
7 THE EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD AT SANTA RITA COROZAL: ISSUES OF HIERARCHY, HETERARCHY AND STRATIFICATION IN NORTHERN BELIZE

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The Early Classic Period is well represented in the excavations undertaken at Santa Rita Corozal. The archaeological data from this site are particularly interesting because Santa Rita was a relatively small site throughout the Classic Period; yet, it is a site that had access to many long-distance trade goods. There also was a marked difference between the upper and other levels of Santa Rita Corozal society during the Early Classic Period. Contextual and spatial patterns at Santa Rita suggest that the Early Classic would be methodologically difficult to identify without a stratified excavation sample. The data recovered from the site also raise broader questions with regard to regional interaction in northern Belize during the Early Classic Period.

Investigations by the Corozal Postclassic Project at Santa Rita Corozal from 1979-1985 provide ample evidence of Early Classic Period occupation (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2004a). Early Classic special deposits (burials and/or caches) were encountered in 8 out of 43 operations at the site or in nearly 20% of excavation locales. A total of 13 interments of Early Classic Period date were recovered. The structures containing Early Classic deposits include epicentral monumental architecture as well as low mounded and “vacant terrain” constructions. Thus, while Santa Rita Corozal is most noted for its abundant Late Postclassic Period remains, there is an appropriate amount of data from these excavations for considerations of hierarchy, heterarchy, and stratification, as well as methodological issues that arise in the dynamic modeling of ancient Maya society.

Santa Rita Corozal was a relatively small site during the Early Classic Period; we have previously suggested that its population was only somewhat over 1400 people (D. Chase 1990). Elite interments at Santa Rita Corozal clearly indicate prosperity during the Early Classic. The

contrast between elite and non-elite interments and residences indicates marked status differentiation and stratification of the population. The dichotomy in statuses is far greater than in earlier or later time horizons – even though there may have been an increased number of status levels in later periods. Early Classic materials recovered from the site’s deposits suggest further that Santa Rita Corozal was well tied into long-distance trade networks. In fact, elite Early Classic interments from Santa Rita Corozal are far more impressive in their offerings than their counterparts from some larger sites such as Caracol, underscoring the need to look at multiple lines of data when making interpretations.

Early Classic Santa Rita Corozal: Structure 7

The most impressive Early Classic remains at Santa Rita Corozal were encountered in Structure 7. The earliest occupation found by our investigations in this locus dated to the Late Preclassic Period. Twentieth century remains attributable to Thomas Gann were also recovered from the front of the structure (D.

Chase and A. Chase 1986). However, the bulk of construction activity and special deposit placement was Early Classic in date. During the Early Classic Period, one version of Structure 7 (-3rd) is known to have been a full masonry corbel-vaulted construction with five rooms; there were three tandem central rooms and two end rooms (Figure 1). Early Classic stucco ornamentation from a fragmentary roof-comb on Structure 7-3rd and from the summit platform of Structure 7-2nd was also recovered. The images in this stucco work directly portray underworld iconography through the use of a skeletal jaw on the earth monster associated with -3rd and through the use of a prominent shell in the iconography associated with -2nd (Figure 2); this imagery is consistent with the use of Structure 7 as a mortuary building, as can be documented archaeologically.

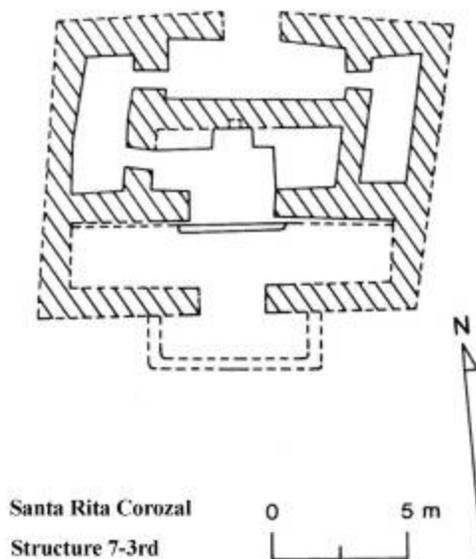


Figure 1. Plan of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7-3rd.

Investigation of Structure 7 included both axial trenching and extensive areal clearing. The axial trench was 60 m in length by 1.5 m in width and was accompanied by extensive areal excavation

over the course of 4 field seasons. Extensive damage had been caused to the various construction episodes evident in the Structure 7 sequence (construction sequence and special deposit location is best viewed in the axial section of the building [Figure 3]). At the beginning of the 20th century, Thomas Gann (1900:686-686; 1918:67-70) removed the majority of what remained of Structure 7-1st, finding a burial, possibly associated with -1st, and a cache, possibly associated with -2nd. At the beginning of the Corozal Postclassic Project in 1979, very little remained of -1st; only the lowest course of a single step associated with a small patch of floor were located off-axis. The combination of Gann's excavations and Belizean road building crews had resulted in the removal of much of the front of the mound and had similarly damaged Structure 7-2nd; only the stucco mask that had once flanked the western side of the summit substructure platform for -2nd was recovered. However, much of Structure 7-3rd was recovered fairly intact. The remains of -3rd's roof-comb stucco ornamentation was recovered and drawn in 1979 (Figure 2), along with an Early Classic cist burial (S.D. P2B-1) that was associated with -2nd. In 1984 and 1985, all of the interior rooms of Structure 7-3rd were exposed and the axial trench was continued into the core of this construction, resulting in the recovery of 2 tombs (S.D. P2B-2 and S.D. P2B-5) and 2 caches (S.D. P2B-3 and S.D. P2B-4). Structure 7-3rd was stabilized by the project during the 1985 field season.

The earliest interment recovered in Corozal Postclassic Project excavation of Structure 7 was a small Early Classic Period tomb on axis to the building, directly below the central room of Structure 7-3rd. This tomb was constructed within a cut in the building floor that was subsequently resealed, allowing continued use of Structure 7-3rd. The tomb was oriented east-west and

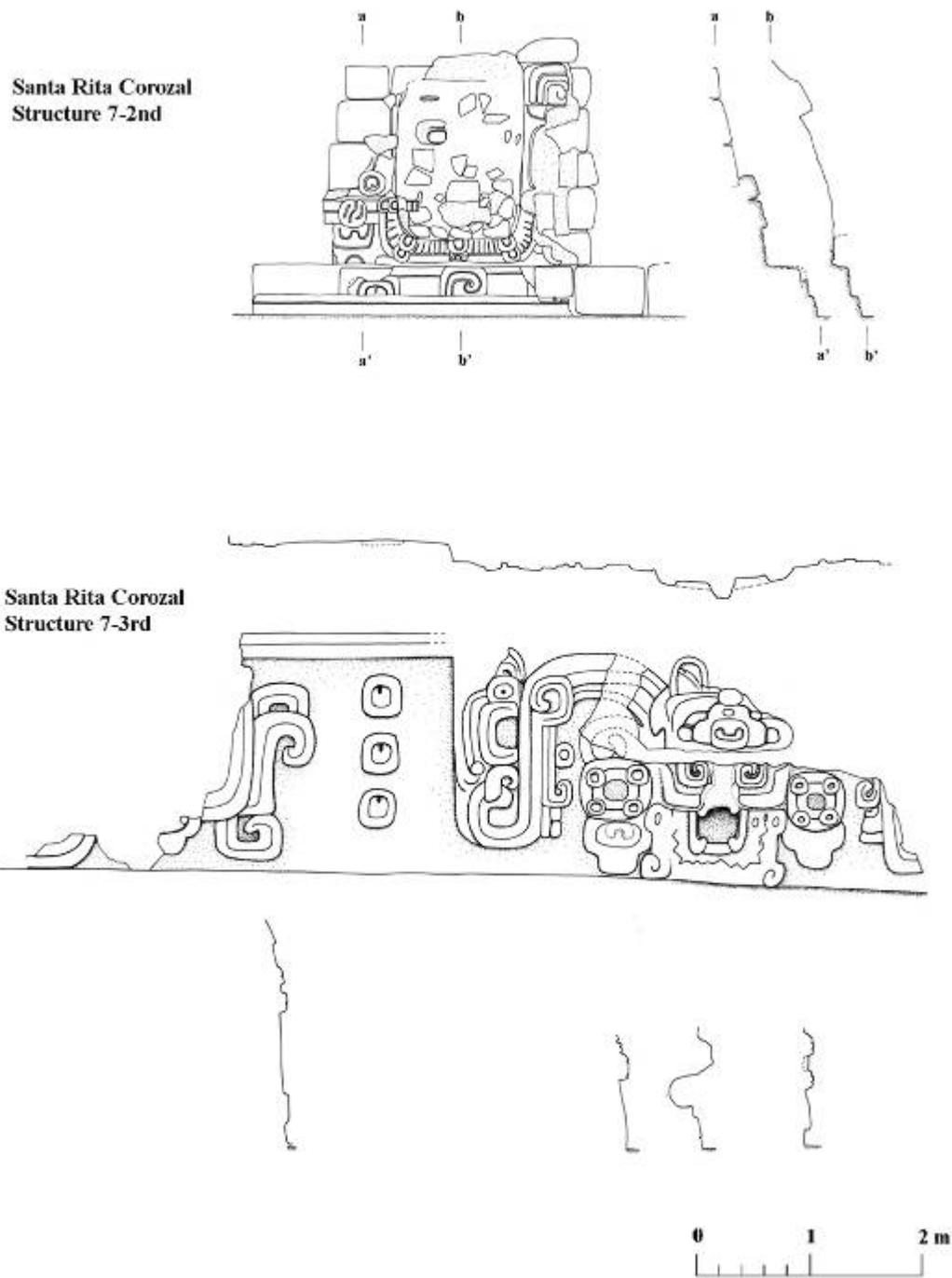


Figure 2. Stucco Ornamentation associated with Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7-2nd and Structure 7-3rd.

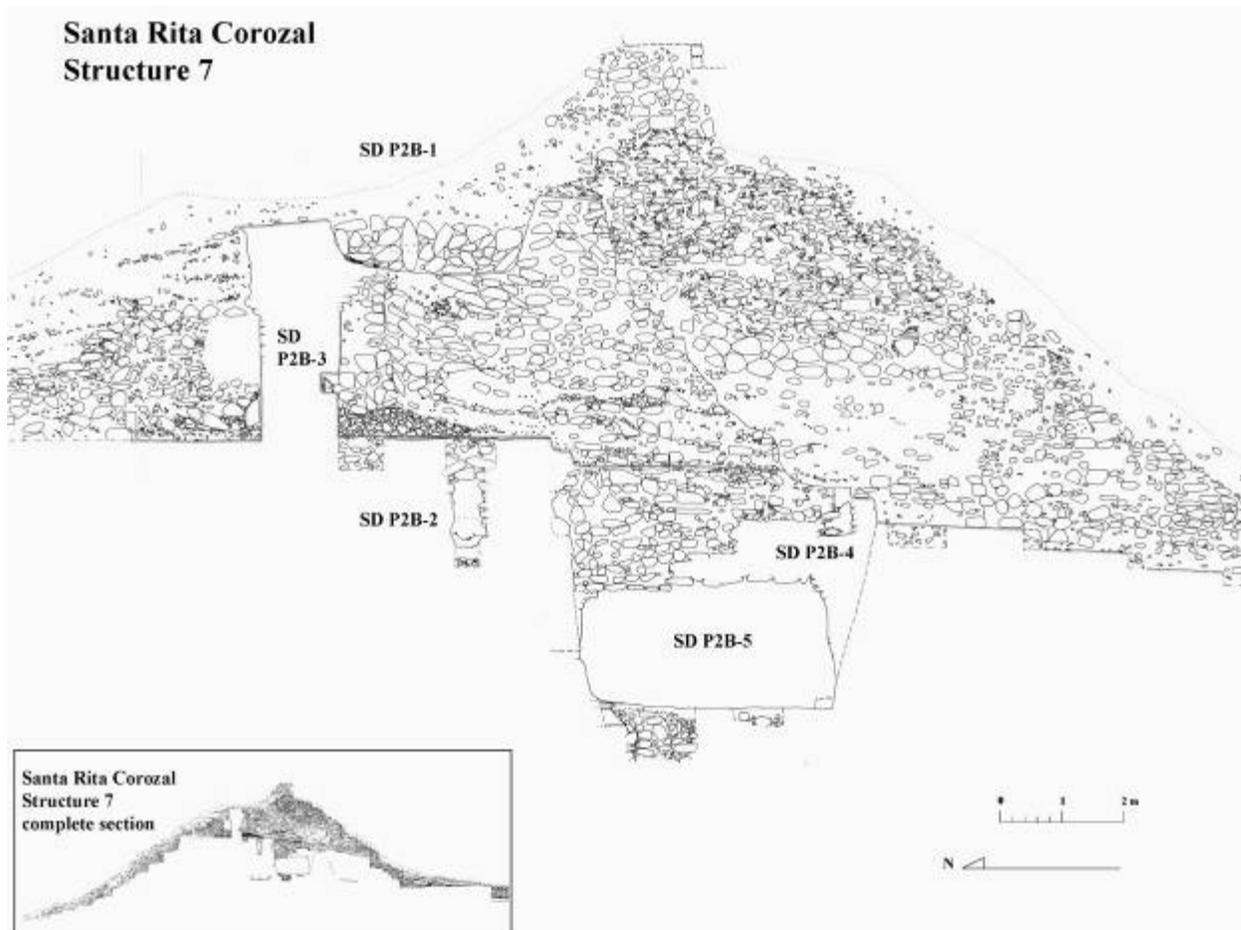


Figure 3. Section detail of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 showing locations of recovered special deposits.

contained the supine remains of an elderly adult female whose head was at the east end of the chamber (Figure 4). Accompanying her were 5 pottery vessels, a carved *Spondylus* shell that had been placed over her face, a pair of jadeite and shell mosaic inlaid earflares portraying clawed birds with human faces and wings of overlapping jadeite mosaic pieces, jadeite ornaments, and shell beads from a necklace (Figure 5). Ceramics included 2 basal flange dishes, 2 annular base bowls, and a composite form vessel with lid. A similar composite form vessel is noted from an Early Classic Copan tomb (Bell et al. 2004).

Subsequent to the deposition of the first chamber, but still within the Early

Classic Period, a second tomb was placed on axis below the front room of the building. This tomb was oriented north-south and was substantially larger in size (measuring 4.25 meters in length, 1.5 meters in width, and 2.0 m in height). A single supine adult male was inside the chamber with his head to the north (Figure 6). Numerous offerings were placed with the body inside the chamber (Figure 7); all attest to the fact that this individual was of the highest status (e.g. A. Chase 1992). A stone bowl, carved with hieroglyphs and depictions of god N that were highlighted through the use of red cinnabar, was located at the north end of the chamber along with a variety of other items. These offerings included a jadeite mosaic

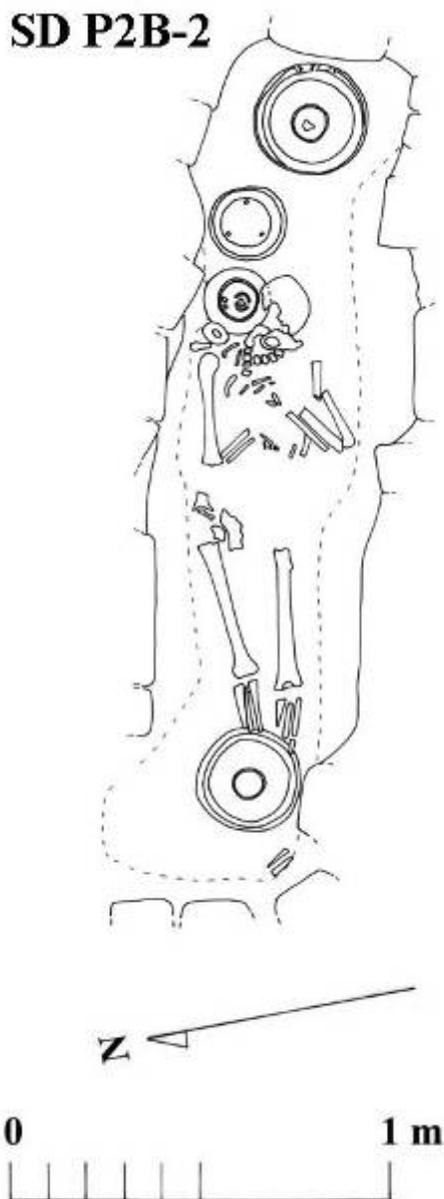


Figure 4. Plan of Special Deposit P2B-2 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.

mask, 8 ceramic vessels, three complete *Melongena* shells, a *Spondylus* shell, a composite blue jadeite bird with wings affixed through the use of green stucco, the remains of 3 stuccoed wooden disks, and stucco pieces from what was thought to have been a fragmentary codex. A large chert ceremonial bar was in the vicinity of the chest. Three jadeite tinklers were below the

waist and a single stingray spine was in the area of the pelvis. Three chert spear-points also overlay the pelvis area. Numerous flamingo-tongue shells were located in and around a vessel in the leg area, presumably the remains of a garment into which the shells had been sewn. Other offerings included flower-like jadeite and hematite earflares, jadeite and *Spondylus* beads, a cowry shell, and the remains of 3 turtles. The tomb contained indicators of elite status, rulership, and rebirth (e.g. A. Chase 1992:34-37); there was also emphasis on the number “3” (apparent in the *Melongena* shells, spear points, jadeite tinklers, stucco disks, and turtle remains). The ceramic vessels included one jar, one miniature olla, two basal flange dishes, one annular ring base bowl, one small copa-shaped vase (cream pitcher), and two cylinder tripods (one red and gold bichrome with effigy lid).

At approximately the same time as this tomb was sealed, a cache was placed in the fill above the chamber towards its southern end, behind a series of frontal building steps. This cache consisted of three pairs of ceramic vessels and lids (Figure 8). Each of the lids had a single distinct hieroglyph painted on it; these have been interpreted as titles and the name of the individual (“Great Scrolled Skull”) placed within the tomb below (A. Chase 1992; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986). Within the lidded vessels were a series of offerings. Each set contained burned stingray spines, natural sea shells, and some modified shells and jadeite. Each set also contained at least one small flat worked shell or jadeite piece with deity heads painted on them –perhaps representing the gods G1, G2, and G3. Other black line work was apparent on some of the smaller pieces of shells, but was more abstract and did not appear to form recognizable portraits.

Subsequent to the placement of the cache and the two tombs in its coring, the

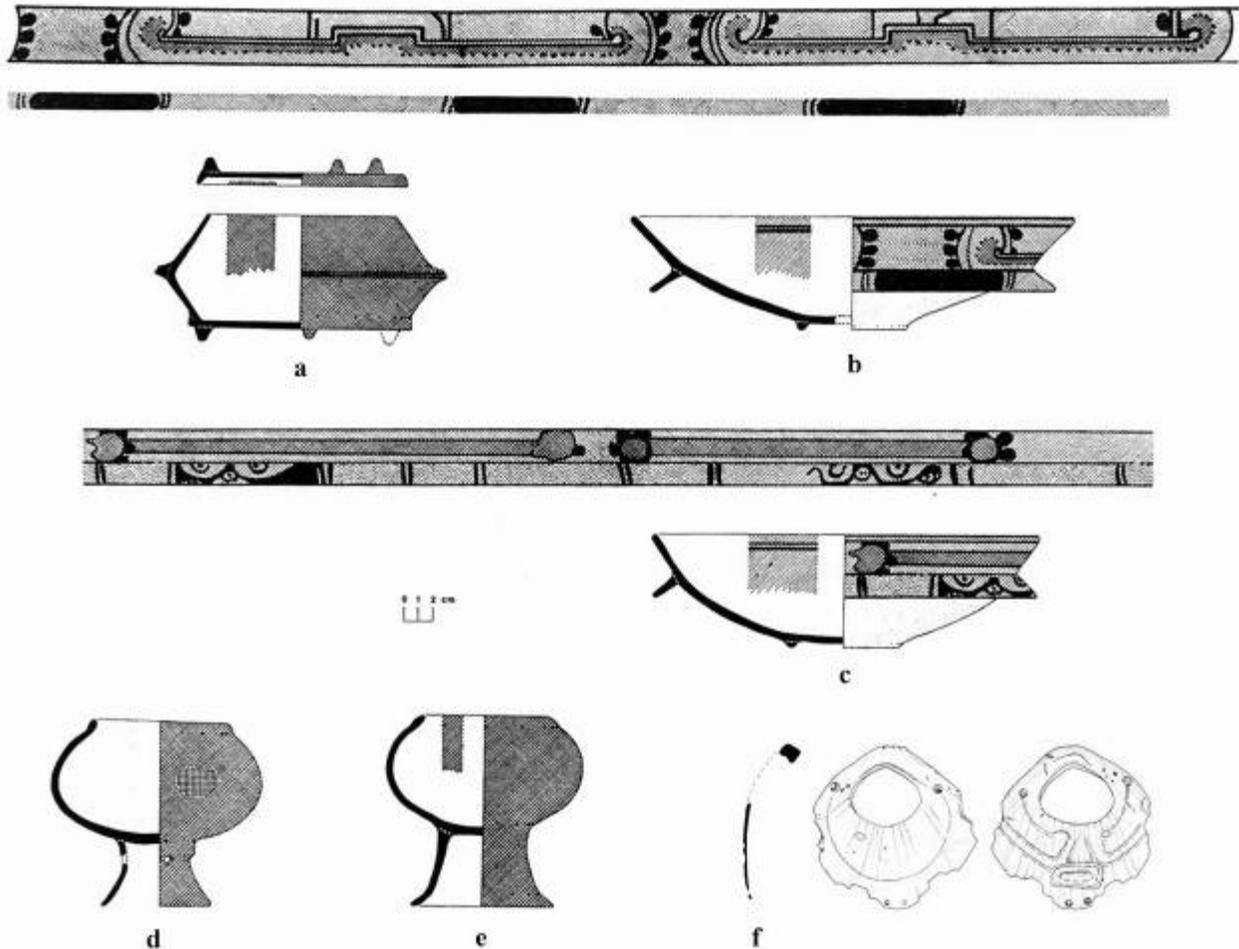


Figure 5. Ceramics and artifacts from Santa Rita Corozal S.D. P2B-2 (mosaic earflares and smaller artifacts not illustrated).

plaster floors of Structure 7-3rd were burned, either through regular use or through purposeful termination activities. Then, large parts of Early Classic vessels (including basal-flanged bowls) were left broken on the interior building floors, incense burners with plainware dishes stacked on them were crammed into an interior central wall niche (Figure 9), and the building rooms were infilled and encased within Structure 7-2nd. The incense burners are nearly identical to one of the Early Classic Period stacked censer sets encountered at nearby Cerros (Walker 1998:92-93) as well as two sets uncovered

from much further away at Uaxactun, Guatemala (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:95, 281, Pl. 85e-g). Walker (1990:356) has suggested that stacked censers served as portals to the otherworld. Their central location in the buried Structure 7-3rd niche could support this notion.

As a result of Gann's summit investigations and subsequent stone-robbing, the remains of Structure 7-2nd and 7-1st were not well preserved; thus, the building form cannot be easily or clearly identified. What is known is that the basal platform for the summit building was flanked on each side of its stair by stuccoed portrait masks. A final

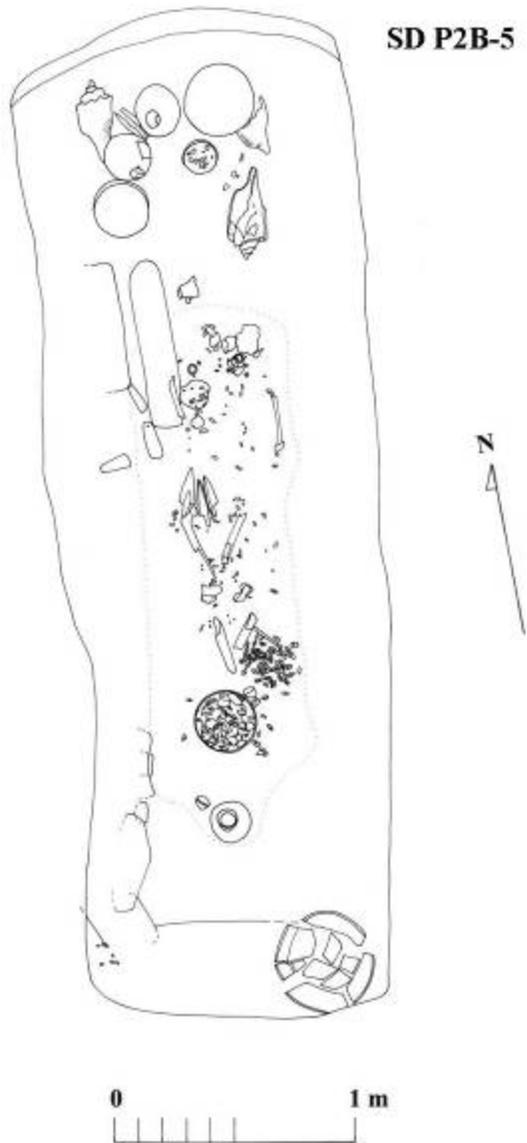


Figure 6. Plan of Special Deposit P2B-5 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.

Early Classic burial, a simple cist, oriented north-south was eventually cut into the core of Structure 7-2nd. An adult was placed supine in this grave with the head to the north (Figure 10). The sex of the poorly preserved skeleton could not be established; however, artifactual associations in the form of carved bone pins suggest that it may have been the remains of a woman. In spite of the fact that this interment was a cist rather than a tomb and that many of the burial

offerings were broken, the contents were nonetheless impressive. There was one small stone vessel, nine ceramic vessels, several carved bone pins, jadeite and shell beads, an earflare, a bone spindle whorl, and a cowry shell (Figure 11). Ceramics consist of three basal flanged dishes, one calabash bowl, one footed plate with spout, one annular base bowl, one cylinder tripod, one basal flanged bowl, and one two-part effigy vessel (Figure 4). The two-part effigy vessel, a pregnant looking *pisote*, resembles those known from Uaxactun (Smith 1955: Fig. 5; Burial A 22). Sherds similar to the bichrome cylinder tripod were encountered at Caledonia by Sidrys (1983: 79, Fig. 54). The basal-flanged bowl is similar to one found in an Early Classic tomb at Dzibanche, Quintana Roo (Campana 1995: 30). Gann's (1900:685-6:1918:67-70) excavations also recovered what appears to have been an Early Classic cache set into Structure 7-2nd above this burial; it is possible that Gann's cache was meant to accompany this burial, much like the cache placed above and in the fill covering the earlier tomb in Structure 7-3rd.

Early Classic Santa Rita Corozal: Other Deposits

The remains recovered from within Structure 7 sharply contrast with Early Classic Period construction and deposits found elsewhere at Santa Rita Corozal. The most elaborate of the other Early Classic Period burials recovered at Santa Rita Corozal contained no more than two ceramic vessels; none contained more than a single jadeite or *Spondylus* shell bead. Several contained no preserved offerings. Some of the human skeletal remains consisted solely of a skull set within a single ceramic vessel. These were presumably skull caches, although the distinction between cache and burial is not always clear (see D. Chase 1988; M. Becker 1992). Other than these

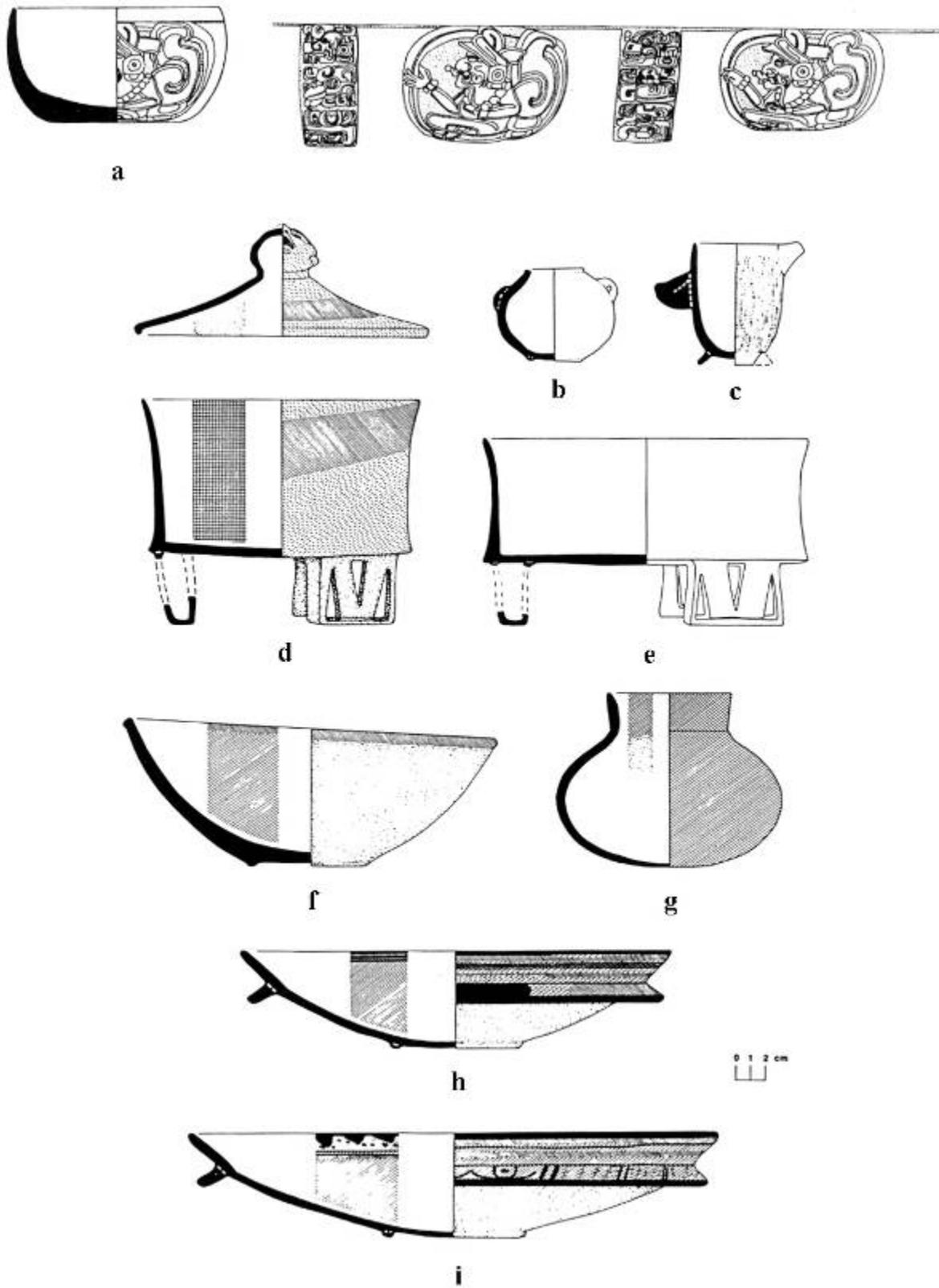


Figure 7a. Ceramics and artifacts from Santa Rita Corozal S.D. P2B-5 (jadeite mask and most small artifacts not illustrated).

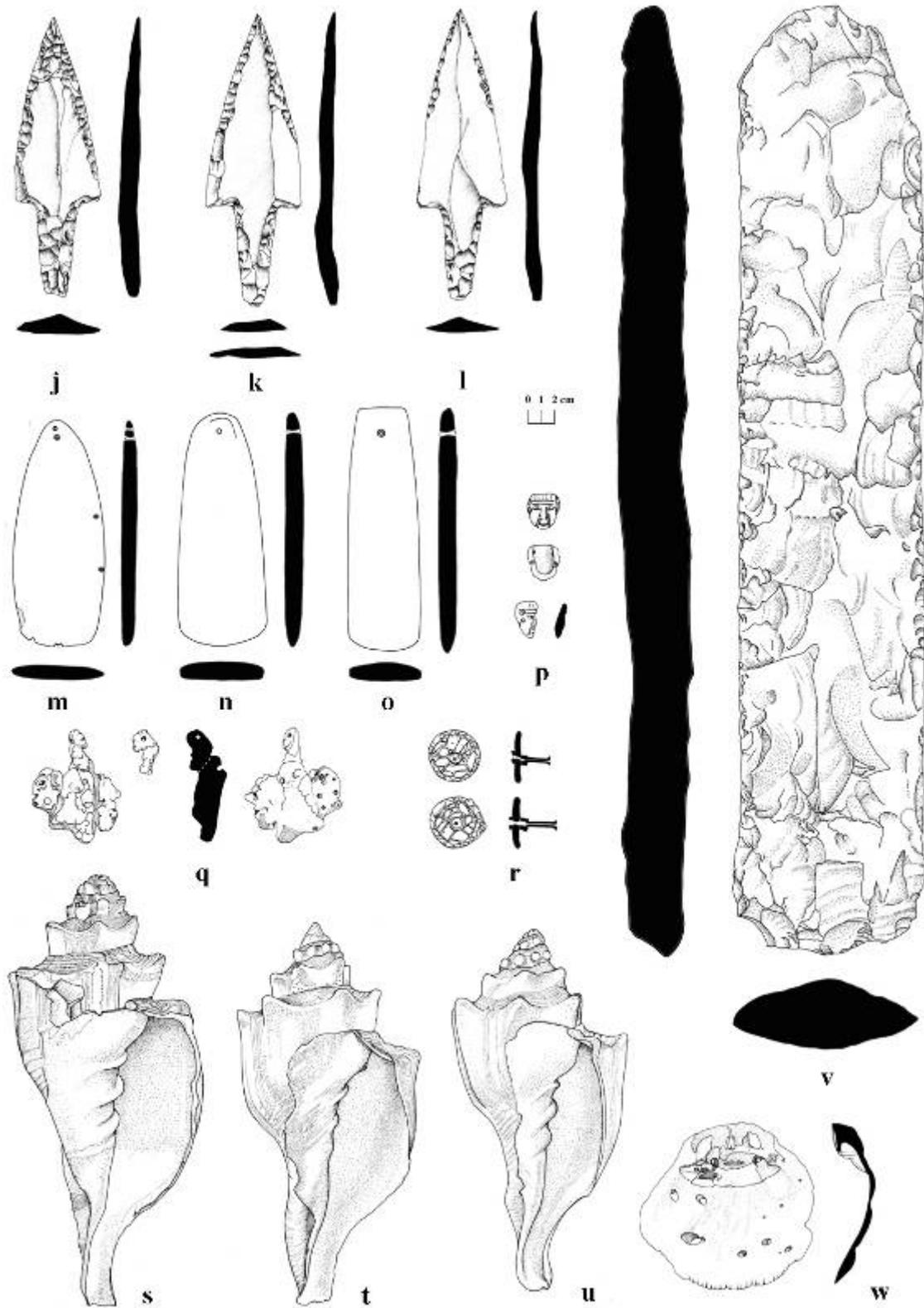


Figure 7b. Plans, ceramics, and shells related to Special Deposit P2B-4 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 (most small artifacts not illustrated).

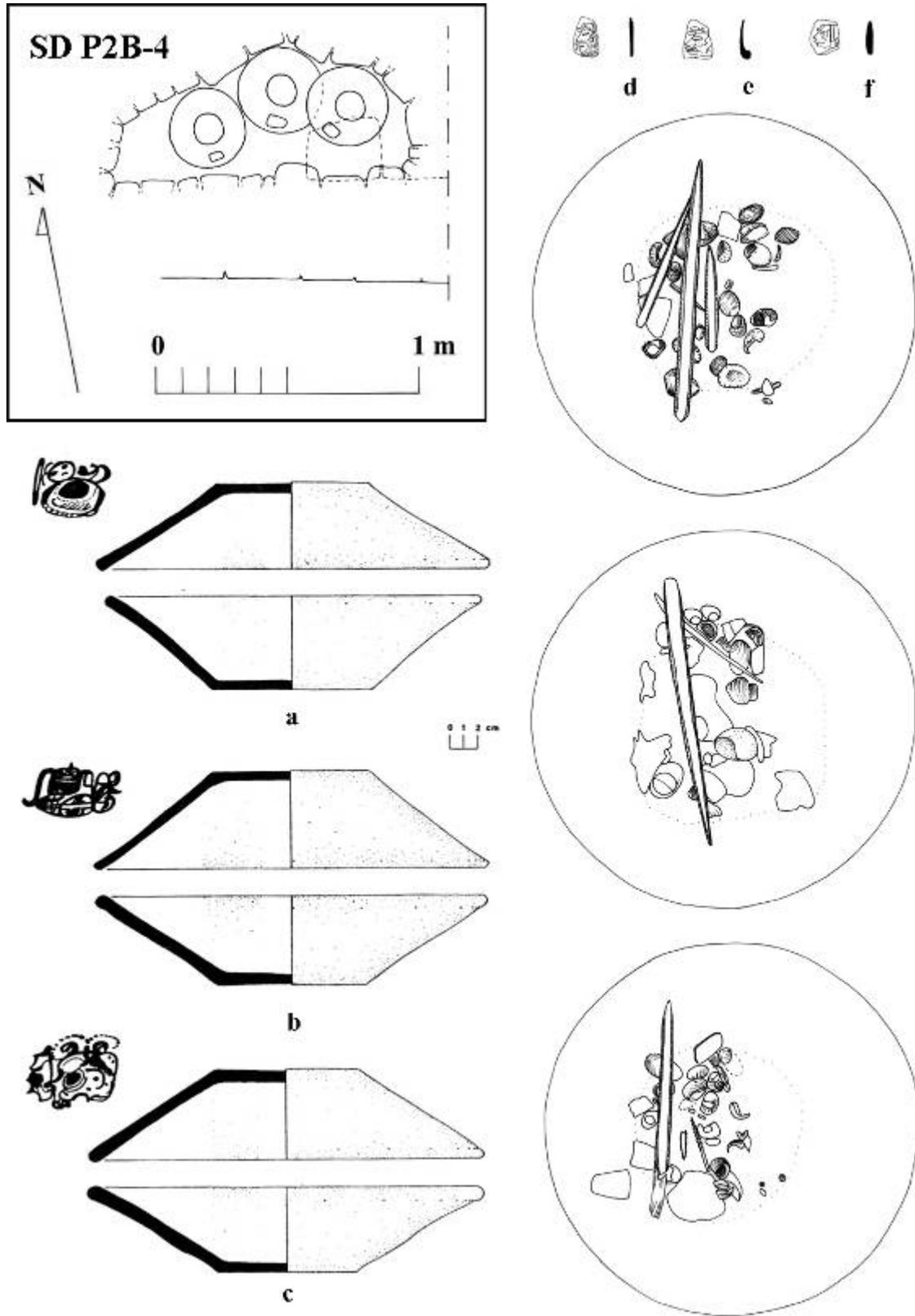


Figure 8. Plans, ceramics, and shells related to Special Deposit P2B-4 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 (most small artifacts not illustrated, including a deity head on jadeite).

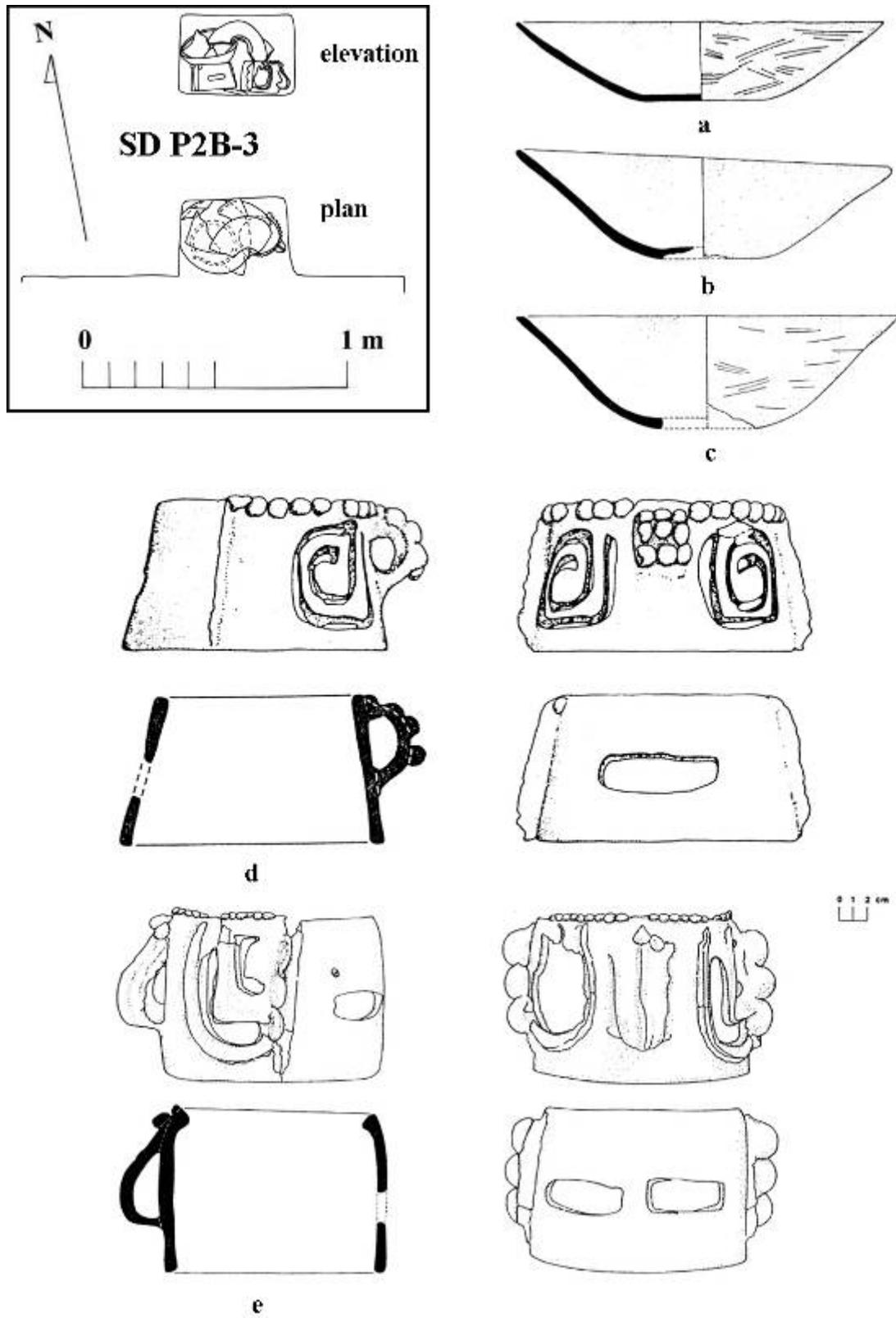


Figure 9. Plan, elevation, and ceramics from Special Deposit P2B-3 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.

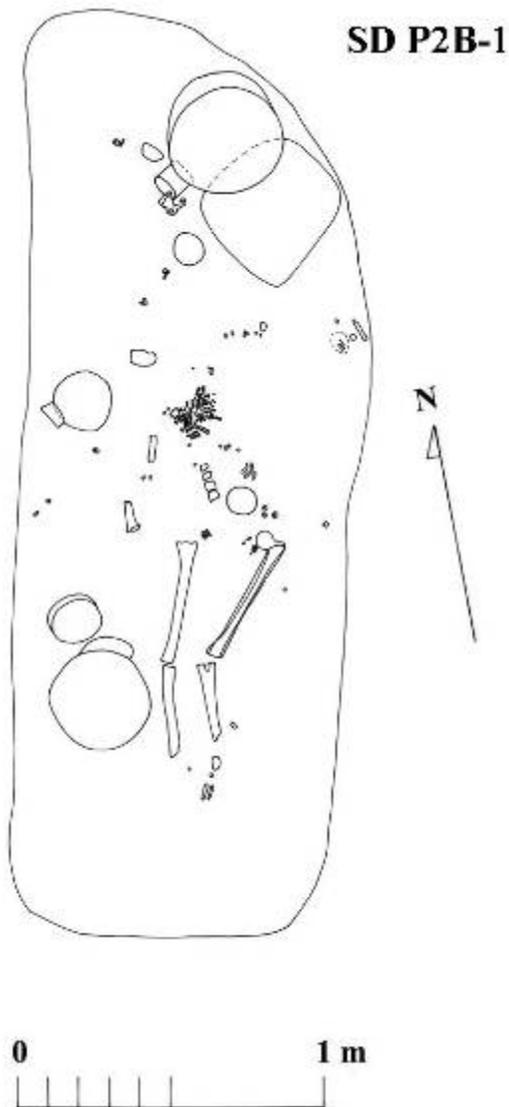


Figure 10. Plan of Special Deposit P2B-1 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.

skull caches, no other Early Classic caches were encountered outside the Structure 7 locus. In contrast to the masonry Structure 7, other excavated Early Classic constructions had no more than one or two courses of stone preserved above floor level. Thus, status differentiation is evident not only in the number and kind of material offerings made in burials, but also in the effort expended in constructions and graves.

A brief survey of the other Early Classic Period deposits recovered at Santa

Rita Corozal serves to emphasize the disparity between the Structure 7 interments and those from the rest of the site. Special Deposit P6E-2 was located just above bedrock within Santa Rita Corozal Platform 2. This interment consisted of a partial skull and incomplete ceramic vessel. It was located immediately above bedrock and likely was the remains of a disturbed skull cache. The ceramic vessel was a partial red slipped flanged bowl with vertical rim, round lip, and exterior groove that probably dates to the early part of the Early Classic.

Special Deposit P4B-1 consisted of a single flexed adult burial with head to north, located inside a cist in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 69. The only offering with the interment was a single shell bead.

Special Deposit P10B-9 located in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 35 consisted of a flexed adult buried in a crypt. The individual was accompanied by a single basal-flange bowl and one jadeite bead.

Special Deposits P12B-2 and P12B-3 were located in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134; each of these consisted of a skull and a ceramic vessel. They could be considered skull caches, possibly deposited in association with another burial, Special Deposit P12B-4 (Figure 12). Special Deposit P12B-4 was also located in Structure 134 and was the most elaborate Early Classic interment known from Santa Rita Corozal outside of Structure 7. It contained an extended individual with head to the north and two ceramic vessels (Figure 12a and 12b).

Special Deposit P13B-4 was located immediately east of the Early Classic version of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 135 (this version, Structure 135-2nd, had a squared exterior with an eastern antechamber, but its interior was circular with a medial wall and an offset doorway; Figure 13), was a cist containing one individual with head to the south and a

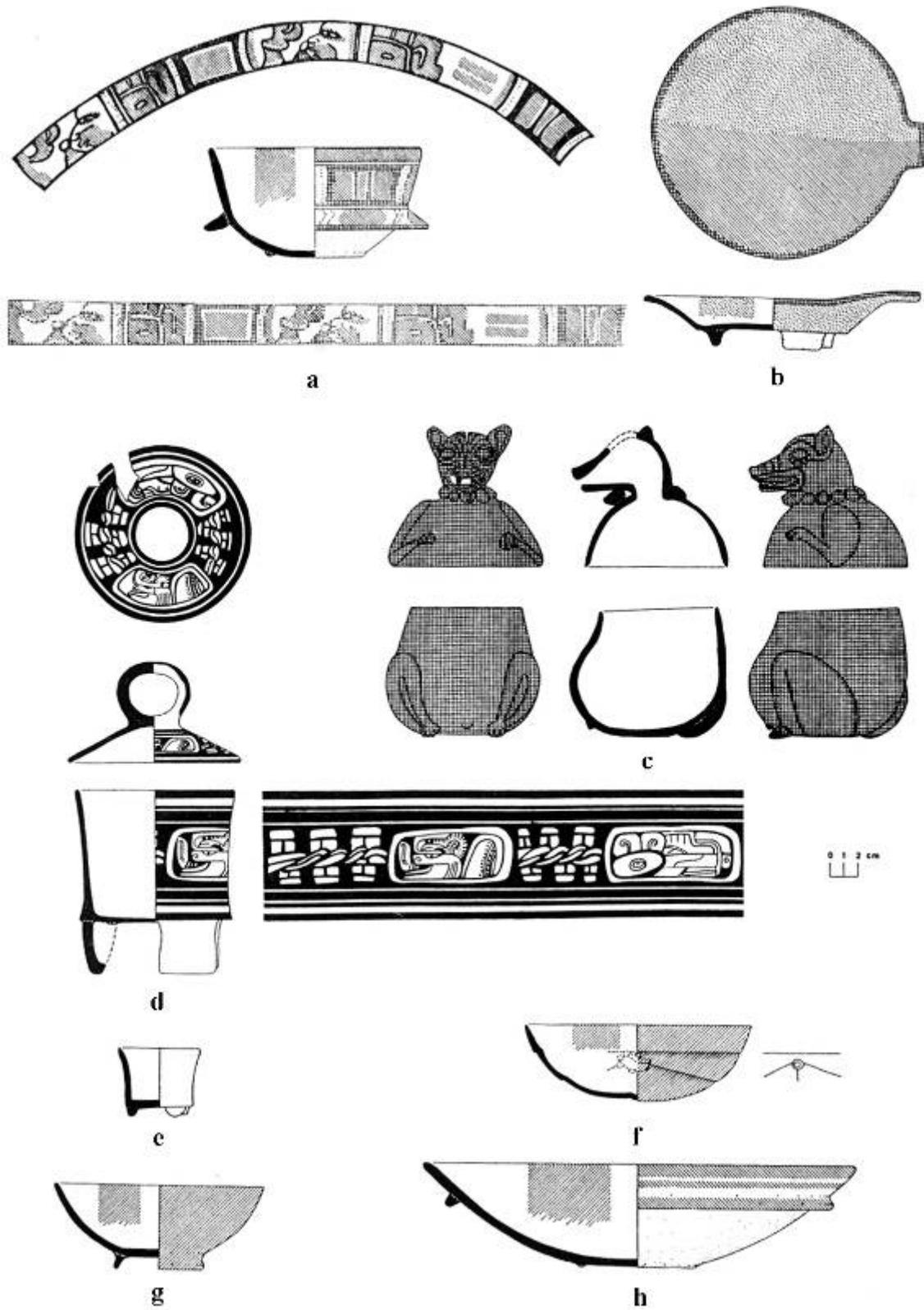


Figure 11a. Ceramics and artifacts from Santa Rita Corozal S.D. P2B-1 (many smaller artifacts not illustrated).

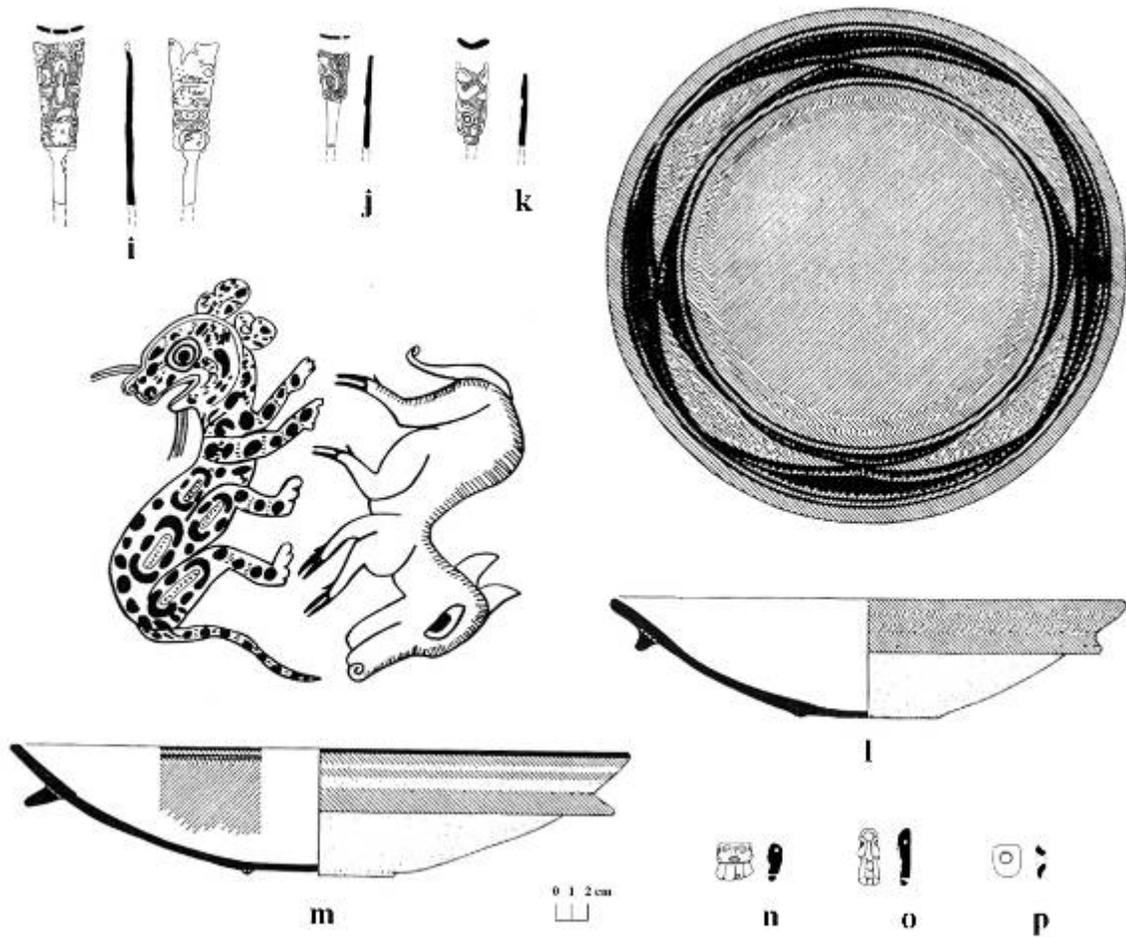


Figure 11b. Ceramics and artifacts from Santa Rita Corozal S.D. P2B-1 (many smaller artifacts not illustrated).

single basal flange bowl (Figure 13a). Two other interments can be stratigraphically dated to the Early Classic at this locus. Special Deposit P13B-5, associated with the same building, was also located in a cist. It contained two flexed individuals, one with the head to the north and the other with the head to the south, but no remaining permanent offerings. Special Deposit P13B-6 contained one flexed individual in a cist with the head to the south, also with no preserved offerings.

Special Deposit P19A-5, from within Santa Rita Corozal Structure 159, consisted of a single flexed burial with basal-flange bowl that had been badly disturbed by a Late

Classic interment which had been placed directly on top of it.

Finally, S.D. P20A-2 was located at the bottom of a deep trench in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 39. As most of the body lay beyond the excavation limits, the interment was not completely recovered. In addition to the human remains, one flanged ceramic vessel was encountered.

Discussion

One of the most striking aspects of the Early Classic Period archaeological remains at Santa Rita Corozal is the existence of marked stratification. There are clear “haves” and “have nots.” Effort

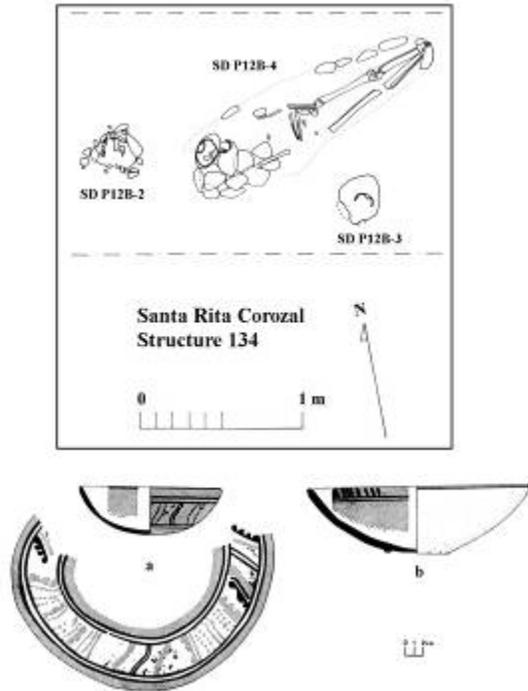


Figure 12. Illustration of special deposits in trench in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134. Special Deposits P12B-2 and P12B-3 are skull caches on either side of Early Classic interment Special Deposit P12B-4; the two vessels associated with S.D. P12B-4 are also illustrated.

expended in construction, creation of burial locations, and the number and kinds of offerings in Structure 7 far exceeds that from other investigated areas of the same date. Furthermore, the only kinds of Early Classic caches encountered in other Santa Rita Corozal buildings were skull caches. No elaborate Early Classic caches were uncovered outside of Structure 7. While there are no stone monuments with inscriptions at Santa Rita Corozal, the status differentiation apparent in material remains at Santa Rita Corozal shows an emphasis on elite individuals and is in accord with interpretations of Early Classic monument history as focused on individual people and individual specific historic events as opposed to Late Classic celebrations of anniversaries and/or periods of time (e.g. D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b). Similar evidence for stratification is evident at other

sites such as Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; A. Chase et al. 2001, D. Chase and A. Chase 2004c).

Also significant are the relationships among Early Classic, Protoclassic, Preclassic, and Late Classic materials and occupations at Santa Rita Corozal, as well as comparisons of occupation and material culture similarities and differences among other sites in northern Belize. At Santa Rita Corozal, Protoclassic occupation and interments are generally encountered in the same locations as the Early Classic. A revision of population history at Santa Rita Corozal that realigns the Protoclassic with more current dating (A.D. 150-300) shows steady population in the Late Preclassic and Protoclassic followed by increased population numbers in the Early Classic Period with even more growth in the subsequent Late Classic (e.g. D. Chase 1990). By far the largest populations at Santa Rita Corozal, however, existed in the Late Postclassic Period.

Protoclassic occupation and material remains at Santa Rita Corozal are viewed as an (identifiable) extension of the Late Preclassic. Protoclassic interments, while not abundant, are notable for combining Late Preclassic and Protoclassic ceramic markers in a single context. These interments suggest smooth, rather than abrupt, temporal divisions and the probability that ceramics may be differentially distributed in accord with status (see below).

Investigations at Santa Rita Corozal point toward difficulties in the identification of Early Classic remains. Research at the site further indicates the significance of and problems with sampling. Early Classic remains are easily apparent at some sites, such as Santa Rita Corozal, but are difficult to document or are absent at others. One of the issues is the way in which Early Classic Period occupation is identified. Generally,

**Santa Rita Corozal
Structure 135**

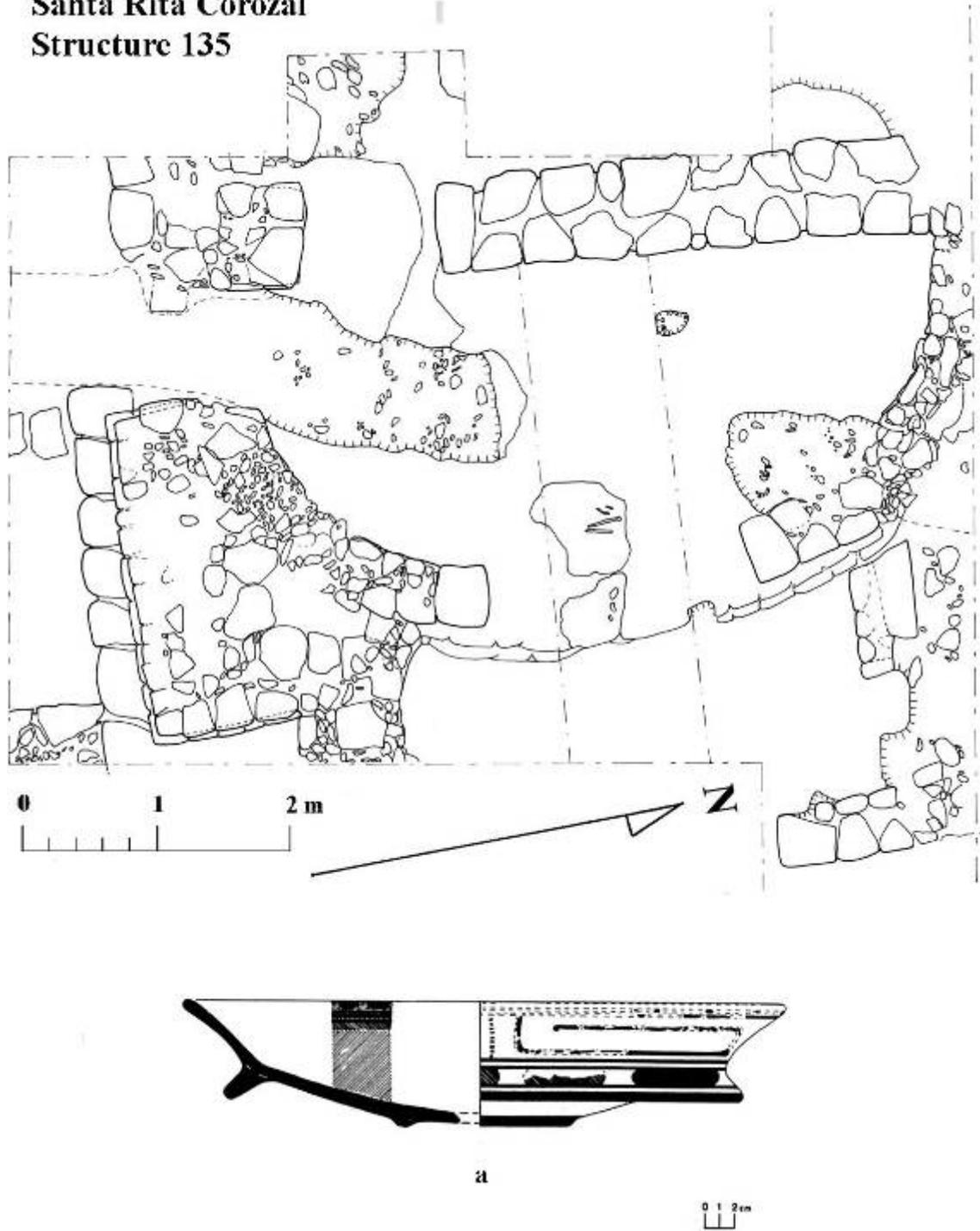


Figure 13. 13. Illustration of the Early Classic plan of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 135. Also illustrated is a ceramic vessel associated with Special Deposit P13B-4, a burial placed in front of this version of Structure 135.

temporal placement in the Early Classic is established by use of ceramic markers that are often found in burials and elite contexts, but that may be absent in other contexts. Early Classic ceramics thus appear to be status linked (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004; see also A. Chase for a similar discussion of Terminal Classic status-linked ceramics at Caracol). Thus, Early Classic occupation may be missed if special deposits are not encountered and if elite contexts are not investigated – or if there is not a substantial excavation sample – especially as Early Classic remains are often not as abundant and may be more deeply buried than those of subsequent periods.

Uncritical comparisons of burial assemblages among sites also may be problematic. The relative wealth of the Structure 7 interments at Santa Rita Corozal compared with contemporary ones at Caracol, ignoring the distinctions in scale between the two sites, might erroneously suggest a greater importance to Santa Rita Corozal than the site merits. The artifactual wealth in the Structure 7 tombs is due to a host of other factors, primary among them being more direct access to trade and an elite desire to stress their importance of an area peripheral to the Maya heartland. The complete context as well as contents of assemblages is clearly important.

A regional consideration of northern Belize suggests the existence of many similarly sized, small, politically independent, but inter-connected, centers during the Early Classic Period. Louisville, Aventura, and Caledonia are not very distant from Santa Rita Corozal and were roughly equivalent in size during the Early Classic Period (see Sidrys 1983). Relations among these centers during the Early Classic were likely to some degree heterarchical rather than hierarchical (Crumley 1998), in contrast to later periods. Unfortunately, however, with certain exceptions, the

economics of the Early Classic are unclear. Excavated Santa Rita Corozal Early Classic households do not provide detailed information on local production and workshops. Non-local trade items were prominent in elite contexts, but exceedingly limited in other households –again suggestive of the marked status differences at the site. While it is appealing to argue for a series of economically specialized Early Classic sites conjoined by regional trade, the proximity of sites to each other in northern Belize and the current lack of evidence for specialization or environmental differentiation among site locales suggest that this was not entirely the case. Santa Rita Corozal likely prospered due to its location on Corozal Bay with easy access to trade –much like Colha, further south, prospered because of its location with easy access to chert. However, it is unclear what different economic specializations would have been undertaken at the nearby inland sites of Aventura, Caledonia, Chan Chen, or Louisville. Many of these sites, while not overtly trade centers like Santa Rita Corozal, may have been economically redundant in function relative to each other. These sites could coexist only due to their relatively small Early Classic Period population sizes. Santa Rita Corozal was among the largest sites in the area during the Early Classic and its postulated population is less than 1500 occupants (D. Chase 1990). Thus, the heterarchical relationships postulated here for Early Classic northern Belize would likely have fractured and become hierarchical with further population growth in the Late Classic and Postclassic eras.

Conclusion

In summary, investigations at Santa Rita Corozal provide important pieces in the reconstruction of ancient Maya prehistory in Belize. While best known for its Late Postclassic remains, archaeology at Santa

Rita Corozal points to an exceedingly long sequence that includes occupation from the earliest part of the Maya Preclassic Period to modern times. Early Classic remains at the site are noteworthy both in suggesting the existence of two-tier stratification in spite of small population numbers and in showcasing Santa Rita Corozal's access to exotic trade items.

This research points to significant methodological issues in identifying and comparing Early Classic Period remains, including the possibilities of status-linked materials, the interpretational problems caused by inadequate sampling, and the significance of context in interpretation and comparison. Excavations underscore the need to explore functional relationships among Maya sites and the changing variations among them. It would appear that the Early Classic in northern Belize was characterized by heterarchical as opposed to hierarchical relationships among sites. The Santa Rita Corozal data show that the Early Classic was a period of growth as well as a time span of political and economic differentiation, trends that were expanded and further modified in the subsequent Late Classic Period.

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