

Archaeological Investigations at Nohmul and Santa Rita, Belize: 1979-1980

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Work by Thomas Gann (1900, 1918) showed the northern part of Belize to be studded with important archaeological sites and to be extremely "productive" in an archaeological sense. Although his excavations in this northern area revealed a sequence which ran from Preclassic to Historic, it is a difficult task to relate the beautiful objects which he uncovered to their more mundane archaeological context. The Corozal Postclassic Project (A. Chase 1980, D. Chase 1981) was begun in 1979 in order to investigate Postclassic remains in northern Belize and attempt to relate the resultant Postclassic sequence to the rest of the Maya area. Two years of excavation have both

broadened and more clearly defined these initial goals and resulted in a focus on the site of Santa Rita Corozal. Besides increasing knowledge of the Postclassic aspects of Santa Rita, first described by Gann, ongoing investigations have also delved into the site's earlier occupations.

In 1979, excavation was split between the sites of Nohmul and Santa Rita. Structure 20 at Nohmul had been excavated in 1978 by the authors in conjunction with Norman Hammond's Corozal Project (Hammond 1973, 1979). The structure 20 investigations revealed a patio-quad building. Both architecture and ceramics hinted at a strong Yucatec presence at this site during the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic Period. Excavations were, therefore, undertaken in 1979 at Nohmul Structure 9 to attempt to confirm the presence. A three meter tall round structure, reminiscent of the Caracol at Chichen-Itza, was uncovered. Again, the data urged a Yucatec connection. Based upon the similarities between Chichen-Itza architecture and Nohmul Structures 9 and 20, a Terminal Classic/ Early Postclassic Yucatec counterthrust is seen as occurring in the eastern lowlands, possibly to offset events occurring simultaneously in the Usumacinta drainage of Guatemala (Chase & Chase in press).

While Nohmul proved instrumental in identifying forces at work during the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic Period, excavation was shifted to Santa Rita in 1979 and continued there in 1980 in order to locate later materials. The site of Santa Rita has long been recognized by Maya archaeologists as important in unraveling the little known events of the Maya Postclassic Period. The site had been excavated by Thomas Gann (1900, 1918), a British medical officer stationed in Belize, at the turn of the present century. His widespread investigations "tested" most of the mounds known on the old Santa Rita Estate located on a bluff above modern Corozal Town. While his excavations uncovered a wide realm of artifactual material relating to the Postclassic Period including spectacular murals, they, and the modernization processes undergone by Corozal Town, resulted in discouraging present-day Maya archaeologists from returning to the site for other than a few brief stays (Sidrys 1976; Green 1973; Pring 1975).

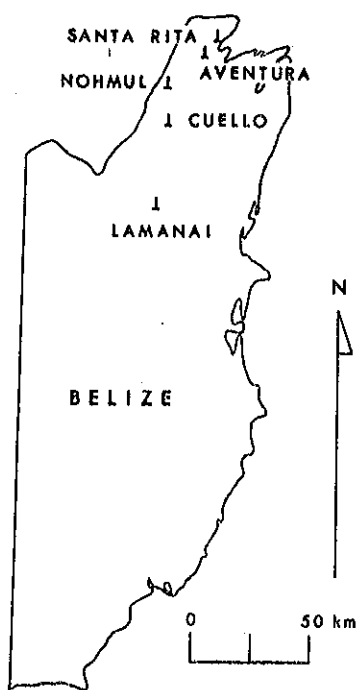
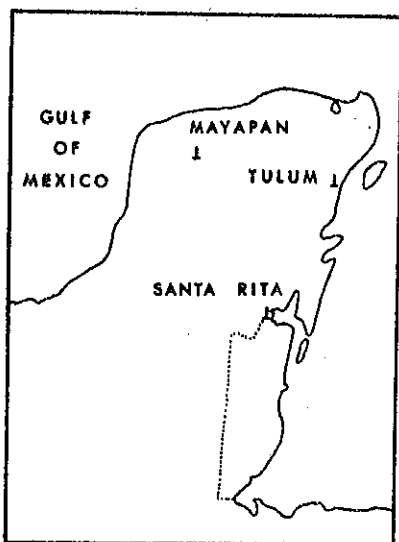


Fig. 1: Map of the Maya area showing the location of Nohmul and Santa Rita.

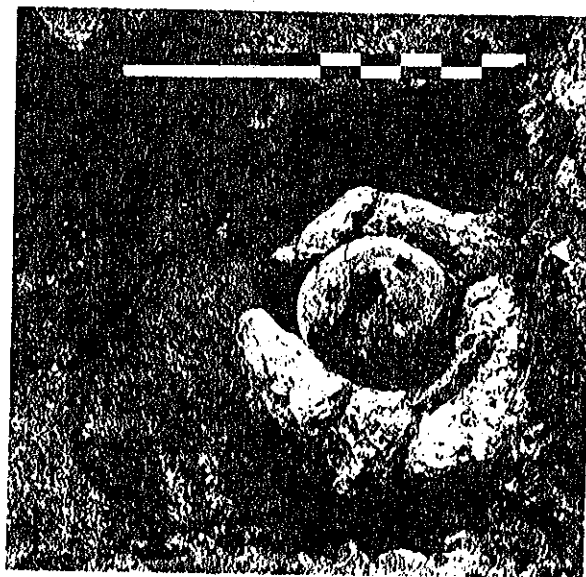


Fig. 2: Postclassic Cache P8C-1 in Santa Rita Structure 81 showing upper vessel in situ. This vessel covers an olla which contains a modeled figure.

The two seasons of work by the C. P. P. at Santa Rita have shown that despite destruction, there is still much of the site left to investigate. Excavations have produced ample amounts of Postclassic materials, including four Postclassic caches. Almost every structure in the northern part of the site has remains dating to the Late Postclassic. As these remains were widespread and fairly evenly distributed over the landscape, there is most likely a heavy occupation during this period. While the constructions and artifacts evince close affinities to those excavated by the Carnegie Institution three decades earlier at Mayapan (Pollock et. al. 1962; Smith 1971), the Santa Rita data also exhibit a marked regionalization.

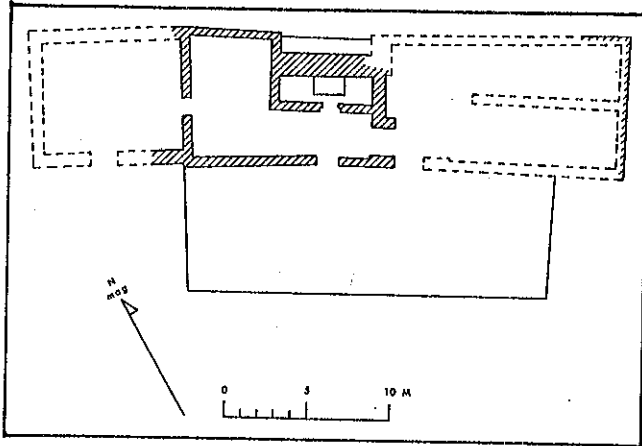


Fig. 3: Plan of multi-roomed Santa Rita Structure 81. Visible in this Postclassic building is an inner "shrine".

Excavation into Postclassic Period locales at Santa Rita disclosed both low structure platforms and larger multi-roomed buildings. Pottery includes redware ceramics and a new censer type, Cohokum Modeled. The distribution of Cohokum Modeled incensarios contrasts with that of the more widely known Chen-Mul Modeled, although the two types do occasionally occur in the same deposits. 1979 and 1980 work has thus far uncovered 61 burials

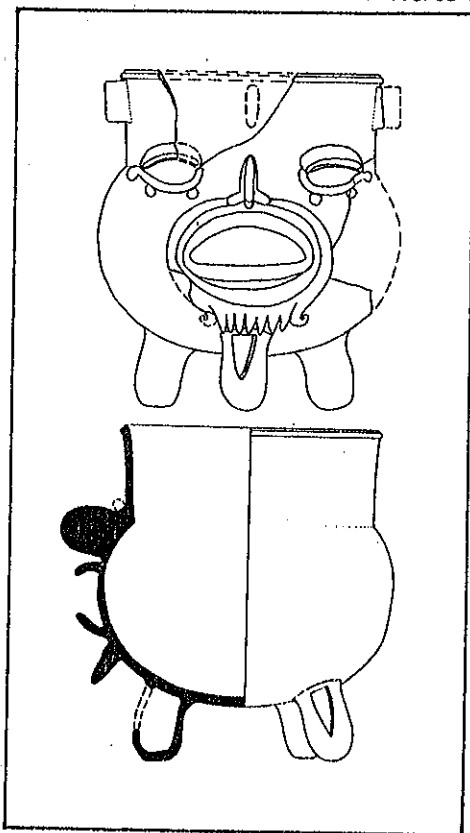


Fig. 4: This Cohokum Modeled vessel is representative of a new type of Postclassic censerware found at Santa Rita. Height of this vessel is about 30 centimeters.

als at the site with 79 individuals being represented. In general, the Postclassic and Classic Period burials are accompanied by a single vessel. Flexed and extended burials are common to all time periods, but flexed burials are especially seen in the Late Postclassic. Multiple individuals in the same burial are also more prevalent in the Postclassic although the trait occurs in a slightly varied form in the Late Postclassic. Postclassic individuals are frequently interred with nothing, although women are sometimes found with copper rings and other burials are occasionally accompanied by broken vessels. Other artifactual remains have been located from varying Postclassic context at Santa Rita. Indications of trade can be seen in many of these objects. Two of the modeled cache vessels contain smaller items, including one small piece of tumbaga and a fragment of turquoise. Perhaps the single most important object, suggestive of connections external to the Maya area, is a double-spouted blackware vessel of probable Peruvian derivation.



Fig. 5: Preclassic burials found in front of Santa Rita Structure 35.

Perhaps as interesting as the Late Postclassic materials recovered from Santa Rita is the almost continuous sequence of occupation which begins at the site circa 2000 B. C. Investigations undertaken in 1980 in the southern portion of the site produced some of the earliest ceramic materials uncovered in the Maya area. They are comparable to those encountered at the site of Cuello some 30 miles to the south (Hammond 1977; Hammond et al. 1979; Hammond 1981). At Santa Rita these ceramics have been recovered from both primary and fill deposits associated with structural remains. Sealed burial deposits contain small, flat-bottomed, vertical-sided red dishes. Similar pieces were apparently found by Gann (1918; Fig. 24a, d, e, g) in this same portion of the site. Although such early ceramics are also reported as existing in the Santa Rita Str. 7 area (Pring 1975; Hammond 1977:89), Corozal Postclassic Project excavations did not confirm their presence.

While Santa Rita exhibits a strong Preclassic and Postclassic component, there are also abundant Classic Period remains. The Early Classic Period is well represented by both burials and middens while the Middle Classic is represented by intense building activity in the site center which included the construction of stucco masks (A. Chase 1980:2) on Str. 7 and the later interment of a spectacular burial in the same building. Late Classic occupation, although present, does not typify the site. It is suspected that this is in part due to sampling forced by the intense destruction of the Santa Rita site core or the prominence of Aventura, seven miles south of Santa Rita during this period and the succeeding Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic Period (Ball, personal communication).

After two years of excavation, the Corozal Postclassic Project has succeeded in answering some of its original questions concerning the Postclassic but has raised a whole host of new ones. The Postclassic sequence is seen

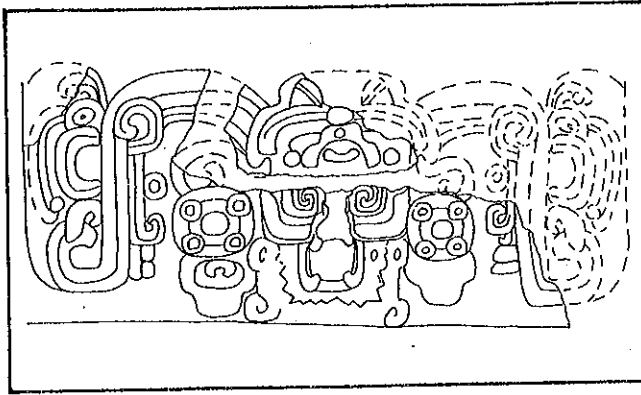


Fig. 6: Central element of an Early Classic red stucco mask from Santa Rita Structure 7 - 3rd. Height of this mask is about 1 meter.

as being quite regionalized in the Early Postclassic with a new tradition, probably the Tulum Ceramic Sphere, arising out of the north-central part of Belize (see also Pendergast 1981:96); Santa Rita and Nohmul, however, do not appear to be full participants within this sphere during the early part of the Postclassic. The Late Postclassic Period at Santa Rita, while having its origins in the central Belize Early Postclassic redwares, cannot be included in the better known Mayapan or Tulum redwares although close similarities exist. Perhaps the most interesting question raised for an earlier period is the apparent continuity between Swasey and Chicanel materials without a distinct Mamom horizon, apparently different from the Preclassic situation at Cuello (Hammond 1977:80, 81, 89). Future investigations at Santa Rita will attempt to garner further information on this obviously important site before it becomes a memory engulfed in the rapidly expanding Corozal Town.

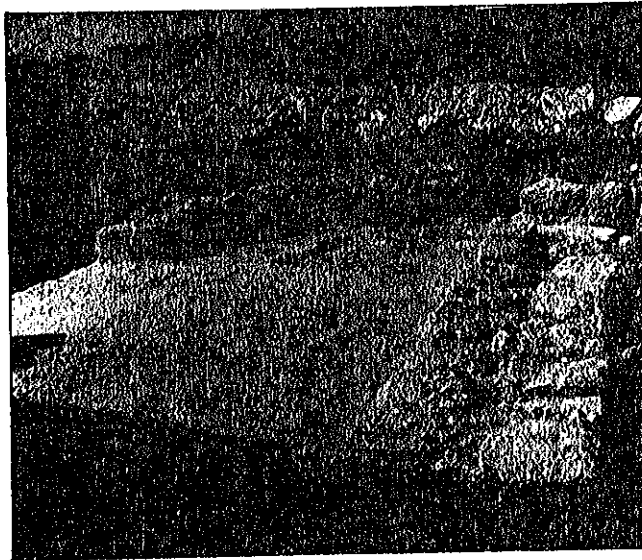


Fig. 7: Santa Rita Structure 135 showing a semi-circular inner room approximately 7 meters in diameter. The building is Classic Period in date.

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Zusammenfassung: In Nohmul ist die Phase des Übergangs vom Spät- zum Postklassikum besonders gut vertreten. Bei der schon früher ausgegrabenen Rundstruktur No. 20, die weiter untersucht wurde, ist yucatekischer Einfluß wegen ihrer Ähnlichkeit mit dem Caracol in Chichén Itzá besonders augenfällig.

In Santa Rita ist die Periode des Postklassikums besonders gut vertreten. Bemerkenswert sind die Existenz eines neuen Räuchergefäß-Typs "Cohokum Modelled" und die Funde exotischer Handelsgüter, darunter Tumbaga-Fragmente und ein vermutlich peruanisches Doppeltüllengefäß. Die Besiedlung ist kontinuierlich von 2000 v. Chr. an nachgewiesen und als lokale Variante der aus Cuello, Tulum und anderen Orten der Umgebung bekannten Kultur- ausprägung charakterisiert.

Resumen: En Nohmul está muy bien representada la fase de transición del clásico tardío al postclásico. La estructura redonda No. 20 se excavó con anterioridad habiéndose continuado con sus investigaciones posteriormente. En ella evidente la influencia yucateca debido a su analogía con el Caracol en Chichén Itzá.

En Santa Rita está especialmente representado el período postclásico. Dignos de atención son la existencia de un nuevo recipiente de sahumero del tipo "Cohokum-Modelled" y el hallazgo de productos exóticos de intercambio; en éstos se encontraban fragmentos Tumbaga y un recipiente de doble pico probablemente peruano. Se ha comprobado que la ocupación es continua desde 2,000 a.C.; puede ser considerada como una variante local de la influencia cultural precedente de Cuello, Tulum y otros lugares adyacentes.