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## **The Northern Belize Coastal Project, 1999**



**Research Year:** 1999

**Culture:** Maya

**Chronology:** Late Classic, Post Classic, and Terminal Classic

**Location:** Belize

**Site:** Saktunja

*There was much commerce, both domestic and foreign, and trade was, as in México, a highly honorable calling, especially when conducted on a large scale. The son of the last Cocom ruler of Mayapán was in Honduras on a trading expedition at the time of the fall of that city. Merchants ranged from the wealthy and noble wholesalers, who had their own factors, trading canoes, and slave carriers, to the petty itinerant who carried his own pack. Once there had been wide causeways across the country, leading to certain centers of pilgrimage, but at the time of the conquest they were completely a thing of the past and had probably not been used for centuries. Roys 1943:51*

### **Table of Contents**

[Introduction](#)

[Saktunja: Background Information of Field Investigations](#)

[Field Research: Mapping and Survey](#)

[Operation 1A-Structure 1](#)

[Operations 3A, 4A, Structures 14 and 15](#)

[An Enterprising Community: Salt making, Fishing, Shell Working, and Trade](#)

[Shell Working](#)  
[Ceramic Analysis](#)  
[Stone Tool Analysis](#)  
[Conclusions](#)  
[List of Figures](#)  
[Sources Cited](#)

## **Introduction**

The Northern Belize Coastal Project (NBCP, 1987-1999) continues to focus on survey and excavation of sites in the archipelago of lagoons lining the northern coast of Belize ([Figure 2](#), and [Figure 3](#)). Some of the sites such as Marlowe Cay and Rocky Point ([Figure 2](#), and [Figure 4](#)) are former islands that have been incorporated into these configurations by complex sedimentation processes. An increase in the settlement and utilization of these frontier settlements is particularly notable during the Late to Terminal Classic period (circa A.D. 680-900) with lingering populations up until Spanish contact (A.D. 1500). Despite the remoteness of many of these coastal sites today, archaeological evidence points to their participation in the mainstream of Maya culture, playing pivotal roles in socioeconomic, political, and ideological relationships with inland sites (e.g., Graham and Pendergast 1989).

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# A VIEW FROM THE LAGOONS:

Late Maya Classic - Postclassic  
Settlement on the Northern  
Belize Coast.



Figure 1. A View from the Lagoons.





Figure 3. Aerial shot of Saktunja and Northern River Lagoon.



Figure 4. Rocky Point Landing site.

### **Saktunja: Background Information of Field Investigations**

The 1999 NBCP field season focused on one of these sites, Saktunja or White Stone Place, situated on a large working plantation, Cabbage Ridge, owned by Mr. Hilly Martinez of Belize City. The site, accessible only by boat, was first singled out in aerial photographs as a substantial village, one of 13 sites located on and around Midwinter's Lagoon by Craig in 1965. Saktunja is also directly south of the larger transshipment site of NRL on Northern River Lagoon ([Figure 2](#), and [Figure 3](#)).

A 1998 reconnaissance of Saktunja revealed similar concentrations of house mounds, intensive salt production, and a wide array of artifacts typical of a residential community. Like Northern River Lagoon and other coastal transshipment sites, a disproportionate number of imported goods, in particular, ceramics typical of the Late Classic Early Postclassic transition, were in evidence ([Figure 5](#), [Figure 6](#) and [Figure 7](#)).



**Figure 5. Palmar Orange-polychrome.**



Figure 6. Zacatal Cream-polychrome.



Figure 7. Daylight Orange: Dark Night Variety.

With FAMSI funding the staff initiated a rigorous program of field work and laboratory analysis at Saktunja in 1999. The primary goals of the project were to fine tune Maya Late Classic to Postclassic chronology (A.D. 680-1500) through the ceramics and lithics and to collect data pertinent to settlement configuration, specialized production, and intra-site hierarchies. An additional goal was compare and contrast this data to examine Saktunja's role within the larger configuration of coastal and inland sites in north central Belize (Mock 1994, 1997).

The patterned distribution of Late Classic-Terminal Classic sites along the coast of northern Belize is significant not only in terms of the concentration of diverse ecological

zones with great economic potential but also in terms of potential trade both up and down the coast linking the site to a broader regional economy. Although trading/exchange models have been proposed in studies of Late Classic to Postclassic Maya social processes, they have been too broad to address the complex, multi-tiered matrixes of economies and exchange at these sites (Graham 1987; see also Andrews 1990, 1991; Andrews et al. 1988; Chapman 1957; Conner 1975; Graham and Pendergast 1989; Guderjan and Garber 1995; Freidel and Sabloff 1984; McKillop 1980, 1987, 1989, 1996; Mock 1994; Sabloff and Rathje 1975, 1980). For additional readings on this topic see Graham (1994) and McKillop (1980, 1987).

Studies of long distance trade have not always considered the role of these intra-regional networks of production and exchange. Investigations of a small site such as Saktunja provide a rare opportunity to fine-tune our models in that production of goods for trade and consumption of incoming goods are accessed more readily through excavations. This is especially true of the Late Classic with the proliferation of ceramic types representing a number of specialized production centers, responding to increasing needs for material expressions of status among growing, more horizontally dispersed populations in the southern Maya Lowlands. The ceramic assemblage reflects the characteristic regionalism of the Late Classic to Terminal Classic transition and the more introspective Postclassic period in the Maya Lowlands. Although sharing some ceramic types, significantly, Saktunja, in contrast to Northern River Lagoon, had access to a more restricted inventory of ceramics and imported goods through the Late to Terminal Classic/Postclassic transition. This difference suggests that possibly Saktunja was a secondary portage perhaps involved in producing salt, salted fish, and shell products as bartering agents or tribute payments, to a sovereign community.

### **Field Research: Mapping and Survey**

The site was first cleared, revealing previously unseen stone alignments such as seven ten-meter wide, cobblestone boat slips, stone lined *aguadas* ([Figure 8](#), shown below), and discrete structures allowing staff to concentrate on mapping, surface collection by structures, and carefully placed excavations. As shown in Figure 8, the site of Saktunja consists of numerous earthen platforms constructed with rough and shaped limestone retaining walls, built up on high ground that witnessed significant cultural terracing in the ancient past. As the population grew the community expanded and built up the outer perimeters of the site with layers of crushed sherds and marl capping.



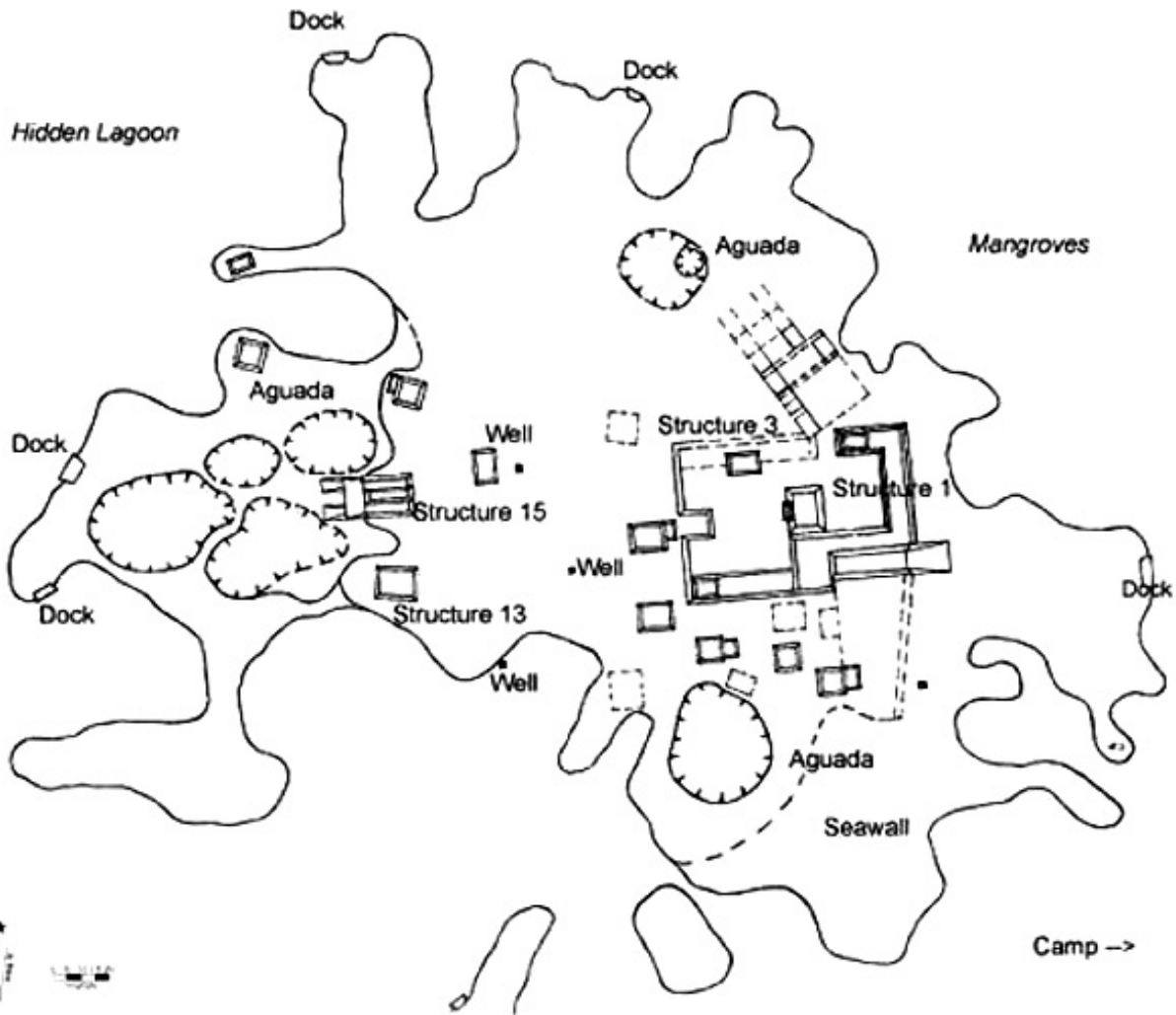


Figure 8. Map of Saktunja, 1999, Northern Belize Coastal Project.

The mere survival of this community required the skills of hydraulic managers and engineers and a consummate knowledge of the fragile environment. These managerial elite had to create and maintain features not only to keep salt water in for evaporation, but also to keep it separate from fresh water, a difficult task considering frequent flooding, tropical storms, hurricanes, and tidal currents. The community also built a substantial sea wall of shaped stones on the ocean side of the site. Survey revealed artifacts typical of a flourishing Late Classic community with lingering populations into the Postclassic. There was full time residential occupation, in which, at least some members apparently enjoyed a high standard of living (Mock 1994).

Moreover, stone alignments and terraces on the peripheries of the fresh water creek and now semi-dry Hidden Lagoon may continue south to Midwinter's Lagoon and north to the southern tip of Northern River Lagoon. Future field research will examine this

possibility. For now we have a detailed map of a Late Classic to Postclassic (A.D. 680-1500) coastal site in north central Belize to use as a model or imprint for future archaeological investigations of the NBCP. Ensuing discussion will focus on three structures.

### **Operation 1A-Structure 1**

A series of terraces leads up to the only plaza group located so far at the site. This plaza group ([Figure 8](#)) is typical of the Late Classic, with Structure 1 being the most prominent mound at the site. The eastern side of the structure facing the plaza had three slumped stairs set with large unshaped stones overlaying a cut stone alignment. Presumably there was some remodeling during the later stages of the Terminal Classic. Both the large looter's hole and mango tree at the apex of the structure created disturbances in the northern sector of the mound, thus leading to determination of Operation 1A. The looter's trench was cleaned up and the northern edge profiled. Surface collections revealed a number of ceramics characteristic of the Late Classic such as Achote Black and Palmar polychromes with an admixture of Postclassic red slipped ceramics. A few typical applique sherds of Postclassic gray censer ware were recovered. Presumably, the prominence of this mound would have encouraged not only looting but surface collection in the past, thus biasing the presence of Late Postclassic presence.

Excavations placed at the southwest corner of the structure revealed a continuation of this sloping row of uncut, upright stones and series of alterations and stone reuse through time to the original cut stone alignment and plaza floor. Artifacts recovered in the construction fill were few, but as anticipated, date to the Late Classic period. Other artifacts recovered in the immediate area include a jade ear flare. There was also indication of a Colonial presence in the plaza area by the recovery of a pipe manufactured from a large conch columella, bottle glass, a chert gun flint, and a side-notched arrow point.

### **Operations 3A, 4A, Structures 14 and 15**

Structures 13 and 14 ([Figure 8](#)) were singled out for excavation because of the strong evidence of Terminal Classic to Postclassic occupation and their location adjacent to stone-lined aguadas on the western edge of a high ridge running east-west across the site. The association of structures with aguada features provides a context in which to review water catchment systems and control by elite managers. Indeed, deep and well-stratified transition deposits (and floors) were found layered on Late Classic structures. This discovery is important, for the Terminal Classic to Postclassic transition is poorly known; shallow, eroded surface deposits being generally characteristic of Postclassic sites rather than deep midden deposits. Moreover, there were signs of ritual activity on and between the floors of the structures such as dedicatory and termination activities,

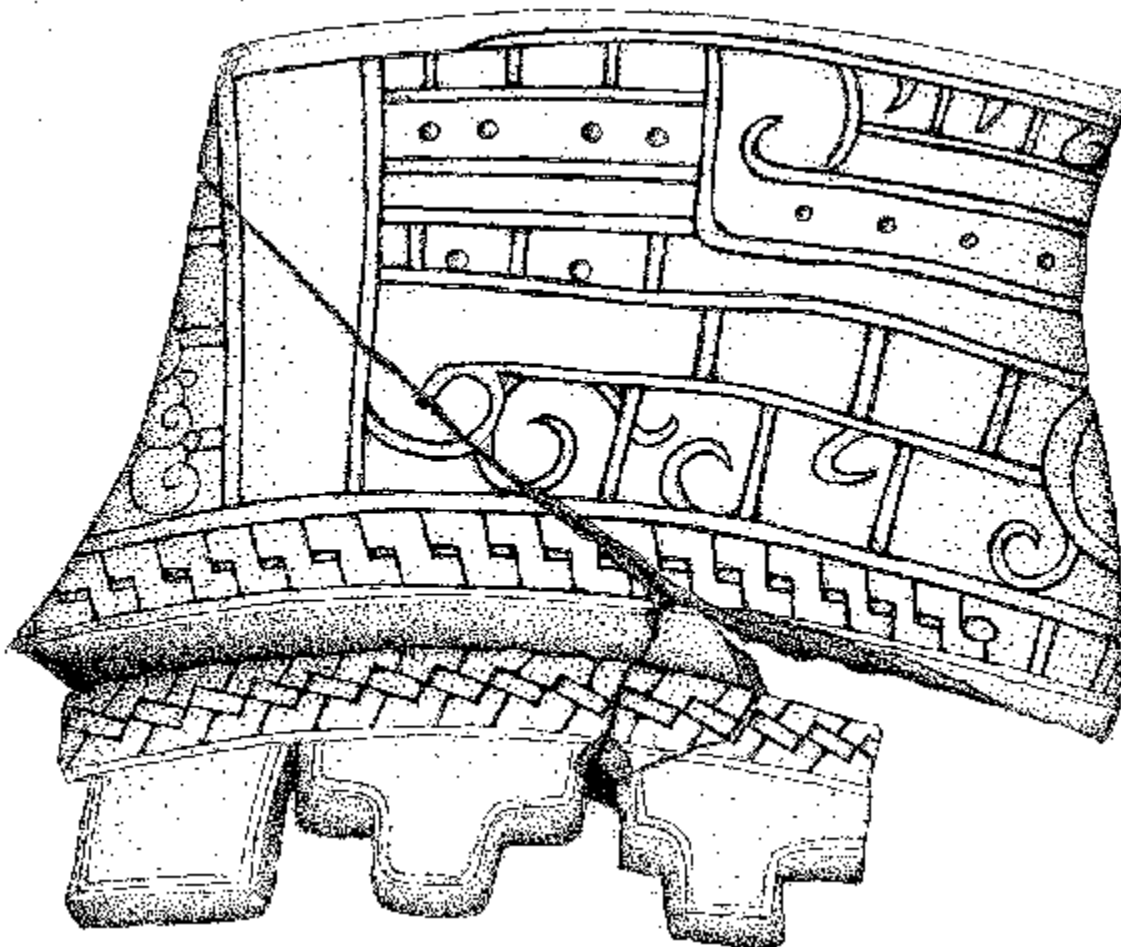
feasting episodes, the deposition of censers, and artifacts imbued with water-related symbolism ([Figure 9](#)).



Figure 9. Post Classic Sandy-paste Censer.

Structure 14 was initially called Chili Pepper Mound due to the great numbers of chili pepper plants growing on its surface, presumably the remnants of an ancient kitchen garden. Designated as Operation 3A, a 2-x-1- m test unit was set up on the western portion of the mound to locate midden deposits. The first lot revealed evidence of termination activities such as breaking and scattering of Postclassic vessels. As the excavations progressed they revealed the presence of a functional Postclassic assemblage (ground stone, net sinkers, jars, bowl, and comal fragments, perforated censer fragments, spindle whorls etc.) and dense deposits of fish bone (see below). Excavations on Structure 14 also revealed a well-preserved burial intruded through the

Postclassic deposits placed on a Late Classic floor later. The burial was capped by an ephemeral packed surface. The burial, from what we observed in the wall profile contains at least two smashed large Lamanai-style censers ([Figure 10](#)).



**Figure 10.** Lamanai-style, red-slipped censer fragment.

The positioning of Operation 4A on Structure 15 ([Figure 8](#)) was based on the identification and subsequent systematic collection of a high density of cultural material on the surface of the highest platform. It is a peculiar structure that appears to be cardinally oriented and dates primarily to the Late to Terminal Classic Period with later Postclassic alterations. The long, central platform is flanked on either side with lower, elongated platforms, all of which interface a smaller, lower platform to the west. What appear to be two ramp-like features descend into the eastern-most aguada. One of the previously mentioned sandy paste incense burners was recovered at the base of an intrusive pit feature. It is distinguished by its applique, splayed frog motif, step-fret flange, and base with a crenellated-like design, typical of the Postclassic ([Figure 9](#)).

Deposited along with the vessel was a sizable piece of mammal bone, preliminarily identified as manatee. These discrete deposits exposed in the eastern wall of the unit appeared to represent a portion of a larger pit deposit, probably a burial, which could not be entirely exposed during the 1999 season.

A high density of elite items, including finely made ceramic ollas (storage jars), polychromes, serving platters, and figurines, as well as worked marine shell, imported stone tools, and obsidian was recovered in Operation 4A. Special finds included marine shell beads and a ceramic net weight. Notably, while a ubiquitous amount of salt-making debris was common throughout much of the site, especially along the shorelines, only a very light density was observed in Lot 1, Operation 4B. This absence indicates that little to no salt production occurred at the terminus period of occupation, around A.D. 1000-1300 at this locale.

### **An Enterprising Community: Salt making, Fishing, Shell Working, and Trade**

We know that the Saktunja community, like other coastal sites, was producing salt by boiling seawater in the Late Classic period, presumably to trade for products of interior sites. For example, evidence suggests the community may have traded with Colha for agricultural products or stone tools ([Figure 11](#)).



Figure 11. Late Classic Stemmed Chert Blades.

Large concentrations of crude, broken ceramics (thin walled bowls) and expended clay cylinders used to hold the salt boiling vessels and molds over the fire are in evidence on the surface and in Operations 1B, 3A, and 4A ([Figure 12](#)).



Figure 12. Expanded Clay Cylinders used in Salt Making.

Some of the typically broken and burned cylinders were found in situ, always-stuck upright in a marly matrix. We also found features suggesting the evaporation of seawater to produce concentrated brine prior to the boiling, thus maximizing what would be a labor and fuel intensive process. By necessity, salt making would have been a dry season activity in Belize, the salt molds if not distributed locally, stored for canoe transportation during the rainy season when the rivers were flowing. Importantly, ceramics associated with the salt making vessels and cylinders are typical of the Late to Terminal Classic, thus anchoring this specialized activity to this time period. Counts of potsherds associated with salt production are considerably lower in the Postclassic upper lots excavated at the site, supporting this conjecture.

Large concentrations of marine fish bone and turtle, clearly beyond needs of the local population indicate that salt also may have been used to preserve fish for inland site consumers. The dense deposits of bone were water-screened in the field for maximum recovery of information in the faunal analysis. Local fisherman at the site still salt fish ([Figure 13](#)) and report that it can last up to four years, thus providing a valued protein supplement to inland sites.



**Figure 13. Salted Fish: Saktunja.**

A number of Late Classic ceramic net sinkers of varying sizes found in the excavations support this contention. Presumably, many of the utilized chert bifaces recovered in Late to Terminal Classic deposits were also hafted and used as spears to catch fish in the more shallow lagoon waters.

Fishing appears to have been important also in the Postclassic. Smaller, decorated cylinder style net sinkers characterize this time period. Obsidian blades are also found in large frequencies in association with the fish bone suggesting their use as a processing tool. Replicative experiments in the field proved that obsidian blades would have been suitable tools to fillet a fish. Fishing would have required the labor of an organized group. The ongoing faunal analysis will provide some insight into the intra site distribution of species and temporal changes in their use.

### **Shell Working**

The NBCP staff documented another important economic activity in 1999, shell blank, tool, and ornament production. In fact we were able to document specialized activity areas such as shell working clearly beyond the needs of the local populace during the Late to Terminal Classic, with the recovery of conch blanks, ornaments, and expended



spirals. During the Postclassic, emphasis seems to have been on the processing of freshwater clams for ornaments or ad hoc use.

## **Ceramic Analysis**

In pursuant to NBCP's goals, the ceramic analysis focused on the presence of transitional modes and attributes crucial to understanding stylistic and functional changes relative to other sites in northern Belize. These subtle transitions are especially notable in the red-slipped ceramics that exhibit characteristic of both the Late Classic and Postclassic. For instance, the more opaque red, late slips appear on traditional Late Classic forms such as thin-walled tinajas, leading into typical Postclassic jar forms. Transition Late Classic-style unslipped utility jars herald the Postclassic in rim modes and surface treatment.

Changes in forms are also represented. A noted variation and change in vessel sizes within the excavation lots of Operations 3B and 4B may be due to different foods cooked or new methods of cooking. Comals and colanders, for instance, appear in the early part of the Postclassic (A.D. 900-1000) at Structure 14 ([Figure 10](#)) and may be related to an elite food technology. Large bowls phase out in the Postclassic to more diminutive bowls with supports. Changes in vessel size may also relate to changes in household size, wealth or status, or modes of food preparation or consumption between these two periods.

Palmar Orange-polychrome plates occur frequently on the surface of the site and in the excavations, the only notable exception being Structure 14, on which Operation 3 deposits date to the Postclassic. Although identical to the plates recovered at Colha and Northern River Lagoon, the polychromes here show subtle differences that may reflect Saktunja's secondary ranking in a chain of coastal trading hierarchies. As the ceramics transition into an almost exclusive Postclassic red-slipped tradition, the polychromes generally become cruder, rounded rims replacing beveled rims within the same type. For more detailed information on the ceramics see Mock (1994, 2000).

## **Stone Tool Analysis**

Both lithic technology and production mode changed remarkably from the Late Classic to the Postclassic. Preliminary observations suggest obvious differences between Late Classic and Postclassic access to and use of chert sources. Inhabitants of Structures 13 and 14 clearly had access to a different, honey-colored chert during the Postclassic. The inhabitants also favored more informal tool forms. Small utilized stemmed blades ([Figure 11](#)) typical of Colha and the larger, bifacially trimmed stemmed blades, both traditionally placed in the Late to Terminal Classic (e.g., Hester 1989) were scattered over the surface of the site. However, they occur to a lesser degree in excavations focused on Structures 14 and 15. Presumably, as a secondary consumer, Saktunja received them via Northern River Lagoon from Colha, where such blades were

produced for trade. However, the presence of primary and secondary flakes indicates some degree of artifact manufacture and resharpening taking place locally through time. Postclassic diagnostic tool forms such as side-notched dart points, bipointed bifaces, and a triangular biface were recovered in the surface collection. Some of the tool forms are manufactured from chalcedony (Michaels 1994).

Utilized obsidian blades, as at other coastal sites, were found in great frequencies in Late Classic to Postclassic deposits, suggesting their use in a specialized activity in the community such as fish processing. Only two small expended cores were recovered in surface deposits suggesting that blade manufacture at Saktunja occurred on site during the Postclassic occupation. For additional information on the stone tool analysis see Mock 2000.

## **Conclusions**

With the assistance of FAMSI and Mr. Hilly Martinez for the field season, and Dr. Fred Valdez, Director of the Programme for Belize, in the analysis phase, NBCP continues to make significant advances toward understanding the larger question of why and when the Maya settled these remote coastal areas. The argument that diversification strategies of inland communities during the Late Classic included settlement of these remote coastal areas, thus broadening resource bases through specialized products and the expedition of exchange networks still holds. However the 1999 field season and analysis will undoubtedly change some of the ideas about the behavioral-material configurations that characterize the Late Classic to Postclassic transition. Saktunja is but a microcosm of other coastal sites serving a number of functions in local exchange networks and regional trading. Through the 1999 Field Season we are just beginning to understand a cultural landscape of inter-linked rivers and lagoon waterways binding these settlements to the broader regional economy.

## **List of Figures**

[Figure 1.](#) A View from the Lagoons.

[Figure 2.](#) Map of the Northern Belize Coastal Project (NBCP).

[Figure 3.](#) Aerial shot of Saktunja and Northern River Lagoon.

[Figure 4.](#) Rocky Point Landing site.

[Figure 5.](#) Palmar Orange-polychrome.

[Figure 6.](#) Zacatal Cream-polychrome.

[Figure 7.](#) Daylight Orange: Dark Night Variety.

[Figure 8](#). Map of Saktunja, 1999, Northern Belize Coastal Project.

[Figure 9](#). Post Classic Sandy-paste Censer.

[Figure 10](#). Lamanai-style, red-slipped censer fragment.

[Figure 11](#). Late Classic Stemmed Chert Blades.

[Figure 12](#). Expeded Clay Cylinders used in Salt Making.

[Figure 13](#). Salted Fish: Saktunja.

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