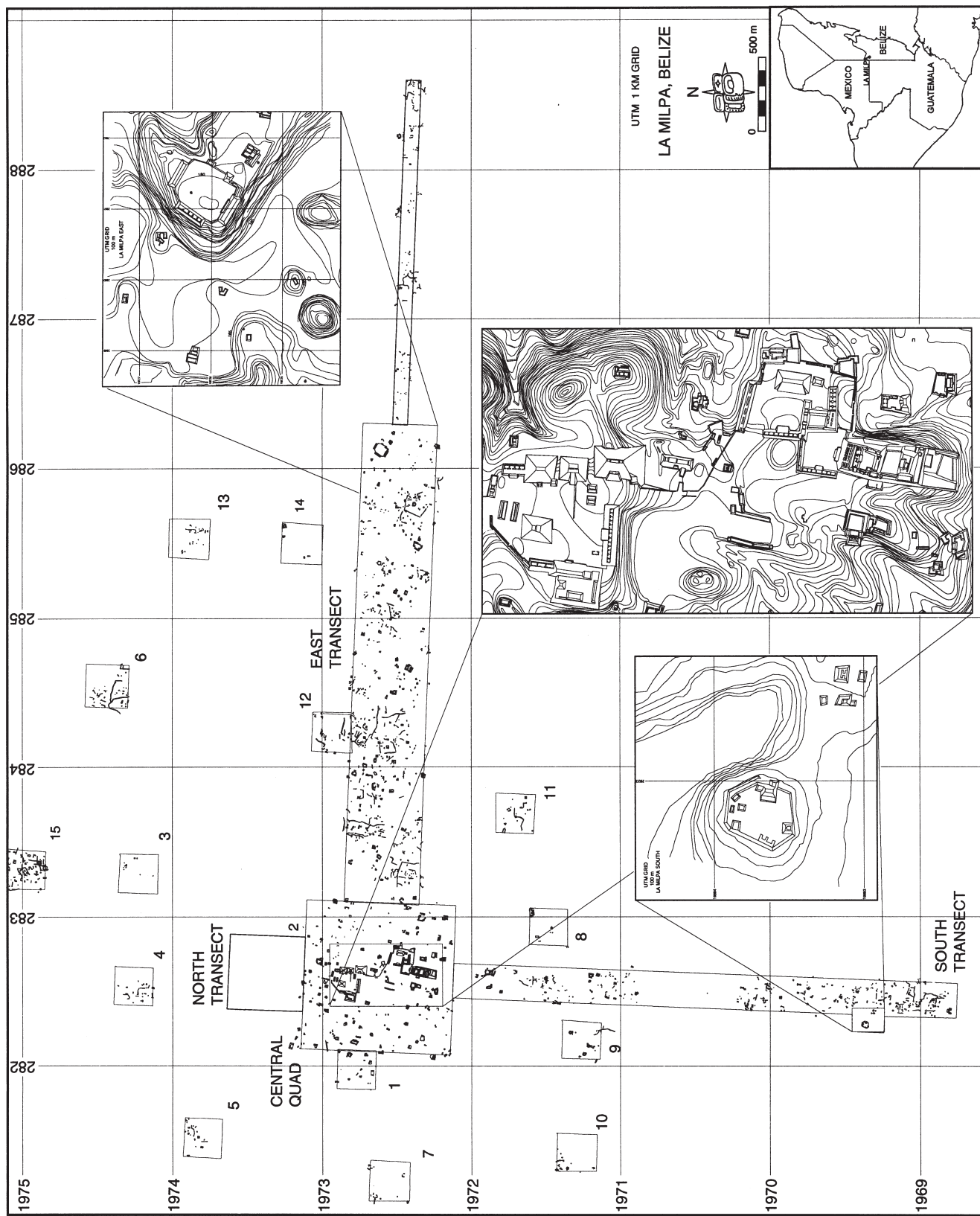




9.1 La Milpa, Belize: mapped center, transects, and survey blocks. Maps by Gair Tourtellot, GIS by Francisco Estrada Belli

9 Suburban Organization

Minor Centers at La Milpa, Belize

Gair Tourtellot, Gloria Everson, and Norman Hammond

INVESTIGATIONS beyond the major center of La Milpa have yielded evidence of several types and levels of middle-level sites within this ancient community. Here we focus on new data concerning upper middle-level sites, or “minor ceremonial centers,” dating to La Milpa’s Late/Terminal Classic apogee, and propose how these sites might have been articulated within local and regional organizational frameworks.

La Milpa lies in northwestern Belize, close to the borders with Mexico and Guatemala, on the eastern edge of the Petén uplands, and in an ecological preserve owned by Programme for Belize (figure 9.1, upper right inset). Boston University has conducted five seasons of work there since 1992 (Hammond 1991; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Hammond et al. 1996, 1998; Schultz, González, and Hammond 1994; Tourtellot, Clarke, and Hammond 1993; Tourtellot, Hammond, and Plank 1997; Tourtellot et al. 1994; Tourtellot, Rose, and Hammond 1996). La Milpa is the largest known site between Lamanai on the east and Rio Azul on the west, and appears to be rather precisely centered within a community 10 km across. The internal organization of such a large and populous site is of great interest.

The site core, or La Milpa Centre (figure 9.1, middle inset), lies in an upland semitropical forest 180 m above sea level on a limestone ridge with a steep eastern scarp. The Great Plaza (plaza A) terrace at the northern end covers some 18,000 m², one of the largest open spaces laid out by the Classic lowland Maya. The plaza has four major temple pyramids, as well as two ballcourts: the visible architecture dates to the Late/Terminal Classic period (AD 750 to 900).¹ Structures of the Early Classic and Late Preclassic periods have been encountered only in excavations and almost exclusively in this part of the site. Plaza A also holds sixteen of the nineteen known stelae, the highest total for any site in this region. Their style dates fall into an earlier group

(AD 350–500) and a later group (AD 750–850), corresponding to the two occupations of La Milpa; only stela 7 has a fully legible inscription, dated 9.17.10.0.0. (AD 780).

The southern group in La Milpa Centre, reached via a short *sacbe* (formal walkway), includes two large ground-level plazas defined by long-range buildings and only one (incomplete) pyramid. South of Plaza C is the Tzaman Acropolis with a succession of elevated courts and throne rooms (Hammond et al. 1998). Unlike the northern area, the southern group dates exclusively to the Late/Terminal Classic, a period when La Milpa underwent a truly dramatic expansion in population size, area, and density, prior to an equally dramatic decline. Beyond La Milpa Centre is a vast suburban zone of houses, gardens, fields, and engineered landscapes of terraces and earthworks. The 78 km² of terrain that our survey established as the community territory of ancient La Milpa largely comprises rugged upland landscapes spotted with numerous small *bajos* (marshy areas). The current count of mapped structures and features exceeds 3200, most of which were Late/Terminal Classic. La Milpa had many people to organize at that time and several ranks of middle-level centers to assist in that endeavor.

Hypotheses

We argue that the middle-level sites around La Milpa are organized in a concentric and cardinally aligned cosmogram and explore their meaning for city planning. Then, we examine the evidence that supports these contentions, how we identified the middle-level sites, and how we think they functioned.

We propose an arrangement of middle-level centers, of which La Milpa East and La Milpa South are examples, in a possible ring configuration 3.5 km within the La Milpa community (figure 9.2). This putative ring is consistent with the somewhat fuller evidence of another concentric ring at

twice that distance from La Milpa Centre, about 7.5 km, and apparently outside the contiguous, high-density, residential suburbs of La Milpa. Two of the three centers in the outer ring, Las Abejas and El Guijarral, lie halfway to the next major sites, and Ma'ax Na may prove to lie in a similar position. It is possible that middle-level sites in such transitional positions served as intermediaries handling cross-border transactions, as well as serving as local control centers in their own right.

It may be possible to find measurable proxies for the radii of easily projected power at lowland Maya sites. Indeed, rings of secondary centers (or at least modes of distances at approximately 3, 7, and 10 km) can be inferred from work at Tikal (Puleston 1983:25, Table 1), Ek Balam (Bey et al. 1998), or perhaps Caracol (A.F. Chase and D.Z. Chase 1987, this volume). The putative La Milpa circles we propose here also echo on a grand scale the network of numerous tertiary, or lower middle-level, sites with little pyramids like those encircling Seibal (very minor centers; Tourtellot 1988b: 277, 291, 376, 381, 396, 402, Fig. 216), although many may be Preclassic in origin. In contrast to La Milpa, their territories average only 0.3 km² (see also Becker 1971). An alternative perspective would be to construe middle-level centers like La Milpa East and South at 3.5 km on the one hand, or Guijarral, Las Abejas, Bedrock, and perhaps Ma'ax Na out some 7.5 km on the other, as just so many cells in a quilt of segmentary units subdividing and organizing the entire landscape. Such a construction of the landscape would privilege an historical discourse among volatile centers at all levels, flexibly agglomerating smaller cells for different purposes or shifting allegiances to different major centers as their dynastic rulers experienced success in trade, war, or kinship manipulations and wrote the sole surviving texts (compare Lucero 1999). At the moment, however, we do not have a time depth at La Milpa that requires (or allows us to see) more than a single static outcome developed during the Late/Terminal Classic.

More general yet, the two tentatively reconstructed concentric rings of middle-level sites bear an uncanny resemblance to the emic view of the world the lowland Maya depicted in their *pepet tsibil* (native maps) from the time of the Spanish conquest. These maps show their mundane world as a circle, top to the east and capital city in the center, with dependencies and provinces arrayed around them in four quarters, the whole bordered by a double circle that may contain regularly spaced sites (Marcus 1993; Roys 1972). We know the Classic lowland Maya were familiar with exactly the same design, for we have the same image of a cross inscribed within two concentric circles pecked into plaster or stone at several Classic-period sites (for examples see A.L. Smith 1950: Figs. 15a, 60, 1982:51) and possibly used as sur-

vey benchmarks or actual maps, among other things (Aveni, Hartung, and Buckingham 1978; Coggins 1980; Tourtellot 1988b:282). Figure 9.2 suggests that the city planners of La Milpa may indeed have constructed in their minds, and embodied in their community, what our perceptions now only hint at, and that this design penetrated down to and controlled the inner workings of individual cities well beyond the small compass of their central plaza groups.

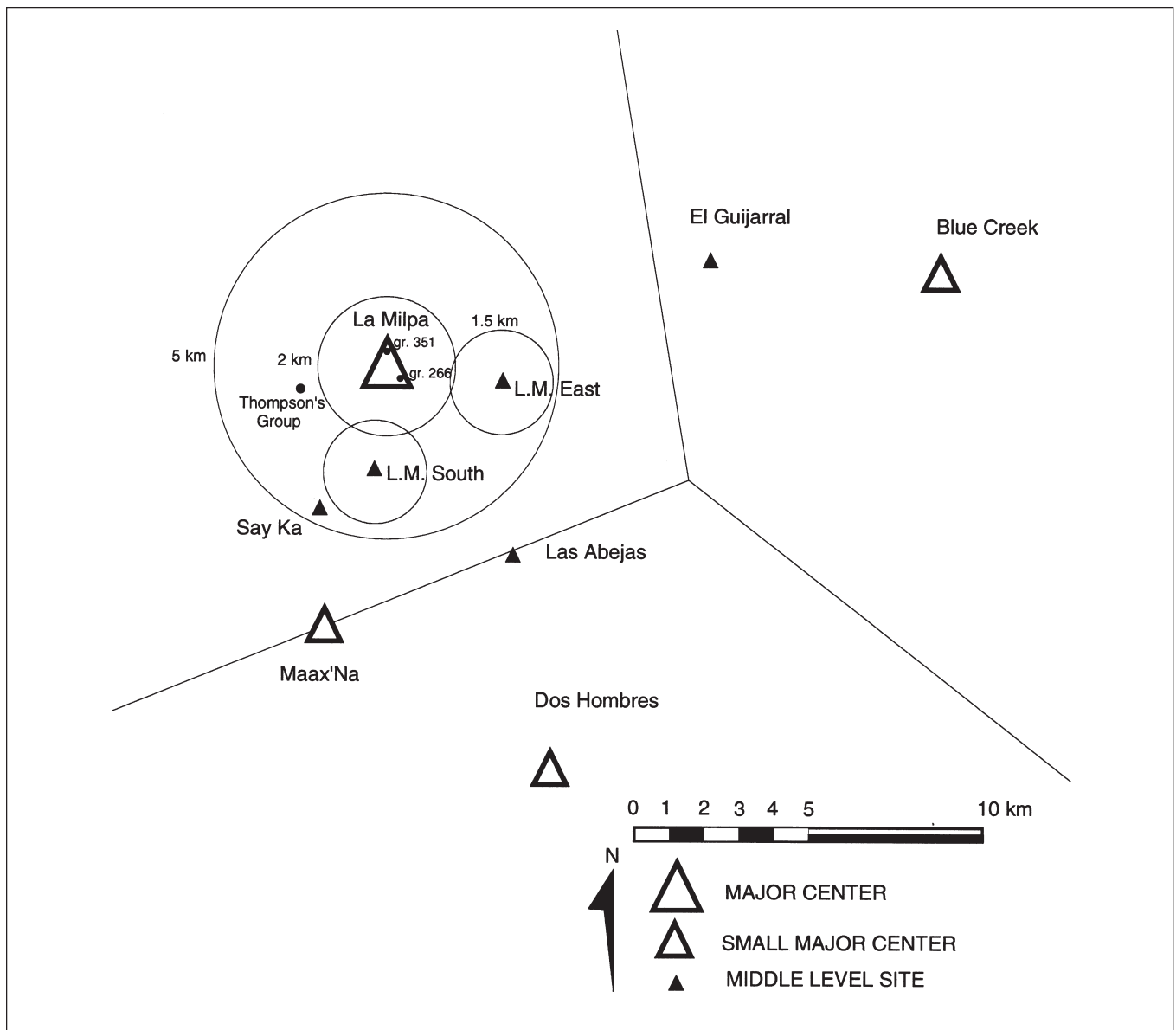
General Administrative Patterns

We first briefly look at the organizational features of the site center and then turn to the evidence for two concentric rings of middle-level centers beyond the major La Milpa Centre. La Milpa Centre consists of two plaza groups linked by a *sacbe* on its high hill (figure 9.1, central quad). Appended to the southern group is a Late/Terminal Classic royal acropolis palace. Another acropolis off plaza A is possibly the remnant of another high elite residence.

Pairs of long buildings (30 to 80 m in length) are repeated four times around the three main plazas. These largely uninvestigated pairs may be office, warehouse, or ritual buildings. One long building is associated with an axially placed stela, and three of the buildings could be oriented on temple pyramids across the plazas. These structures may be ancillary to the central government or religion, or even another layer of government (perhaps the headquarters for quadripartite divisions of the site, a potential arrangement of the community as described below).

Flanking the southern acropolis are five basal platform groups of notable height and size, exhibiting varied layouts, including masonry buildings, some of them vaulted. These groups might represent the in-town houses of many powerful clans or high officials attached to the ruler's court. Their disparate designs suggest many different functions in support of the palace establishment. Alternatively, they might have been embassies from many other polities. Courtyard group 69 is known to contain a reception room with a throne bench (of the same design as thrones in the acropolis palace), another group has a late Yukatekan-style pillared shrine building facing onto a galleried court (not a Chichén Itzá-style gallery patio). All have patios (200 to 500 m²) screened from the public; excavations in four yielded only Late/Terminal Classic materials (Hammond et al. 1996, 1998).

Other basal platforms of lesser magnificence are more widely scattered around the plaza groups of La Milpa Centre, and single- and double-courtyard groups are found here and there throughout the community. Additionally, numerous ordinary residential units (some with masonry buildings) and two extraordinary groups extend along the main hill. The house groups close about the center appear to be finer than the average farmer's house, as monitored by the



9.2 *Hierarchy, space, and territory around La Milpa.* Illustration by Francisco Estrada Belli

height of the ruins, the amount of plaster and obsidian in the test pits, and the better preservation of identifiable slipped pottery. Occupation density here is identical to the site average (an estimated 736 persons per km² but is greater when adjusted for an excess of uninhabitable steep or public terrain).

Elements of site organization—plaza groups, acropoleis, and grand basal platforms—occur together on the main high ridge at La Milpa and were arguably involved in top-level and external affairs. Along with many ordinary house groups (the lower-level sites), these elements cover about 1.5 km² at an estimated population density of 736 persons per km², or about 1100 people total. This number represents about 2% of the estimated total population of La Milpa at its peak around AD 800.

Off the main hill, we have hints of two possible concentric rings of administrative loci.² As background to understanding the hierarchical and geographic position of the middle-level sites inside La Milpa, let us review the hints of administrative units possibly forming an outer ring outside La Milpa. Between 7 to 8 km out from La Milpa, beyond what we think is the residential (suburban) area, 5 km in radius and subject to La Milpa, lie three medium-size sites, each with one or two plazas and a temple (figure 9.2). These are, first, Ma'ax Na (RB-49), sited on a high ridge 7 km south across a bajo from La Milpa Centre (Shaw and King 1997; Shaw, King, and Moses 1999). Ma'ax Na has a plaza with a ballcourt and unlooted vaulted range structures, a set of elite compounds, a sacbe, and at least one temple pyramid and two stelae. Still under investigation, it

is potentially a major center rather than a middle-level site. Yet it is far too close to La Milpa to be an independent capital, unless its apogee corresponds to a different time period, such as the seventh century (Tepeu I). The second site is Las Abejas (RB-5), about 6.9 km southeast of La Milpa (Sullivan 1997). Las Abejas has two informal Late Classic plazas in a valley, with a single small temple or feasting house. The third site in this putative ring is El Guijarral (RB-18), some 8 km to the northeast (studied by Paul Hughbanks of Tulane University). It is an agricultural settlement on the shoulder of a high ridge visible from La Milpa Centre. One assemblage consists of a small plaza group with a pyramid and range structures located alongside a bajo.

These three sites fall at a distance equivalent to halfway between La Milpa and its next largest neighboring centers, which are Blue Creek 15 km to the northeast and Dos Hombres 12 km to the southeast at a lower elevation across the Rio Bravo (Houk 1996; Jon Hageman of Southern Illinois is investigating a complete transect between the two major sites of La Milpa and Dos Hombres). Thus, with the three sites of Ma'ax Na, Las Abejas, and El Guijarral, we have about one-third of a potential ring of middle-level sites some 7.5 km out from La Milpa Centre. Their location outside La Milpa's 5-km radius, but well short of the neighboring major centers, suggests potential independence and some degree of local autonomy. Las Abejas lies just over halfway from La Milpa to Dos Hombres farther to the southeast, and El Guijarral is just over half way to Blue Creek. If this relationship also holds for Ma'ax Na, then the pattern predicts that a still unknown major site should be found in the trackless area southwest about 6 km beyond Ma'ax Na (that is, halfway from La Milpa to Kinal in Guatemala) and perhaps also 12 km west from Dos Hombres. If the pattern is correctly reconstructed, then the middle-level sites in this ring may have served as intermediaries between neighboring major centers, perhaps located on the provincial frontiers between potentially competing polities (there is currently no indication that these three middle-level sites are more, or less, fortified than any other centers in the area; all are relatively open).

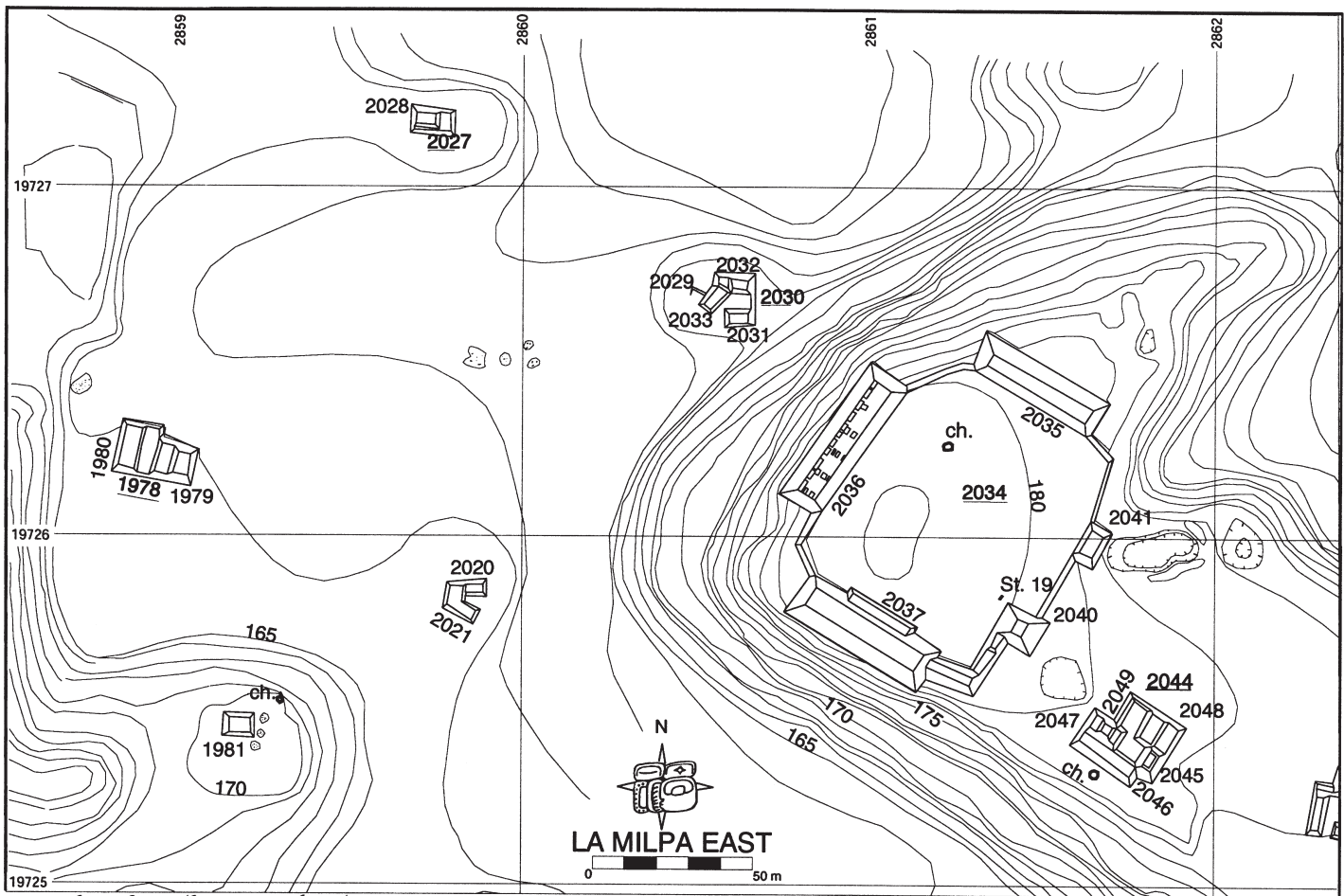
A cautionary note should be entered here: what looks like three sites on a curved path inferred to be circular might instead be the fortuitous by-product of the particular spacing of the three major centers. No major sites are known west or north of La Milpa in Belize, perhaps because of the large bajos (including Bajo Santa Fe and Dumb-bell Bajo) and the broad valley of the Rio Azul (Blue Creek) lying in those quadrants. Three middling sites are now reported to exist in that direction: Bedrock, Gray Fox, and X'noha (Guderjan 1997), all of them probably more than 7 km from La Milpa.

What about middle-level centers closer to La Milpa? Within its residential radius of 5 km, we have had, until recently, only two hints of a secondary level of administrative centers. In 1994 Hugh Robichaux located a single-temple group he named Thompson's Group, in honor of the late Sir Eric Thompson, the original recorder of La Milpa in 1938 (Hammond 1991; Robichaux 1995a). Thompson's Group is located 2.8 km west by southwest of La Milpa Centre. This group is very similar in layout, components, and scale to other elaborated house groups found on hills or adjacent to good farmland throughout the environs of La Milpa. These comparable groups also have a small pyramid mound, 2 to 5 m tall, on the court, usually on the east side, as is the case in Thompson's Group (and also Las Abejas and El Guijarral).

A more likely candidate for a secondary minor center within La Milpa is the lost site of Say Ka. In 1991, Tom Guderjan reported a hilltop site with large buildings up to 12 m high, one or two temple pyramids on a 1250 m² plaza, and a reservoir still retaining water (Guderjan et al. 1991:73). Say Ka was reputedly located 4 km southwest of La Milpa, but all subsequent efforts to relocate it have failed. Most recently, we explored the tall hill under its alleged UTM coordinates, 2.5 km southwest of La Milpa Centre, and found nothing notable. Based on new information (generously provided by T.H. Guderjan in March, 1998), we now think Say Ka is instead somewhere east (probably southeast) of La Milpa Centre, perhaps on one of the 160+ m high hills shown on regional maps. Say Ka is a prime candidate for a secondary administrative center subject to La Milpa. It appears to be contemporary with both Early and Late Classic La Milpa. It falls well within the 5 km residential radius for La Milpa, and it might be located at about half the distance to Las Abejas. To the glimmer of a system of minor centers hinted at by the existence of Thompson's Group and elusive Say Ka, our recent discoveries of La Milpa East and La Milpa South add fixed data points and new perspectives.

La Milpa East: A Minor Center

La Milpa East is a full-fledged minor plaza center located 3.5 km east of La Milpa Centre, within our eastern survey transect (figure 9.3). Continuous residential occupation between the two shows only a single break, at 2.2 km from the Centre. La Milpa East is located on the leveled summit of a steep rock-girt hill, an imposing promontory with natural stair-step rock terracing along much of it. La Milpa East includes (table 9.1) a large square plaza that is the third largest public space at La Milpa, eclipsing in size plaza C within La Milpa Centre. The large plaza of this minor center would do credit to many famous Maya sites elsewhere in the low-



9.3 Plan of La Milpa East and environs. Map by Gair Tourtellot; GIS by Francisco Estrada Belli

lands, but its size is typical of the exaggerated plazas of northwestern Belize, as documented by Houk (1996). The plaza at La Milpa East appears to be leveled with rock fill behind the terrace edges that connect the five structures around the plaza (figure 9.3). Most unusually, its four corners, rather than its four sides, are more closely oriented to the cardinal, than to the intercardinal, points of the compass.

Three sides of the plaza are defined by collapsed multiroom range structures, now 3.5 m high by some 35 m long (structures 2035 to 2037), abutting the plaza from low terraced plinths. Similarities in size, height, plan, siting, and alignment among the range structures suggest that all three were built contemporaneously and pursuant to a unified plan. It is likely all three served the same purpose, but their size, formality, redundancy, and great separation suggest the purpose was not domestic. Instead, it is tempting to see them as presentation or feasting halls dedicated to a more public use commensurate with the size and prominent location of the group.

Two structures are found along the fourth (southeastern) side of the plaza. The irregular positions of these two structures may indicate that they are the earliest compo-

Table 9.1 Basic data on some middle-level groups at La Milpa

Group	Distance	Plaza (M2)	Hgt	Axis	Main str.	Stelae
East	3.5	5000	5	300	5	1
South	3.5	1500	3	270	4	?
266	0.6	2000	3	285	6	0
351	0.2	1050	2	245	5	0

*Distance = km from pyramid 1 in La Milpa Centre

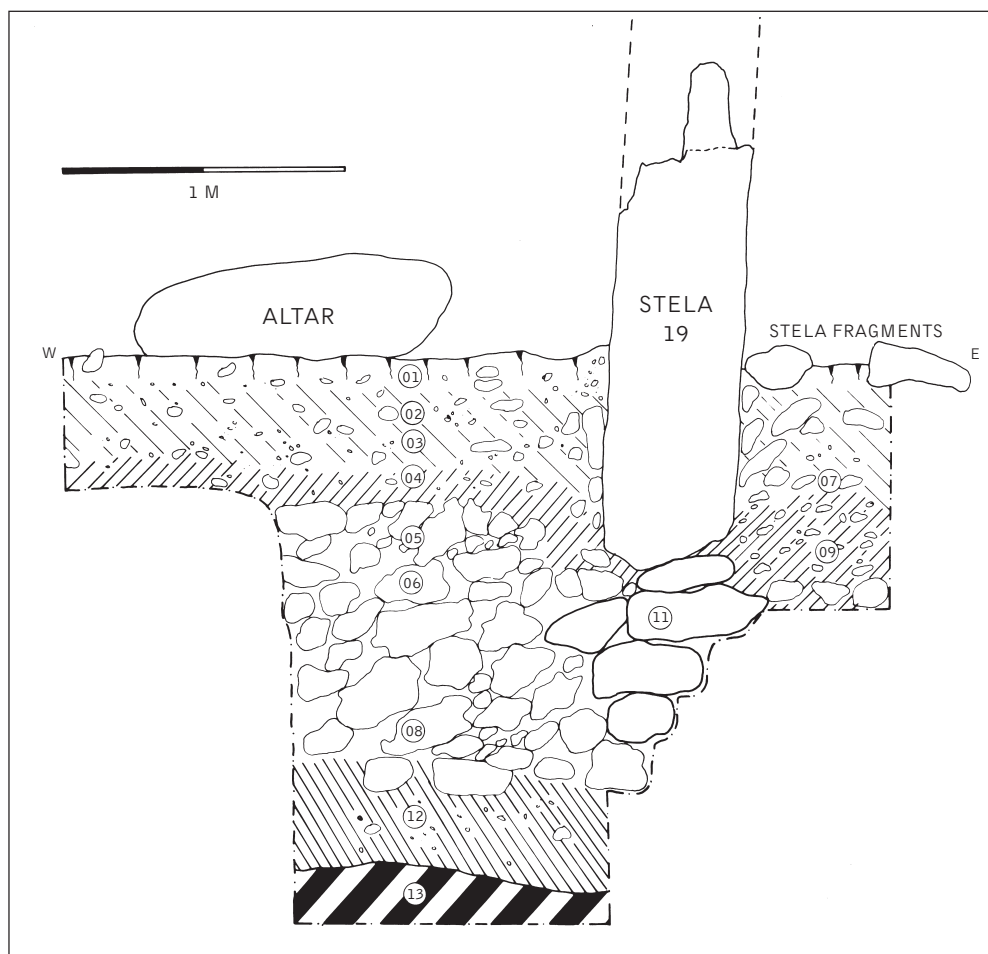
Hgt = pyramid height; Axis = pyramid axis (in °);

Main str. = # of main structures

nents present. The northern building, structure 2041 at the easternmost point of the plaza, is the smallest structure. It appears to have been a simple rectangular platform, now gutted by a looter's hole exposing not only a crude rubble fill but also the opening to an older *chultun* (underground chamber) below the center of the platform. We speculate that this rubble platform, close to the eastern corner of the plaza, sealed and commemorated the contents of this buried *chultun*, whether it was equivalent to a sacred cave, a source of precious water, or the final resting place of someone special. At least one other *chultun* lies in the open plaza, its intact lid displaced alongside. A plaza is a strange place for a storage *chultun* (two also occur near range structures on

**9.4 Section of La Milpa East
Plaza through stela 19, Op. G22.**

Drawing by Jan Morrison



plaza A at La Milpa Centre); perhaps they were involved in rituals or feasting (see Dahlin and Litzinger's hypothesis [1986] that chultuns were used to prepare fermented beverages).

The other building on the southeast side of the plaza is structure 2040, the sole temple pyramid at La Milpa East. A collapsed looter's trench defaces the higher rear side and reveals rubble fill without clear walls or floor levels, or a looted tomb. This pyramid, which lies well off-axis in the group, is the only principal structure that intrudes onto the plaza. The pyramid has a low side platform to the south that projects toward a similar side platform, or collapsed building, projecting from the southwest range structure 2037. These projections close the south corner of the plaza, the only corner that is not wholly open. A looter's tunnel through one of these side extensions exposes three floors representing at least two refurbishments.

Gloria Everson discovered stela 19 and its altar, placed off one corner of the small pyramid. Both are plain, but the presence of a stela of any sort does rather take La Milpa East out of the middle-level ordinary group category and places it firmly in the minor ceremonial center category (Bullard 1960). Excavation showed that both monuments

are in their original settings (figure 9.4). The stela is socketed in clean jagged rubble and chocked with unusual tabular pieces of finely laminated limestone. The meter of loose rubble fill that levels the plaza under the stela is a unitary deposit overlying the original soil horizon on bedrock.

Ceramics from several test pits clearly dated the patently single period of plaza construction for La Milpa East as Late/Terminal Classic (provided by Laura Kosakowsky in March, 1998). All ceramics excavated just beneath and around the altar and stela are censer pieces. The censers, with their hour-glass forms, rather vertical walls, pierced windows, and applied ridges, are very late Tepeu II/III. The old soil horizon below the plaza fill, exposed in Op. 22 (figure 9.4), also contains only Late/Terminal Classic pottery, but of the usual non-censer forms. Ceramics from other excavations at La Milpa East and in nearby house units show the usual predominance of Late to Terminal Classic types. The only earlier pottery at La Milpa East is Early Classic Z-angle bowl sherds mixed in Late Classic contexts on high bedrock under the west side of the plaza. Thus there is no identified locus of occupation before the Late Classic, although subsequent excavation in group 1978 in the valley west of La

Milpa East (figure 9.3) revealed that the basal platform below structure 1979 appears to be Early Classic in construction. As one of the very rare pre-eighth century construction contexts found outside La Milpa Centre, this basal platform suggests a settlement locus that might have attracted later settlement to this spot, or it may merely signify especially good soils or moisture obvious to any farmer.

The Late/Terminal Classic date for La Milpa East is important because it is consistent with the evidence that earlier periods of occupation at La Milpa, going back to the Late Preclassic, were tightly restricted to the area immediately surrounding the present La Milpa Centre (Tourtellot, Hammond, and Rose, *N.D.*). The needs La Milpa East served late in the Classic period probably did not exist earlier. The late date, and apparently single episode of construction, are also consistent with our developing appreciation that the Late/Terminal Classic occupation at La Milpa was massive, extensive, rapid, and perhaps short. Suburban La Milpa lacked Tepeu I ceramics, middens were often thin, burials were shallow, and construction was generally unitary with few rebuildings and little replastering.

The peculiar orientation of the La Milpa East group, 30° off the cardinal points, may relate to the geographical and astronomical position of La Milpa East and also to its field of view or viewshed. La Milpa East is located 3.5 km directly (magnetic) east of the central plaza at La Milpa Centre (figure 9.1): One possibility is that the exact site for La Milpa East was chosen because it lay due east of the largest pyramids in La Milpa Centre, on the highest point where it could serve as an eastern horizon marker or sunrise shrine, the seat of a lord of the eastern sector of the city.

Topographic surveys along the east transect and in two sample survey blocks just to the north, where hill summits top out at 170 m (figure 9.1), suggest that one could look from the pyramids on plaza A in La Milpa Centre, at over 200 m altitude above sea level, directly across to La Milpa East, at over 181 m altitude. One hill immediately east of the central pyramids crests at 197 m, just below the line of sight. Maintaining a free sightline to La Milpa East may explain why nothing was ever built on this summit despite its attractive location.³ We must assume that the contemporary forest was nearly clear-cut on the densely occupied hilly terrain between La Milpa Centre and La Milpa East—as it may well have been during intense landscape engineering at the peak of occupation about AD 800. To obtain a view of the plaza A pyramids from the La Milpa East plaza, it was necessary to leave open the western side of the La Milpa East plaza. A simple rotation of 30° accomplished this, while still providing for structures on all sides. Viewshed analysis of the intervening topography by Francisco Estrada Belli (Boston University) confirms that the corner of temple 2040,

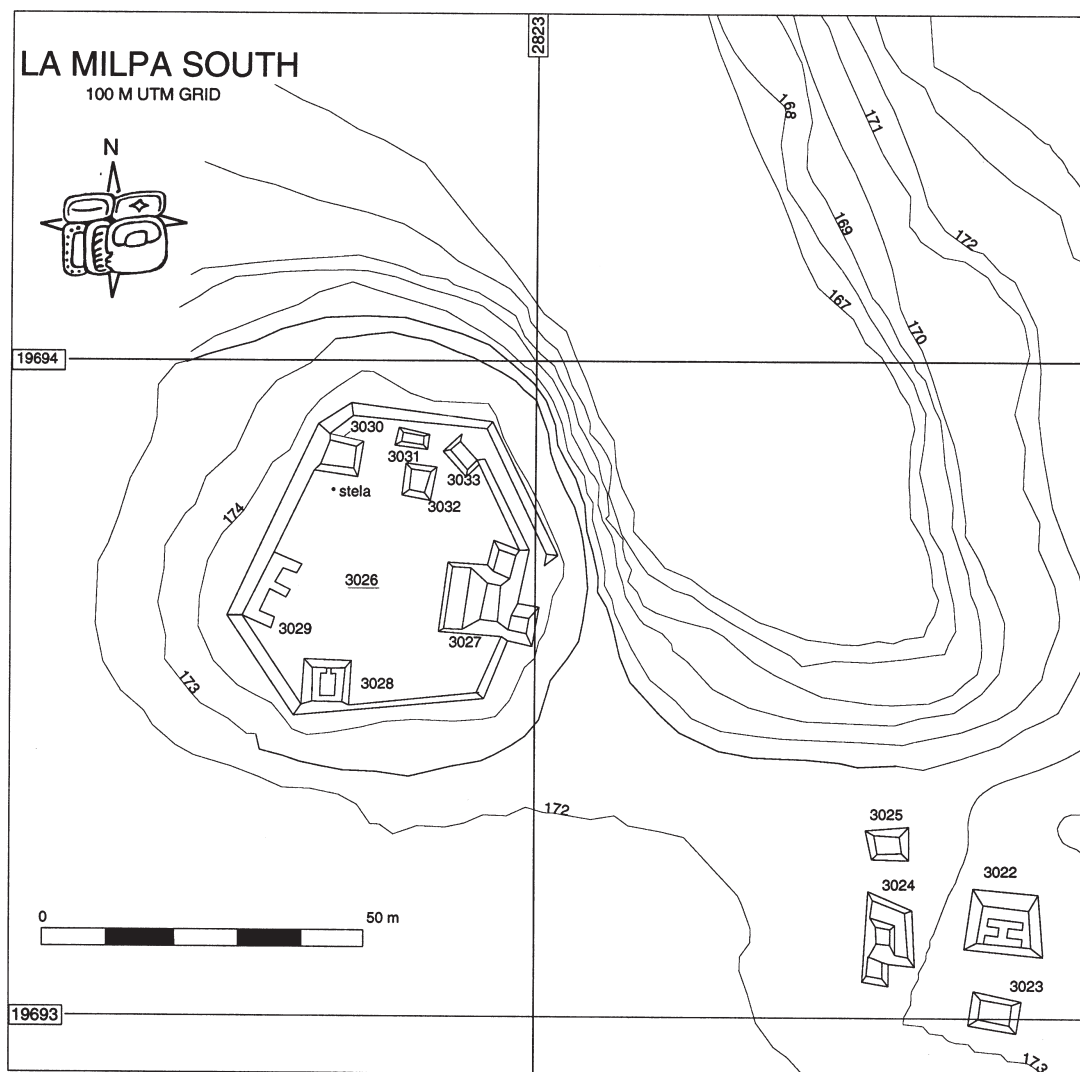
where stela 19 stands, is just visible from pyramid 1 on plaza A, whose top is the highest, potentially most visible, point in all of La Milpa. If stela 19 had been placed axially on pyramid 2040, it would have been screened from view by range structure 2037. The shape and size of the hilltop forced no particular configuration on the builders.

What sort of place, then, was La Milpa East? Current evidence suggests that, minimally, it was a locus of temple and stela-altar ritual. Its position on the horizon due east of La Milpa Centre emphasizes its sacred potential, being positioned under the rising sun. The large size and openness of the plaza implies it was not a domestic unit. If the large size of the La Milpa East plaza is an indication, then events here could have accommodated mass audiences of up to about 5000 people. The range structures are likely logistical support structures; they are too similar to be the result of accretion during the growth of a family group. Each structure appears to consist of a single row of rooms, and there is no surface evidence of the simple domestic ancillary structures beside or behind them, as would be expected if they were domestic. Nor is there a palatial group (closed-corner courtyard) either linked or in the vicinity. Nevertheless, it is possible that the range structures on the plaza were maintained not only as depots for ritual equipment or tribute, but as temporary living quarters for visiting dignitaries and their entourages, people who traveled here to use the permanent ritual facilities on the east side of the plaza. Eastern platform 2041 and temple pyramid 2040 may be places of important burials or other special deposits whose significance was celebrated with commemorative rituals. The looters certainly thought so, but whether they proved it in the buried chultun under structure 2041 or the deep tunnel into structure 2040 remains unknown. The presence of a stela and altar certainly marks the sacred use of this space, and it suggests the very direct interest of La Milpa's rulers, for monuments were a highly restricted class of politically significant items. Possibly, La Milpa East was part of a politico-religious circuit used in boundary maintenance for the central La Milpa polity. While La Milpa East lies close to the edge of denser settlement at La Milpa, it is still 1.5 km from the beginning of the rural intersite area.

La Milpa East does not appear to have been involved in water management or control, as Scarborough and his associates (Scarborough et al. 1995) have proposed in explaining the growth and power of La Milpa Centre. Control of water storage in a riverless upland, with an annual season of drought, would be a powerful coercive tool for any administrator (Lucero 1999; see also chapter 3). We have seen no evidence that the large plaza surface served as a collection area for an associated reservoir or distributor. Given the large size of plastered plazas in northwestern Belize—

9.5 Plan of La Milpa

South. Map by Marc
Wolf; GIS by Francisco
Estrada Belli



possibly serving as rainfall catchments where permanent water sources are very rare—the lack of evidence for water storage here is perhaps surprising. The edges of the plaza surface lack parapets, except at the south end, and surface flow would be out the eastern corner of the plaza, bypassing two quarry holes perhaps convertible into water tanks, with no hint of a channel or other reservoir. A shallow quarry basin behind the little temple pyramid shows no means of ingress and lies off the one closed corner of the plaza. We are not even sure the plaza had been plastered; there was no plaster in our two test pits, and bedrock outcrops poke through the surface in several spots. We did find a chultun in the plaza, but the intact lid beside it is a solid stone disk, as used for a dry storage pit, instead of the perforated disks familiar from indubitable water cisterns in, for example, the Puuc region of Yucatán. An absence of water storage here suggests that occupation was either nondomestic or of a transient nature. Unfortunately, the

same could be said for most houses around La Milpa, which also lack a visible means of water storage.

Northwest of La Milpa East, north of group 2030 (figure 9.3), is a patch of low ground that may flood during the wet season, forming a small bajo, while another wet area lies at the foot of the cliff on the eastern side of the La Milpa East hill. Although these are potential reservoirs draining broad valleys, we saw no attempts at artificial improvement during our mapping. The nearest known bodies of standing water to La Milpa East are two *aguadas* (perennial ponds) at least 1 km away, well outside our survey transect. We do not think it likely that there is a large bajo any closer. Water control, as expressed in special facilities or physical proximity, is not yet in evidence at La Milpa East.

Although the La Milpa East hilltop is naturally defensible, owing to its many steeply terraced sides, we do not see evidence of making it so. Three of the plaza corners are open, and natural ramps give access onto the hilltop itself

on the northeast and southeast. Buildings are not crowded onto the hill as for a refuge, nor are earthworks (walls or ditches) in evidence. Numerous property walls occur only on neighboring hills to the west. La Milpa East appears to lack evidence for coercive mechanisms, such as exclusive reservoirs or artificial fortifications.

The La Milpa East hilltop is also the site of quarries and a small residential area east of the plaza. Two of the four widely spaced house groups on the hill include at least low masonry buildings erected around small patios. These two groups are also the highest and closest to the plaza (figure 9.3). Perhaps significantly, the closest house unit, group 2044, shares the same unusual 30° orientation as the plaza group (as the three more distant domestic groups on the hill do not). Judging from its compact size, yet tall mounds (probably collapsed masonry buildings) and courtyard screen, we speculate that group 2044 might have been the house of a resident caretaker or ritual specialist attached to the plaza group; the house seems too modest to be the home or independent power base of a lord. Although it includes the tallest ordinary house structure on the hill, this building is dwarfed by buildings in larger house groups on adjacent hills.

Five excavations in house units in the vicinity of La Milpa East have not yet been analyzed to establish the possible effects of La Milpa East on local lifestyles. We will look for peak values in masonry, plaster, architectural styles, obsidian, stone-tool-to-debitage ratio, burials, and pottery that may enable us to judge just how “disembedded,” or not involved in local affairs, La Milpa East really was, since we do not recognize a clear residential component. At present, La Milpa East does not appear to have been the seat of a resident leader, for example, the head of a local conical clan. The three range structures on the plaza are nearly identical, none of which is singled out as the residence. Several large residential patio groups and a single courtyard group are found within 400 m but off the hill. The single courtyard group is surrounded by its own property walls, a rare occurrence (see walls southwest of La Milpa East; figure 9.1). Dozens of ordinary patio groups are in the vicinity, along with an unusual concentration of chultuns. If La Milpa East really is the seat of local power, despite appearances, then the power holders may be so embedded in their social, residential, and agricultural matrix, somewhere nearby, that they are invisible to us. Such a degree of invisibility could be caused either by frequent rotation of different people through temporary roles enacted on the plaza (for an ethnographic analogy, see Vogt 1983b), thus spreading status markers widely, or such severe extraction of local tribute by paramounts at La Milpa Centre that local people literally

could not construct personal material representations of their nominal power.

La Milpa South

Late in the 1998 season, we found another middle-level site, group 3026, near the end of the south transect (figure 9.5). Gratifyingly, it is located 3.2 km from La Milpa Centre, as was predicted from the distance to La Milpa East alone.

Basal platform 3026 is the largest single artificial construction surface mapped along the south transect (table 9.1). An apparent ramp access is visible on one side (an unusual feature for the southern lowlands, although occasionally seen in the northern lowlands). Unlike La Milpa East, all structures intrude onto the plaza surface. Structure 3027, on the east side of the plaza, is the tallest and likely conceals a small pyramid or vaulted masonry building. To its south is a large shapeless platform. On the west is a long structure composed of two rooms. On the north side of the plaza is a collection of four small mounds of uncertain conformation (they are too broad to be wall stubs for a single building); a possible stela stone protrudes from the earth on the south side of the larger west mound.

What we know of its environs suggests that La Milpa South is situated near ordinary house groups and removed from nearby agricultural or drainage works such as terraces and berms. One of the larger of these house groups is located a short distance to the southeast (figure 9.5). Group 3022 is a middle-size domestic unit with two masonry buildings suitable for a caretaker's residence, but we know little of what lies undiscovered in the other directions from La Milpa South, for the 200-m-wide south transect passing here crosses only a small portion of a long ridge. La Milpa South's hilltop location and site plan do not suggest that it was fortified, although it is possible that the hill falls toward a large *bajo* over a kilometer to the west. No permanent source of water, in which its residents might have had a management role, is yet known nearby.

The knoll on which La Milpa South rests is an unimpressive gentle knob on the ridge, but it is one of the highest spots along the south transect. Viewshed analysis by Francisco Estrada Belli suggests that this plaza, too, was visible from atop pyramid 1 on plaza A in La Milpa Centre, in this case exactly 3.5 km away, as was La Milpa East. He finds that a nearly perfect 90° angle is formed by the sightlines from La Milpa West and La Milpa East, as they converge on pyramid 1 at the northeast corner of La Milpa Centre (figure 9.1). Again, this conclusion requires that the forest be cleared.

La Milpa South is significantly smaller than La Milpa East in any dimension of comparison. The sizes of its struc-

tures are typically those of domestic groups, but the spaces between them are large. While gratifying that La Milpa South was located close to the predicted 3.5 km distance from the center, its identification may be fortuitous and somewhat self-fulfilling. It certainly is not a copy of La Milpa East and equally is not an ordinary house group due to the large size of the plaza, the arrangement of the widely spaced structures, the presence of a probable eastern temple, and the possible stela. At least, it is an unusual plazuela-type group that bears an intriguing resemblance to La Milpa East and to the two central groups discussed next. All four of these groups can be classified as exhibiting Plaza Plan 2 layouts, recognized as a pyramid sited on the east side of a plaza defined by several long structures (Becker 1971).

Other Candidates

Two other groups, 266 and 351, located in a very different context, share many of the features of La Milpa East and South. They are found on the main hill just outside La Milpa Centre (just visible in figure 9.1 as hollow squares to the east and north of the inner rectangle marking La Milpa Centre). They cannot be part of the same putative 3.5-km-radius ring as La Milpa East and South but might signify that the same local and secondary organizing principle was actually carried out “right under” the major elite center, displacing La Milpa Centre from having to oversee its local people.

Group 266 lies on a ridge 250 m east of the southern plazas. Unique among the middle-level sites discussed here, it does not crown its local hill but lies some 9 m below an ordinary house group and a solitary 5-m-tall pyramid. Unexcavated group 266 is second in size only to La Milpa East among the middle-level groups considered here (table 9.1). The tall mound on the east was looted and yielded only a plain vessel from a sacked burial. A long building on the west has six rooms and a largely perishable superstructure. One chultun penetrates the plaza surface.

The approach to this group is easy on all but the eastern side. While there are ravines nearby, there is no permanent source of water and not much space for gardening. Group 266 would have had clear views of the south group and the pyramids on the Great Plaza if foliage were removed.

Platform group 351 is located off the northeast corner of plaza A in La Milpa Centre. Its elements are familiar: the small (looted) structure 53 pyramid on the east, a long building facing it on the west, and two or three structures on the north and south sides of a generous central space that barely qualify it for the plaza category, but it is certainly far larger than commoner house patios in the 200 to 700 m² range.

A distinguishing characteristic of group 351 is that it is situated at 199 m, the highest natural elevation known at La

Milpa and 7 m higher than the nearby Great Plaza. Like group 266, it is right on an escarpment. The knoll beneath group 351 is only large enough for this group, which probably accounts for the placement of the main plazas on flatter and broader, albeit slightly lower, ground to the south.

Neither of these groups is associated with property or agricultural features, such as the terraces, stony berms, property walls, or rock piles associated with groups a few hundred meters below the main hill. Nor are there linear features close around any of the other middle-level candidates discussed.

A caveat is that groups 266 and 351 are only 700 m apart on the main La Milpa hill, rather than the much longer distances that separate the other middle-level groups. Speculatively, their proximity has to do with uniquely rugged canyon terrain between them. Another possibility is that they are not centrally located in their territories (as supposed for the 3.5 km ring of groups) because of the powerfully distorting attraction of the hilltop plazas that drew them to one side of territories extending well off the hill to the northeast for group 351 and to the southeast for group 266.

On the other hand, if these two groups really are centrally located inside their territories (as well as properly identified), we can construct an intriguing alternative that their territories extended “under” the main plazas and out to the west (where the closest known competition is Thompson’s Group nearly 3 km distant).

The proximity of groups 266 and 351 to La Milpa Centre thus raises some provocative questions about how local territory was managed. Conceivably, the royal and elite residents of La Milpa Centre (residing in the acropoleis and nearby elite groups) were not directly involved in working the land around them, but only in community-wide and foreign affairs. It is certainly the case, both here and across the Maya lowlands, that palaces do not sit atop the extra-broad parcels of “empty” terrain that would be required to grow food for their many people. If the top elites were “floating” on the land (as well as skimming off its produce), then local administration was delegated to middle-level “islands” that dotted the seas of household gardeners.

With the suggested addition of groups 266 and 351 near La Milpa Centre, and Say Ka perhaps close by, the previously proposed inner ring of middle-level centers at 3.5 km is evolving toward a network of sites, as intimated by Bullard (1960, 1962) and Hammond (1975). The actual situation was probably more complicated still, because of the existence of other types of middle-level sites not discussed here, such as the six smaller but elegant double courtyard groups, the dozens of single courtyards, or the smaller patio groups with tall eastern mounds (which happen to be particularly common halfway between La Milpa Centre and La Milpa East).

In sum, the four middle-level La Milpa groups of La Milpa East and South, and groups 266 and 351 are intermediate in size between the largest plaza groups at La Milpa and large ordinary domestic groups. More significantly, they share fundamentally similar plans that distinguish them collectively and individually from all other suburban groups. All are sited on hilltops (usually the highest point in their vicinity) at a long distance from one another. They are erected on a basal platform terrace that supports an open-cornered and generous central space (versus the many tight house groups). Each exhibits structures on all four sides of the central space, multiple structures on one or two sides of this space, the chief pyramidal mound placed to the east, and a long structure with multiple rooms to the west. None seems to have a central shrine or altar, but two may have plain stelae. Thus, they have some of the elements and scale of the major plazas but share less with house groups. Of course, these are superficial characteristics only; none of the groups has been extensively excavated. While their basal platforms might conceal earlier materials, as at La Milpa East, we have no reason to suspect that any of these middle-level groups acquired their special function and layout before the Late/Terminal Classic period.

Completing the Ring

Having indicated why the arrangement of large middle-level sites may be rather more complex than a ring, let us return to the simpler question of the 3.5 km La Milpa ring on the west and north (figure 9.2). Thompson's Group, which appears to be an elaborate house group with an eastern shrine mound, is located only 2.8 km westward of La Milpa Centre. It is located on sloping high ground below 180 m, but viewshed analysis suggests its eastern shrine may have had a clear view of La Milpa Centre. It is on a slope among neighboring house groups rather than standing in splendid isolation and has a cramped patio only some 400 m² in area within the domestic range. We should classify it as a very minor center or Plaza Plan 2 (Becker 1971). The potential availability of a better site, as yet unexplored, 3.3 km west of La Milpa Centre and across the Far West Bajo, is another reason for currently disallowing Thompson's Group as the western participant in the putative 3.5 km ring.

In his discussion of Thompson's Group, Robichaux (1995b) claims that it and Say Ka were situated so as to oversee extensive tracts of bajo lying within a kilometer of each. Acknowledging that La Milpa Centre is not positioned next to a (major) bajo but is located centrally some 3 km distant from five such depressions, he suggests that "minor centers are the specific loci of oversight and management activities for intensive agriculture production efforts in the bajo zones" (Robichaux 1995b:22). This oversight would be un-

der the major center, another reasonable explanation of the function served by people using these middle-level groups. The problem is not that the location of Say Ka is currently unknown and its association with a bajo unproven; rather, the claim that a middle-level site within a kilometer of a bajo was therefore involved in managing the bajo, is dubious. Any part of the La Milpa community is likely to lie within a kilometer or so of some bajo terrain (or, equally, of a seasonal stream, an *aguada* (reservoir), a tall hill, chert outcropping, or a zone of earthworks). La Milpa South is centered between fingers of a bajo 500 m to the north and south, and within a kilometer or two of the vast Thompson Creek Bajo between La Milpa and Ma'ax Na. La Milpa East overlooks two little bajos.

Furthermore, we cannot accept a more specific argument for central control of Thompson's Group out of La Milpa Centre based on Scarborough's proposal that the Far West Bajo was flooded from a reservoir next to Great Plaza A by means of an irrigation canal and a 3-km-long gorge (Robichaux 1995a:210, 295–298; Scarborough et al. 1992; Scarborough et al. 1995) until this relationship is proved feasible. Nor would we accept the related notion that La Milpa Centre physically controlled all its people in a seasonally parched landscape, because it alone had artificial reservoirs. Even if La Milpa Centre had three reservoirs and little pools behind a dozen checkdams in its adjacent ravines, we doubt that enough water could be stored to meet the needs of the some fifty thousand people estimated to be present by the Late/Terminal Classic period (although it might have done so for the small concentrated population at its founding in the Late Preclassic). Although difficult to prove, we suspect that every household looked out for its own water provision and stored it in quarry holes, chultuns, casks, rubberized bags, or pottery jars. We have not yet identified a water-management role for the residents of middle-level sites. To the contrary, we have noticed that suburban *aguadas* are not directly associated even with large domestic groups.

To complete a ring of middle-level sites at 3.5 km, what about a site north from La Milpa? Coincidentally, the next patches of high ground (more than 160 m) around the vicinity of Thompson's Group in the west do not occur until 2 and 3.5 km due north of La Milpa Centre. The 2 km distance is on the hill sampled by survey block 15 (with its high density of stony berms; see figure 9.1), while the hill-ock at 3.5 km is north of that along the west flank of the large Dumb-bell Bajo. Elsewhere within the circumference of La Milpa, most other high spots lie south of La Milpa Centre, where the land gradually rises toward the distant crest of the La Lucha Escarpment above 200 m. Plots of high land appear to us to have been suitable for constructing at

least six well-spaced minor centers, thus completing a ring of such locales situated approximately 3.5 km out from La Milpa.

Conclusion

Middle-level centers are recognized by a congeries of familiar elite components writ small (Hammond 1975). At least the upper ranks of middle-level centers, like minor centers, include some combination of prominent location, large open spaces (plazas rather than patios or courts), temple pyramids, range structures, and monuments. Ballcourts appear at the transition from middle-level to major sites, as may be the case with Ma'ax Na south of La Milpa. So far, only major sites in northwestern Belize possess causeways, that is, at least two separate architectural assemblages requiring such formal links.

The community of La Milpa exhibits material traces of numerous potential levels of sociopolitical expression, control, or organization, only the highest of which we discuss here. At La Milpa we discovered several plaza groups outside La Milpa Centre. La Milpa East is complementary and secondary to La Milpa Centre, having been built too late to constitute an abortive earlier developmental alternative. Current evidence does not support the conclusion that La Milpa East was anything more than a periodically used ceremonial precinct.

We suggest that middle-level centers together may trace potentially coherent or regular geopolitical or georeligious patterns on the physical and conceptual landscape (figure 9.2). La Milpa East and South may be parts of a ring of middle-level centers encircling La Milpa Centre at a radius of some 3 to 4 km, each commanding a radius of approximately 1.5 km (approximately 7 km²), a radius derived from the approximate distance by which they fall short of the La Milpa community border. Analysis by Gloria Everson of the frequency distributions of mounds and artifact ratios along the east transect suggests that the actual border occurs 2.2 km from La Milpa Centre and 1.3 km from La Milpa East, although this point corresponds to no natural break in settlement. Towards La Milpa South, this distance falls in a broad finger of *bajo*. To the extent they were involved in local social and resource management, such outlying minor sites imply that direct control over land or intervention in the affairs of people stemming from the major center extended only over a radius of some 2.2 km, or 15.2 km². Beyond this radius, supplemental secondary (or middle-level) administrative centers located some 3.5 km out, with an area of 5.3 km², were found useful or necessary to interact with the densely dispersed population. Together, the major and minor centers would oversee the total La Milpa suburban community (some 50,000 people).

Heuristically converting these areal figures into population estimates for the major and minor centers, La Milpa Centre directed some 12,000 people (at 791 people per km², projected from the central quad and near east transect). Each satellite, like La Milpa East or South, would have drawn upon the reproductive and labor powers of more than 3,000 people (at 572 people per km² within the range of La Milpa East on the east transect). Note that the large size of the La Milpa East plaza could have simultaneously accommodated all of the local population within 1.3 km, or nearly all, totaling 2,600, if they were seated.⁴ This size audience, if realized, greatly exceeds the number of people in basic social units such as families or lineages. If the satellite centers represent any single type of sociopolitical unit, then it was far larger, perhaps a super-clan, and commensurate with a territorial scope of many square kilometers, a virtual mini-province.

If each minor center had a radius of control of 1.3 km, then there is room for eight of them in a circle 3.5 km from La Milpa Centre. At present, we have only two outlying plaza groups with known locations, one directly east and the other directly south of La Milpa Centre. We have mapped only about 6% of the whole city, Say Ka is not yet pinned down, and Thompson's Group appears to belong instead to a class of smaller middle-level Plaza Plan 2 groups scattered throughout the community.

If celestial orientation toward the cardinal points was the operative cause for the location of middle-level plaza groups, rather than the demographic service areas we have been considering, we would expect a total of four (not eight) middle-level plaza groups, one in each of the cardinal directions. The axes from pyramid 1 to La Milpa East and La Milpa South happen to be precisely 90° apart, and almost exactly oriented to the true (rather than magnetic) cardinal points. The larger size of La Milpa East relative to La Milpa South would materialize the prime importance of the eastern axis. If cardinally placed minor centers are the only consideration, then it seems more likely they are creatures of the central administration, or more purely ritual foci, because they seem too small in comparison to La Milpa Centre to have efficiently administered the number of people living in the outer belt between them.

A cardinal arrangement would also suggest a quadripartition of the community, resulting in four much larger "territories" up to 19.5 km² apiece, with some 13,500 persons in each. Any scheme of quadripartition reminds us of the four pairs of range-type structures defining the three main plazas of La Milpa Centre. It is pure speculation that the large middle-level sites, whether cardinal or simply circular in arrangement, served as terminals for activities connected directly to many long structures in the main center (for example, as tribute collection versus central storage

points, or as ritual versus regalia-storage points); there are no causeways like those of Cobá or Caracol to improve this likelihood.

It is difficult to believe the ancient Milperos could pick their spots and design a city so precisely. If the forest were already cleared at the height of the Late Classic when these centers appear to have been built, then direct views from pyramid 1 were possible in order to project lines along certain directions over great distances. In a bowl-shaped landscape filled with dozens of karstic hills of every shape and height, rising to the horizon some 10 km distant and still visible today over the forest from atop pyramid 1, perhaps it was easier to spot just the right hilltops that happened to be there to fulfill a cosmic layout reflecting their quincuncial vision of the world.

This study of middle-level sites around La Milpa has raised provocative ideas about the internal spatial organization of major communities, and the areas and means of effective influence exerted by different-size centers nested within a single community. The alleged patterns or cosmograms on which these interpretations are based will be fairly easy to test with new explorations and spatial data. We have also raised questions about systematically differing roles for centers located at varying distances from major centers rather than simple nesting, and suggested that perhaps roles depended on different geopolitical situations. We have also yet to prove that La Milpa East or the other candidates actually had an administrative or "centralizing" role rather than a merely ceremonial function. Questions of function will require much larger and longer programs of excavation before we can truly understand how intermediate levels within ancient La Milpa were organized within the diverse Maya universe.

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NOTES

1. We have not yet satisfactorily distinguished Late Classic (Tepeu II equivalent) ceramics from Terminal Classic (Tepeu III) ceramics, a continuing analytical problem for the region (Kosakowsky et al. 1997). Accordingly, what may be two phases have to be treated for now as one, approximately AD 830 $\pm$ 100, obviating studies of late community development apart from local stratigraphies.
2. Future work may show they form part of a broader network of middle-level sites reaching into the center. Here, we depend largely on the vagaries of survey coverage that is still far short of total. Our project has mapped La Milpa Centre; radial transects to the north, east, and south; and fifteen randomly scattered spot sample blocks around the community (figure 9.1), aggregating 6% of the 78 km² that we project was La Milpa's direct territory. Additionally, the University of Texas regional projects under R. E. W. Adams and Fred Valdez, Jr., have followed up Tom Guderjan's initial inventory of sites in northwest Belize (Guderjan 1991) and ongoing investigation to the north, and together they provide information concerning minor sites lying beyond the 5-km radius deduced for La Milpa proper (see R.E.W. Adams and Valdez 1995; Guderjan 1997; and Houk 1996). There seem to be a number of objectively different levels of architectural assemblages, based on considerations of size and the readily visible surface elements present. Our proposed pattern recognitions are tentative, however, because our surveys are incomplete, excavation is absent or spotty, and the number of examples for each level is still tiny. Initial distinctions made on the basis of these samples also may be exaggerated because of the myriad ways in which the same cosmological, religious, and iconographical elements, among others, seem to pervade all levels of Maya society.
3. Another argument for a late date for La Milpa East is it would have been visible across this hill only from the last stages of pyramids 1 and 2 on the Great Plaza.
4. That is 5000 m² at 1 m²/standing person = 5000 people, or at 2 m²/seated person = 2500 people.