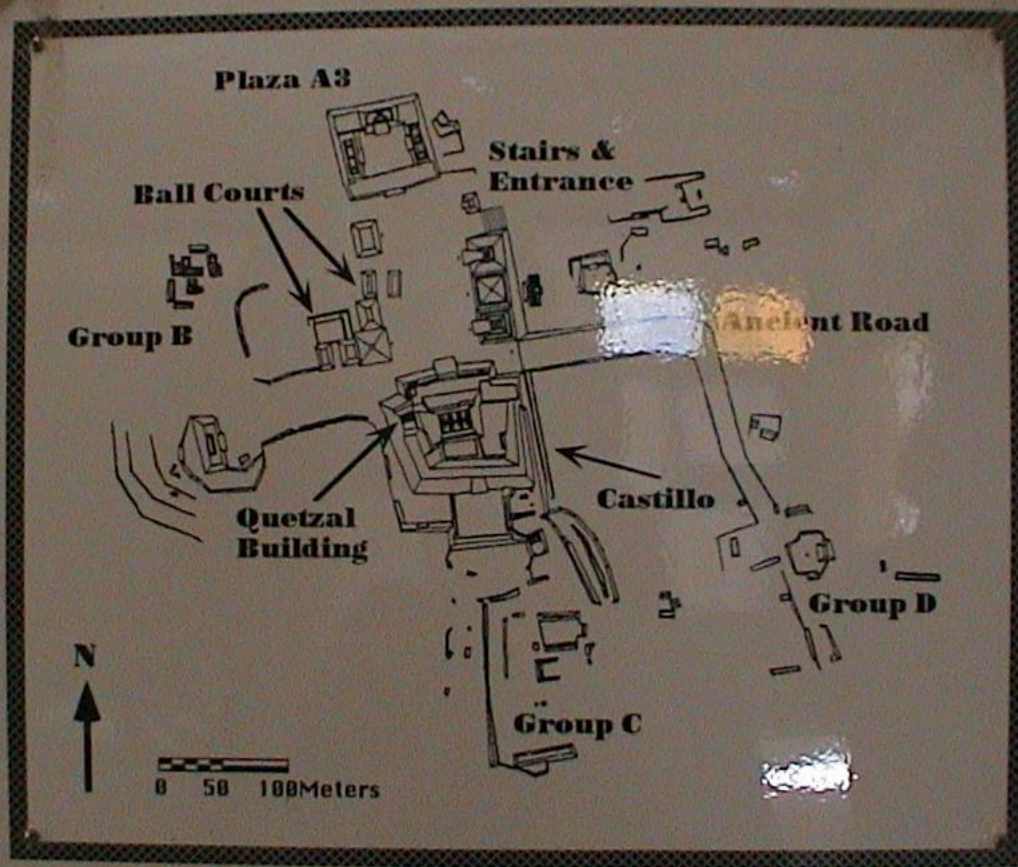
On the west side of the Castillo, excavations revealed an early building extending east-west from the central core. This building is today called Quetzal Building. The tunnel which revealed Quetzal Building is visible on the right side of the photograph. At a later time, Quetzal was completely filled-in, its doorways blocked (see photo), and then used as a platform for Structure A-20.

Photos: Xunantunich Archaeological Project

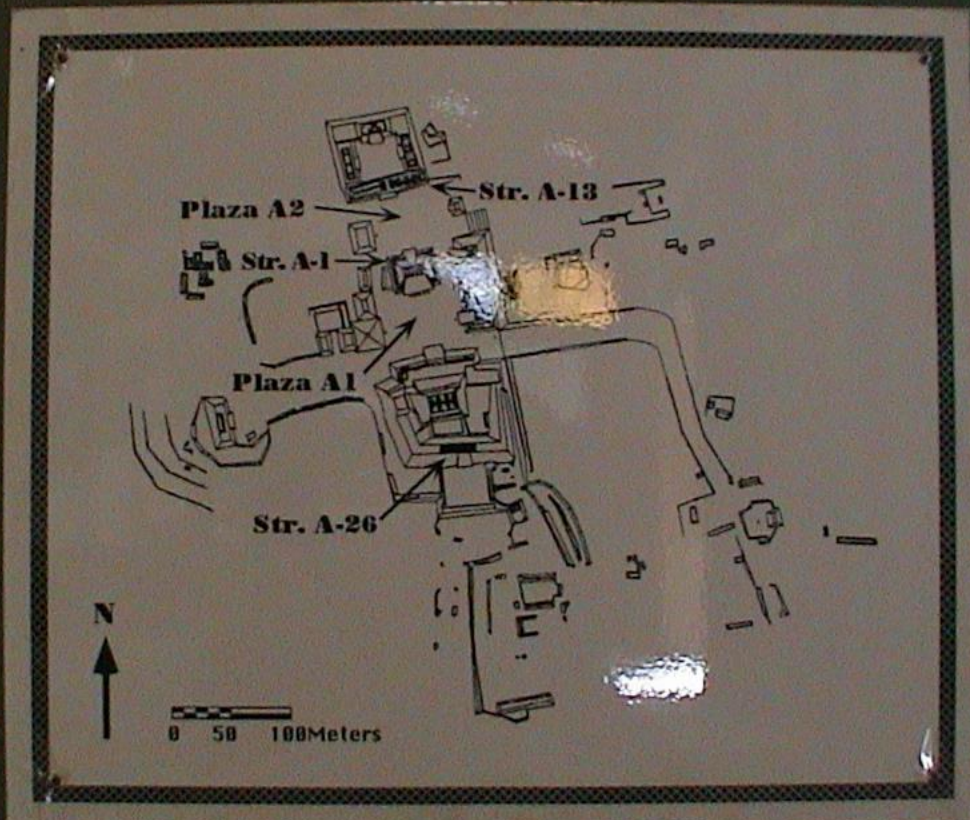
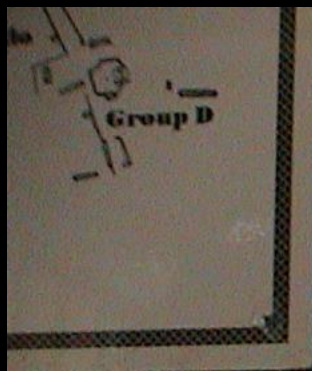


Structure A-20 is one of the last buildings constructed at Xunantunich. It was probably built sometime after AD 900. The two columns marking the front of the building are uncommon architectural elements within the Maya lowlands until after the collapse.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project



Phase 1
AD 700 - 800/850

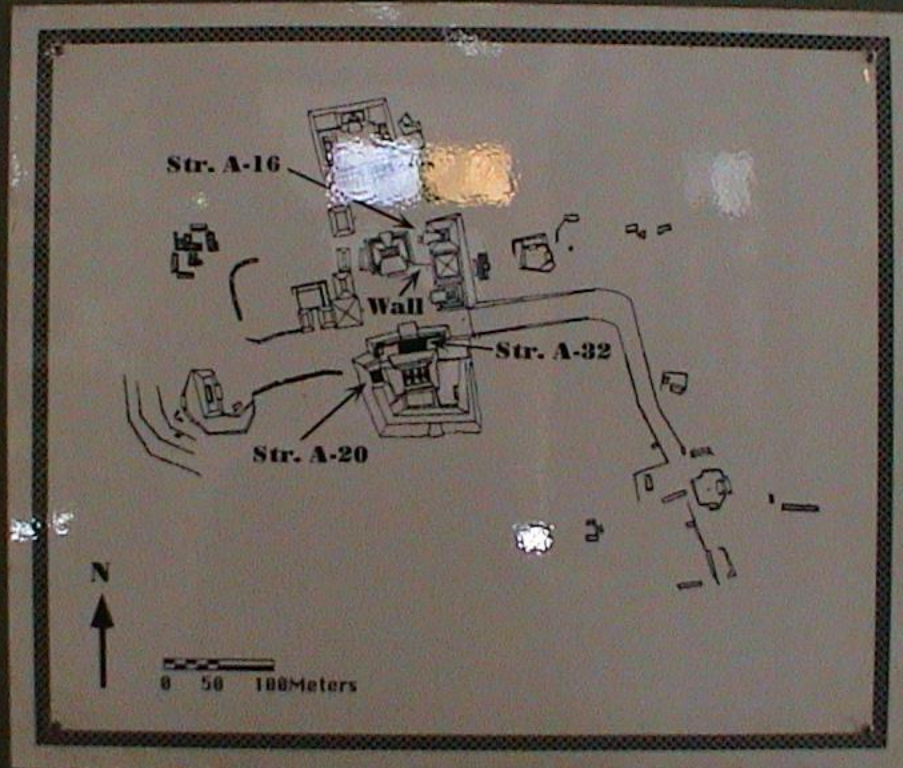
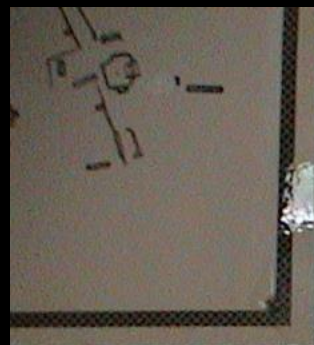


Phase 2
AD 800/850 - 900

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Phase 3
AD 900 - 1,000

Recent excavations at Xunantunich have shown a developmental pattern which starts with an expanding city center and which ends with a city decreasing in size. Smaller and smaller areas of the site core are open to the public.

Although archaeologists have evidence of earlier constructions dating back to AD 600, the earliest comprehensive picture of the site dates from AD 700.

PHASE 1: The Castillo, Structure A-6, is located within the central part of the city center. A large open plaza is visible to the north leading to the ruler's residential area, Plaza A-III. Ball court #2 is located on the west side of the plaza. To the south of the Castillo can be found an entire series of large plazas and buildings.

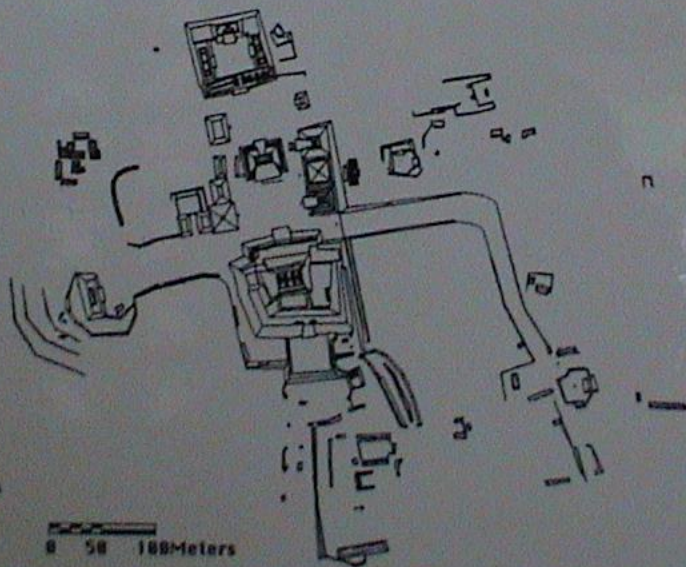
PHASE 2: Sections of Xunantunich are being divided-up and separated. Structure A-1, constructed within the middle of the north plaza, creates the open Plaza A-I and the restricted access Plaza A-II. Structure A-13 is built which separates the ruling family from the Xunantunich population. Structure A-26 is constructed on the south side of the Castillo.

PHASE 3: The Castillo shifts from being in the middle of the city to being on the edge as the area to the south is abandoned. A wall is built between Structures A-1 and A-3 blocking all movement to the north. In addition, Structure A-16 is created as a private stela shrine in front of Structure A-2. The entry area and stair to the north are abandoned and dismantled. Structure A-32 is built which blocks movement up the north side of the Castillo. Structure A-20 is one of the last buildings constructed at the site. Xunantunich is in its final period of occupation.

Plaza A3




0 50 100Meters





*This photograph from the 1960s shows Plaza A-III, with Structure A-II
in the background and Structure A-13 in the foreground.*

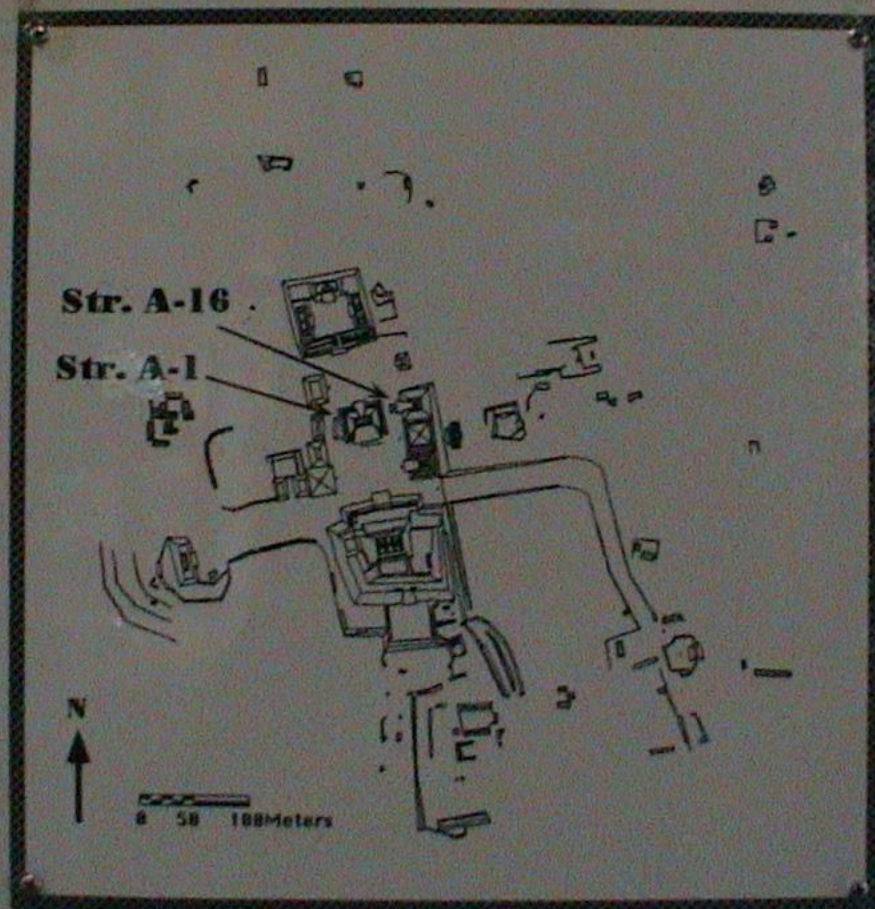
Photo: A. H. Anderson



Archaeologists believe that Plaza A-III, located on the north edge of the Xunantunich core, was the residential area for the ruler and his family. In fact, Structure A-11 may be the actual residence as it is the second tallest building at Xunantunich and it faces south to the Castillo, the ancestral shrine for the ruling family.

Structure A-13 may have been a late addition to this complex. Its construction would have closed off the plaza as the power of the ruling family was being questioned near the time of the collapse.

Excavations to the east of Plaza A-III revealed a series of small platforms and large quantities of trash. This area, now behind the modern stela house, may have been a food preparation area for the people living in the ruler's residential plaza.





South side of the Structure A-1. Structure A-16 is visible on the right side. Plaza A-I is in the foreground to the south of Structure A-1 with the closed off Plaza A-II to the north.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project



Structure A-16 in 1959 prior to excavation and reconstruction.

Photo: E. W. MacKie



Structure A-16 after



Structure A-46 after excavation and reconstruction.

Photo: M. Diedrich

With the collapse throughout the Maya area, most sites in the southern lowlands are abandoned. Xunantunich survives but changes dramatically. A large open plaza is broken into two smaller plazas with the construction of Structure A-1. Plaza A-I, to the south, remains open to the public while Plaza A-II is closed off. Part of this separation includes the construction of Structure A-16. This building encloses a stela and an altar, possibly creating a private shrine.





Dancing figure holding ropes which descend from the sky. This photograph shows the preservation of this frieze during excavation.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project



Framed head of a K'awil deity associated with ancestors and royal lineages. This figure has an ax eye and a representation of smoke coming from the forehead of a head depicted in the headdress.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project



Detail of the seated Xunantunich ruler. This is sculpture in the round with the legs, head and perhaps arms free from the back panels. The head of this figure would have been placed in front of the flat panel at the top center of the photograph. This individual is seated on a throne and surrounded by a skyband on both sides of his head with large ropes and knots on both sides of the throne.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project

This west frieze was first excavated in 1993. In order to preserve the original stucco frieze, a fiberglass replica was made in 1996. The original frieze remains buried and preserved about one meter behind the replica.

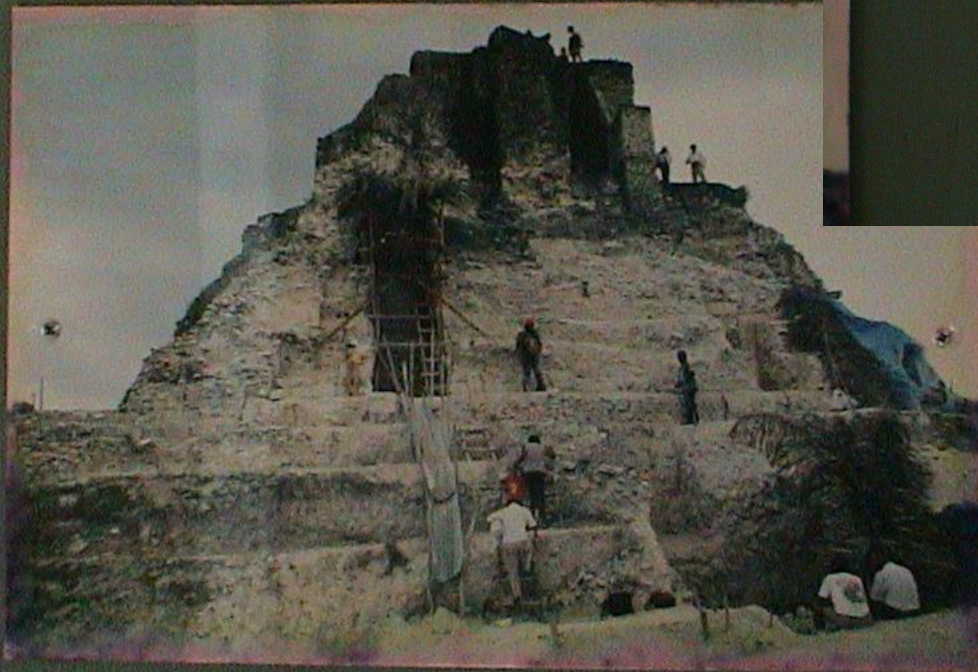
As with the east frieze, this sculpture is divided into two horizontal sections. Symbols representing twisted cord or plaited rope connect all the elements of the frieze.

Only the central and northern masks within the lower register are visible today on the west frieze. The end mask, with the axes in its eye associating it with the number 6, represents the World Tree or central axis of the Maya world. The central mask seems to represent the Maya sun god.

Between the masks is a framed profile face of an ancestral deity

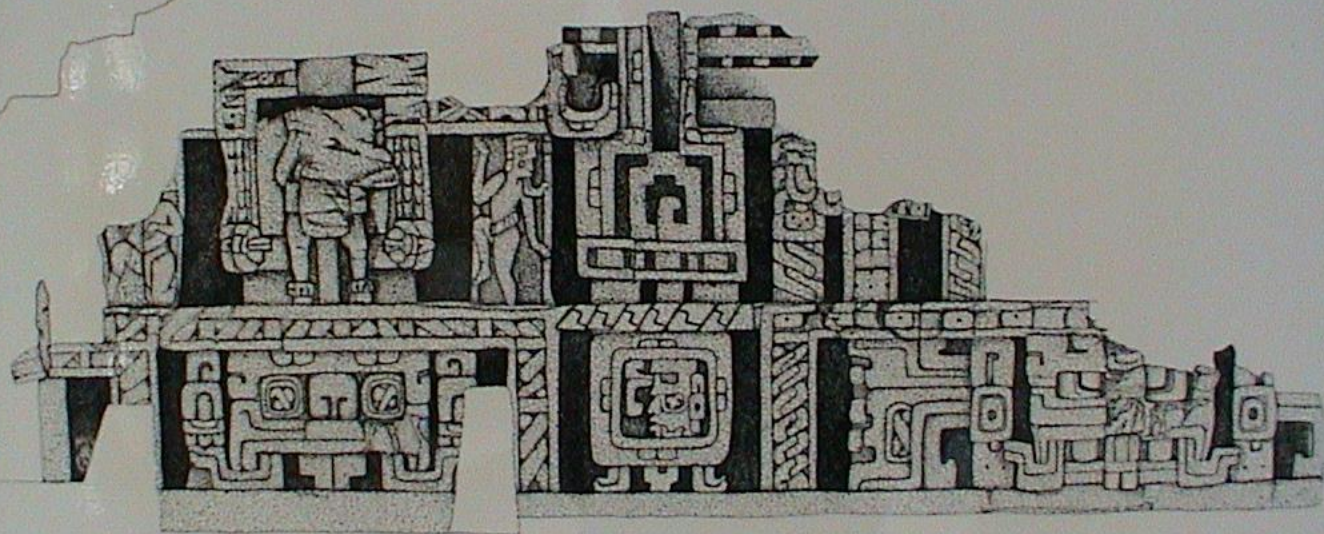
In the upper register, a figure seated on a throne is visible. Although badly eroded, this figure probably represents a previous ruler or ancestor marking the lineage of the ruling family at Xunantunich. A dancing figure is visible next to the ruler. To the right of the dancing figure is a cross-sectioned shell.

A fragment of a serpent-headed throne can be seen above the central mask. Three rulers or ancestors of the ruling family were probably portrayed on all sides of this building, each seated in a niche or atop a throne.

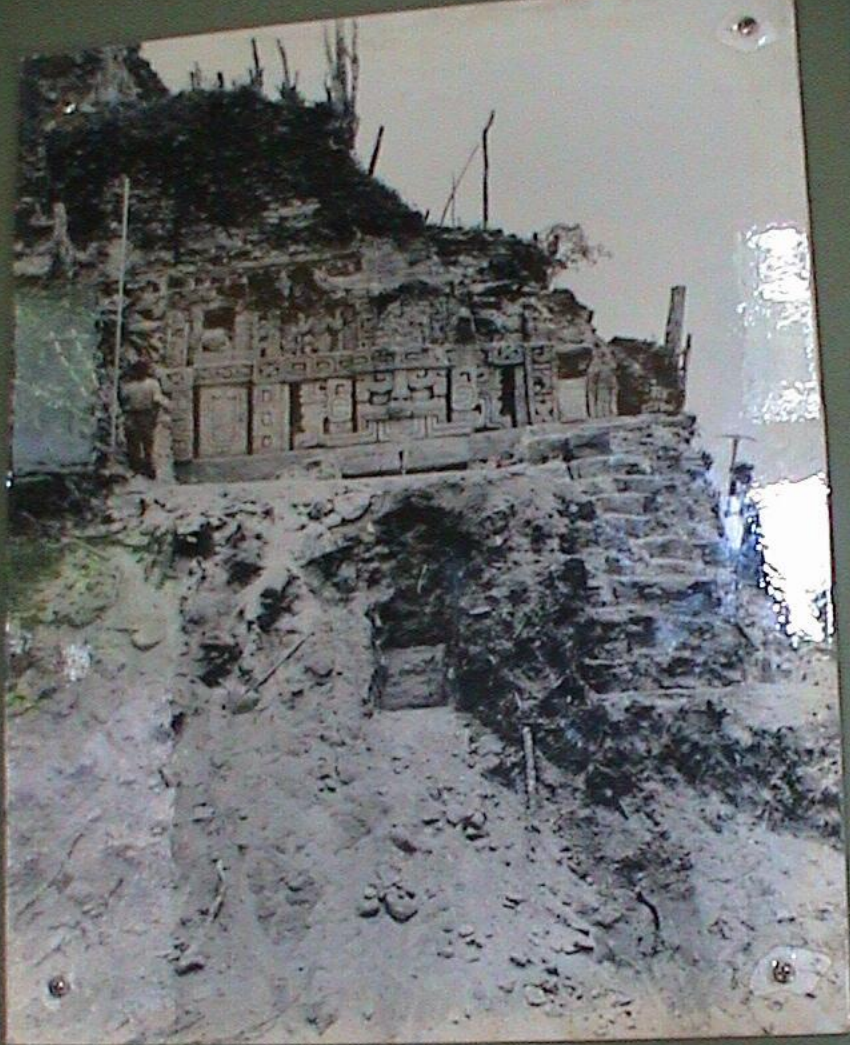


The west side of the Castillo in 1993 during the initial excavation of the west frieze. The level of the scaffolding marks the excavation area for the upper part of the frieze.

Photo: G. Aldana / J. Paul Getty Trust



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The north half of the east frieze was uncovered by Linton Satterthwaite of the University of Pennsylvania in 1950. A. H. Anderson, the first Archaeological Commissioner of Belize, excavated the remainder of the frieze soon thereafter.

Photo: A. H. Anderson


A detail of the central mask of the east frieze. Notice the crossed band in this figure's forehead. This mask may therefore represent Chac.

Photo: Xunantunich Archaeological Project

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. This mask may

Archaeological Project






The east frieze was first found and excavated in 1950. The sculptured frieze is attached to the upper part of the building, A-6-2nd, constructed about 800 AD. Both the building and the frieze were buried by the construction of the final building, A-6-1st.

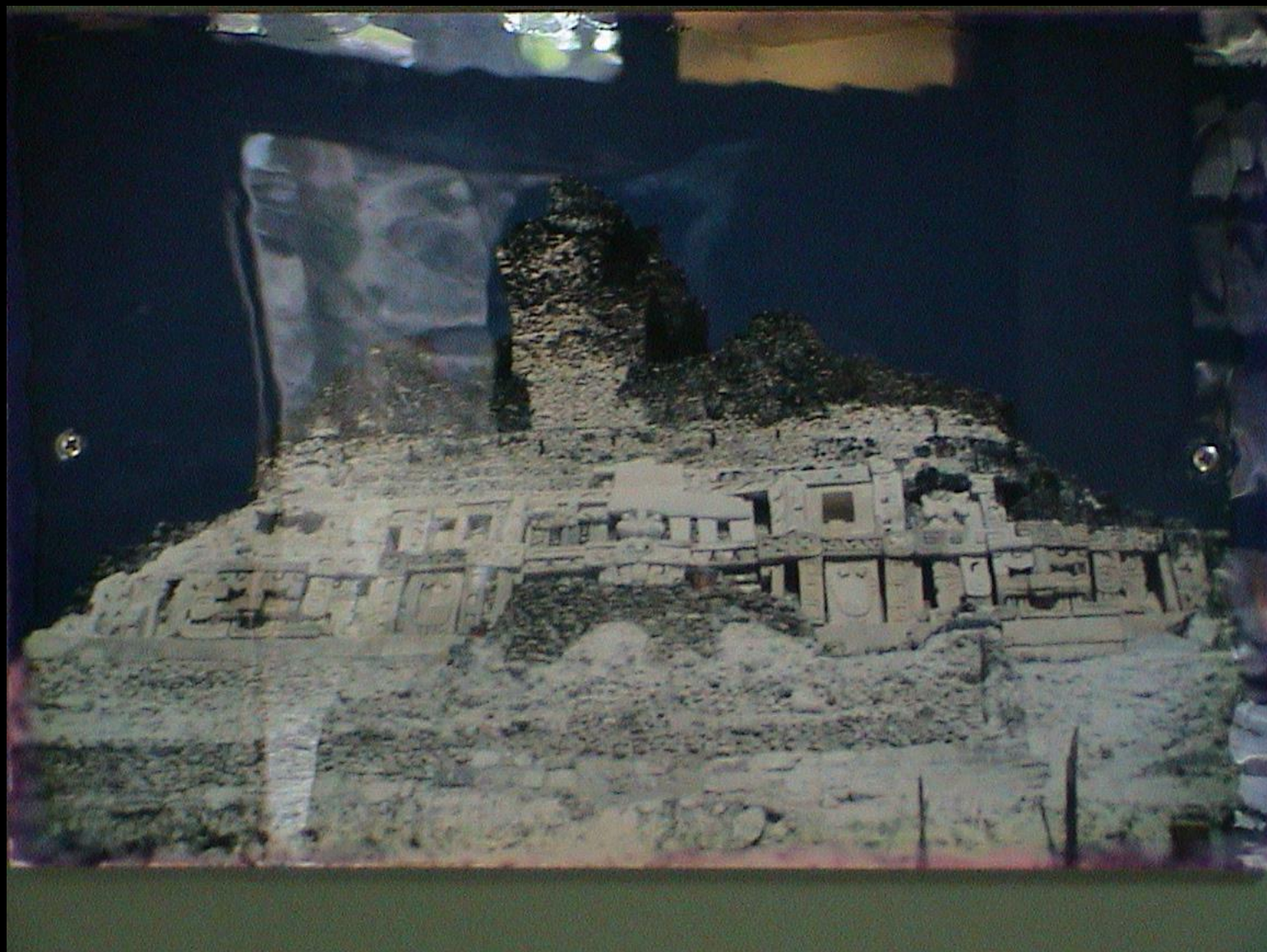
The frieze originally wrapped around all four sides of Structure A-6-2nd. Today, only fragments on the east and west remain. The rest fell away, probably centuries ago.

The sculpture is divided into two horizontal sections. Symbols representing twisted cord or plaited rope connect all the elements of the frieze.

Three monumental masks, located over three original doorways into A-6-2nd, are found within the lower register. The masks on both ends of the frieze seem to be identical with crossed bands in their mouths. They seem to be Pax Gods and may represent the World Tree or central axis of the Maya world. The central mask, now visible only in the drawing and in a photograph, has a crossed band in its forehead and probably represents Chac, an important deity in the Maya creation of the world. Between the masks are two U-shaped elements which represent the moon.

Above the central mask is a throne with an open-mouthed, jawless serpent head facing to the left. On both sides of the throne, figures can be seen holding up the sky.





















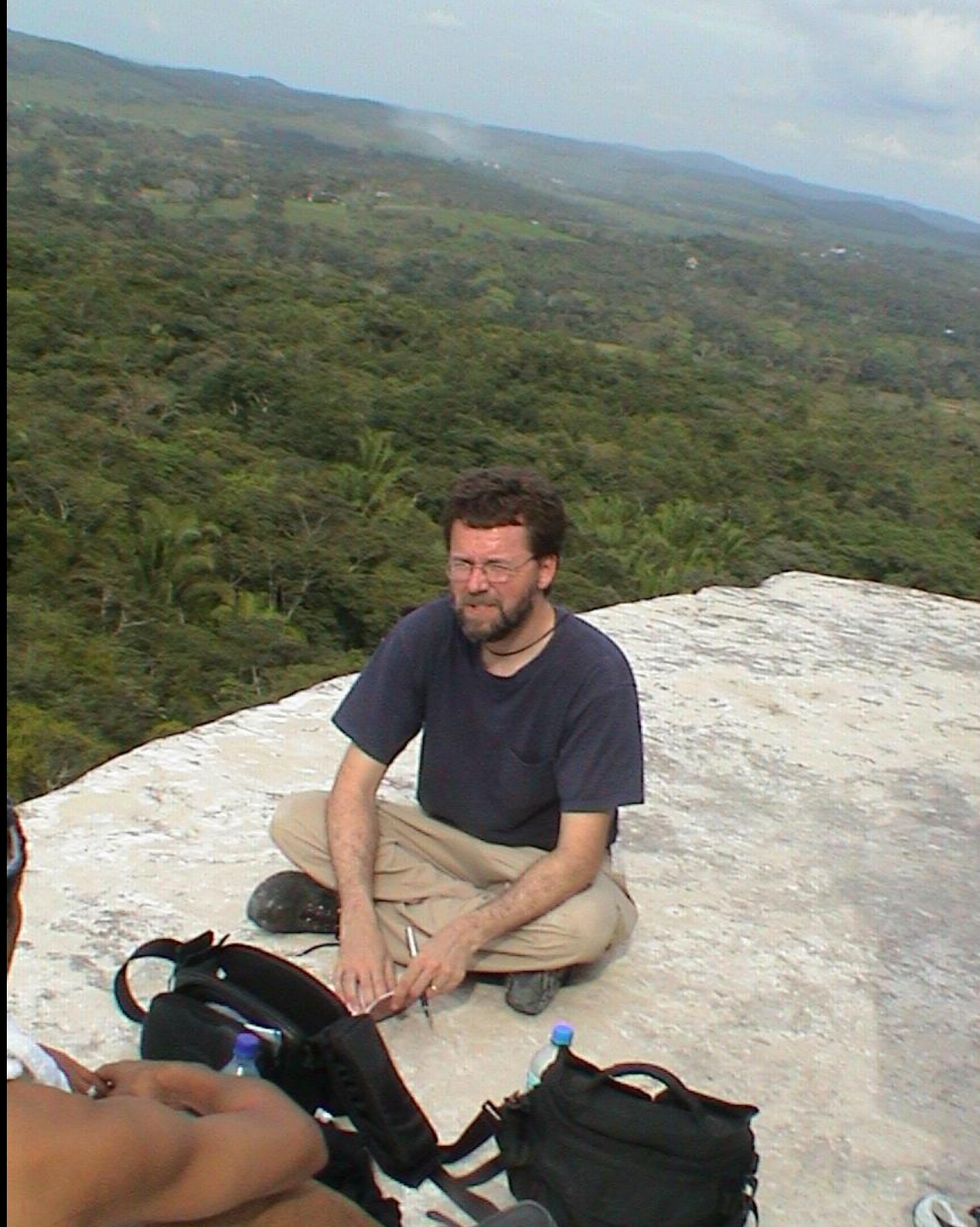


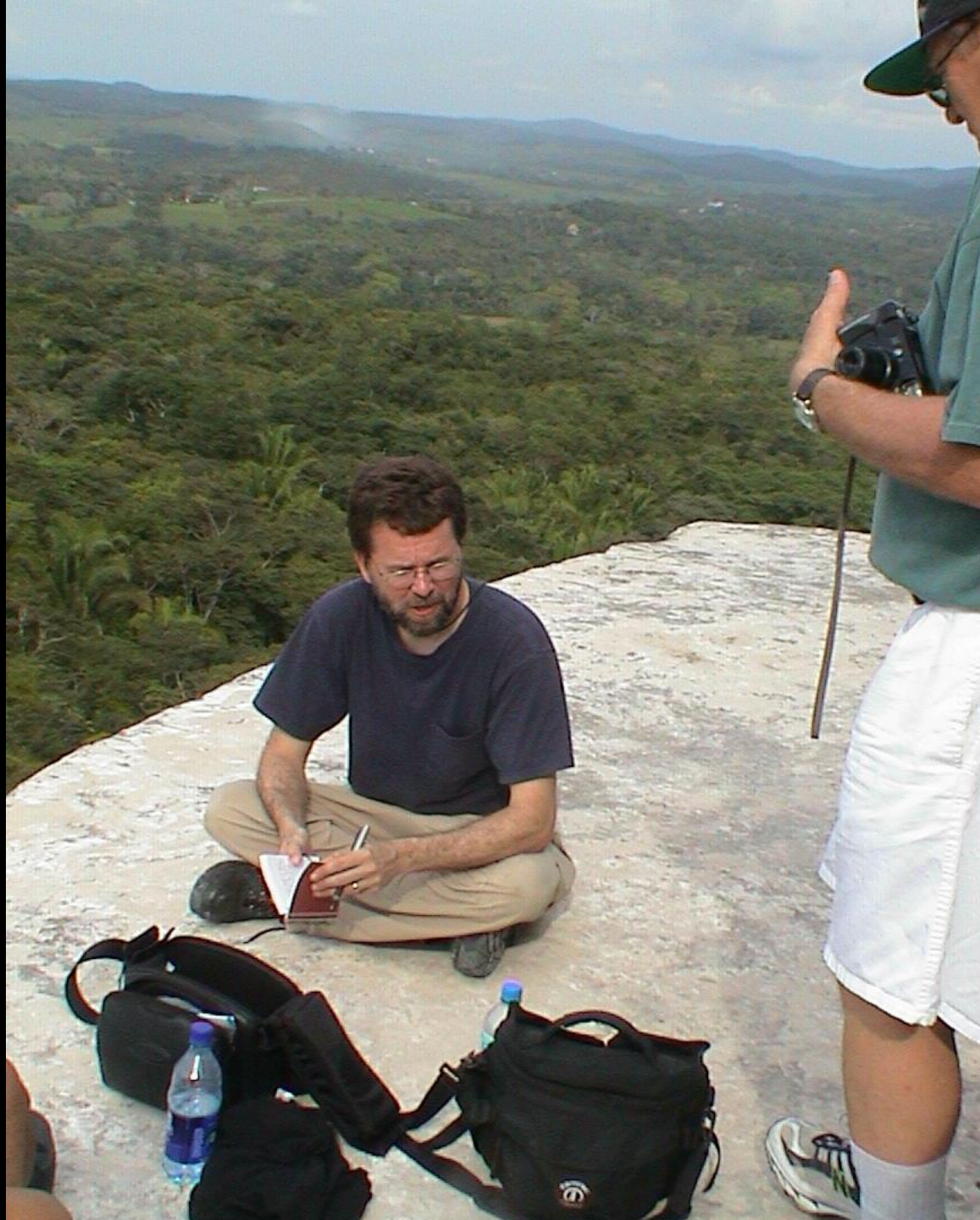


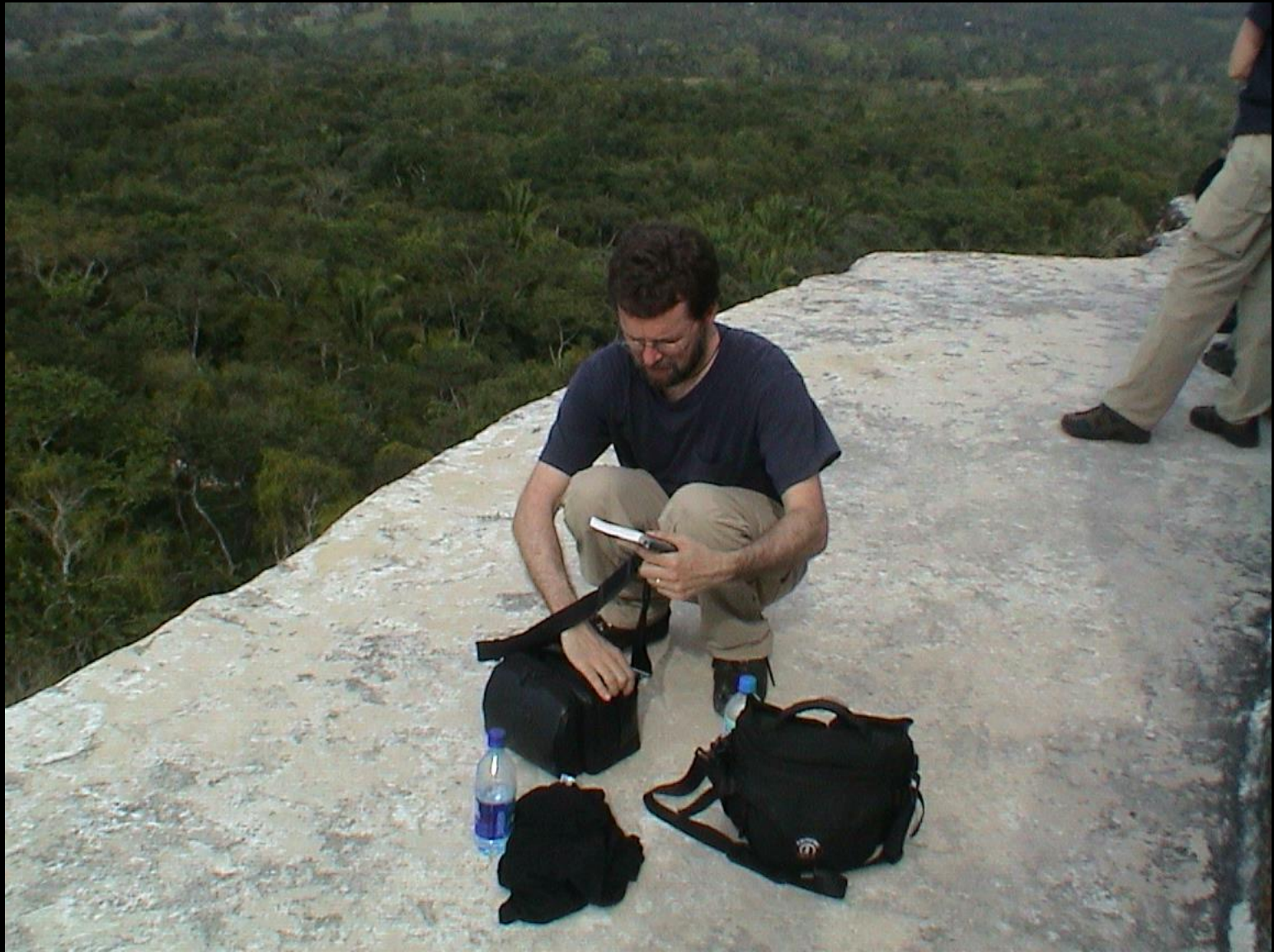






















































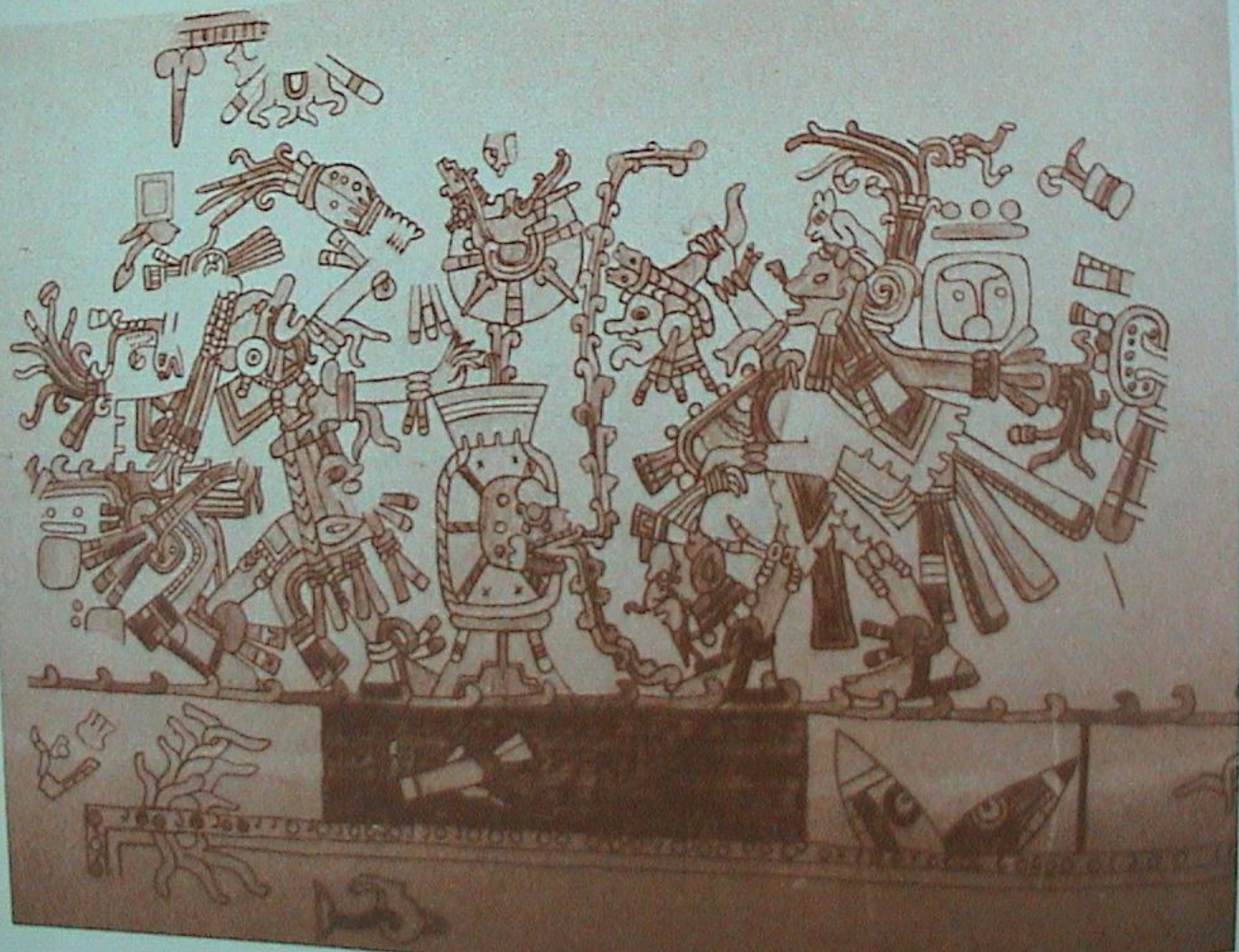






Mag North

5 Deg West
of Mag North





Mixtec-style murals at Santa Rita, representing the capture of local Maya gods, may indicate Mixtec conquest of the city.

Although they were driven out of Rita, the Spaniards established an o and were successful in their attar Northern Yucatan. This effectively trade routes on which the prosperi depended; the Maya therefore aban

The site



