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## 6 THE DAWN OF MAYA CIVILIZATION: PRECLASSIC PERIOD ARCHAEOLOGY FROM SANTA RITA COROZAL

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*Although the site of Santa Rita Corozal is best known for its Postclassic Period (A.D. 1100-1532) remains, a substantial number of Preclassic deposits were recovered during the course of archaeological investigation. These materials spanned the entire Preclassic era from ca. 1000 B.C. through the transition into the Early Classic Period at about A.D. 250. This paper presents these data and examines relationships to other Preclassic materials in Belize and elsewhere. These archaeological data have a bearing on the rise of Maya civilization in northern Belize and the posited dating and relationships of Swasey ceramics. They further document the variability that existed in ceramic materials prior to the onset of the Late Preclassic Period.*

### **Introduction**

Even prior to the beginning of the 20th century (Gann 1900), the site of Santa Rita Corozal was known for its Postclassic Period remains (A.D. 1100-1532). Subsequent work has amplified our knowledge of Postclassic Maya and the site is identified as the Late Postclassic capital for the province of Chetumal. Besides the Postclassic remains, however, substantial evidence for a lengthy Preclassic occupation also has been recovered during the course of archaeological investigation. These materials span the entire Preclassic era (B.C. 1000 – A.D. 250) and represent some of the earliest remains known from northern Belize. The Corozal Postclassic Project investigations undertaken at Santa Rita Corozal from 1979 through 1985 were not directed towards answering questions concerning the nature of Preclassic occupation and organization at this site. Excavations were often halted before the earliest levels were reached. Full areal exposure of Preclassic constructions was also not attempted, as it would have entailed the removal of overlying architecture. Thus, there was likely a substantially larger Preclassic Period occupation at Santa Rita Corozal than indicated in the current excavation sample. Nevertheless, the

temporal and spatial relationships of these early materials have a bearing on considerations of the rise of Maya civilization.

Preclassic remains encountered at Santa Rita Corozal included special deposits, constructions, and use-related debris - as well as stone and ceramic lined pits. As in most periods of Maya prehistory, pottery forms a basic tool in the interpretation of the Preclassic Period archaeological record (Andrews V 1990; Ball and Taschek 2003). As has been noted by Andrews V (1990), however, reconstructions based on pottery may not necessarily mirror other aspects of material culture or be clear reflections of language or ethnicity. This being said, pottery has the obvious advantage of being abundant and variable (Gifford 1976:3). Thus, this paper will highlight the contextual associations of pottery bearing Preclassic Period materials from special deposits at Santa Rita Corozal in order to facilitate consideration of the relationships among materials encountered at other sites in northern Belize and in neighboring lowland areas, building on earlier arguments over the importance of analyzing ceramic subcomplexes (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987). The Santa Rita Corozal data are pertinent to both a consideration of

the early Maya in northern Belize and to the posited dating and relationships of Preclassic Period pottery.

One of the more frustrating aspects of studying Preclassic Period Lowland Maya remains is the dearth of stratigraphically related sealed deposits containing ceramic components. Comparisons are, of necessity, often relegated to stylistic comparisons of surface treatment or modal similarities of pottery among sites. For this reason the focus of this paper is on the illustration of primary Preclassic contexts with whole or reconstructible vessels, particularly those with multiple Preclassic deposits.

#### **Operation P12: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134**

The best-stratified Preclassic Period remains from Santa Rita Corozal were located in Santa Rita Structure 134, an extremely low building situated on the grounds of Corozal Community College at the western edge of Corozal town. Earlier work by Gann (1918:75-78; see also D. Chase 1982:59-60) had found early remains in this portion of the site, so it was not surprising that other early materials were recovered in this vicinity. Structure 134 is the easternmost structure on a small platform. Decision to excavate this area was made because the local high school was in the process of preparing a soccer field that in its original plan would have led to the leveling of this construction. Following excavation, the proposed soccer field was positioned so that it avoided disturbing the structure and its associated platform. Unlike other areas of the site, there was little Late Postclassic Period debris visible on the Structure 134 surface; thus, it appeared at the onset that this locus was likely not late in date. In view of the Postclassic orientation of the Corozal Postclassic Project - and because it seemed likely that excavations would produce non-Postclassic occupation -

a trench (rather than areal excavation) was placed across the mound. Operation P12 became a small 15 m long by 1.5 m wide excavation that eventually produced some of the most complex stratigraphy encountered at Santa Rita Corozal. At least 4 separate construction episodes and 22 burials were recovered from this locus (Figure 1). More than half of these burials dated to the Preclassic.

Excavation in Structure 134 was undertaken from May to July of 1980. The trench was completely excavated from its surface to the underlying bedrock, some 2 m below the surface, producing a complex history of use and construction. In this excavation 27 special deposits and features were defined, consisting primarily of burials and hearths. The majority of the recovered deposits and constructions in Structure 134 date to the Preclassic and Early Classic Periods.

The earliest archaeological evidence of activity at the Structure 134 locus consisted of the placement of a burial (SD P12B-25) just above bedrock; this interment was later disturbed by another burial that was placed directly above it (SD P12B-26). This later interment contained a slipped vessel in the upper chest area. The lower portion of this second burial was also partially disturbed by subsequent interment activity; thus the original position of the lower body is not clear. The vessel associated with SD P12B-26 was slipped light red to pink and is of a form similar to Swasey Phase vessels defined at Cuello (Pring 1976); however, the slip color and crude forming of the pot differ from the more refined Cuello examples. These two earliest burials at the Structure 134 locus were covered by a small substructure 2 meters in depth and 30 cm in height. The construction was abutted by a white friable floor lens to its west. The western face of the structure was up to two stone courses in

Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134

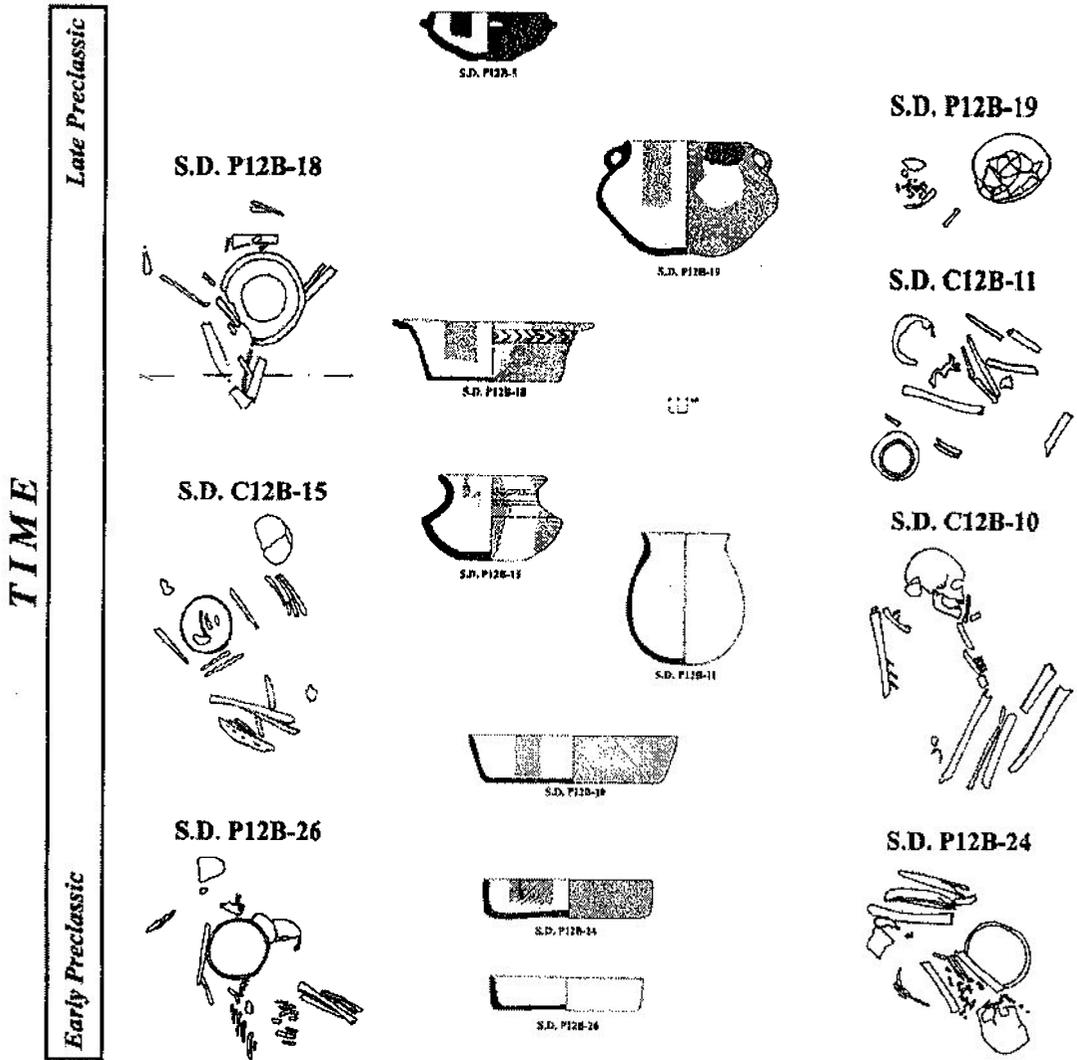
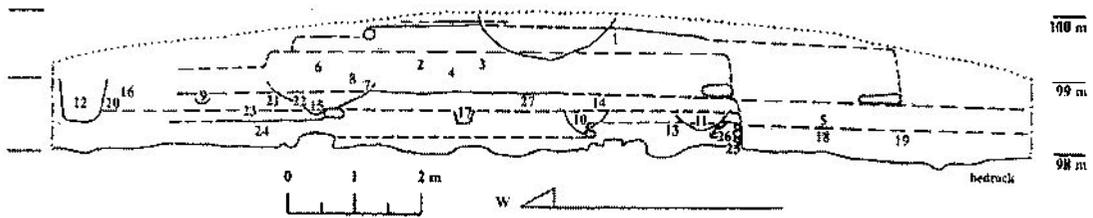


Figure 1. Schematic section through Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134 showing approximate location of recovered special deposits, the plans and vessels associated with the Preclassic burials, and their relative placement in time.

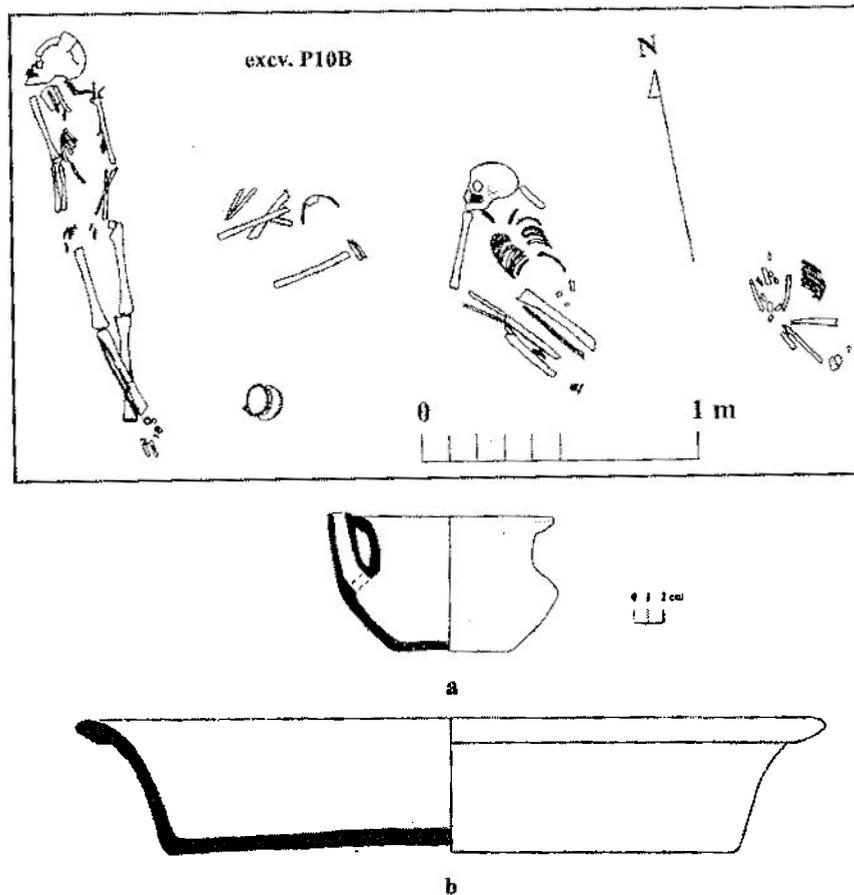


Figure 2. Four interments from the front of the P10B excavation into Santa Rita Corozal Structure 35 and two Sierra Red vessels associated with burials in this structure.

height and was composed of irregular limestone pieces, as was much of the core for the construction. The eastern face was reused in two following construction efforts and, as recovered, were at least 5 stone courses in height.

The second major construction effort in the Structure 134 locus produced a substructure 6 m deep and abutted by a slightly more formalized "plaster" surface to the west; the eastern platform surface must also have been raised at approximately the same time. This second substructure was associated with two presumed hearths, one on its summit (SD P12B-17) and one to its west (SD P12B-23) on the surface of the abutting floor. This western plaster floor

sealed SD P12B-24, the burial of a flexed female (see picture in D. Chase 1981). This interment was associated with a single vessel, a shell necklace, and two shell bracelets. The vessel form is well within the range of Swasey forms found at Cuello and the employment of a double slip on the piece is reminiscent of Cuello's Consejo Red. The slip color, however, is a light red to pink, similar to the other early Santa Rita vessels. The formation of this later piece is technically better than the vessel associated with SD P12B-26.

Several other interments were placed within the building core or intruded into this second version of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134. SD P12B-11 was intruded

through the east wall of the early construction. This burial of a flexed female contained a total of five small-jadeite, shell, and other stone beads, a carnivore canine, and an unslipped olla. The olla is perhaps most similar to Copetilla Unslipped and has the characteristic flattened lip of Cuello's Swasey phase. Two other burials with associated vessels were found intruded into this second early construction. Special Deposit P12B-15 consisted of a flexed female burial intruded through the west facing of the substructure. A single inverted vessel was placed in the chest area; two shell beads were also included within the interment. This vessel is of a form similar to that illustrated for the Swasey Phase at Cuello and for Mamom at Uaxactun. Its slip color ranges from pink to red to black. Another interment (SD P12B-10) was intruded into the area of the west face of the earliest construction. This was the burial of a flexed male. The individual was interred contemporaneously with yet another bowl. This red dish is larger than the flat-bottomed bowls included in the earlier two burials; it potentially approximates Cuello's early Ramgoat Red.

Two burials were located in the matrix east of the earliest Structure 134 construction; these were most likely placed following the second construction effort in the Structure 134 locus. SD P12B-19 was a very poorly preserved burial (only traces of bone remained) associated with an inverted red slipped vessel. This vessel is somewhat problematic as it has a slip characteristic of Abelino Red, but form characteristics possibly suggest a later dating. SD P12B-18 is similarly problematic. This is a disturbed flexed burial with an associated vessel slipped a light red and decorated with a raised band of incised chevrons. While chevrons are noted as appearing in Mamom at Uaxactun (Smith 1955:21), the vessel does not accord well with descriptions of the later Joventud

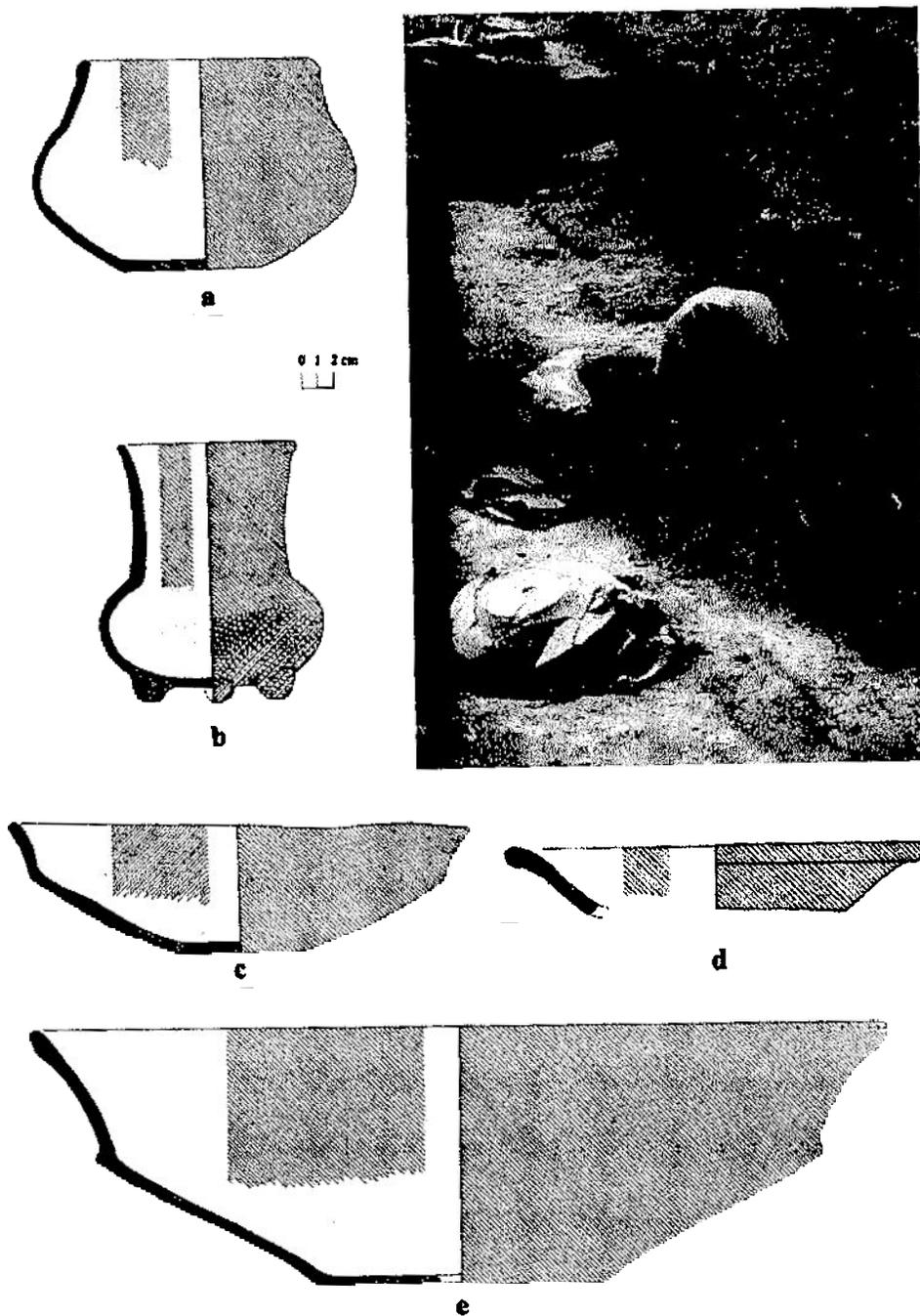
Red. It is also reminiscent of a chevron decorated vessel from K'axob dated to the Late Preclassic (Berry et al 2004: 207), but is of much finer manufacture and is most definitely not Sierra Red.

Subsequent to the placement of these interments, the western plaza floor was further elevated. Extensive use of this new surface is indicated by 3 well-marked hearths (SDS P12B20, 21, and 22). The entire locus was then raised and replastered following the use of this western floor. This construction sealed a series of burials. While most were not overtly associated with ceramic vessels, a flexed burial (SD P12B-5) associated with a burnt Sierra Red bowl was located in the eastern portion of the excavation. This burial was interred either immediately before the construction of this platform flooring or intruded through it not long afterward, thus suggesting a Late Preclassic Period dating. Activity following these burials and constructions appears to be largely dateable to the Early Classic Period.

The Structure 134 excavations provide evidence for a series of construction activities associated with what have generally been termed Swasey sphere ceramics in northern Belize. These constructions are more elaborate than those noted from the site of Cuello. Excavation gives no evidence for abandonment during the sequence of occupation. The burials and associated pottery vessels encountered in this investigation provide a sequence of vessel forms and types. Unfortunately, with the possible exception of the earliest two bowls, these ceramic pieces do not easily fit into any of the recognized early ceramic spheres such as Swasey, Xe, Mamom, or Jenny Creek.

#### **P10B: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 35**

Structure 35 was investigated with a 27.4 m by 1.5 m axial trench combined with areal excavation to the front and east sides



**Figure 3.** Photograph of axial trench through Santa Rita Corozal Structure 159 showing two Preclassic burials in situ and the Sierra Red vessels associated with Special Deposit P19A-4.

of the building. The investigations revealed a sequence of multiple constructions and 9 human interments as well as artifactual materials dating from the Late Preclassic through the early Historic Periods. No clear

evidence of a Preclassic Period building was encountered within the excavation limits; however, a Preclassic Period stone-lined pit was encountered in the south excavation limit just above bedrock and 5 Preclassic

Period burials were interred below the basal floor level. Excavation in the eastern extent of the axial trench encountered 4 burials that were all aligned with each other and at the same level; the data suggest both sequential burials within a limited time span and the involvement of some social memory in their placement (Figure 2). Three of these interments, SDs P10B-2,-4, and-5, were flexed individuals with heads to the north but with no associated artifacts or pottery. A fourth burial, SD P10B-3 consisted of an extended burial with head to the north and a Sierra Red chocolate pot (Figure 2a) east of the individual's feet. Approximately 2 m west of the eastern "cemetery," another Late Preclassic interment was found. Special Deposit P10B-8 consisted of a flexed individual completely covered by a red-slipped Sierra Red platter (Figure 2b); a single bone bead also accompanied the interment. While no formally constructed building remains dateable to the Late Preclassic were encountered in the Structure 35 platform, the recovery of 5 burials of this date suggests that such constructions must have been built nearby. The recovery of Late Preclassic burials without buildings is consistent with recovered patterns from elsewhere at Santa Rita Corozal, showing that the Late Preclassic burials were often set some distance apart from their building platforms.

#### **Operation P19: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 159 and Chultun 13**

Operation P19A was designated for investigations into Structure 159. Excavation opened up 112.5 sq meters areally and also penetrated this locus with two separate trenches. A complex construction and occupation history was revealed with the earliest recovered materials dated to the Late Preclassic Period. None of the deeper excavations, however, went to bedrock;

instead the investigations were halted once non-Postclassic remains were encountered. A total of ten human interments were found in this operation. Two of these were Late Preclassic burials with one or more accompanying ceramic vessels. Both individuals were flexed and placed under large ceramic containers. Special Deposit P19A-4 was covered with a large inverted Sierra Red platter. Special Deposit P19A-5 was accompanied by five Sierra Red vessels (Figure 3). The individual was covered by a large flaring bowl that covered his body, and also 4 other vessels, a jadeite bead, and a jadeite pendent. Although technically Sierra Red, all the pottery encountered within this burial was stylistically extremely late. Additional early remains were recovered from Chultun 14, located in close proximity to Structure 159. This chultun, investigated as Sub-Operation P19D, contained Terminal Preclassic (Protoclassic) ceramics and a bone rasper.

#### **Operation P22: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 37**

Investigations in Structure 37 consisted of two areal clearings, one measuring 6 m by 3.8 m and the other measuring 4.5 m by 3.6, combined with an axial trench, measuring 14 m by 1.5 m. The trench was dug to bedrock only in its eastern portion; in other areas, sealed floors were not penetrated. Thus, while Preclassic Period remains were encountered, they constitute a limited excavation sample for this locus. The earliest occupation of the area appears to date to the Late Preclassic. In the eastern end of the trench, excavation encountered a Preclassic Period rounded construction as well as three Preclassic burials, one of which contained 7 ceramic vessels. Six other burials dating to the Late Classic Period and two caches dating to the Late Postclassic Period were also excavated here.

### Santa Rita Corozal Structure 92

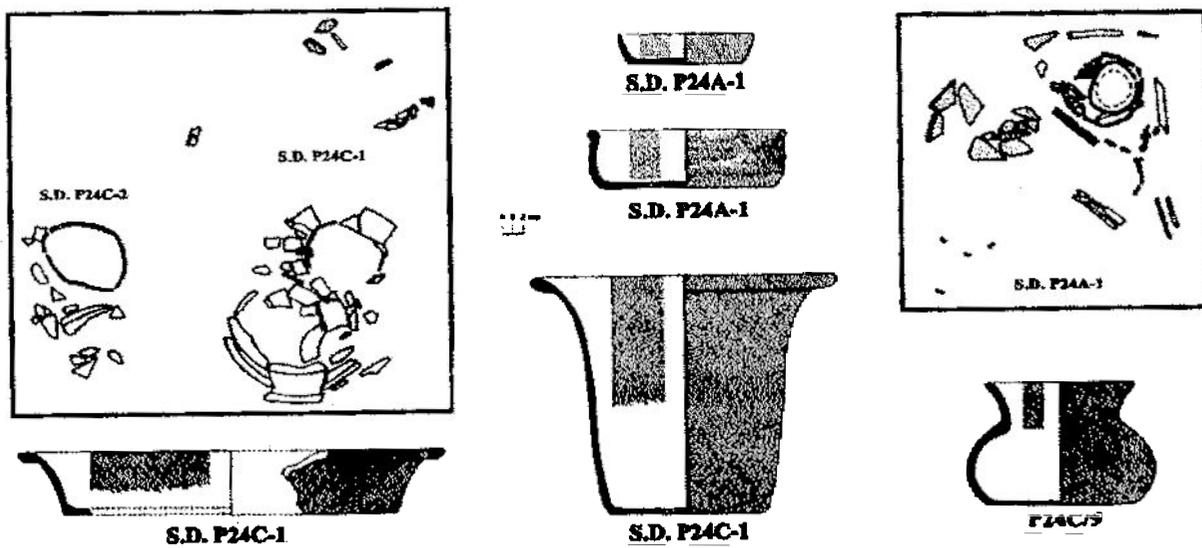
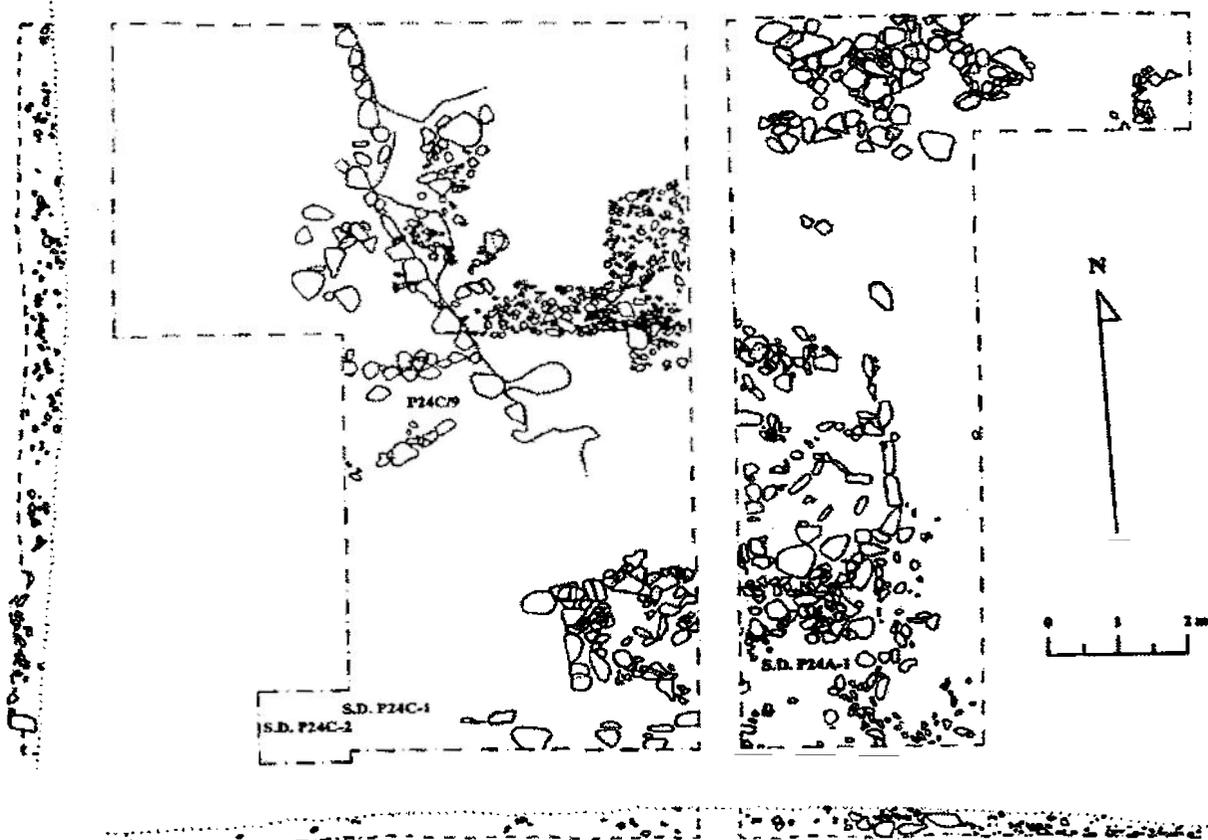


Figure 4. Plan of excavations undertaken in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 92 showing the location, plans, and some of the pottery vessels associated with interments in this construction.

All three Preclassic burials were accompanied by pottery. Special Deposit P22A-4 contained the skull of an infant covered by an inverted Sierra Red bowl. Special Deposit P22A-5 consisted of a flexed adult burial accompanied by 2 chocolate pots, 1 platter, 1 flower-pot, 1 small jar, and 2 other bowls. Special Deposit P22A-6 was the burial of a flexed adult associated with a perforated shell and a large partial Sierra Red platter.

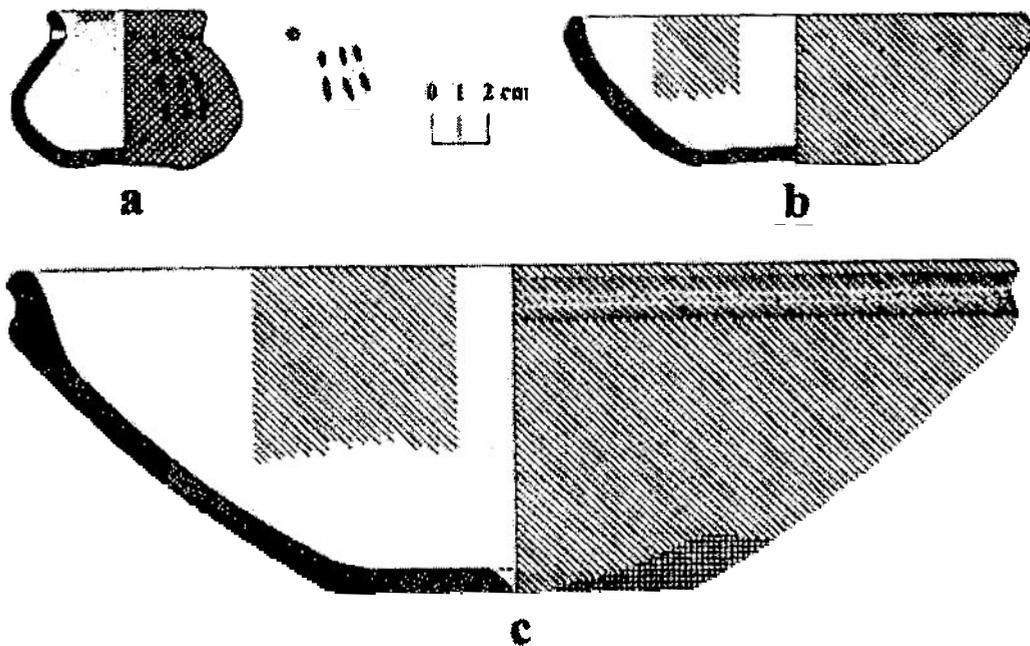
#### **Operation P24: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 92**

Investigation of Structure 92 consisted of areal excavation combined with an axial trench that measured 12 m by 1.5 m. Two large areal excavations separated by a 50 cm balk were stripped of overburden exposing approximately 130 sq m of partial floors and walls, the majority of which were Late Preclassic in date (Figure 4). This excavation was a rare instance where Late Preclassic remains were situated immediately beneath the current ground surface. Evidence for Preclassic occupation consisted of line-of-stone building platforms, in situ Late Preclassic ceramics on floor surfaces, and 4 burials. One of these burials was encountered approximately 20 cm below the ground surface in the axial trench and the other three were barely below the surface in the extreme southwestern corner of the areal excavations. Bedrock was encountered within 50 cm of the ground surface in this southeastern locus. Pottery incorporated within 3 of these interments indicates that these remains range from Middle to Late Preclassic Period in date (Figure 4). Two of the southeastern burials dated to the Late Preclassic based on their accompanying pottery. Special Deposit P24C-1 consisted of a flexed individual interred with 2 vessels, a Sierra Red platter inverted over the body and a Sierra Red flower pot. Special Deposit P24C-2

consisted of a flexed body accompanied by a single Sierra Red flower-pot. A third southeast burial, SD P24C-3 consisted of only fragmentary long bones. The Middle Preclassic burial, SD P24A-1, consisted of a single flexed individual barely below the ground surface. This individual was accompanied by 3 pottery vessels and 4 small tubular jadeite beads. Two of the pottery bowls in this interment exhibit Swasey affinities in their forms, while the large red platter (Joventud Red) that was once inverted over the body is a Mamom-related form. Taken together, this deposit may be dated to the Middle Preclassic and is strongly suggestive of temporal overlap between these two different ceramic units. Had the two bowls been found without the dish, the deposit would have been considered to be Swasey-related; had the dish been found with no bowls, it would have been considered to be Mamom-related – thus reinforcing the problematic nature of ceramic seriation and dating in Preclassic northern Belize.

#### **Operation P28: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 182**

Structure 182 was a low platform raised no more than 35 cm above the surrounding ground surface. Two distinct construction efforts were uncovered in this investigation. Areal stripping revealed a circular Late Postclassic substructure and a Late Postclassic circular burial shrine with associated artifacts (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988). A deeper trench, measuring 9 m by 1.5 m, penetrated the Postclassic substructure, finding, first, Terminal Preclassic and, subsequently, Late Preclassic ceramic deposits associated with a circular Late Preclassic construction. Immediately beneath the core of the Late Postclassic construction, the burial of a flexed individual was uncovered.



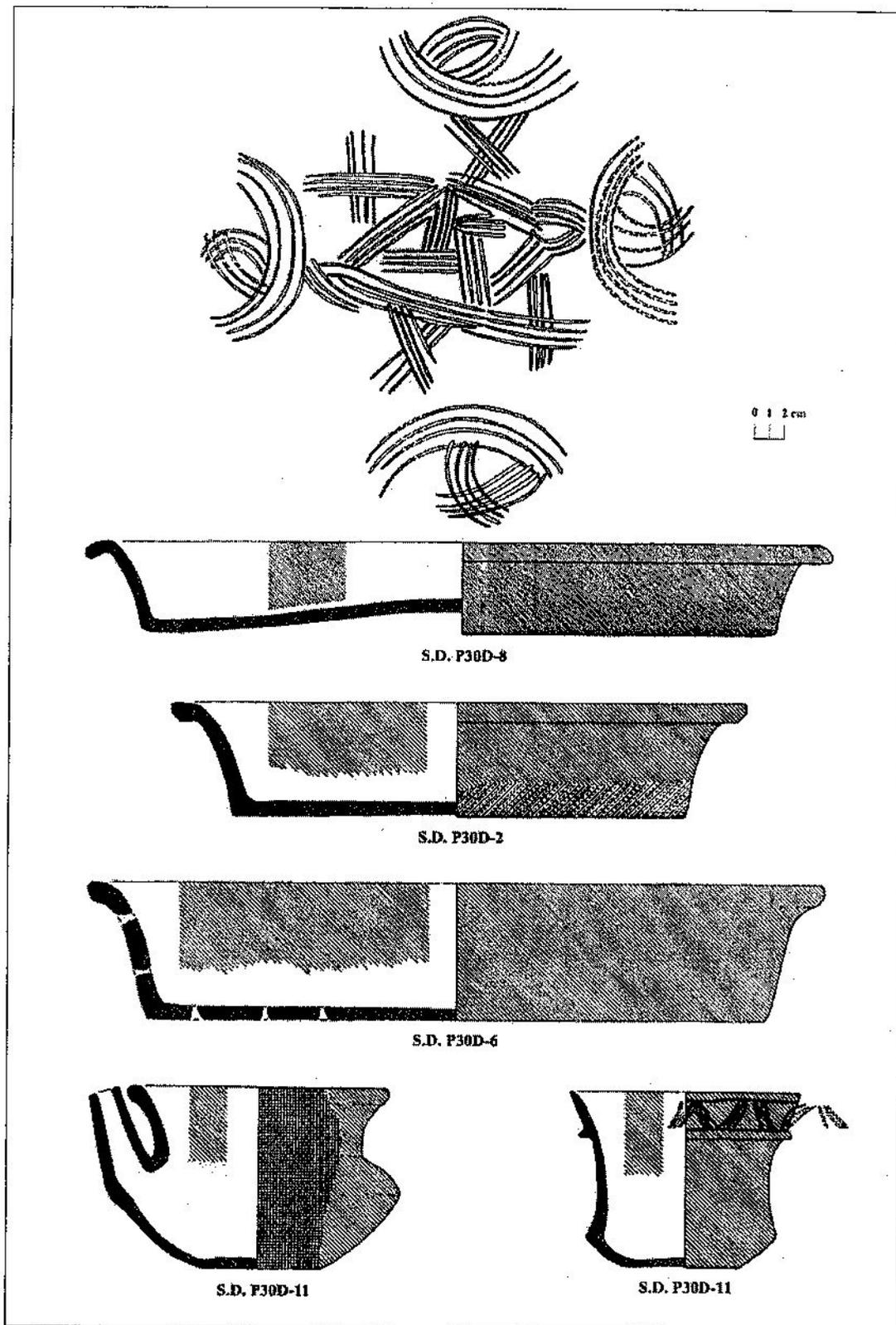
**Figure 5.** Three ceramic vessels associated with Special Deposit P30D-1 in front of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 189: a. Lechugal Incised; b., c. Sierra Red.

Special Deposit P28B-2 was associated with three vessels (a red tetrapod plate, a red chocolate pot, and a small brown cup) and two carved shell beads (a monkey face and a tooth); the tetrapod Sierra Red plate in this burial was inverted over the bones, much like earlier Preclassic platters.

**Operation P30: Santa Rita Corozal Structure 189**

Like most Santa Rita Corozal investigations, excavation of Structure 189 consisted of areal clearing undertaken in conjunction with an axial trench. As in other areas at Santa Rita Corozal, the latest – indeed the only – construction encountered was a raised Postclassic platform. This platform was raised a maximum of 55 cm above the surrounding ground surface and had two inset stairs separated by a central balk on its eastern side (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988). However, everything beneath

the platform was of Preclassic date. Axial penetration of the formal construction yielded nothing in the fill, but did encounter extensive Preclassic materials in the underlying stratum. Four hearths (SDs P30B-4, -7, -10, -12) and 6 flexed burials were recovered; all were Late to Terminal Preclassic in date. Of the four hearths, one (SD P30B-4) was directly associated with 2 Late Preclassic vessels, chert pieces, and a pomacea flagellate fragment; dating of carbon (Beta-18086) associated with this hearth to BC 1920±120 is clearly far too early for the associated material. Only one of the burials (SD C30D-9) had no pottery; the other five all had accompanying vessels (Figures 5 and 6). Special Deposit P30D-1 is stylistically the latest Preclassic deposit in this locus and was accompanied by 3 vessels (Figure 5); SDs P30D-2 and P30D-8 each had 2 Sierra Red pottery vessels; SD P30D 8 included a drilled shell and an inverted



**Figure 6.** Ceramic vessels associated with Special Deposits from beneath Santa Rita Corozal Structure 189; vessels are either Laguna Verde Incised or Sierra Red; one vessel is extensively crack-laced

platter that had a pre-slip turtle groove-incised on its interior (Figure 6). Special Deposit P30D-11 was accompanied by 4 ceramic vessels and 14 marginella shells; the Sierra Red platter in this interment had a painted cross design on the unslipped underside.

### Conclusions

The earliest remains at Santa Rita Corozal are constructions and interments associated with Swasey pottery (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987) similar to that first identified at Cuello (Pring 1977; Hammond 1999; Kosakowsky 1987a, 1987b; Kosakowsky and Pring 1991, 1998). These earliest remains, specifically those found in Structure 134, are stratigraphically separate from later Preclassic materials at this locus. Whether these remains can be considered to be "Early Preclassic," however, is presently unanswerable. Slightly later stratigraphic materials from Structure 134 can be considered to be Swasey or "Bladen"-related and have been used as illustrative examples of Swasey in international museum exhibits (e.g. Grube 1992). We believe that these remains are, in fact, coeval with Swasey/Bladen materials from Cuello and Xe ceramics from Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971) and suggest that the difficulty in cross-correlating pottery of this date is due to strong regional variation. Most interpretations and arguments over the placement of the earliest ceramic remains in northern Belize are based on isolated contexts and single vessels whose modes and surface treatments do not clearly fit one sphere versus another.

Thus, while it is possible to stratigraphically isolate early constructions and deposits at Santa Rita Corozal, like Cuello and the Belize Valley, the limited quantity of these materials engenders controversial discussions, but few solid conclusions. When vessels with earlier

modes are found with more easily sorted redwares, like Joventud Red, there still is no consensus. At Cuello, the occurrence of Bladen-style ceramics in Middle Preclassic Mamom burials was viewed as an anachronism rather than as a co-occurrence; Bladen and Mamom are viewed as being sequential at that site (Kosakowsky and Pring 1998). Both the contents of the Middle Preclassic Structure 92 burial and the archaeological stratigraphy from Structure 134 suggest that Bladen and Mamom are not sequential, but rather overlap.

Late Preclassic interments at Santa Rita Corozal are extremely common, occurring throughout the entire site. These burials are usually accompanied by inverted Sierra Red platters, but are less likely to incorporate shell or jadeite offerings as part of their contents than are earlier burials at the site. While Sierra Red vessels are relatively easy to identify, they are far less uniform in shape and diameter than might be expected and are sometimes accompanied by incised or painted designs (see also McAnany 2004). A number of the large Sierra Red platters were crack-laced, potentially suggesting that they were not always easy to obtain and that they may have been used for a substantial period of time prior to their inclusion as burial offerings.

While a substantial quantity of Preclassic remains were recovered at Santa Rita Corozal, the investigations that were undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project point to the need to review sampling strategy carefully when making interpretations. Preclassic deposits at Santa Rita Corozal were only rarely encountered in close proximity to the surface and unburied by later occupation. Much of the Preclassic occupation of Santa Rita Corozal was sampled only in the deeper trenches, only incidentally being encountered in a

research design that focused on the areal stripping of Postclassic Period remains.

Yet another issue related to Preclassic interpretation is the difficulty involved in reconstructing the large Late Preclassic vessels; their fragmentary natures requires substantial patience and time to reconstruct – often a problem in today's "publish or perish" world. In the case of Santa Rita Corozal, since the Preclassic was not the focus of research, the data were carefully collected, initially described, and then essentially stored. It is suspected that similar circumstances affect interpretations on other projects. Also of great concern for the Preclassic Period is the amount of time invested in the analysis of pottery. Type Variety-Mode Analysis is the most commonly used methodology for classifying pottery in the Maya Lowlands. The system was conceived by Gifford (1960) and was argued as being "an efficient and effective medium for establishing spatiotemporal frameworks, delineating patterns of ceramic interaction, and facilitating inter-analyst communication throughout the Lowland Maya area and much of eastern Mesoamerica" (Ball 1979: 830). While counter-arguments exist over the usefulness of TVM, no other articulated system of pottery analysis has formally superseded it. Type-Variety-Mode analysis is generally used to analyze sherds within archaeological deposits, often without regard to context (e.g. Kosakowsky and Pring 1998). However, a focus on whole vessels and their contexts, as has been done at Santa Rita Corozal, is in keeping with Gifford's original intent for ceramic analysis. In his words:

Therefore, it is important to stress that complete vessel reconstruction is not only what the archaeologist is striving for, but that whole vessels and complete special segments of vessel units ultimately comprise those variety, type,

and mode units which display meaningful interpretive significance. Consequently, even though in most archaeological situations we are obliged to cope with large quantities of sherds and adapt the type: variety-mode approach to the limitations of sherd collections, our conceptual scheme is based on whole vessels and culturally meaningful segments of vessels. Throughout our researches we continuously draw support from the postulate that additions to our ceramic knowledge will eventually reveal the reconstruction of whole vessels and mode portions thereof to supplement the sherd fragments on which initial variety, type, and mode descriptions are based. (Gifford 1976:6)

As noted, this discussion has been limited to primary deposits and whole or reconstructible vessels. While the presence of whole vessels should ideally make the identification of type and variety simpler, the Santa Rita Corozal excavations do not suggest an easy solution to the Early-Middle Preclassic problem. In this case, the investigations serve to highlight the differences of interpretation gained from contextual analysis compared with those from strictly sherd-based analysis (e.g. Kosakowsky and Pring 1998). Contextual consideration of Santa Rita Corozal deposits suggest a sequence in which there is great diversity in the early mortuary remains, which seemingly are not standardized until the Late Preclassic era. Thus, while a Swasey-level can be stratigraphically isolated at Santa Rita Corozal, it would appear to be followed by conjoined Bladen- and Mamom-related materials, which are difficult to analyze because they are most often deposited separately, but sometimes occur in combination. It is also possible that social factors may be at play. While recognizing that further excavation at Santa Rita Corozal could locate an isolated

Mamom ceramic sphere of Middle Preclassic date, it seems more likely that the Preclassic sequence suggested for other sites in northern Belize, such as Cuello or Colha in which Swasey and Bladen are sequenced before Mamom, does not apply to the Santa Rita archaeological data. Rather than progressing from the Swasey sphere to a mixture of Swasey and Mamom to a true Mamom sphere, as is argued for Cuello (Kosakowsky and Pring 1998), Santa Rita moves from a limited Swasey repertoire to a diverse conjoined Mamom-Swasey admixture to a more standardized Late Preclassic Chicanel sphere (e.g. D. Chase 1983).

It is suspected that much of the analytical arguments over Early and Middle Preclassic ceramic sphere affiliations – and the resulting analytic proliferation of these early spheres – is due to limited archaeological sampling of an already highly differentiated Maya society that coevally used both widely shared ceramic forms and modes with more localized forms and modes. It is further suspected that these diverse forms and modes were often deposited in the archaeological record independently of each other by neighboring residential groups at the same site.

In summary, there are particular periods of time when change and variation appear to be the common rule in the archaeological record. During times such as these, stylistic cross-dating becomes particularly difficult. Such appears to be the case during much of the Early and Middle Preclassic Periods. Although present in the literature (Andrews 1990; Ball and Taschek 2003), attempts to stylistically cross date various parts of the Southern Maya lowlands and to link formative ceramics directly to ethnic or linguistic groups are likely to meet with only partial success. Analytic problems exist for ceramics of this era, especially in terms of the predilection to

“standardize” the Preclassic Period in terms of known ceramic modes, spheres, and forms. Such analytic homogenization obscures local ceramic developments prior to the onset of the Late Preclassic Period. When combined with problematic radiocarbon dates, difficult stratigraphic correlations, and a tendency to search for the firsts of prehistory, it is no wonder that there are debates over interpreting the Preclassic Period. But, it is precisely these questions and differences of interpretation that will shape the future of archaeological research in the Maya lowlands.

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