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PSB OP 023 Excavation Report

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Site 23

Site 23 consists of 45 low constructions scattered over the high terrace of the western Gualjoquito vega overlooking Site 22 ca. 150m to the east. The settlement exhibits no clear patterning. Two irregular lines of small buildings do seem to converge from the northwest and southwest, meeting at the largest construction, Str. 23-14. East of this edifice, a few dispersed constructions are built into the slope leading to the low terrace supporting Sites 20 through 22. Based on surface data, the site was divided into four major components, the northwest and southwest lines of construction, Str. 23-14, and the buildings set into the eastern descent. Though time was limited, only five days could be devoted to Site 23 investigations in April, 1985, each of these zones was probed: Strs. 23-4, 5, and 8 in the northwest line; Str. 23-19 in the southwest branch; Str. 23-14; and Str. 23-29 on the eastern slope. Altogether, 30 person-days of labor were invested in uncovering roughly 74.4m² at Site 23. The work was overseen by T. Johnson and E. Schortman.

Structures 23-4, 5, and 8

Structures 23-4, 5, and 8 are part of a group of zero-elevation constructions that extend in a nearly straight line northwest of Str. 23-14. The close-spacing, averaging 5.4m apart, and similar alignments of these edifices raised questions concerning their behavioral significance. No comparable organizational scheme was identified elsewhere within the middle Ulua drainage. It was hoped that excavations here would reveal what activities were associated with these features and the time period(s) in which those actions occurred. In fact, these investigations strongly suggest that Strs. 23-4, 5, and 8, along with other buildings and features in this line, were part of a single, long, narrow construction, most likely a road. Fully 11m² was exposed in the course of digging Subops. 23C, K, L, P, Q, and R. Excavations were carried down to a maximum depth of 0.21m within, and 0.35m outside, construction revealing a single building phase. No artifacts or other culturally relevant materials were uncovered in these tests.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	-	S.1	-
2	Str. 23-Sub.1	U.1,2	-	-	HIST
3	-	-	F.1	S.2	-

Time Span 1

Stratum 1, a deep reddish-brown, fine-textured, greasy, hard-compacted clay, underlies and buries the lower 0.04-0.12m of Str. 23-Sub.1 construction, strongly suggesting that this earth layer was laid down prior to the events included in TS.2. Stratum 1 was exposed to a maximum thickness of 0.28m, the base lying outside excavation limits. This soil level was most clearly

revealed in Subop. 23K, the westernmost trench, where it ran more-or-less level north-to-south, dipping down noticeably in the area of U.2.

Time Span 2

Units 1 and 2 were raised during this span, comprising the northern and southern boundaries of Str. 23-Sub.1 respectively. Both constructions are cobble walls standing a preserved 0.16-0.31m high, spaced 2.08-2.45m apart, and running parallel to each other at an azimuth of 100° for at least 62m. Vesicular basalt seems to have been the primary material used in wall construction here, some slight effort having been expended in placing the naturally flatter aspects of the rocks outward. A brown mud mortar was used as a binding agent. Stones sizes range from 0.23x0.27m to 0.4x0.58m.

Units 1 and 2 were first exposed in Subop. 23K where they were traced for 18m. A test trench set ca. 42m to the southeast (Subop. 23Q) exposed these elements over a northwest-southeast extent of 1m. A third probe, ca. 20m southeast of Subop. 23Q (Subop. 23R), failed to locate clear evidence of U.1 and 2. This trench did reveal a jumbled concentration of river-rounded stones covering 1.5x2.24m in the area where U.1 and 2 had been expected (F.1). It seems likely that F.1 represents the disrupted remnants of U.1 and 2, though the cause of such disturbance remains unknown. Finally, excavation of Str. 23-14 unearthed a cobble line (U.11) roughly aligned with U.2 and extending northwestward from the building. Unit 11 may, therefore, represent the point where Str. 23-Sub.1 joins Str. 23-14-1st. The northern wall of Str. 23-Sub.1 (U.1) was not encountered in the Str. 23-14 investigations. Taking the above evidence together, it appears that the "buildings" forming a line northwest of Str. 23-14 are, in fact, remnants of a single linear construction emanating from the latter building and running for at least 180m (the distance from Str. 23-14 to F.2, the last surface-visible unit in the northwest line). We interpret this locally unusual construction as a road, U.1 and 2 defining the route's north and south flanks. The surface of this path was probably the top of S.1, the hard-compacted red-brown clay deposited during TS.1. There is no good evidence that the putative road was raised significantly above contemporary ground surface.

Time Span 3

Structure 23-Sub.1 was eventually buried by the natural deposition of S.2, a light tan, fine-textured, hard-compacted soil mottled with orange and containing charcoal flecks. Stratum 2 is 0.05-0.19m thick (though it may be deeper in the area of U.2). Feature 1, described under TS.2, was probably also created at this time as a result of disruptions suffered by U.1 and 2.

Structure 23-14

Structure 23-14 is the largest building at Site 23. This, and its central position within the settlement, strongly suggested that the edifice played an important role in the life of Site 23's inhabitants. Considerable effort was, therefore, expended in trying to reconstruct what that role(s) might have been. Fully 45.9m² were uncovered here in the course of revealing final phase architecture (Subops. 23B, C, E, F, H, I, and M). Excavations remained shallow in all areas, never exceeding 0.31m below modern ground surface, revealing a single construction phase.

Excavation Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Time Span Date</u>
23C/1	artifacts <u>bajareque</u> frags.	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/-
23C/2	13 sherds	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/LC
23C/3	1 carbon sample	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/-
23C/4	19 sherds	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/LC
23C/5	5 sherds	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/-
23C/6	17 sherds	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/LC
23E/1	1 sherd	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/-

Note: Only excavation lots containing cultural material are included here.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	Str. 23-14-1st	U.1-11	F.1	-	HIST
2	-	-	-	S.1	-

Time Span 1

Structure 23-14-1st is an extensive surface-level building defined by low cobble foundations of variable widths that probably supported perishable upper walls. The eastern and western footings (U.1 and 4 respectively) are the most substantial perimeter constructions, rising 0.21-0.27m and measuring 1-1.56m across. Northern and southern foundations (U.2 and 3) are considerably narrower, 0.32-0.4m wide and 0.17-0.33m high. Structure 23-14-1st's northeast corner, where U.1 and 2 should join, was not well preserved. Fragmentary remains tentatively suggest that this intersection was rounded, an unusual feature for excavated middle Ulua buildings. None of the other Str. 23-14-1st corners was exposed. Structure 23-14-1st's interior is subdivided by U.5, a 0.08-0.28m-high, ca. 0.3m-wide cobble wall running 5.17m north-south between U.2 and 6. The flat faces of the rocks comprising U.5 are oriented westward while the few stones dislodged from the unit tilt back to the east. This pattern implies that U.5 was a free-

standing foundation meant to be viewed from the west.

Most of Str. 23-14-1st's interior was apparently surfaced with earth. The primary exception is a complex of paved areas located immediately south and east of U.5 (U.6-8). Together, these cobble surfaces cover an area measuring 5.45m north-south by 3.4m east-west (maximum) and are generally one stone (0.09-0.29m) thick. The curved portions of U.6 and 8 seem to form discontinuous segments of a circle for which excavations revealed no connecting elements in the 3m gap separating them on the east. Units 7 and 8 are linked by an "L"-shaped pavement while U.6 is isolated from the aforementioned constructions by 0.1-0.4m of dirt. The relationship between U.5 and 6 was not clear; the foundation and pavement may have been built separately with the 0.25-0.5m gap between them later filled with a westward continuation of U.6. Units 6-8 are surrounded by dirt.

Lying approximately 2.4m west of U.4 is an extensive pavement built of densely packed cobbles one stone (0.06-0.1m) thick (U.9). Unit 9 measures roughly 5.5m east-west by 8.7m north-south and has a 3.5-4m-long projection extending from its western side (U.10). Unit 10 narrows from east to west, being 2.05m across at the junction with U.9 and 0.7m wide at its western terminus. There is no indication that U.9 and 10 are separate constructions, the latter was likely an extension of the former. Projecting for at least 2.75m northwest from U.10's southwest corner is U.11, a ca. 0.12m-high cobble wall similar in appearance to U.1 and 2 of Str. 23-Sub.1 described above (Strs. 23-4, 5, and 8 excavations). Unit 11's base sits at the same level as those of U.9 and 10, all three apparently having been built at about the same time. As noted earlier, U.11 may be a continuation of the putative road identified northwest of Str. 23-14-1st, the U.10 projection possibly constructed to formalize passage from the road to U.9 and, ultimately, Str. 23-14-1st. The 2.4m-wide gap separating U.4 and 9 is largely filled with earth. The apparent discrepancy in the orientations of U.4 and 9's east side may well be a result of the small extents of both constructions revealed by excavation. How Str. 23-14-1st's western foundation and the U.9 pavement were articulated in unexcavated areas remains unknown.

Roughly half-way between U.4 and 9 are what seems to be the remnants of a 0.06m-high by 0.21-0.29m-wide cobble wall whose base is set 0.04-0.06m above those of the aforementioned units (F.1). Feature 1 was exposed for a north-south distance of 0.6m. It does not appear to continue further north though its southern limit is beyond the 1985 excavation limits. Feature 1's stratigraphic position may indicate that it was introduced relatively late in Str. 23-14-1st's history though its purpose remains uncertain.

Overall, Str. 23-14-1st is a building constructed over a relatively short interval (with the enigmatic F.1 possibly added later). Defined by foundations supporting perishable upper walls, the edifice measures a reconstructed 10.9m north-south by 13m east-west (across the center, exclusive of U.9-11 and F.1) and is aligned 94° to 104°. The largely earthen interior of the building was divided into at least two rooms by U.5. Whether additional compartments delimited by similar stone foundations existed in uninvestigated portions of the structure remains unknown. Units 6-8, the complexly interrelated pavements off the south and east side of U.5, seem to comprise a focal point within Str. 23-14-1st. The substantial sizes of U.1 and 4 imply that the building faced east and west. Formal access to the structure, however, was almost certainly on the west where the edifice is fronted by an extensive cobble pavement. It even seems likely that a road intersected 23-14-1st on the west (U.10 and 11). Rocks used in walls and floors are, primarily, unmodified vesicular basalt cobbles set in a brown mud mortar. The naturally flatter faces of wall stones are generally oriented outwards, and a few cases of rocks artificially (if minimally) modified to create vertical faces were noted. No clear evidence of

coursing or chinking stones was recorded. Rock sizes span the range from 0.07x0.13m to 0.42x0.55m.

Time Span 2

Following abandonment of Str. 23-14-1st, the building was largely buried by the deposition of S.1, a light brown, fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted soil mottled with orange and containing charcoal flecks. There was little sign that Str. 23-14-1st had been significantly disturbed since TS.1. In particular, tumbled architectural debris was almost non-existent.

Structure 23-19

Structure 23-19 is 73m southeast of Str. 23-14 in the line of buildings extending southwest of the latter edifice. This construction is flush with current ground surface and was investigated by means of Subop. 23D, G, and J. A total of 12.5m² was exposed in the course of cutting a north-south trench across Str. 23-19's approximate center and exposing the building's northwest and southeast corners. Excavations were carried to a maximum depth of 0.24m below modern ground surface, revealing a single construction phase.

Excavation Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Time Span/ Date</u>
23D/1	2 sherds	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/?
23D/2	1 sherd	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/?
23D/3	9 sherds	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/LC?
23D/4	11 sherds	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/?
23D/5	7 sherds 1 censer frag. 8 <u>bajareque</u> pieces	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/-
23D/6	5 sherds 2 lithics	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/LPC
23D/7	8 sherds 4 lithics 9 <u>jute</u> shells	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/?
23D/8	5 sherds	Terminal Debris (Secondary)	1/LC, EPC

23D/9 6 sherds Occupation Debris (Secondary) 1/EPC
 1 bajareque frag.

Note: Only lots containing cultural material are included here.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	-	S.1	LC, EPC
2	Str. 23-19-1st	U.1-4	F.1	-	HIST
3	-	-	-	S.2	-

Time Span 1

Stratum 1, a reddish-brown, fine-textured, hard-compacted soil, underlies and/or buries the bases of Str. 23-19-1st construction (U.1-4). Consequently, deposition of this soil level must predate the events of TS.2. Only the uppermost 0.13m (maximum) of S.1 was revealed in excavation, the base being located beyond the limits of our trenches. Recovery of a few scattered artifacts, some diagnostic of the Late Classic and Early Postclassic, points to a light prehistoric occupation in this area preceding the raising of Str. 23-19.

Time Span 2

Structure 23-19-1st is a surface-level construction bounded by stone foundations for perishable upper walls. The northern and southern footings (U.1 and 2) are built of cobbles and river-rounded slabs. Units 1 and 2 are 0.19-0.29m high and 0.1-0.37m thick. Both walls are fashioned of slabs set on end near their centers, construction changing to flat-laid cobbles to the east (U.1) and west (U.2). While U.1 ends in a near right-angle corner with Str. 23-19-1st's east foundation, U.2 terminates in a curved junction with the western footing. The remaining two corners were not uncovered. Structure 23-19-1st contains at least one room measuring 5.44m north-south. Whether this space was divided into smaller compartments by foundations lying in unexcavated portions of the interior remains unknown. A small fragment of the earthen floor was apparently preserved by burning (F.1). Feature 1, a 0.04m-thick lens of scorched reddish-orange clay covered with fragments of white plaster, was exposed in the axial trench (Subop. 23D). This floor fragments rests on the S.1/2 interface and is 0.68m south of U.2. Feature 1 covers 0.3m north-south by at least 0.38m east-west, the western limit being located beyond the trench's borders. It looks as though the top of S.1 served as the original living surface within Str. 23-19-1st, formalized at least in some areas with a white plaster floor.

Extending 2.34m south of the southern foundation (U.1) is a cobble-paved projection apparently built in two stages (U.3 and 4). The first (U.3) covers 0.9m southward from U.1 while its successor (U.4) continues the remaining 1.44m. The surface is 0.08-0.14m (one stone) thick.

Rocks comprising the U.3 are more tightly compacted and flatter laid, making for a more level surface when compared with U.4. The eastern edge of the U.3/4 pavement is located at almost the exact center of U.1; the western margin lay beyond 1985 excavation limits.

Structure 23-19-1st is a surface-level building measuring 5.76m north-south by a reconstructed 6.2m east-west and oriented between 101° to 105°30'. The building contains at least one room covering 5.44m north-south, some portions of which were floored with white plaster. A stone-paved porch extends 2.34m south of the building, apparently added in two stages. Most likely, Str. 23-19-1st was entered over this veranda. The few bajareque fragments recovered during excavation indicate that walls of clay and wood once rose above Str. 23-19-1st's foundations. Rocks used in construction are, primarily, vesicular basalt, held together with a brown mud mortar, and measuring 0.13x0.14m to 0.23x0.54m. The naturally flatter aspects of wall stones were usually placed facing outwards; a few stones artificially modified to create vertical faces were noted as well.

Time Span 3

Following Str. 23-19-1st's abandonment, the building was buried by the deposition of S.2, a brown, fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted soil. There was very little tumbled architectural debris, suggesting that Str. 23-19-1st had suffered relatively little disruption since TS.2.

Structure 23-29

Structure 23-29, located ca. 70m southeast and slightly downslope from Str. 23-14, is built into the flank of the high terrace overlooking Site 22. This building has no apparent elevation on its west, upslope, side and rises 0.44m on the east. Suboperation 23N, a 4.97m east-west by 1m north-south trench, was dug into Str. 23-29's east side extending to the summit. Excavations were continued to a maximum depth of 0.48m through debris overlying and into construction fill, and 0.4m below modern ground surface beyond architecture, revealing a single building phase.

Excavation Lots

<u>Lot</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Context</u>	<u>Time Span/ Date</u>
23N/1	60 sherds	Occupation Debris (Secondary)	1,2/LC, EPC
23N/2	105 sherds 2 <u>bajareque</u> frags.	Mixed Fill and Occupation Debris	2/EPC
23N/3	15 sherds	Mixed Fill and Occupation Debris	2/LC

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	-	S.1	LC?
2	Str. 23-29-1st	U.1-4	-	-	LC, EPC
3	-	-	-	S.2	-

Time Span 1

The deposition of S.1, a light brown, fine-textured, hard-compacted soil heavily mottled with orange and containing numerous carbon flecks, is the earliest event documented in Subop. 23N. Stratum 1 is minimally 0.23m thick (its base lies outside excavation limits) and rises 0.19m over a horizontal east-to-west distance of 1.98m. At least some of the sherds recovered from lot 23N/1 were found in S.1 suggesting that this area supported human occupation prior to the building of Str. 23-29-1st.

Time Span 2

The segments of Str. 23-29-1st exposed in Subop. 23N include a relatively thick eastern basal facing (U.1) backed by a fill of mixed earth and cobbles (U.3) giving way, in turn, to a stone summit wall (U.2). Unit 1 is a cobble wall standing a reconstructed 0.37m high and 0.6m wide placed well within S.1 (0.17m of U.1 is covered by S.1 on the down-sloping, eastern side). The relative thickness of this unit and the setting of its foundation well within the pre-existing earth level may reflect efforts to stabilize construction on the side most prone to erosion. Nevertheless, U.1 was not well preserved when exposed. The terrace defined by U.1 on the east measures 1.36m across and is underlain by U.3. The earth comprising U.3 is a brown, fine-textured, hard-compacted soil almost identical to S.1 and 2. Some of the rocks comprising U.3 may have served as an informal pavement for the eastern terrace, though no clear formal surface was noted. Succeeding the terrace on the west is U.2, a 0.17m-high, 0.69m-wide cobble wall marking the eastern summit margin. Like U.1, U.2 seems to have deep foundations, set approximately 0.18m into the U.3 fill. Unit 2 is backed on the west by an earthen fill identical in composition to S.1 (U.4), of which very little was exposed. Overall, Str. 23-29-1st rose 0.5m on the east and was aligned roughly 19°. Stones used in U.1 and 2 construction are, for the most part, vesicular basalt river cobbles, set in a brown mud mortar, and with their naturally flatter aspects facing outwards. Rock sizes range from 0.23-0.34m in diameter.

Time Span 3

After Str. 23-29-1st's abandonment, the building was largely buried by the natural deposition of S.2, a dark brown, fine-textured, hard-compacted soil with some orange mottling and carbon flecks. The paucity of tumbled architectural debris recorded in Subop. 23N implies that Str. 23-29-1st had been little disrupted since TS.2. While this seems generally to have been the case, such a supposition is belied by the poor preservation of U.1.

Chronological Summary

The first attested occupation of Site 23 dates to the Late Classic when Str. 23-29-1st was built. Scattered use of the high terrace summit during this interval is also attested to in the environs of Str. 23-19 and 23-14. Habitation seems to have persisted into the Early Postclassic in and around Strs. 23-29-1st and -19-1st, though no architecture is clearly associated with this span. The major occupation period at Site 23, however, seems to have been the Historic when Strs. 23-14-1st, 23-19-1st, and Str. 23-Sub.1 were raised (Str. 23-29-1st was apparently abandoned by this time). Structure 23-14-1st is assigned to this span, despite the absence of Historic period ceramic diagnostics, because of its association with the putative road and the nature of its construction, so out of keeping with other edifices dated to the prehistoric era in the basin. The few Late Classic ceramics unearthed while excavating Str. 23-14-1st probably derived from scattered, earlier deposits whose contents have worked their way to the surface by cultural and natural means.

It is difficult to specify when precisely within the post-columbian epoch Site 23 was inhabited. Recovery of glazed ceramics in Subops. 23D, G, and J implies a relatively late Historic date for construction and residence here. The paucity of artifacts found in general during work on the three historic buildings further suggests that post-Columbian residence at Site 23 was relatively short-lived or did not involve the use of large numbers of non-perishable materials.

Architectural Summary

The sole example of Late Classic architecture revealed at Site 23 (Str. 23-29-1st) is a platform, oriented 19°, and mounted on the east by a relatively wide (1.36m across) terrace retained by a low (0.37m high), wide (0.6m across) cobble wall. A well-made summit step-up of comparable dimensions (0.17m high by 0.69m wide) is also fashioned of river-rounded stones. There was some slight effort noted to place the naturally flatter faces of cobbles outward in both of these walls. Terrace fill consists of cobbles mixed with earth; the hearting underlying the summit may have been made up solely of earth though too little was revealed of this unit to be certain. Stones employed in both walls and fill are largely vesicular basalt, set in a brown mud mortar. Rock sizes, recorded in the best-preserved Str. 23-29-1st construction (U.2) run between 0.23-0.34m diameter.

Historic architecture at Site 23 consists of surface-level buildings delimited by stone footings that once supported perishable upper walls (Strs. 23-14-1st and 23-19-1st). Foundations rise 0.08-0.33m, measure 0.3-1.56m wide, and are generally fashioned of medium to large basalt cobbles, measuring 0.07x0.13m to 0.4x0.58m (most fall towards the middle and upper end of the continuum), the naturally flatter faces of which are oriented outwards. A small minority of these rocks may have been simply modified to create a vertical face, especially seen in the south edge of U.3, Str. 23-19-1st. In most cases, the stones are flat-laid, though the approximate centers of Str. 23-19-1st's southern and northern footings were fashioned of river-rounded slabs set on end. Rooms contained by these units usually have earthen floors though portions of Str. 23-14-1st's interior were paved with stone (U.6-8) and plaster seems to have been laid over the earthen surface of Str. 23-19-1st's enclosure (F.1). Exposed stone pavements are invariably one cobble thick (0.06-0.29m) and laid directly on earth. A locally unusual feature of both excavated

buildings is their rounded corners (Str. 23-19-1st's northwest junction and, possibly, Str. 23-14-1st's northeast corner). The significance of this divergence from angled junctions remains unknown. The two uncovered Historic edifices measure 5.76x6.2m (Str. 23-19-1st) and 10.9x13m (Str. 23-14-1st) and are oriented between 94° and 105°30'.

Structure 23-Sub.1 is a construction with no local precedents in our excavated sample. As noted earlier, it seems to be an earthen-surfaced road that is 2.08-2.45m wide, oriented roughly 100°, and bounded on the north and south by cobble walls 0.12-0.31m high. This route seems to originate at Str. 23-14-1st and to extend for at least 180m to the northwest. It is very likely that the road was much longer but was formalized with stone boundary walls only within the confines of Site 23.