

Archaeology:

Major Find From Maya Era Unearthed

New discoveries made during the 1980 season of the Corozal Post-classic Project offer convincing evidence that the site of Santa Rita Corozal was a thriving Late Post-Classic Maya Centre and the probable Maya Capital of Chetumal. In their second season of excavation, Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase of the University of Pennsylvania also exposed an unknown side of Santa Rita Corozal in finding unusual evidence for the earliest Maya by locating ceramic material which is, at minimum, as early as that previously located at the site of Cuello in northern Belize. Two seasons of excavations by the C. P. P. have therefore yield the longest ceramic sequence yet known for the Maya area.

Santa Rita has long been known as a site of major importance during Post-Classic Period of Maya civilization (roughly A. D. 1000 until Spanish contact.) Excavations carried out by Thomas Gann in the late 19th and early 20th centuries revealed extremely unique remains including one structure with murals showing Mexicanized figures along with Maya hieroglyphic writing. Since Gann's time a series of small excavations have been carried out at the site, but until the onset of the Corozal Post-Classic Project in 1979, it was commonly believed that the site had been too badly destroyed in the growth of modern Corozal Town to warrant further extensive excavation. By the early 1970's none of the larger structures remained standing with the exception of one large central mound.

Even given the destruction of the largest standing structures at the site, recent extensive excavation has revealed the site to be much larger than previously thought with significant occupational areas still standing. The picture which has emerged of the *latest* prehistoric Maya diverged considerably from the traditional view of a decadent society suffering decline from its classic zenith. Santa Rita was a large, highly developed community with wide trading networks, most likely extending as far south as Peru and with artistic creativity not seen in earlier time periods.

Architecture, although not as finished as in earlier times, shows large occupation and significant labor expenditure. Work

thus far confirms the importance of Santa Rita during late Post-Classic times and suggests that it may well be the remains of Chetumal — which once served as a major port of trade and as one of the regional capitals of the Maya at the time of the Spanish entrance into the Americas.

Although research in 1979 and 1980 has been focused on discovering more about the Post-Classic or latest prehistoric Maya the investigations have also uncovered a multitude of Santa Rita's earlier periods of occupation. Besides the previously mentioned extremely early Swasey deposits, the site also manifests a Middle-Classic component seemingly unique for northern Belize. Archaeological remains attributable to this period of time include large construction projects involving extensive use of modeled stucco masks. Burial patterning for this same era also suggests close ties between coastal Santa Rita and the Maya heartland of the Peten.

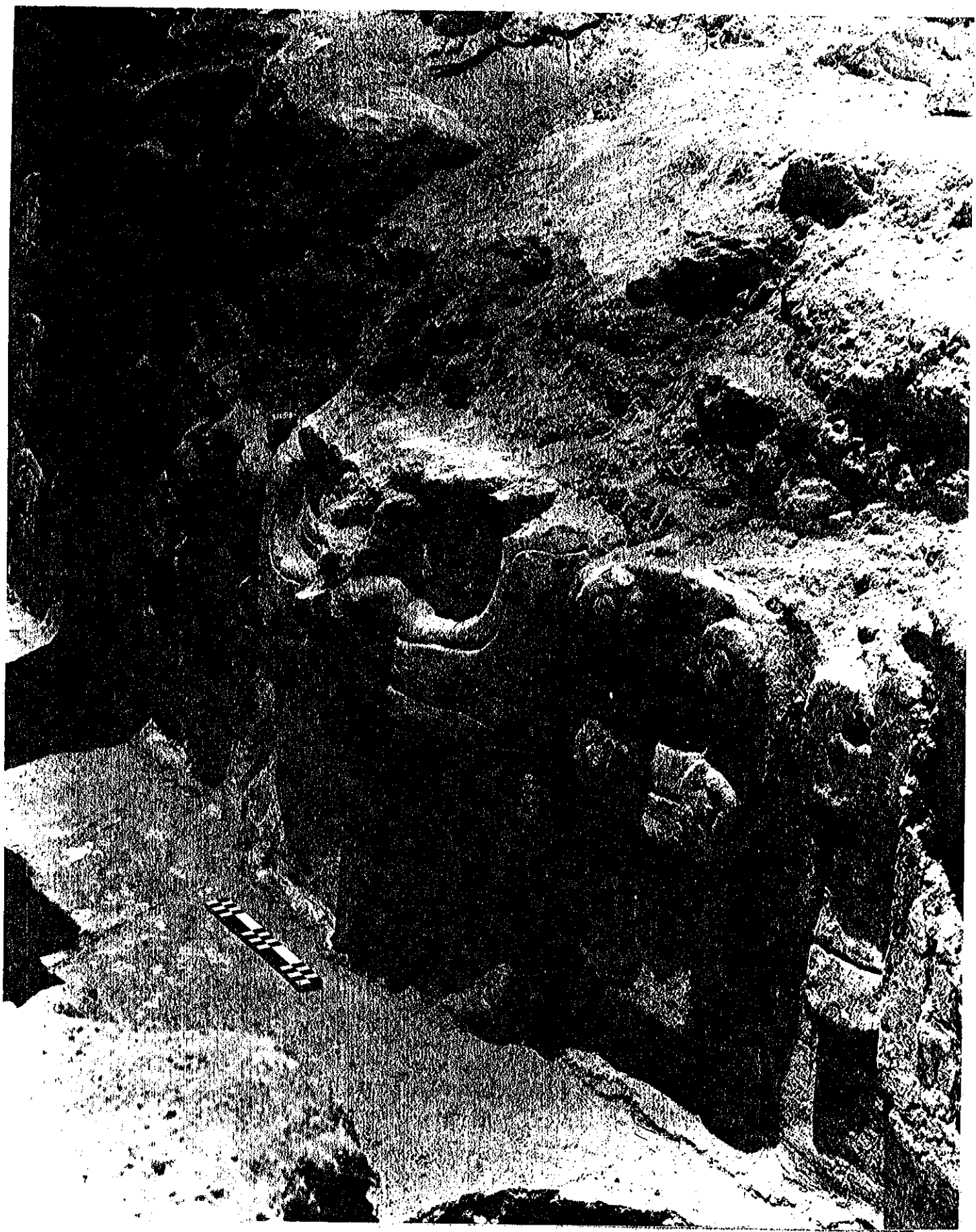
In spite of being largely destroyed and ignored through the rigors of modern building demands, Santa Rita retains a wealth of knowledge on Maya culture and Belizean history. The results of the C. P. P.'s excavations are currently being analyzed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where the findings of the first season of work are on public display in the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. It is expected that further seasons of work in and around Corozal, Belize will be undertaken once funding is secured.

Excavation in 1979 and 1980 has been carried out under a permit granted from the Department of Archeology to Diane Z Chase who was assisted by undergraduate and graduate student supervisors from the United States as well as by representatives from the Department of Archaeology in Belmopan, Belize. Funding has been through private donations as well as grants from the university museum, the University of Pennsylvania, the Anthropology Department of the University of Pennsylvania, the Explorer's Club Education Fund and Sigma XI Grants for Scientific Exploration.

(This article was prepared for us by Arlen Chase.)

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Stucco mask...unearthed by Corozal Postclassic Project.