



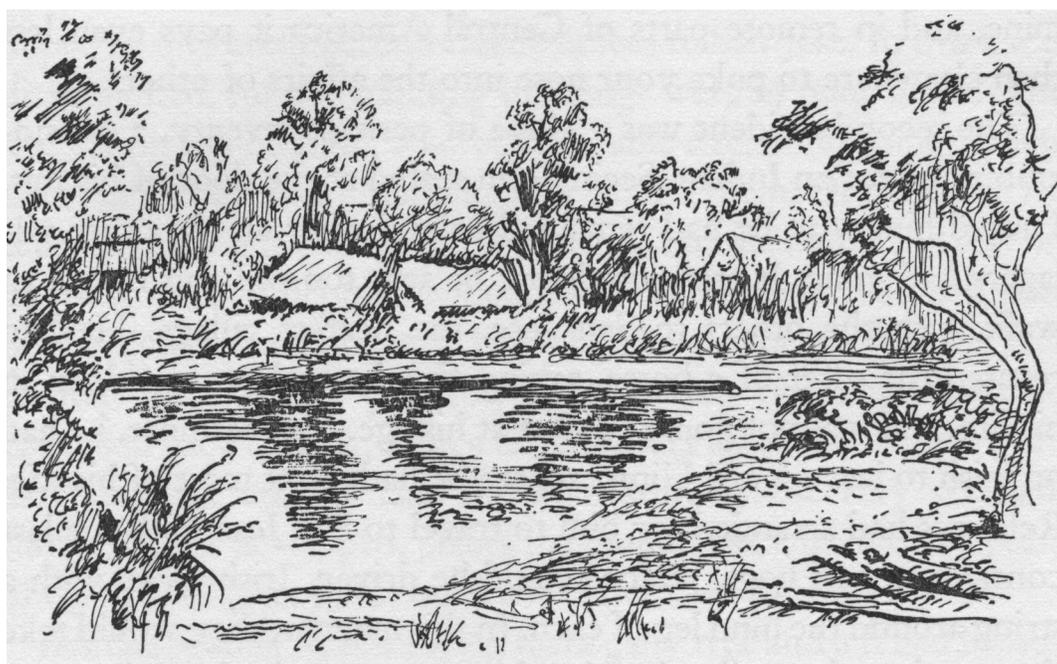
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The Curious Case of Kaxil Uinic

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Introduction

Archaeologists largely ignored northwestern Belize prior to the late 1980s, but several prominent scholars made early forays into the region and the adjacent northeastern Petén in the first half of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, these expeditions were decades ahead of GPS technology and satellite imagery, and it is often difficult today to precisely match the location of ruins reported by the early explorers to those known today. Compounding the confusion is the use of new site names introduced recently that may or may not be referring to previously named ruins. A case in point is the site of Kaxil Uinic, a site very near the Guatemalan border that J. Eric Thompson (1963) planned to excavate in 1931. This article examines the published literature regarding Kaxil Uinic and two more recently reported sites in the general vicinity with the intent of establishing the relationship between the three. Unfortunately, it was not possible to examine field notes from the original explorers, but much can be gleaned from published accounts.

Geographically, the area under consideration is in the south/central portion of the Three Rivers region, a geographically defined study area centered where the modern nations of Belize, Mexico, and Guatemala meet. The region is home to over a dozen medium-to-large size ruins, including Río Azul, La Milpa, Dos Hombres, La Honradez, San José, and what is now known as Chan Chich (Figure 1).

Historically, the area on the Belizean side of the border was owned by the Belize Estates and Produce Company, which opened up a network of roads through the jungle to assist with their mahogany logging operations. Another industry apparently in operation more intensively on the Guatemalan side of the border was chicle harvesting, and Thompson (1963:234–235) makes note of an abandoned settlement he visited in 1931 that “had been an important chicle station of the P. W. Shuffeldt concession” near the site of Chochkitam.

The first scientific archaeological exploration into the area was Alfred Tozzer’s (1913) mule back survey in 1909 and 1910 along the border of Guatemala and British Honduras. While Tozzer (1913) recorded the location of numerous sites and traveled as far north as La Honradez, the focus of his work was excavating the site of Nakum in 1910. Sylvanus Morely spent five days at La Honradez in 1915, and his work was followed by a Tulane University

expedition to the site in 1929 (Von Euw and Graham 1984). Members of the eighth expedition of the Carnegie Institution of Washington to Central America visited and mapped the relatively small site of Chochkitam, notable for its numerous stelae (Morley 1937–38).

Kaxil Uinic

The first mention of Kaxil Uinic in the archaeological literature was in a 1928 article by Frans Blom (1928:170), who, in a discussion about ball courts, mentions:

A ball court was found among a large group of mounds and completely ruined buildings located a few hours’ ride southwest or Kashuunik, a small Maya Indian settlement in British Honduras. These ruins are situated just over the border in the Department of Peten, of Guatemala, and the place has no name.

The village of “Kashuunik” mentioned by Blom, is undoubtedly the village of “Kaxil Uinic” visited by Thompson (1963) a few years later. Thompson (1963:223, 228) arrived in Belize in 1931 with the intention of excavating the ruins of Kaxil Uinic, but while at Hill Bank at the southern end of the New River Lagoon awaiting transportation to the site he learned that the village had been abandoned:

Next morning mules arrived from San Jose to carry us and the greater part of our supplies to Kaxil Uinic, but in the meantime we had learned that this village had been abandoned and all its inhabitants had been moved to San Jose. This was a serious blow, for, counting on getting our workers from the village, we had not brought food supplies for laborers. As much time would be wasted in recruiting labor and sending to Belize for their food, I decided to see if there were suitable ruins in the neighborhood of the Maya village of San Jose, where we could count on local labor.

Thompson (1939, 1963) shifted his efforts to a small group of ruins about 5 km east of the village of San José, referring to the ruins by the same name. During Easter week in 1931, Thompson (1963:232) decided to take a break from the excavations and visit the sites of La Honradez and Chochkitam in Guatemala. Guided by a part-Kechi Maya named Julio Torres, Thompson (1963:232–234) set out:

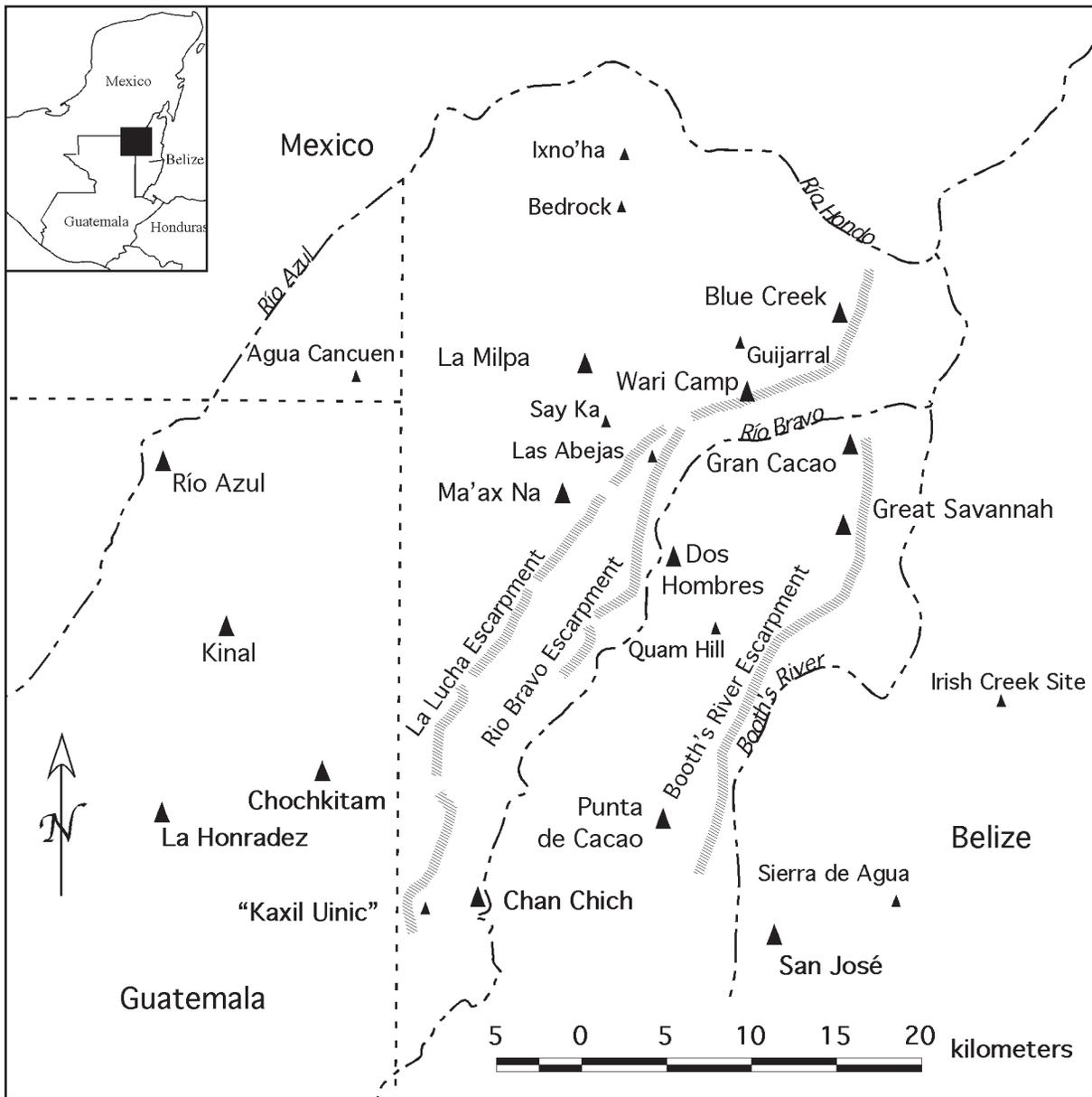


Figure 1. Map of the Three Rivers region. Sites mentioned in the text appear in bold. “Kaxil Uinic” refers to the location of the camp and ruins visited by Thompson (1963) as well as the site of E’kenha reported by Guderjan et al. (1991).

Late in the afternoon of the first day we reached Kaxil Uinic, near which we had originally intended to work. The score of huts scattered around a dirty water hole presented a melancholy appearance...I did not find Kaxil Uinic attractive. There were too many fleas, and the hogs wallowed in our drinking water. We were on our way by sunrise. A few miles brought us to the British Honduras-Guatemala frontier, marked by a straight swathe cut through the forest, and about an hour later we were at Chochkitam, “peccary entrails,” a plant.

From Thompson’s (1963:232–234) description in *Maya Archaeologist* of the remains of the settlement at Kaxil Uinic (Figure 2), it is unclear exactly where the ruins at

which he had originally planned to excavate are in relation to the aguada where the huts were located. On the map of British Honduras included in the San José report (Thompson 1939:Fig. 100), Kaxil Uinic is depicted approximately 5 km west of the Guatemalan border along the Rio Bravo (Figure 3). In Appendix C, an index of ruins in British Honduras, of the San José report, Thompson (1939:280) includes the following entry for the site:

KAXIL UINIC. (Xaxe Venic, Kax Uinic). Mounds, sculptured stela, plain altar. Second group on west bank of R. Holmul (Bravo) one league southeast. Ball-court group in Guatemala “some hours away” listed by Blom under this site name. Blom, 1928, p. 170; Thompson, field notes, 1931.

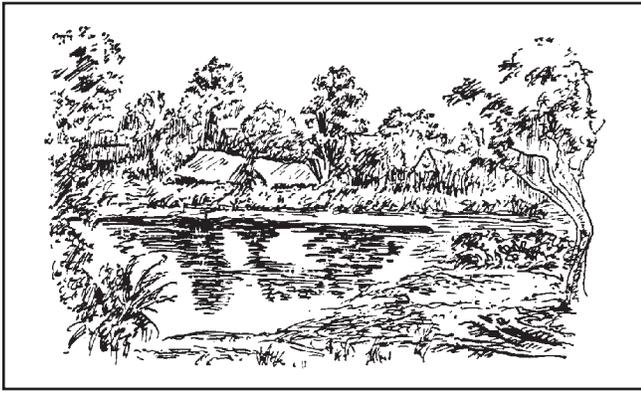


Figure 2. Sketch of Kaxil Uinic, after Thompson (1963:Fig. 22). The original caption reads, “Part of Abandoned Kaxil Uinic Water hole in foreground, frequented by hogs and mules for wallowing, was only source of drinking water for villagers.”

Unfortunately, key elements of this description are rather vague. Does he mean that the site is the second group of mounds he encountered on the west bank of the Rio Bravo (which is today called Chan Chich Creek at this point in its course), presumably as he traveled west from San José? Similarly, to what does “one league southeast” refer—that the river was crossed one league southeast of the second group? I interpret this description to indicate that the site (a) is west of the Rio Bravo, (b) is perhaps as far as one league (approximately 3 miles) from the river, and (c) possessed, at least in 1931, a carved stela and plain altar. Thompson’s (1939:Fig. 100) map shows Kaxil Uinic immediately west (about 100 m) of the Rio Bravo, which could suggest that perhaps the “second group” is one league from the first, and the first is on the west bank of the river. Assuming that his path to Kaxil Uinic from San José followed the same logging road that traverses the area today from east to west, one possibility is that, despite the location shown on the map, he considered Kaxil Uinic to be the second group of mounds he encountered after crossing the river on his way west to La Honradez. The first group then could possibly be one Thompson (1963:238) mentions in *Maya Archaeologist*:

After another day in Chochkitam we started home. We got off at 6:15 A.M., passed through Kaxil Uinic, completely deserted, and rested by the Rio Bravo. . . There was a pleasant group of ruins near the river which I briefly examined, one of the hundreds of small unrecorded sites scattered over the whole Maya area. It was placed on top of a low hill with a court surrounded by mounds, the tallest thirty feet high.

From this discussion, published nearly 25 years after the San José report, it appears as if the site of Kaxil Uinic was not the same as the “pleasant group of ruins near the river,” or else Thompson would have certainly referred to them as such. Furthermore, given the description of the group, as being located on a hill and possessing a 30-foot high mound,

the site where he rested is rather large for region. A possible candidate for this group of mounds is the site of Chan Chich.

Chan Chich

Following Thompson return trip through Kaxil Uinic on his way back to San José in 1931, archaeologists disregarded the area for over 50 years. In the 1980s, a prominent Belizean named Barry Bowen purchased approximately 100,000 acres of former Belize Estates Land and Produce Company holdings that included the reported location of the former village and chicle camp of Kaxil Uinic. Shortly thereafter, Bowen reopened an old logging road running west from the small company town of Gallon Jug to the Guatemalan border. He chose the main plaza of a Maya site along this road just west of Chan Chich Creek (the main channel of the Rio Bravo) as the location for a new jungle lodge. Bowen named the site and the lodge “Chan Chich” after the nearby creek (Guderjan 1991:35).

The site known as Chan Chich is approximately 4 km east of the Guatemalan border, on the western bank of Chan Chich Creek. Following the road west into the site from Gallon Jug, the main plaza, which is today the setting for Chan Chich Lodge, is approximately 900 m west of Chan Chich Creek. Several hundred meters north of the site, Little Chan Chich Creek and Chan Chich Creek meet to form the Río Bravo.

Thomas Guderjan (1991:35), as part of a regional reconnaissance in northwestern Belize, visited the site in 1987, as the brush was being cleared, and returned in 1988 and 1990 to map the ruins and record features at the site. Guderjan (1991:35) opted to call the ruins “Chan Chich,” as well, even though he believed they were actually the site of Kaxil Uinic:

Eric Thompson had previously named the site “Kaxil Uinic” after the chicle camp about two miles west of the site, following his standard practice of naming ruins after the nearest named habitation. . . Thompson planned to excavate at the site, but Belize Estates had abandoned the Xaxe Venic (or Kaxil Uinic) camp just prior to Thompson’s arrival (Thompson 1963) and he shifted his work to San José. The only discrepancy between Thompson’s description of Kaxil Uinic and Chan Chich is that Thompson noted a carved stela present at Kaxil Uinic. We can only assume that this has since been plundered.

E’kenha

In his description of Chan Chich, Guderjan (1991:35) notes that west of the site “is a bajo or low-lying area. On the far side of the bajo is the site of E’kenha.” Guderjan et al. (1991:59) include the following description of the site:

E’kenha is also the location of the 1930’s chicle camp of Kaxil Uinic, the community after which Thompson named the site of Kaxil Uinic, now Chan Chich. The water source illustrated in Thompson’s

autobiography (1961:233) [sic], only about 200 m south of the E'kenha site core, as well as artifactual evidence of the chicle camp, have both been located. . . E'kenha consists of at least 13 structures.

. . Structures 3, 6-9, and 12 enclose a small plaza. In the plaza, in front of the major building, Str. 3, is a very badly damaged carved stela and altar.

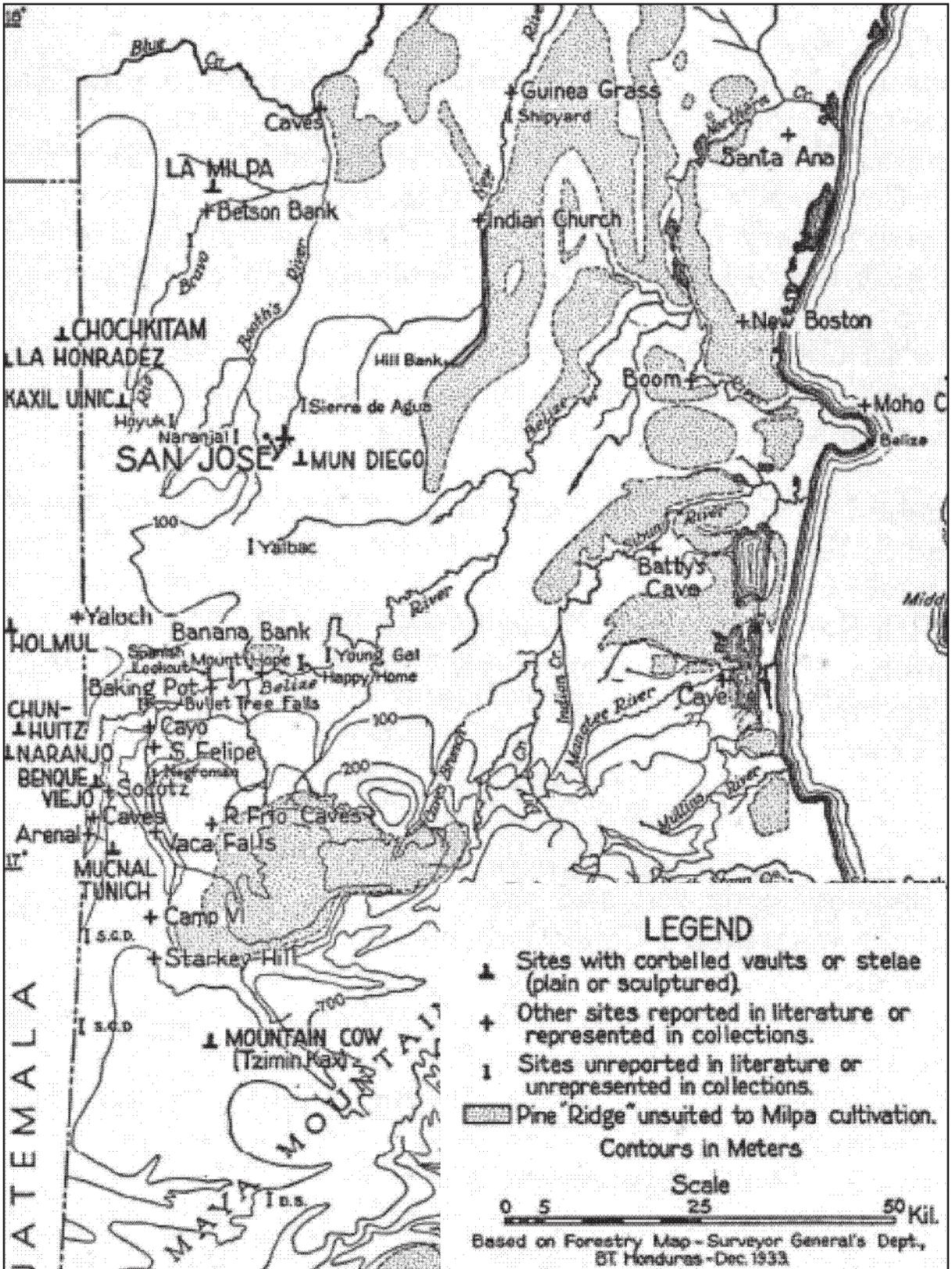


Figure 3. Portion of Thompson's (1939:Fig. 100) "Map of British Honduras Showing Locations of Ruins."

Where and What is Thompson's Kaxil Uinic?

The Chan Chich Archaeological Project (CCAP) conducted mapping in 1996 and excavations in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2001. During the 1998 season, I led a group of CCAP staff and students in an attempt to reach Guatemala by following the old logging road that runs to the west through Chan Chich. In 1998, the old road was still used by the more adventurous staff and guests of Chan Chich Lodge as a hiking trail, the ultimate destination being "Xaxe Venic," as a trail sign called it. While it is unclear if we actually reached Guatemala, we did locate Guderjan et al.'s (1991:59) site of E'kenha, Thompson's (1963:233) "dirty water hole," and evidence of the historic chicle camp of Kaxil Uinic. As reported by Guderjan et al. (1991:59), the ruins near the aguada do contain a badly preserved, but carved, stela and an altar.

So what then is the relationship between Blom's (1928:170) "Kashuunik," Thompson's (1939:280) "Kaxil Uinic," Guderjan's (1991:35) "Chan Chich," and Guderjan et al.'s (1991:59) "E'kenha?" It seems most reasonable to return to Blom's (1928:170) original description of a site several hours' ride from the village of "Kashuunik" and consider those ruins, which have a ball court and are probably at least 5 km away, to be separate from the other sites in question. For now, Blom's (1928:170) site should remain unnamed and essentially unknown. The site of E'kenha is almost certainly part of, if not, the same place Thompson (1939:280) considered to be Kaxil Uinic. Guderjan et al.'s (1991:59) own description of the site mentions that it is located at the former chicle camp of Kaxil Uinic and that it possesses a carved stela and an altar. Carved stelae are exceedingly rare in northwestern Belize, and, given the striking similarities between the descriptions of Kaxil Uinic and E'kenha, it is probable that they are the same site. Here I am following the simplest explanation. Thompson reported a carved stela at Kaxil Uinic, and E'kenha has a carved stela and is located 200 m from the chicle camp of Kaxil Uinic. Therefore, the ruins of E'kenha are most likely those referred to by Thompson (1939:280) as Kaxil Uinic.

The big question remaining unresolved is the relationship between Kaxil Uinic and Chan Chich. Assuming the main road through Chan Chich follows the route of the road used by Thompson in 1931 to travel between San José and La Honradez, Thompson would have passed right through the main plaza of what is now known as Chan Chich. It is unlikely he would have missed the ruins, particularly since the plaza is located on a natural rise and contains the largest structures for several kilometers in all directions. Chan Chich could be the "pleasant group of ruins near the river" that Thompson (1963:238) examined on his return from La Honradez, but it is also possible that he considered the ruins at Chan Chich and the ruins adjacent to the chicle camp at Kaxil Uinic to be the same site. After all, Thompson (1939:280) was familiar with much larger sites, and apparently considered Blom's (1928:170) ball court group, some hours away, to be part of Kaxil Uinic.

Given the fact that "Chan Chich" has become imbedded in the archaeological literature since it was first reported by Guderjan (1991), the name should continue to be applied to the ruins surrounding Chan Chich Lodge. The ruins near the former chicle camp, west of Chan Chich, however, should be referred to as Kaxil Uinic, given their proximity to the camp and their similarity to Thompson's (1939:280) description. The name "E'kenha" should not be used any longer because it only perpetuates confusion.

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