

## The Discovery, Exploration, and Monuments of Nim Li Punit, Belize

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**N**im Li Punit, a Late Classic site in the Toledo District of Southern Belize, is located some 15 kilometers north-east of Lubaantún, the principal Maya center in the region. At approximately 16° 20' N and 88° 51' W, the site is just south of the Golden Stream drainage and some 1.5 kilometers west of the Southern Highway. Nim Li Punit lies on the last ridge in a series of steep foothills on the eastern margin of the Maya Mountains, where the land drops to the coastal plain located at 25 m above sea level (Figure 1).

The ridge upon which the main plaza is located slopes steeply downward on the east, south and west. The elevation of the ridge is approximately 100 m (measured from the site datum located at the south end of the ball court). Ruins extend north onto a higher and flatter hill which is connected to the ridge by a saddle. However, those structures were not bushed or mapped and are not included in this report.

### DISCOVERY

In March 1976, an oil-exploration company

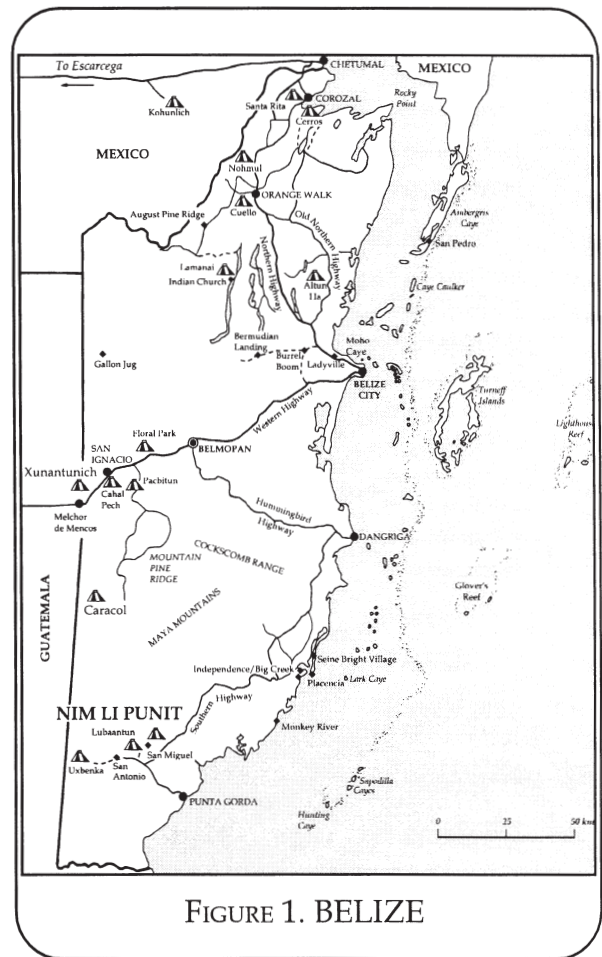


FIGURE 1. BELIZE

ran a seismic line into the foothills of the Maya Mountains, and a bulldozer cut into a stone-faced substructure on the flat hill north of the main plaza. The ruin was reported to Joseph O. Palacio, then Archaeological Commissioner of Belize, who inspected it and discovered the main plaza with its stelae. He named the site Nim Li Punit, “large headdress” in Kekchi, the dominant local Maya language, referring to the towering mask and feathered panache worn by the figure on Stela 14, one of the two monuments fully visible at the time. In the beginning of April, Hammond accompanied Palacio on another visit and was asked to undertake the preliminary exploration to record the monuments in case of looting. The ruins may have been locally known prior to 1976. For instance, in 1970, an informant in Punta Gorda told the senior author of “giant stone heads” in the bush near Golden Stream.

### EXPLORATION

The exploration of Nim Li Punit was done over the weekend of April 22-24, 1976, was directed by Hammond. The crew consisted of volunteers from the Corozal Project at Cuello in northern Belize. Photography was done by Hammond. Wilk supervised several test excavations, including the extraction of the fragments of Stela 2. Howarth drew the four best preserved of the carved stelae: 1, 2, 14, and 15; the two others – the small glyphic panel on Stela 4 and the fragments of Stela 7 – were both too eroded to yield their content<sup>1</sup>. Fritz Johnson and Basilio Ah mapped the main plaza and its surrounding structures running north to the ball court (Figure 2). Kekchi workmen, under Julio Sánchez, cleared the site. Don Owen Lewis provided accommodations at Missouri Farm and the use of his Land Rover each day, and Charles Wright assisted with the excavation of Stela 2; both are local residents. Jaime Awe of the Belize Department of Archaeology made a latex cast of the carving on Stela 14. Barbara MacLeod and members of the El

Pozito Project (directed by Mary Neivens) also assisted. Gordon Roe of Maya Airways provided transportation for the Cuello crew members to and from southern Belize, and the Royal Engineers detachment from Salamanca Camp rigged the sheerlegs and cradle with which Stela 15 was raised.

### THE SITE

The site is built upon the Toledo Beds – a complex series of Oligocene siltstones, sandstones, shales and grits – and Cretaceous or later limestones (Dixon 1955). Jointing in the calcareous sandstones yields roughly rectangular blocks of various sizes. The largest of these were used for the monuments of Nim Li Punit and the smaller ones as building stone for the structures with fills of siltstone and limestone rubble. The same techniques were used at Lubaantún (Hazelden 1975).

Nim Li Punit consists essentially of one small plaza containing numerous monuments and bordered by a ball court, residential areas, long structures which might have been lineage houses (cf. Carmack and Weeks, 1981), and some outlying structures<sup>2</sup>.

Using the construction classification and terminology developed for Lubaantún (Hammond 1975: 140-141), the central precinct of Nim Li Punit consists of a plaza, the surface of which is the top of a large platform (Platform 1, also called the main plaza), modifying the topography and supporting the structures around it (Figure 2). The main plaza is raised some 5 m above the natural ground surface (at the site datum). A stepped retaining wall that formed a stair gives access to the main plaza from the ball court to the north. The main plaza is a maximum 56 by 31 m in area and almost rectangular in plan, narrowing to 13 m wide at its north entry.

Structure 2 is the highest building, and lies on the west side of the main plaza. It is a pyramidal construction with outset stair rising about 11 m above the plaza level. In front of Structure 2 stood Stelae 1 and 2. A

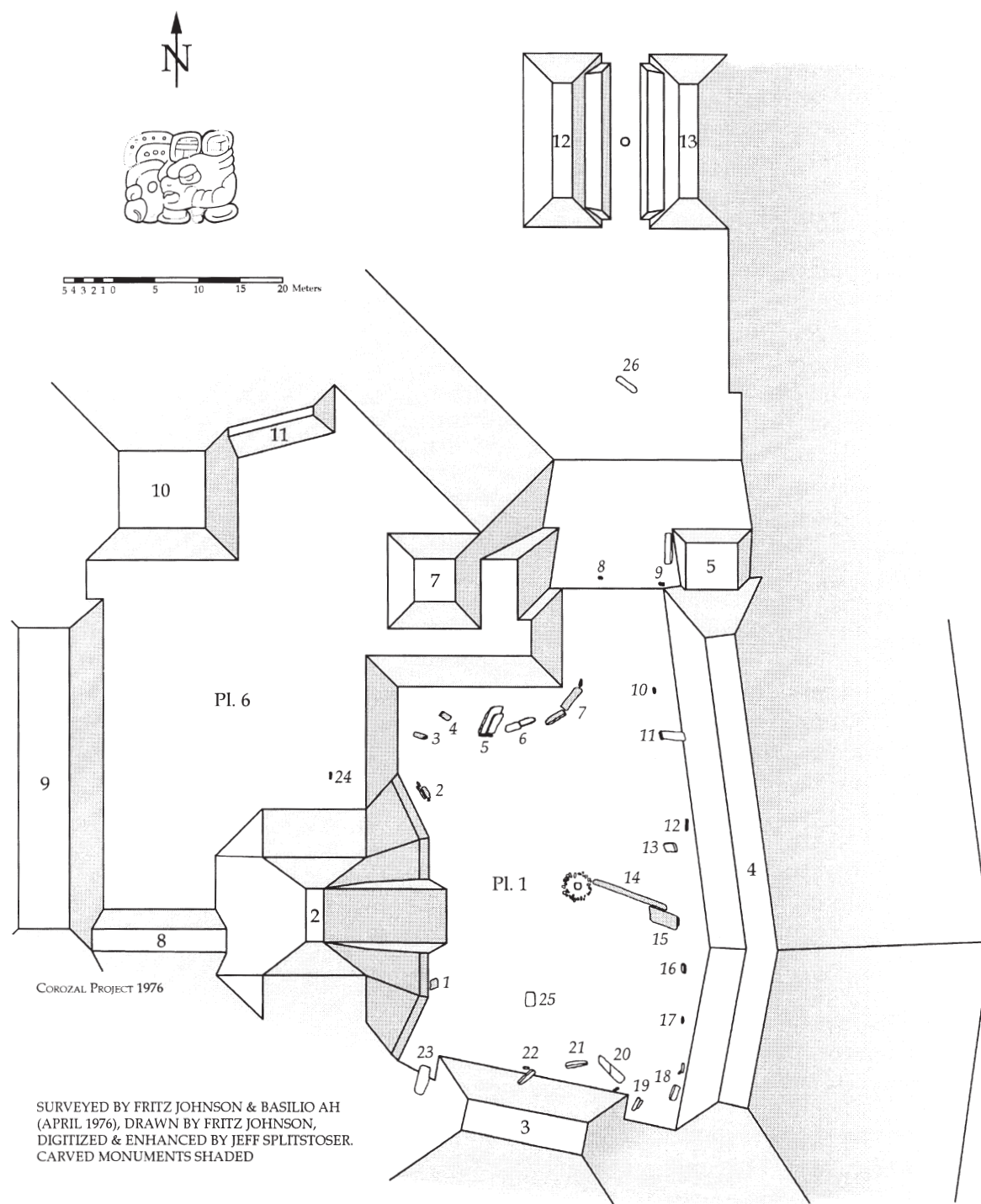


FIGURE 2. MAIN GROUP, NIM LI PUNIT, BELIZE



narrow gap at the southwest corner of the main plaza separates Structure 2 from Structure 3. Structure 3 is 24 m long and 3 m high and occupies most of the southern side of the main plaza. Stelae 19-23, and possibly 25, stood in front of Structure 3.

Structure 4 occupies the entire east side of the main plaza and is 63 m long and 3 m high. A bend in the mound 43 m from its northern end suggests that at least two separate superstructures topped the long mound. Stelae 10-13, and probably 15, stood in front of the northern portion, Stelae 16-18 in front of the southern.

Structure 5 is a low platform projecting from the north end of Structure 4. Stela 9 has fallen beside Structure 5 with its butt resting near its northwest corner. The butt of Stela 8 lies almost in the center of the approach from the ball court to the main plaza. The top of Structure 8 is missing, but, on the basis of cross-section dimensions, it is likely that Stela 26, lying 22 m away down slope towards the ball court, is part of the missing upper section.

On the northwest side and 4 m above the main plaza is Platform 6. The top of Platform 6 forms a small raised plaza bounded by steep retaining walls on its northeast and west sides. Set back from the top of the retaining wall on the northeast side is the small, square Structure 7, 3.5 m high (known from Leventhal's excavations in 1985 to have a collective tomb similar to Lubaantún Op. 38B [Hammond, Pretty and Saul 1975; Hammond 1975: 255-257]). Structure 2, the upper portion of which appears to originate from the platform surface, and Structure 8, a low mound, form the southern border of Platform 6; Structure 9, 40 m long and 2 m high borders Platform 6 on the west. Structure 10, 18 m square and 2 m high, borders Platform 6 on the north. Lower in elevation than Structure 10, Structure 11 is a narrow mound which protrudes from the northeastern corner of Structure 10 a distance of 12 m forming an extension of Platform 6. The northeast side of Platform 6—the retaining wall between Structures 7 and 11—is open

and looks down onto the ball court area.

The ball court consists of twin ranges (Structures 12 and 13) and is very similar to the South Ball Court (Structures 4E and 4W) at Lubaantún in plan, profile and construction. Structures 12 and 13 are each 20 m long separated by a ca. 6 m wide alley. Low playing benches project from Structures 12 and 13 into the alley and constricting it to 3.5 m between them. Excavation revealed one plain, disc-shaped, limestone marker in the center of the alley, 0.9 m diameter.

## THE MONUMENTS

A total of 26 stelae were numbered at Nim Li Punit; since some, such as Stelae 8 and 26, may be parts of the same monument, the actual number of stelae is probably somewhat lower. Further examination of the monuments (e.g., stone types and size), and further excavation may allow researchers to match some of the several butts (i.e., Stelae 10, 12, 17, 24) with shaft fragments (i.e., Stelae 13, part of 18, 19, 21, 23, 25), in which case some movement of monuments towards the southern side of the plaza would be indicated. The stelae were numbered in clockwise order from the southwest corner of the main plaza. Only Stelae 1 and 16 remain standing, although several others lay adjacent to their butts. Visual inspection and excavation of the monuments revealed that Stelae 1, 2, 4, 7, 14, and 15 were carved. Apart from Stelae 26 and 24, all the monuments are in the main plaza and, apart from Stela 14, are distributed in front of its bordering structures. No altars or wall panels were found; the single ball court marker is plain and not included in the numbered series.

Stela 1 (Figure 3), although partially fallen towards the southwest, is still *in situ* in front of Structure 2 and south of its stair block. Excavation to locate its butt and any sub-stela cache was stopped before the base was reached to avoid further destabilizing the monument. A small unslipped hemispherical bowl was found below the topsoil in front of the stela.



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MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

FIGURE 3. STELA 1



Stela 1 measures 2.7 m from its tip to the base of its carving. It tapers from a base width of 1.13 m to 0.95 m. The carved area, which is 2.5 m high and narrows upward from 0.9 to 0.7 m, is divided into four registers numbered 1-4 from top to bottom. Register 1 consists of twelve glyph blocks, arranged in three columns of four. Each glyph is inset in a rectangular cell with a raised border. In some cases, the glyphs are squared off to conform to the cell margins. The first eight glyphs give a clear Initial Series date of 9.15.10.0.0. 3 Ahau 3 Mol [June 28th, A.D. 741]. For a description of the remaining glyphs, see Grube, MacLeod, and Wanyerka, RRAMW #41, this volume.

The lowest register is occupied by a large woven-mat motif 0.27 m high, and the second by a panel of the same size containing two long-nosed/lipped monster heads in profile, of slightly differing design and facing each other; two glyph-like elements appear between them. The border with the main panel above is not continuous, as it is below the heads, but only covers the central part of the panel, so that the heads may be considered as part of the main composition.

Register 2 comprises two human figures in a panel 0.93 m high. The figure on the right is standing, the other seated. The standing figure is male, in profile with only his left arm and leg shown. He wears an elaborate mask headdress with an infixed mat motif and surrounded by a high feathered panache with three dangling plumes. His upper body is apparently unclad. His left arm is extended obliquely in front of his body with his hand open and pointing downwards. He wears a heavy belt with what seems to be a back rack. An *ex* (loincloth) and a rear overgarment, both ankle-length, hang from his belt. He wears a wristlet and anklet of "bow-tie" form.

The seated figure, female, faces the standing figure. She is in profile, with her right leg and arm shown. Her head is eroded. She wears both a *huipil* and an ankle-length skirt; no decoration is visible. She sits on a square, boxlike seat with her foot well clear of the

ground. The seat has a decorative molding around its top and base with two cut-out panels in its middle; it is a higher and more elaborate version of the seat on Stela 2, which is closer to the Classic Maya "throne" known elsewhere. Her arm extends downward away from her body. Her hand is eroded but apparently open.

Below the seated woman's feet and in front of the toes of the standing man is a bowl with a heavily everted and rolled rim. It contains a material with a multi peaked edge. Comparing this bowl and its contents with others seen on such monuments as Yaxchilan Lintels 15 and 17, we can identify the material as folded sheets of bark paper. The open-handed gestures of the two figures suggest that they are allowing something to fall into the bowl: unfortunately the stela is so eroded that the substance, if it was in fact shown, cannot be ascertained.

The overall style of Stela 1 is plain, although some double-lining is used on the mat panel and the monster heads.

Stela 2 lies in front of the northeast corner of Structure 2. The extant portions of the monument have a height of 4.32 m and a width of 1.54 m with carving extending to the bottom where a glyph is broken off. The original height of Stela 2 must have been close to 5 m, including the butt. When work began, this monument was visible only as several fragments projecting above the leaf mold. Excavations showed that it had been broken into two major and four minor pieces. Virtually all the carving on the smaller pieces was eroded away. The fragments were drawn separately and assembled into Figure 4. Subsequent to our work at Nim Li Punit, local political rivalries resulted in damage to the principal figure (Jackson and McKillop, 1985). Thus, this drawing is the primary record of Stela 2. At this writing, the fragments were protected under a shelter at the site.

The stela's carving is divided into five registers; the registers are numbered 1-5 from top to bottom. Register 1 consists of an Initial Series date which is almost entirely

FIGURE 4. STELA 2



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SHEENA HOWARTH



eroded away (see Grube, MacLeod and Wanyerka, RRAMW #41, this volume).

The second register contains three profile human figures; the right and center figures are standing and facing left, and the left figure is seated and facing right. The central figure is the tallest and most elaborately clad. The central figure is male with a strongly drawn face. The figure wears a tall feathered headdress with a long-nosed monster mask and other ornaments. He wears an elaborate pectoral with a pendant trefoil, which has an *ik* decoration cut into it. He wears some kind of cloak or scarf hanging from his shoulder which is either made of leaves or of broad strips of cloth braided together. He wears a broad belt with crossed bands. A loincloth hangs to his knees, a cutaway garment sweeps down across his thigh, and another garment with a long tail hangs to his mid-calf. The cutaway garment has an elaborately decorated edge and is decorated with a group of three dotted circles and a quadrilobate sign similar to that for zero or completion. His wrist and ankle have fringed cuffs tied on with bands, and the anklebone is marked by an incised circle. All five toes are clearly shown and slightly spread. His left arm is extended downwards diagonally with his hand open and palm outwards. Something falls from his hand, or rises towards it, in spaghetti-like strands. Unfortunately the break between the two main fragments of the stela comes at this point, and the edge is damaged; however, the strands closest to the central figure's legs are clear and are neither pointed flames nor discrete nodules like those falling from the seated figure's hand (see below). The strands are depicted above an everted-rim bowl set on the profile head of a long-nosed/lipped monster similar to those depicted on Stela 1. Sheets of paper fill the bowl.

Behind the principal figure stands a smaller male figure with strongly-marked features. The back of his head is missing, but two feathers behind the neck showed that he wore a headdress with dangling plumes. He has a collar around his neck and an ear-flare.

He wears a thick garment around his waist which seems to fall in folds in front of him. Under this, he wears a loincloth, and he wears some kind of garment with a fringed hem which hangs just below his buttocks. He does not wear wristlets or anklets. His legs are bare with a circle on his ankle as seen on the other two figures. A distinct line following the back of his calf and thigh seems to indicate his right leg behind the left, a trait seen in a similarly placed figure on Stela 15 and clearly intentional. His left arm hangs diagonally from his shoulder and is bent slightly at the elbow. His hand hangs limp. From the position of his thumb, his palm seems to be turned towards his body. His palm and fingers are unnaturally elongated. Nothing is falling from his hand. The four fingers of his right hand are shown clasping his left forearm.

The seated figure, who, if she stood up, would be distinctly taller than the smaller male, wears an ear-flare and some kind of headdress, but the top of her head has been destroyed so the details are not clear. She wears an ankle-length skirt and a garment over her right shoulder and arm (the latter shown by a crease in the garment) with the hint of a *huipil* below it. She is seated on a two-legged bench with two cartouches on its edge and two tapering legs each with an inset cartouche containing crossed bands. Her left forearm and hand are extended out past her knee, and from her palm she drops a cluster of discrete nodules.

The bench and the long-nosed/lipped monster head (which supports the bowl of paper) both rest on top of a horizontal bar which divides the second and third registers. The feet of all three individuals transgress this bar (linking the registers) and are carved in striking relief over it. The three figures' feet rest on the profile head of a grotesque monster which occupies the whole of the third register. Only the toes and ball of the woman's foot touch the head; the smaller male's entire flat foot rests on the monster's head; and the heel of the principal male's foot rests on the head, while the side of his



foot curls over its edge and his toes spread to grip it. Perhaps this is meant to depict the linking of the people in the upper world and the monster in the underworld.

The third register consists of the most elaborate monster head known at Nim Li Punit with a quincunx ear-flare, sprouts of vegetation at the back of the head, an outlined irregularly-lobated forehead, and an eye with a trident pupil. Yet its most unusual features are the monster's upper lip, or nose, which extends forward into a leaping jaguar with a waterlily sprouting from its head, and the serpent with a scaly belly which either forms the lower lip or underlies a jawless head. Could the use of the monster to support the offering bowl indicate that the oblation is being made to an underworld deity?

The inscription continues in the fourth register, where nine columns and four rows of glyphs are compactly placed below the main scene. The fifth register consists of four glyphs incised into what may have been the butt of Stela 2 (see Grube, MacLeod and Wanyerka, *RRAMW* #41, this volume).

Stela 3 lies north of Stela 2 in the northwest corner of the main plaza.

Monument/Stela 4 is located in the plaza between Stelae 3 and 5. It is a rectangular slab with a damaged panel containing at least six double glyph blocks. Because the glyphs are too eroded to read, we were unable to tell for certain whether the slab was a vertical stela (with two columns and six rows of glyphs) or a horizontal step (with two rows and six columns of glyphs) which might have fallen from a hieroglyphic stair leading up to Structure 7. It is unlike any of the other monuments at Nim Li Punit.

Stela 5, a very large, thick slab, is situated approximately on the midline of the northern retaining wall which separates the main plaza from Platform 6.

Stela 6 lies in two pieces just east of Stela 5. It is a columnar monument.

Stela 7, broken in two and with its butt

visible at the corner of Platform 6, has fallen to the south. Like Stela 6, it is columnar in shape. The larger portion is ca. 3.5 m long, and the stela stood ca. 6 m tall. While the carving is heavily eroded, it is possible to see that the central scene consists of two standing figures facing one another, both apparently male, with their feet resting on a profile monster head. A single column of glyphs hangs between the figures. The upper register contains an Initial Series date, apparently in two columns; the lower register contains an inscription in four columns and three rows (the same layout as Stela 14). If the length of carved to uncarved surfaces is proportional among Nim Li Punit stelae, then the butt of stela 7, still in place, would be 2.5 m deep.

Stelae 8 and 9 stood on the edge of the northern extension of the main plaza, where it begins to descend to the ball court. Stela 8 lies just west of the ball court's central axis. Its upper portion is gone, and it seems likely that Stela 8 is the butt of Stela 26 which is situated below Stela 8 near the ball court. The butt of Stela 9 stands at the northwest corner of Structure 4; its shaft is 3.5 m long and lies on the west side of Structure 5. Stelae 8 and 9 may form a pair of monuments that once flanked the entry to the plaza.

Stela 10 is located in front of Structure 4 opposite Stela 7 and consists of only a butt. Stelae 10 and 7 may have formed a pair marking the entry to the main plaza proper. There is no sign of the shaft of Stela 10 which, from the form of the butt, was a columnar monument like Stelae 7, 8, and 9.

Stela 11 is located 5 m south of Stela 10. It is a broad slab lying beside its butt. The 3 m monument fell eastwards leaving its front face upwards. Any carving that may once have existed eroded away long ago.

Stelae 12 and 13 present a slight puzzle: the former is a slab-like butt projecting from the ground in front of Structure 4, while the latter is a flat slab without a butt and lying a few meters away. The lack of a butt to fit Stela 13 makes its association with Stela 12

attractive; however, the breadth and thickness of the two monuments do not match, making it difficult to assume that they belong together. The butt of Stela 12 was not excavated, however, and may prove to have a different appearance below ground level.

Stela 14 lies near the center of the main plaza with its butt adjacent to a circular setting of stones which seems to have been the socket prepared for it. At 9.5 m, Stela 14 is the tallest monument at Nim Li Punit (Figure 5). It is columnar in shape and carved from calcareous sandstone, 0.75-0.8 m wide in the center and tapering at both the top and bottom. Like the other monuments at the site, it is carved only on one face. Because the stela is totally exposed, it can be seen that the bottom 3.5 m is uncarved. The complete and undamaged state of the stela suggests that it was never erected, but abandoned after all the preparations had been made; whether the plaza continued in use with the monument lying in it, or whether the site also was abandoned, we shall never know. Since 1980, the stela has been slightly damaged from attempted looting (Jackson and McKillop 1985).

Stela 14's carving forms three bordered registers. The uppermost register is 1.7 m high and contains two columns of glyphs in six rows, including an Initial Series date of 9.18.10.0.0., 10 Ahau 8 Zac.

The central register is 2.68 m high and contains a single figure placed frontally with his head in profile and facing to his right. At 1.5 m, the figure is practically life-sized; his headdress, extending up another 1.05 m, is the motif from which the site takes its name. He wears an elaborate costume: a headdress consisting of a large mask surmounted by two exuberant panaches of feathers; a large bar-pectoral, necklace, ear-flares and wristlets, all apparently of jade; a belt with crossed bands; and sandals with pompons. His right arm is bent at the elbow and seems to be folded across his chest. His left arm is extended diagonally across his body with his hand pointing down, palm out and thumb raised; he casts a group of nine discrete

nodules.

The lower register is 1.02 m high and contains two columns and four rows of double glyph blocks.

Stela 15 was found lying beside Stela 14 in front of Structure 4 with its butt end pointing towards the structure. It was lying on its face, but excavation revealed carving. With the aid of the Royal Engineers, the slab was lifted to a vertical position for study. The slab, 3.9 by 1.9 m, is complete with a plain butt 0.9 m long; there is no indication of a socket in which the monument would have stood. The possibility that Stela 15 was never erected, although not impossible, is unlikely because of its early date (see below), and a gap between Stelae 13 and 16 along the east side of the main plaza seems to mark its original location (further excavation in this area might reveal its socket). The carving is well preserved, and is organized into three registers, although the upper two are not clearly divided from each other (Figure 6). Exposure since 1976 has resulted in some erosion of the fine detail, and there is superficial damage from attempted looting (Jackson and McKillop 1985).

The upper register, ca. 0.5 by 0.3 m, consists of an inscription of twenty glyph blocks of varying sizes beginning with an Initial Series date of 9.14.10.0.0., 5 Ahau, 3 Mak.

The main scene in the middle register depicts three people, all standing, and three short glyphic panels. They hang in front of the figures, creating a scene in which three individuals each perform the same action. The central figure is a man, frontal with his head turned to his right in profile. His headdress consists of four layers, each cantilevered out over the one below, similar to that on Copán Stela X but larger relative to the head. Three streamers or feathers hang from the top layer down behind his ear. He wears large ear-flares and a large trilobate pendant with an *ik* sign incised on it. He wears wristlets and anklets consisting of large beads over tight-fitting cuffs. He wears an elaborate belt with three human heads, each with long hair and pendant plaques; a



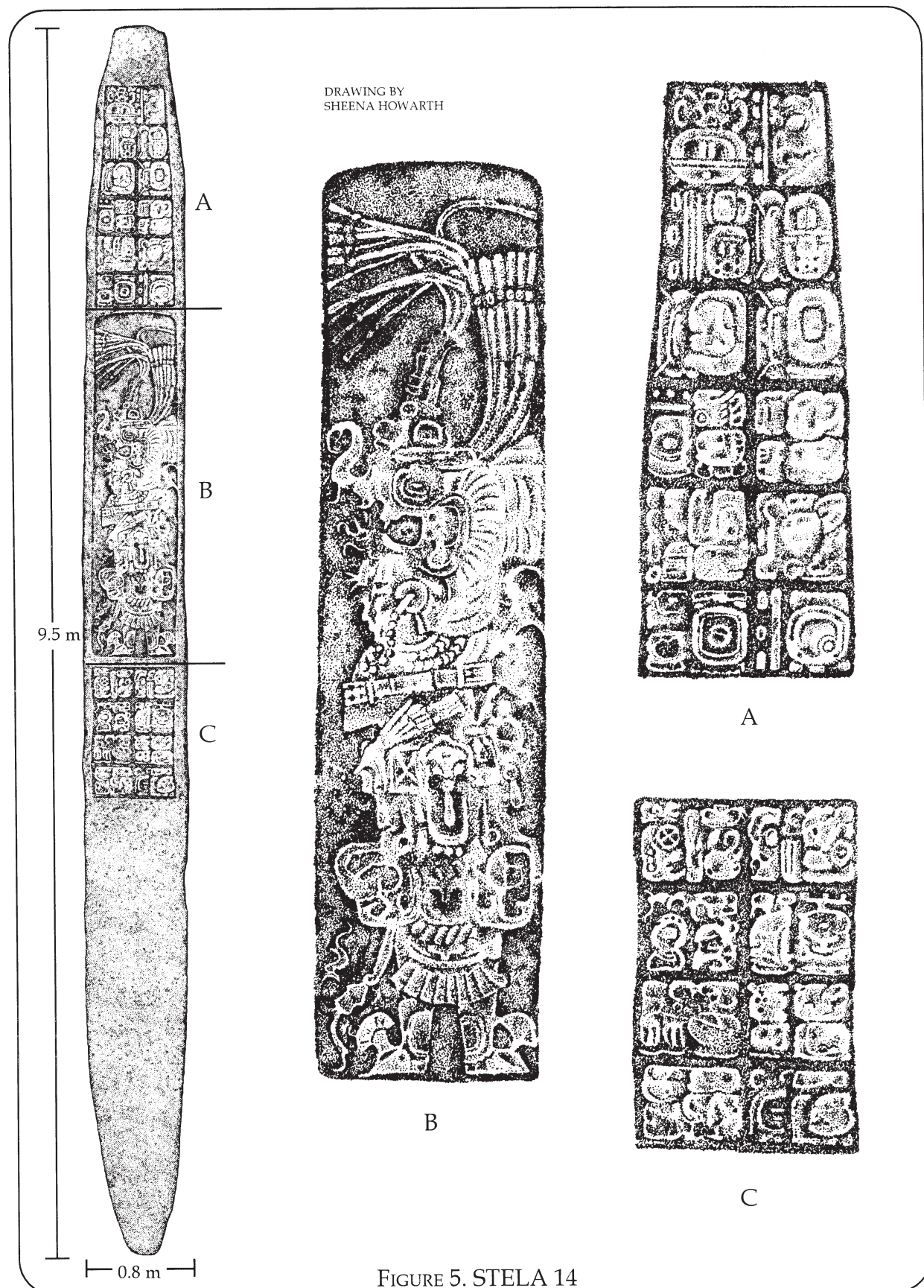


FIGURE 5. STELA 14





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MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

FIGURE 6. STELA 15



loincloth and a cutaway hip cloth both hang from his belt. His anklebone is shown by an incised circle leaving a raised knob. His left arm hangs beside his body with his hand cocked forward at the wrist; his fingers are possibly clenched. His right arm is extended out diagonally with his hand hanging open scattering a cluster of discrete nodules, at least 18 in number. The destination seems to be a bowl with an everted rim set on a profile monster head with many of the same traits of the elaborate head on Stela 2 (e.g., vegetal tendrils at the rear, dots below the eye, large oval ear-flare). The bowl contains folded paper with three wavy, flame-like elements rising from it.

To the left of the bowl is the second figure, a female who stands facing the first. Her headdress is a tall cylinder adorned with two bow-tie elements set one above the other. Her face has a long groove from nose to chin, and another around her mouth, which may indicate old age. She wears what appears to be a quatrefoil ear ornament. She is wearing either a long garment gathered at the waist or a mid-calf skirt with a short cape hanging from her neck. Below this she wears a *huipil* with short sleeves, which seems to be gathered with the same cord. Her feet are bare with her anklebone indicated, and a line parallel to her calf seems to indicate her left leg behind the right. Only her right arm is shown; it is held out diagonally from her body with her hand hanging open, palm forward. A cluster of ten nodules drops from her hand onto the paper in the bowl. The actions of both figures appear to be the same, using the same hand.

The third figure, standing on the far right of the scene and separated from the central man by a column of glyphs, is simply dressed wearing a flat headdress tilted forward. He wears a bar pectoral, a collar, and an ear-flare. He wears neither wristlets nor anklets. He probably wears a hip cloth which has a loincloth hanging from it almost to his ankle. His right leg is shown behind the left by a line down the thigh and calf, and his anklebone is indicated. His left arm

hangs diagonally out from the body with his hand open, palm turned away from the viewer, and dropping a tight cluster of ten nodules.

The remainder of the middle register is occupied by the three glyph panels: a vertical one of five glyphs in front of the woman; an L-shaped one, also of five glyphs, in front of the central male; and an L-shaped one of nine glyphs behind him. The bottom register consists of ten columns and two rows of double glyphs; the two rows of glyphs are divided by a panel.

Stela 16 stands in front of the southern section of Structure 4. It is a rectangular slab, more than two meters high and 1 m wide, of the type of laminated shale present in the Toledo Series rocks. It is the only complete monument apart from Stela 1 to remain in position. Unfortunately, the front face has spalled badly, removing the whole of the original surface and any carving that may have existed.

Stela 17 lies in front of the southern section of Structure 4 in the same alignment as Stela 16 north of it and Stela 18 to the south. Only the butt of this monument remains. It is possible that one of the fragments lying in the southern part of the main plaza, for which no butt is present, may be the upper part of Stela 17; further examination of the stone type and cross sections of the fragments are needed.

Stela 18, a butt and adjacent shaft fragment (dimensions not available), is located in front of the south end of Structure 4. Slightly farther south is another, broader shaft fragment which might possibly belong to Stela 17.

Stela 19 is situated east of the northeast corner of Structure 3. It is a shaft fragment, without a butt. Dimensions are not available.

Stela 20 lies in front of the eastern end of Structure 3. It is a butt, no longer parallel to the mound, with an adjacent shaft fragment. Dimensions are not available.

Stela 21 is located in front of Structure 3 midway between the butts of Stelae 20 and 22. It is a shaft fragment with no visible butt.

Dimensions are not available.

Stela 22, a butt with an adjacent shaft fragment, stands in front of Structure 3 just west of the midline. Dimensions are not available.

Stela 23 is situated near the west end of Structure 3 in the corner of the plaza. It is a large slab 3 m high and 1 m wide. No butt or socket are visible.

Monument 24 stands on Platform 6 north of Structure 2. It is a butt with no shaft visible nearby. Monument 24 may not be the butt of a stela.

Stela 25 lies in the main plaza 7 m north of Stela 22. It is a slab fragment about 1.5 m square. No butt is visible.

Stela 26 occurs north of the main plaza at the base of its entry stair and south of the ball court on the projected axis of the ball court's alley. It is a 2.5 m long shaft fragment. Its butt is missing, however, and it is speculated to be the top of Stela 8 (see above).

#### CARVED STELAE: CONTENT AND STYLE

There are seven carved monuments (Stelae 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 14, 15)<sup>3</sup>. Of them, Stela 4 could be either a standing glyphic shaft, a wall panel, or a hieroglyphic step from Platform 6. Stelae 7 and 14 are columnar in shape with long, narrow vertical formats. Both have inscriptions with an Initial Series date at the top, a central scene with one or two standing figures, and another inscription below.

The earliest monument is Stela 15, dated 9.14.10.0.0. (A.D. 721). The second oldest is Stela 1 at 9.15.10.0.0. (A.D. 741).

Among the surprising features of the Nim Li Punit monuments is the range of sculptural styles and formats present. Each is different in the treatment of its inscriptions, human figures, costumes and other details. The sculptural tradition at Nim Li Punit may have lasted less than a century, perhaps only four *katunob*, and resulted in less than a half dozen monuments, but its variety and inventiveness are surprising for such a small and presumably marginal center.

Stelae 15 and 2 are the most similar; both depict scenes with a subordinate male to the right, a dominant male in the center, and a female to the left. On both stelae, the dominant male and the female stand to either side of a bowl containing paper set on a profile monster head; on Stela 15, flame-like elements rise from the bowl, while on Stela 2, spaghetti-like lines seem to rise from the bowl (or fall from the central male's hand above). On Stela 15, all three figures clearly cast groups of discrete nodules, the central ones apparently into the flames. On Stela 2 the woman casts similar nodules, but damage to the monument obscures the hand action of the central male; the subordinate male has his hand in the casting position, but nothing falls from it. On both stelae, the dominant male is elaborately clad and wears an *ik* pectoral; he may be the same person, but unfortunately the glyph panel which might have identified him on Stela 2 is almost wholly destroyed. On Stela 2 he wears cloth/paper wristlets and anklets which may indicate a change of status. If the same individual is depicted on both stelae, then the woman and the subordinate male are probably also the same individuals on both stelae. Both Stelae 15 and 2 have lower inscriptions. The major differences between the two stelae are the presence of the great monster head and the scribal signature on Stela 2. The scene on Stela 1 is, perhaps, an excerpt from the scenes on Stelae 15 and 2; as on Stela 2, a standing male in left profile and a seated woman face a bowl of paper between them. Unlike Stela 2, the bowl on Stela 1 does not rest on a profile monster head and does not have flame-like elements above it. In addition, the actors on Stela 1 are above two monster heads instead of one, as on Stela 2, and a *mat* panel replaces the lower panel inscription.

On all of the monuments (except perhaps Stela 7 where the nature of the action cannot be determined), the protagonists are casting a substance which, when its portrayal is clear and undamaged, as on Stelae 2, 14, and 15, can be seen to consist of pellets or nod-



ules. On monuments 1, 2, and 15, a bowl containing paper is placed to receive the substance; on Stela 14 there is no room for it, but its presence might be implied by the falling nodules.

In his preliminary report, Hammond (1976a: 63) speculates on the identity of the substance being cast: "the offering could be blood, rubber or copal (although the granular nature of the matter dropped by the woman on Stela 2 suggests copal), while on Stela 15 the container is a brazier with flames rising from it, suggesting that the granular matter is also copal. In view of this identification perhaps copal should be inferred on Stela 14 as well."

#### THE FUNCTION OF NIM LI PUNIT

The largest site in the region of Nim Li Punit is Lubaantún, 15 km southwest, with twenty plazas, two ball courts, and three major pyramids; it is coeval with Nim Li Punit, sharing the same architectural style and ceramic types of the Late Classic, but lacking stelae; its only carved monuments are three ball court markers with eroded inscriptions (Hammond 1975: Fig. 148). Hammond (1976b) suggested that Lubaantún was the economic and political center of the polity, and Nim Li Punit was its dynastic cult center, but this position is debatable. Small hilltop sites with stelae such as the site of Xnaheb Ahse-ahel — with two carved Late Classic stelae (Awe 1978)

located midway between Lubaantún and Nim Li Punit — and Uxbenka — a site comparable in size to Nim Li Punit with an Early Classic carved stela and several plain ones (Leventhal, personal communication) located west of Lubaantún — are clearly an important feature of the Late Classic landscape in southern Belize. Therefore, if Nim Li Punit was Lubaantún's dynastic cult center, then it was probably not the only one.

The existence of small peripheral sites does not necessarily indicate the abandonment of Lubaantún either, since Lubaantún continued to be occupied and expanded architecturally into the Terminal Classic (to ca. A.D. 850) (Hammond 1975).

On the other hand, the pattern of small centers with inscribed monuments claiming elite status for their rulers around Lubaantún<sup>4</sup> parallels a pattern of balkanization that accompanied growing political instability in the southern Maya lowlands (e.g., the Copán polity [Fash 1983: 257-261] and the Belize Valley). If Nim Li Punit is indeed the core of one of these epigonal "statelets", then the process of political fragmentation and the emergence of mini-polities at the moiety or principal-lineage level (cf. Fox 1988) may have begun even earlier in the marginal region of southern Belize, beyond the Maya Mountains, than it did in either Copán or the heartland of Petén.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: since this article was written, carving has been discovered on Stela 3 (see Grube, MacLeod, & Wanyerka, RRAMW #41, this volume).

<sup>2</sup> Small structures were found to the north and west of the area mapped in 1976 (i.e., the areas around Platform 1, Platform 6 and the ball court). In later years, Richard M. Leventhal found more structures

(personal communication); however, he did not find more monuments.

<sup>3</sup> Stela 3 is not included in this analysis.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Nim Li Punit has its own Emblem Glyph (see Grube MacLeod, and Wanyerka, RRAMW #41, this volume).

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