

**THE BVAR/GALEN UNIVERSITY 2021 EXCAVATIONS AT  
GROUP B, COURTYARD B2, XUNANTUNICH, BELIZE**

**PRELIMINARY REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE OF  
ARCHAEOLOGY, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CULTURE AND  
HISTORY**

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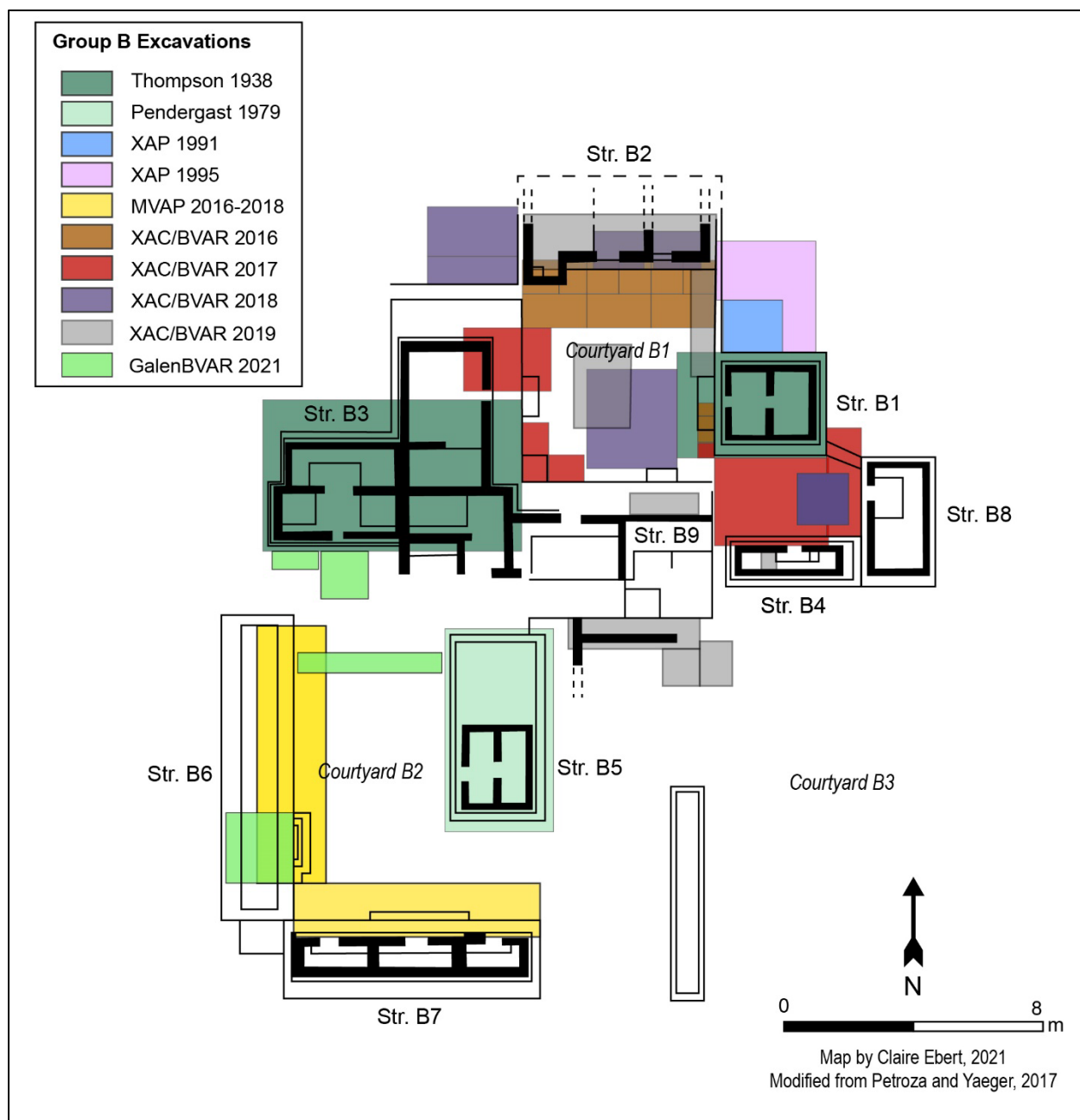
## **INTRODUCTION**

This is a preliminary report describing archaeological investigations led by Mr. Antonio Beardall with Galen University students in Courtyard B2 of Group B at Xunantunich. The investigations were conducted with special permission from Dr. John Morris, Director of the Institute of Archaeology, and under the supervision of Dr. Jaime Awe, Director of the Xunantunich Archaeology and Conservation Project (XACP), which is a joint effort between the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance (BVAR) Project and the Belize Institute of Archaeology. The goal of the excavations were to expose architecture on Structure B6 for future conservation and to document Terminal Classic (AD 750-900) peri-abandonment deposits near the building, similar to those documented by previous XACP investigations in Group B (see Sullivan et al. 2017; Alvarado et al. 2018; Messinger et al. 2019; Ebert et al. 2020).

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH AT GROUP B**

XACP research at Group B began in 2016. Prior to this time, three other projects focused attention on Group B (Figure 1). The first was led by Eric Thompson (1942), who conducted investigations on Structure B1, considered the eastern shrine of this group, and Structure B3. Thompson's excavations provided evidence for Terminal Classic occupation at Group B based on high frequencies of Spanish Lookout phase pottery from stratified contexts. Thompson's work was followed decades later by Pendergast and Graham (1981) who conducted salvage operations in Group B following instances of extensive looting in Courtyard B2 (formerly Plaza B2). This operation also unearthed copious amounts of Spanish Lookout pottery, which would later be identified as peri-abandonment deposits. These deposits included refit censurs and polychrome vessels dating to the Late and Terminal Classic period. The Xunantunich Archaeological Project (XAP), under the direction of Richard Leventhal, also conducted limited investigations in Group B between 1991 and 1995, and they too encountered several large deposits dating to the Terminal Classic. In 2016, Michael Petrozza and Dr. Jason Yaeger of the Mopan Valley Archaeological Project (MVAP) renewed investigations into Structures B6 and B7 in Courtyard B2, with their research concluding in 2018. Petrozza and Yaeger focused on documenting the architecture of those structures and investigated possible evidence for warfare.

In 2016, XACP/BVAR also commenced investigations in Group B, with a focus on the peri-abandonment deposits in Courtyard B1 in front of Structures B1 and B2 (Sullivan et al. 2017). These excavations exposed previously unknown architecture including doorways to two rooms, and further Terminal Classic deposits against the facades of Structures B1, B2, and B3. The 2017 XACP/BVAR excavations continued to unearth deposits in Courtyard B1, and exposed terminal phase architecture of Structures B1, B3, and B4. Conservation efforts of buildings in Courtyard B1 commenced in 2018, exposing more terminal phase architecture. This work also resulted in the discovery and exposure of a previously unknown building, Structure B8, on Courtyard B1's southeastern periphery. Further conservation efforts were conducted in 2019 in Courtyard B1, where excavators uncovered high frequencies of artifacts in units placed on Structure B2 and on a bench surface of Structure B4.



**Figure 1.** Map of Group B at Xunantunich showing areas of excavation (modified from Ebert et al. 2020; Petrozza and Yaeger 2017).

## THE 2021 COURTYARD B2 EXCAVATIONS

The 2021 excavations in Courtyard B2 focused on two locations: 1) the area directly south of Structure B3 to expose more of the peri-abandonment deposits, and 2) the courtyard surface to locate the terminal surface of the plaza.

## Courtyard Surface

A 7x1m trench was placed in Courtyard B2 running east-to-west between Structures B5 and B6. This trench was divided into two sub-units, each measuring 3.5x1m. The units were taken to bedrock, which was located approximately 28-30cm below the modern ground surface, suggesting that the bedrock was cleared and buildings placed directly on top. Excavations in Unit C2-1 (Courtyard B2-1), nearest to Structure B6, exposed construction plastic on the western edge placed there by Michael Petrozza during his excavations on Structure B6 (Figure 2). Table 1 provides the artifact tally for this trench, including a possible tip of a chert blade found in three pieces (Figure 3). Excavations were completed in a single level. Once excavations reached bedrock, further investigations into the central courtyard surface were not continued.



**Figure 2.** Before and after images of courtyard surface excavations.

**Table 1.** Artifact tally from Courtyard B2 surface excavations.

<i>Artifact Type</i>	<i>Count</i>
Ceramic (Diagnostic)	48
Ceramic (Non-Diagnostic)	130
Chert	118
Obsidian	1
Freshwater Shell	2
Special Find	1(?)



**Figure 3.** Chert blade fragments from Unit C2-1.

### **B3 South**

Four excavation units, all 3x1m, were placed in the area south of Structure B3 to investigate the peri-abandonment deposit noted above. The deposit in Courtyard B2 was previously identified by Petrozza and Yaeger during their investigations on Structure B6. This area was thus recommended as an appropriate locus for investigation. Two units extended to the southern exterior of Structure B3 when the peri-abandonment deposit was identified. Previous excavations on Structure B3 had revealed the southern wall and created a small trench between that wall and the excavation units (Figure 4).

A shallow humic layer was removed from these units revealing a layer of medium boulders and some cut limestone blocks, likely representing collapse on Structure B3, though no standing architecture was present. This layer, approximately 45cm at its thickest, was removed to reveal the top layer of the deposit (Figure 5). The deposit yielded sporadic and inconsistent frequencies and densities of artifacts spread across an area approximately 4m (east-west) by 3 (north-south) with an average thickness of about 25cm going down to bedrock. A portion of this deposit had been previously exposed by Michael Petrozza in his excavations in 2018, but was covered by construction plastic and left in place for future investigations. Notable finds in the deposit include an anthropomorphic ocarina missing its head, a miniature *olla*, appliques, stone tool fragments, and a single shell *adorno* (Figures 6 and 7). Unlike other peri-abandonment deposits in Group B, the 2021 excavations unearthed no whole vessels, no complete obsidian blades, no complete stone tools or other stone implements, and no burials. The largest vessel fragment was a rim of a Cayo Unslipped *olla*. Excavations in this area stopped when bedrock was encountered.





**Figure 4.** Excavation units south of Structure B3. Note sloped elevation of units and presence of trench.

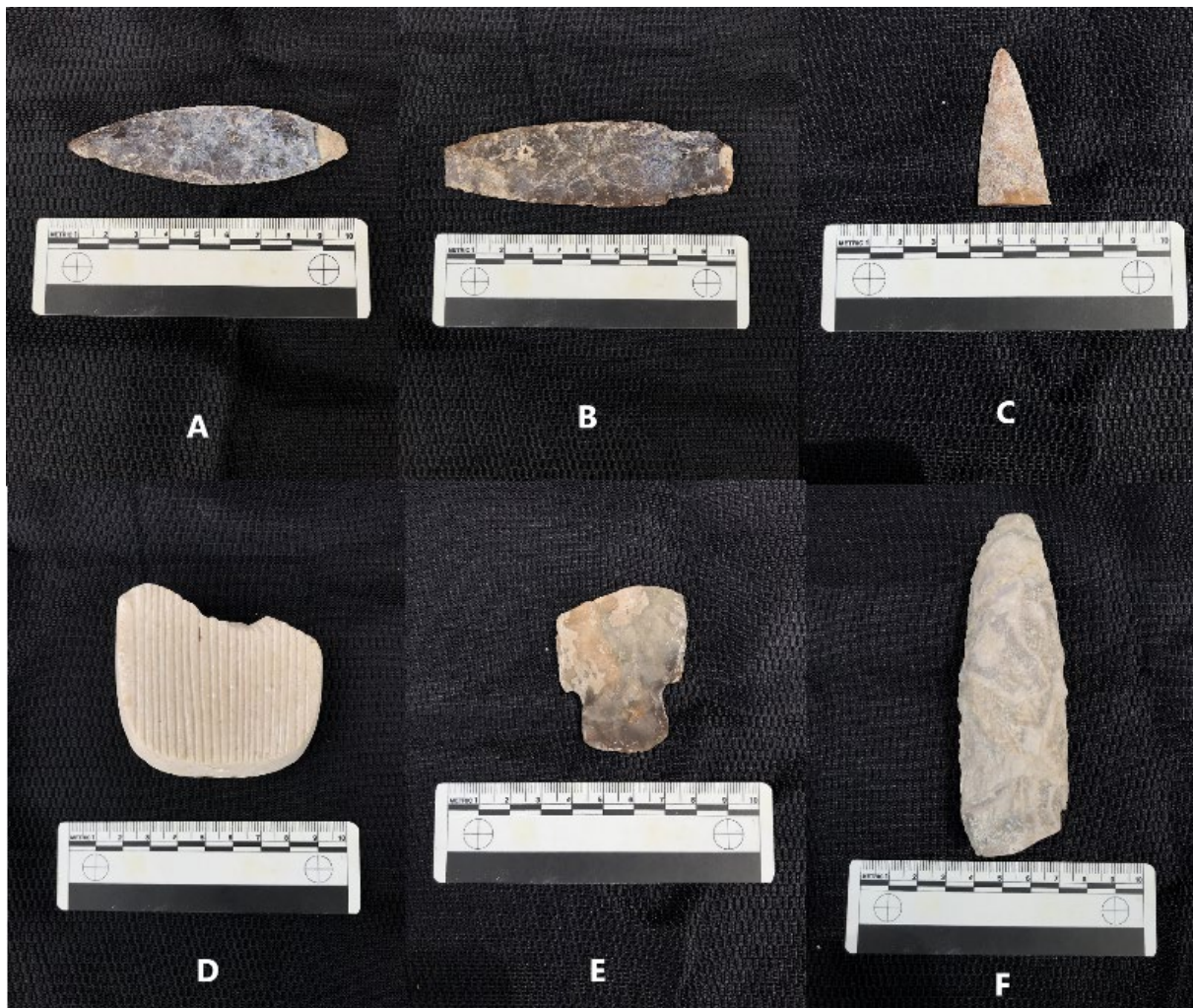


**Figure 5.** Surface of deposit south of Structure B3.





**Figure 6.** Special finds from deposit (right to left): anthropomorphic *ocarina*, woman holding a baby; miniature olla; marine shell *adorno*.



**Figure 7.** Special finds from deposit: (A) Spear point; (B) spear point; (C) projectile fragment; (D) bark beater fragment; (E) projectile fragment; (F) adze.



Clearing the deposit uncovered an architectural feature south of Structure B3, jutting out at about a 45° angle in relation to Str. B3's southern walls (Figure 8). The bedrock in front of this feature sloped gradually by 8cm from east to west. Conservator Jorge Can of the Belize Institute for Archaeology suggested that this was a built-in drain for the courtyard, as such a feature related to the latter function was also discovered in the southwest corner of Courtyard B2. This feature was exposed further by a single excavation unit placed west of the deposit, with hopes to also locate the northeast corner of Structure B6 and its proximity to Structure B3. While this corner was not discovered, and insufficient time prevented further investigation, the unit exposed another section of the southern wall of Structure B3. This low wall was held in place by a large tree root growing across it (Figure 9). Time constraints in 2021 prevented the further investigation of this feature.



**Figure 8.** Architectural feature attached south of Structure B3.



**Figure 9.** Southwestern wall of Structure B3. Note root holding wall in place.

**Table 2.** Artifact tally of deposit located south of Structure B3.

<i>Artifact Type</i>	<i>Count</i>
Ceramic (Non-Diagnostic)	4378
Ceramic (Diagnostic)	1152
Chert	806
Obsidian	22
Slate	2
Freshwater Shell	3
Marine Shell	2
Quartz	6
Granite	16
Faunal Remains	40
Special Finds	(see Appendix)

## Structure B6

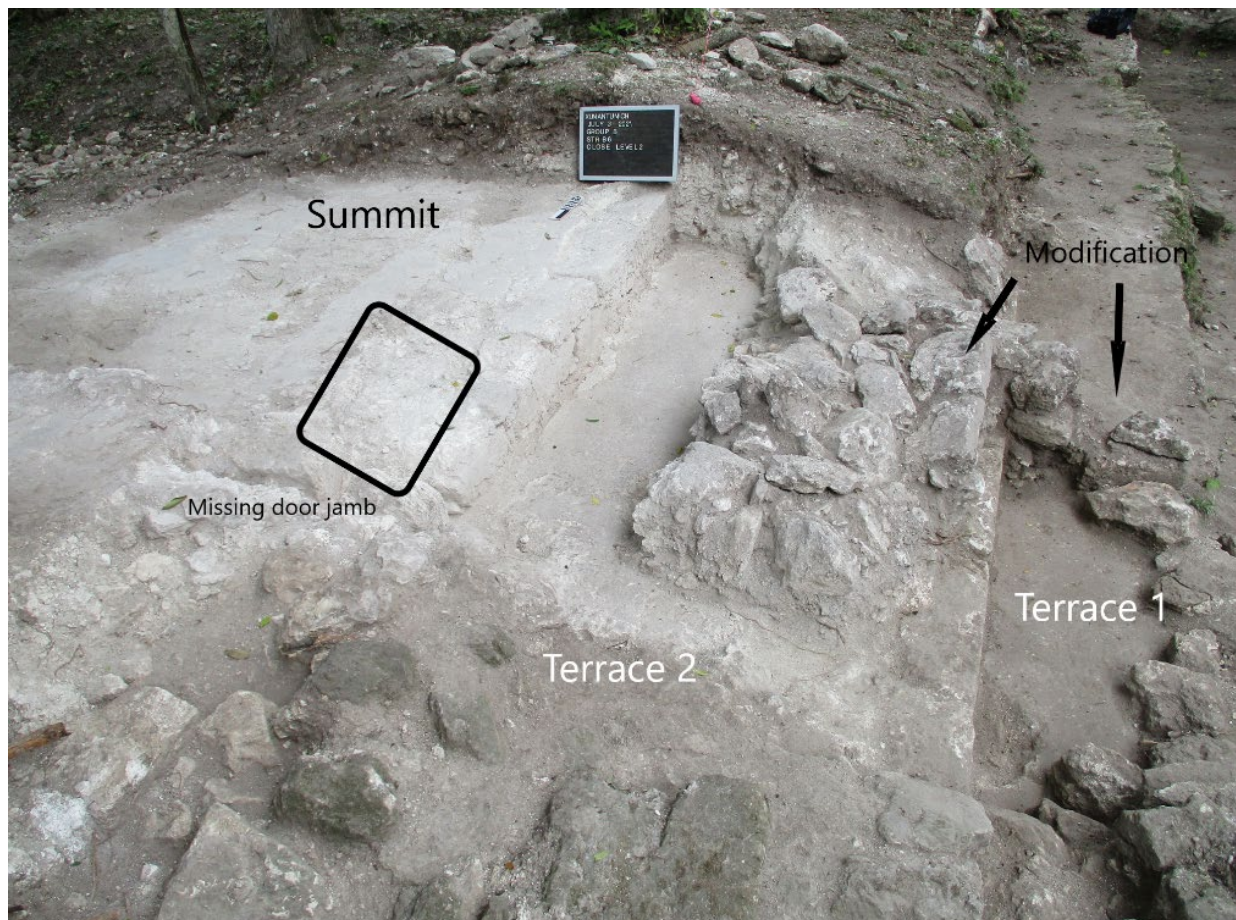
Previous work on Structure B6 by Petrozza and Yaeger focused on the front of the structure in relation to the courtyard surface. In 2021, excavations focused on the southern portion of the



structure, west of a previously discovered stairway. This location was chosen to investigate conditions of the terminal phase of architecture for future conservation efforts.

One unit, measuring 2.5x2.5m was placed on the structure directly west of the staircase. Two extensions were later added to further expose the preserved architecture of the structure. Excavations exposed one major phase of architecture with one modification. The terminal architecture included two terraces leading up to the summit of the structure (Figure 10). Each terrace was a single course high, measuring approximately 20cm in height. After climbing the first terrace, the second terrace is 1.45m west, which then leads up the summit platform. While no door jamb was encountered, there was evidence it was once a part of the summit and had been removed or destroyed by bioturbation. The modification was a poorly preserved staircase including three possible steps.

While the staircase added on to the structure was in a poor state of preservation, the terraces themselves were in good condition, with the cut stones averaging 45cm in width and 20cm in height. The plastered surfaces of the terraces and the summit were also relatively well preserved. Time constraints prevented further exposure of architecture. The exposed architecture was covered with construction plastic for future conservation efforts.



**Figure 5.** Finished excavations on Structure B6 showing terraces, modification, and area of missing door jamb.



**Table 3.** Artifact tally from Structure B6 excavations.

<i>Artifact Type</i>	<i>Count</i>
Ceramic (Non-Diagnostic)	784
Ceramic (Diagnostic)	177
Chert	117
Obsidian	1
Slate	1

## CONCLUSIONS

Our 2021 investigations in Courtyard B2 of Group B served to confirm previous XACP/BVAR observations that Group B at Xunantunich was a focus of peri-abandonment activities during the Terminal Classic period. These activities are possibly related to pilgrimages to the site by remnant peripheral populations during the time of abandonment (see Awe et al. 2020). Future excavations hope to continue exposing the peri-abandonment deposits in Courtyard B2 and further expose the preserved architecture on Structure B6 for future conservation by the joint XACP/Belize Institute of Archaeology project.

## Acknowledgements

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