

21 **SITUATING HOUSEHOLDS WITHIN AN URBAN COMMUNITY: RECENT RESEARCH AT AVENTURA, AN ANCIENT MAYA CITY**

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Recent excavations at the Maya site of Aventura, Belize provide insights into the social, economic, and environmental resources available to the residents of its ancient urban community. In 2019, the Aventura Archaeology Project (AAP) horizontally excavated three households and continued vertical test-pit investigations across commoner and elite domestic groups. The horizontal excavations, comparable to previous excavations of households in 2018, provided new insights into the similarities and differences between structures, features, burials, and middens across status groups at Aventura. One household excavation, Group 54, elucidated commoners' access and relationships to a nearby water management feature. Commoner household excavations at Group 24, one of the smallest mound features identified by the AAP survey, revealed that even the smallest of Aventura's households had access, though limited, to cut limestone blocks for domestic architecture. Excavations of an elite patio group, Group 38, to the north of the site core provided architectural data which complicate distinctions between elite and non-elite households. These excavations of households across the site also revealed a pattern of primary and secondary subfloor-burial deposits across elite and non-elite groups, which may indicate an attempt to socially integrate households of all statuses into Aventura's urban community. Vertical test excavations further support Aventura's community was inhabited over the long-term, with multiple households revealing Early and Middle Classic materials, and all households revealing occupation during the Late to Terminal Classic transition. Together, household excavations provide insights into the social, economic, and environmental forces that shaped the lives of Aventura's urban community, bringing better focus to heterogenous and enduring urban populations during dynamic periods of Maya society.

Introduction

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Aventura Archaeology Project (AAP) conducted its second year of household excavations at the Maya site of Aventura, Belize, in 2019. These excavations provided insights into the social, economic, and environmental resources available to residents of an ancient city. During our 2019 season, the AAP team horizontally excavated three households and continued vertical test-pit investigations across domestic groups at the site. The horizontal excavations, comparable to previous excavations of households in 2018, provided new insights into the similarities and differences between structures, features, burials, and refuse deposits across status groups at Aventura. Together, these investigations elucidated the forces that shaped the lives of Aventura's residents, bringing better focus to heterogeneous and enduring urban populations during dynamic periods of ancient Maya society.

The site of Aventura is a medium-sized ancient Maya city, located in the contemporary district of Corozal, Belize (Figure 1). Since the AAP's inception in 2015, under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia Robin, the project has surveyed the site and documented 246 archaeological features

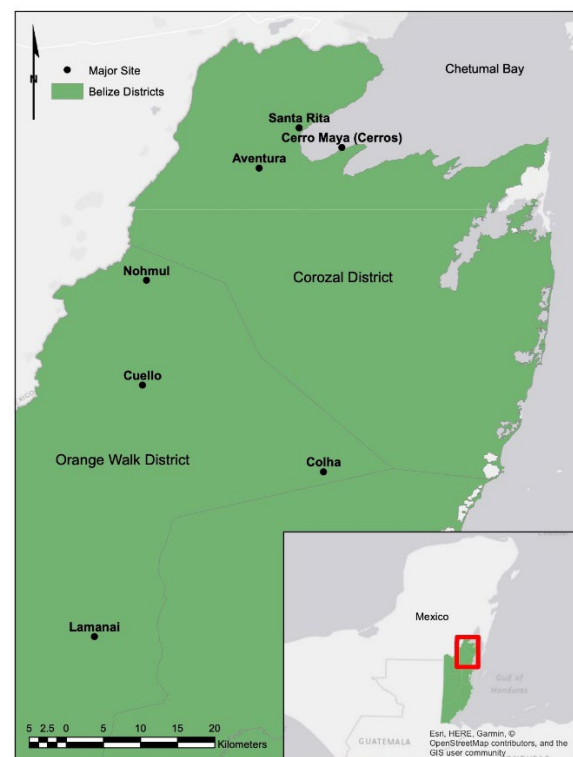


Figure 1. Map of Belize showing location of Aventura and other key ancient Maya sites (generated by Nissen).

within a 1 km sq area (Fitzgerald 2018). And in 2018 we began conducting excavations of households to assess the diversity of settlement at

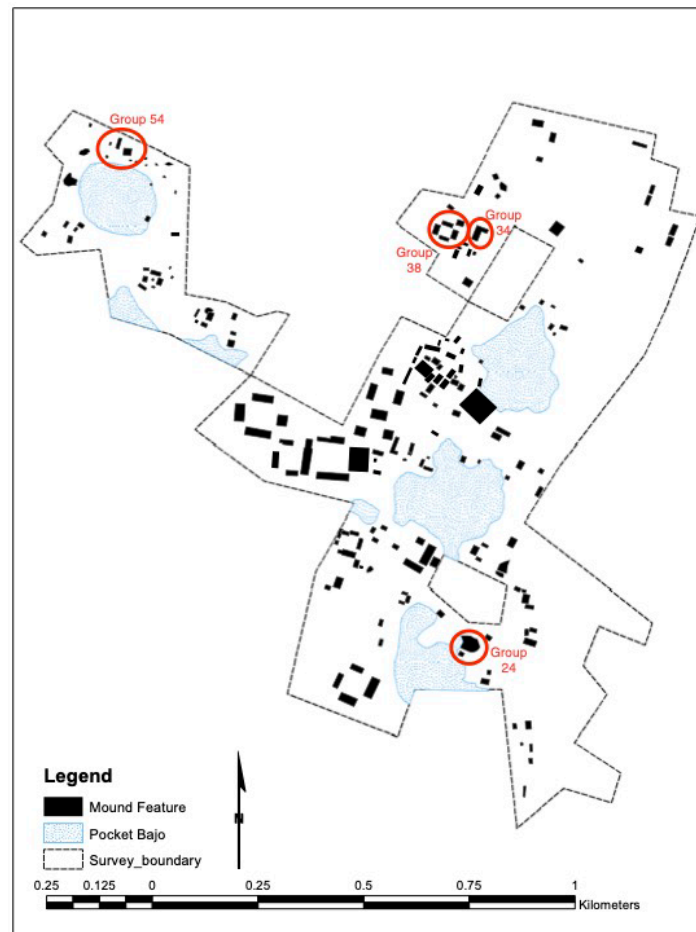


Figure 2. Survey map of Aventura depicting groups excavated in 2019 (generated by Nissen).

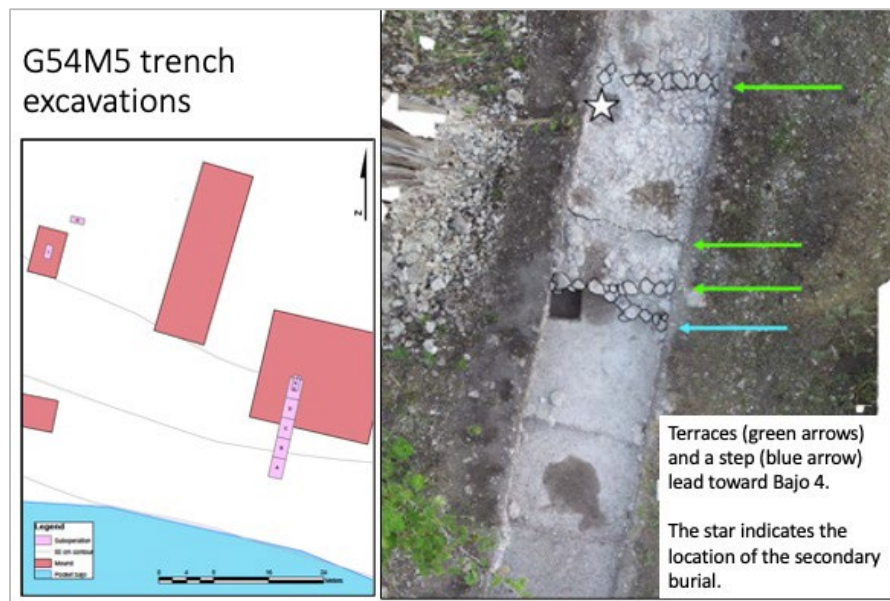


Figure 3. Group 54 and Op 14 Trench (Generated by Grauer).

the site and examine the lives of the city's residents, from unassuming commoner households to the impressive masonry residences of elites (Grauer *et al.* 2020).

Our work prior to the 2019 season, through the ceramic analysis of Laura Kosakowsky, indicates that Aventura was initially settled in the Late Preclassic and grew to its maximal population during the extended terminal classic from 750 – 1100 CE (Kosakowsky 2018). Understanding Aventura's growth and persistence during this period has been central to the investigations of our project, as this was also a period where cities in the Peten region were experiencing dramatic social, environmental, and economic changes that resulted in the depopulation of many classic period centers and the decline of divine rulership.

At Aventura, we define households as groups of mounds located around a patio, or when a central patio is absent, as groups of mounds within a 20m distance of one another (Nissen 2018). Household groups at the site contain mounds that are all less than 5m in height and radiate out from the monumental and civic-ceremonial core of the city. Looking at the settlement data, two groups of non-monumental architecture emerge that comprise three different types of residential architecture: low-lying substructures that supported perishable domestic superstructures, part-masonry superstructures with thatch roofs, and fully masonry superstructures with corbel vaulted roofs (Nissen 2022). In this paper, we delve into the 2019 household excavations to flesh out similarities and differences across two commoner and two elite household at Aventura (Figure 2).

Operation 14, Commoner Household excavations at Group 54

The first excavations we will discuss were directed by Kacey Grauer, who conducted a trench excavation, four test units and a posthole program at Group 54, as part of her dissertation research (Grauer 2021). Group 54 is a commoner household group composed of 5 mound features located approximately 1 km west of the site core along the edge of pocket *Bajo* 4 (Figure 3). Designated as Op.14, Grauer's excavations sought to assess the household's relationship to pocket *Bajo* 4, and to determine the function of

an ancillary structure near the main house mounds.

To investigate the household's relationship to the nearby pocket *bajo*, a trench excavation was conducted along the mound running from the top of the structure down toward *Bajo* 4. It revealed that G54M5 consisted of a platform supporting two substructures that would have supported perishable superstructures. The platform was constructed in sixteen phases of alternating fills and ballasts, with a total of four floors. The platform consisted of three levels and exhibits evidence of a small step from the lowest level leading from the top of G54M5 toward *Bajo* 4.

The recovery of a high variety of artifact types from Operation 14 excavations, along with the presence of a primary burial underneath floors, suggests that G22M3 was indeed a household. Artifact types uncovered include ceramics, obsidian, chert, ground stone, and shell. Ceramics ranged from utilitarian to ritual in function.

At least three interred individuals were encountered during excavation. A secondary burial was encountered just south of the second terrace of the platform. The burial consisted of a smashed black slipped bowl containing human teeth and a fragment of a bone, possibly mandibular or cranial. A primary burial of an adult individual associated with a subadult secondary burial was encountered in a cut in the platform of G54M5 in between the two substructures, radiocarbon dated to 693-967 CE. An upturned Corona Red hemispherical bowl was placed on top of the cranium of the adult individual. Human teeth lacking roots were encountered upon fine screen soil from an upturned Unnamed red-on-red deep bowl.

The trench excavation also demonstrated the importance of *Bajo* 4 to the Group 54 household, as they revealed a terraced platform of the structure, as well as the small step, that would have facilitated movement between the dwelling area and the pocket *bajo*. This suggests the commoners living here had the ability to physically access *Bajo* 4. Additionally, the presence of the secondary burial on the backside of the structure facing the pocket *bajo* points toward the ideological significance of pocket *bajos*. It is possible that this secondary burial is

the remains of ancestor veneration, suggesting people living here were accessing nonhuman worlds in association with *Bajo* 4.

In addition to the trench excavation in G54M5, Grauer conducted a test excavation at G54M3, a small ancillary structure measuring 0.29 meters high. Due to its size and location, she posited that this structure may be the remains of a kitchen. The features encountered during excavation, including a possible hearth, confirm this. The structure was built in three phases from the Early to Middle Classic. However, its collapse has a *Terminus Post Quem* of the Middle to Late Classic, indicating there may have been a final later construction phase that has not preserved.

Along the western edge of the excavation, we encountered a burn feature on top of a sascab surface. This was a 10cm thick area of loose, gravely sediment with layers of ash. Additionally, a large amount of burning was evident in the profile, and there was a line of burned stones encountered to the west. Directly in the center of the structure, there was a cut in the sascab with a near perfect east-west orientation, which contained refuse. Refuse 2 contained a wide variety of artifacts consisting of ceramics, lithics, ground stone, and shell. It also contained a significant amount of ash and burned material. The *Terminus Post Quem* for this midden is the Early Classic, indicating it was deposited at the same time the earliest phase of the structure was built. Phytolith and starch grain analysis are currently underway in the hopes of elucidating what plant materials may have been prepared and disposed at G54M3.

In her efforts to assess the function of the pocket *bajos* at Aventura, Grauer also conducted a test excavation in the center of *Bajo* 4. The excavations in *Bajo* 4 revealed interesting data that contributes to the notion that the pocket *bajo* may have been filled with water during ancient Maya occupation. Elsewhere in the Maya region, archaeologists have demonstrated that the ancient Maya maintained water management features by clearing sediment out of them (Dunning *et al.* 2015). This corroborates oral histories that indicate pocket *bajos* at Aventura held water as recently as the War of Castes in Mexico (1847-1901) when the historic village of *San Jose de los Abanes* was founded (R. Aban, personal

communication date). This is further complemented by Grauer's more recent phytolith analysis that demonstrates *Bajo* 2 at Aventura was much wetter in the past than it is today (Grauer 2021).

In sum, Excavations in Operation 14 demonstrate that the commoners living at G54 had access to *Bajo* 4 and the water contained therein. They had access to both the physical aspects of water, as demonstrated by the presence of steps, and metaphysical access, as demonstrated by the evidence of ancestor veneration in between the dwelling and the pocket *bajo*. Interestingly, both these types of access were also implicated in excavations of an elite household on a pocket *bajo* edge in the site core (Grauer *et al.* 2020; Grauer 2021). This suggests elites and commoners alike had access to multiple important aspects of water at Aventura.

Operation 15, Commoner Household excavations at Group 24

The second household we present here was excavated by Zachary Nissen, as part of his doctoral research, at Group 24 (Nissen 2022). Composed of a single mound, standing a mere 20 centimeters tall, G24 represents one of the smallest households identified by the AAP. Here, we credit the project's meticulous pedestrian survey, because G24 was not documented by Sidrys and colleagues survey of northern Belize in the 1970s (Sidrys 1983). Furthermore, Cynthia Robin discusses how small mounds (less than 1m in height) were too small to identify in recent LiDAR imagery of the site, leaving their discovery up to traditional pedestrian survey techniques (see Robin, this volume). Despite the difficulty of identifying small mounds, G24 is identifiable as a surface as a scatter of limestone rubble and artifacts (ceramics, chert, and groundstone) along the edge of *Bajo* 3, about a half a kilometer from the site core.

In 2018, Nissen conducted test excavations at the group which revealed it to be the remains of a single-phase residential building composed of a limestone rubble filled substructure, covered by a single plaster floor that would likely have supported a perishable superstructure, likely pole-and thatch, that has since decomposed (Nissen 2019b). Artifacts

from the fill and a nearby refuse deposit indicate the structure was occupied during the Late Classic.

Nissen returned in 2019 to conduct a horizontal exposure of the domestic structure, which revealed a low, but impressive substructure facing Pocket *Bajo* 3 (Figure 4). The substructure was composed of a limestone rubble fill with a single plaster floor and a low-lying basal wall. The basal was constructed with two courses of parallel cut stones outlining the edge of the substructure, which would have likely supported a superstructure constructed with perishable materials such as pole-and-thatch. The Op.15 exposure confirmed at least one phase of occupation, as well as a secondary burial placed in the rubble fill under Floor 1. The secondary burial consisted of an upturned tripod bowl, which AAP Ceramicist, Debra Walker, preliminarily typed as Kik Red. Upon removing the bowl, excavators discovered four and a half very poorly preserved tooth crowns, which were identified by Anna Moles as representing those of a young adult individual.

Following the exposure of the G24M1, Nissen opened a series of interior units designed to excavate the front centerline of the structure. The interior excavations consisted of a trench utilizing 2 x 3m units along the front center of the structure, which revealed the mound's stratigraphy down to the limestone bedrock. An additional unit was placed outside the trench to excavate the area below the secondary burial, which revealed a primary burial. Primary Burial 9, like the secondary burial, was poorly preserved and consisted primarily of long bones. However, Nissen's team did find a metatarsal shaft, vertebral fragments, and 5 teeth from another young adult individual. Along the front/center of the structure we discovered a second upturned ceramic vessel, a smashed jar. There were no human remains associated with this deposit, but Nissen found a single chert flake underneath the jar. As this deposit was found within the fill beneath the front step of the G24 substructure, we interpret this deposit as some kind of cache or dedicatory deposit.

Outside of the special finds, the Op.15 excavations collected a diverse array of artifact types, from utilitarian ceramics to those of finer quality likely procured through trade like slate

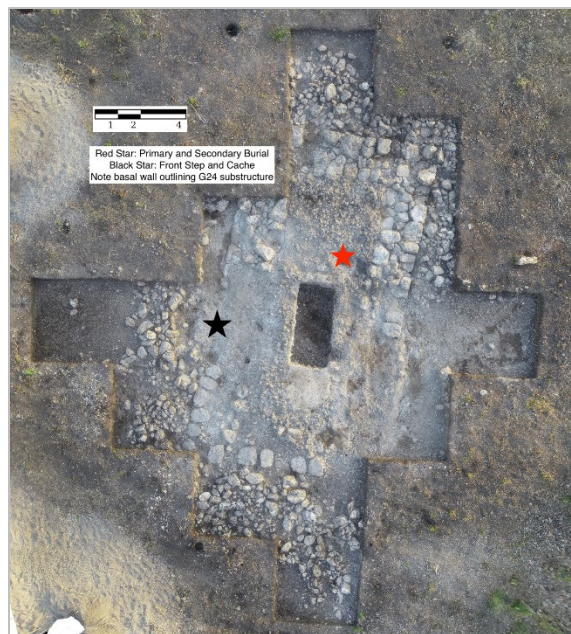


Figure 4. Drone Image of Op.15 Horizontal Excavations (Photo by Nissen).

wares, a ceramic figurine, and a couple spindle whorls, as well as two carved shell beads, obsidian blades and points, and a diverse array of chert types. The only material type not identified by the Op.15 excavations was jade or greenstone, which has been found at other, predominantly elite, households at Aventura.

Together, the Op.15 excavations provided key insights into the architecture, activities, and ritual practices of one of the smallest households identified at Aventura. While G24 is one of the smallest groups mapped by the Aventura Project, the 2019 excavations revealed significant architectural features: including a plaster floor, a basal wall, and a step along the front-center line of the substructure. These features along with the ritual evidence of primary and secondary burials indicate that even low-status residents at Aventura could be active participants in the social and economic networks of the city.

Operations 16 and 17: Elite Household Excavations at Group 38

The third group excavated in 2019 was subject to excavations directed by Gabriela Dziki of UCL and Hanna Hoover of the University of Michigan. Group 38 consists of six mounds, four of which are tightly and cardinally



Figure 5. Group 38 Mound 2 (Photo by Dziki).

arranged around a patio area. The fifth mound is adjacent to the northern mound while another, low-lying mound in the center of the plaza was observed after the area had been cleared of brush in advance of the 2019 field season. Dziki's Operation 16 focused on the largest mound (G38M2) of Group 38. Hoover's Operation 17 sampled the smallest of the group's residential mounds, as well as the central plaza structure. Together, Operations 16 and 17 provide an insight into the architecture of Aventura's residential complex Group 38 and the incorporation of burials into the structures.

The purpose of Operation 16 was to investigate the northern mound of Group 38, G38M2 (Group 38 Mound 2). During her initial exposure of the mound, Dziki documented that G38M2 was actually two separate superstructures on what seemed to be one substructure, which have been subcategorized as the western and eastern buildings of G38-M2.

The eastern building was a masonry structure with a vaulted roof and had only one doorway facing south. The western building, on the other hand, was likely a part masonry part perishable structure with low masonry walls, with few cut stones found in the collapse. Vertical excavations under the floors of the western building uncovered three burials, identified as Primary Burials 6, 7, and 8. Burial 6 was found

in the eastern room containing two individuals placed along the length of the building, the EW axis, while Burials 7 and 8 were found under the floor of the western room, each with one individual along the NS axis.

Dziki's excavation provide insight into how one large structure can offer at least two different types of architectural construction: the eastern building is a large, masonry, corbel vaulted building, while the western building a part perishable, part masonry wall building. The architects of G38M2 were able to connect the two buildings through a step design that links both into one structure (Figure 5).

Moreover, the burials found in the western building run on a different axis, with burial 8 in the western room running on the north-south axis and Burial 6 in the eastern room running on the east-west axis. Even within the same building, excavations revealed differences in how the burials and therefore, the ancestors, were incorporated into the construction process.

Operation 17, directed by Hoover, sought to examine G38M4, the western mound of Group 38, which identified typical residential architecture with a single level substructure (Figure 6). Hoover's excavations revealed two to three courses of cut limestone that likely supported walls and a roof made of perishable materials unlike the full masonry walls of



Figure 6. Group 38 Mound 4 (Photo by Hoover).



Figure 7. Group 34, Mound 1 (Photo by Niles).

G38M2. Excavations exposed a doorjamb along the centerline of the mound and subsequent excavations focused on what was likely the central room of the structure. Given the size of the room relative to the length of the mound, there may have been an additional room to its north.

G38M6 is a mound located just west of the geometric center of the Group 38 plaza. It consisted only of a low lying, single level substructure with no evidence of a masonry superstructure. An interior room, measuring 3.2m by 2.3m, was identified in the northeast corner of the structure and is likely the earliest construction phase of the structure. It sits atop the penultimate plaza floor that unites all of the G38 mounds. Hoover's excavation of this plaza center structure revealed one and maybe two floors of G38M6, three plaza floors, a Crypt, as well as a

primary and secondary burial, in addition to ceramics, obsidian, marine shell, and chert. The central location of G38M6 as well as the layering of Crypt 1, Secondary Burial 11, and Primary Burial 5 below the Group 38 plaza floors suggests that G38M6 was a plaza center shrine structure for the residents of Group 38.

Operation 18, Elite Household Text Excavations

The final set of excavations we present here were directed by Erin Niles. Designed as test excavations to assess the construction history of elite house mounds, Operation 18 exposed one room of an L-shaped residential structure G34M1, a household to the east of Group 38 (Figure 7).

From the excavation of one room in the 'L' shaped elite structure of G34M1, Niles establish that this was an elite vaulted masonry structure. Burning was an important feature in the structure's construction process, as there were several layers of burning, especially in connection to both plaster floors and sascab construction floors. Niles also identified 4 secondary burials under the final-phase building floor in the fill, revealing an emerging pattern of secondary burials found underneath plaster floors at household groups across the city.

Through Operation 18's excavations, Niles also determined that G34M1 had two construction phases. The top 'L' shaped one being from the Late Terminal Classic period, and a second structure being uncovered underneath this one dating to the Early Classic period. Little was discerned of this earlier structure, as only a small portion of it was uncovered. What is known from this investigation is that the structure has basal molding on its exterior, which connects to a plaster plaza floor.

Conclusion

Household excavations reveal the city of Aventura to have had a relatively heterogeneous urban community. From large masonry elite residences, to smaller pole-and-thatch commoner residences, or those that mixed masonry and perishable forms of architecture, residents of all statuses were distributed across the city's landscape. Yet, despite these differences in construction, the 2019 excavations reveal a series

of patterns that extend across groups of all statuses. Excavations of both commoner and elite households have revealed domestic assemblages of diverse material types, with goods like obsidian and fine ceramics having been procured through long-distance trade networks. We are also seeing a pattern of upturned ceramic vessels being interred with primary burials or even with collections of teeth underneath plaster floors. Here, we suggest that Aventura offers important insights into the ways residents of all statuses were integrated into thriving social and economic networks, shedding new light on why the city thrived during the terminal classic, when many other cities were undergoing population decline and political turmoil.

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