
18 *SANTA RITA COROZAL: TWENTY YEARS LATER*

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When Corozal Postclassic Project investigations were initiated at Santa Rita Corozal in 1979, the primary focus of most ongoing Maya research was the Classic Period (with notable exceptions). This paper reviews the contributions of the Corozal Postclassic Project and considers archaeological data from Santa Rita Corozal in light of recent investigations on the Postclassic Period Maya and on current ideas and approaches in Maya Studies. These data highlight the use of a contextual approach that combines history and archaeology in the reconstruction of ancient Maya social, political, ritual, and economic organization.

Introduction

Corozal Postclassic Project investigations at Santa Rita Corozal were conducted from 1979 through 1985. This work was undertaken at a time when the Postclassic Period Maya were viewed largely in negative terms as compared to their Classic Period ancestors. The Postclassic Maya were seen as decadent and still declining, faint remnants of the glorious populations that had once inhabited the depopulated Classic Period centers. The Postclassic Maya were contrasted with their Classic counterparts in terms of things that were no longer present, such as carved stelae with long count dates. We now know that these characterizations are incomplete and inaccurate. Since the 1980's the Postclassic Period has come to be associated with temporal rather than cultural meaning. As was the case during the 1970s and 1980s, however, archaeological investigations continue to focus predominantly on the Preclassic, Classic, and Terminal Classic Periods of Maya prehistory, even though there has been an increased emphasis on Postclassic Period archaeological research and conferences (A. Chase and P. Rice 1985; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988; Masson 2000; Sabloff and Andrews 1986; Smith and Berdan 2003).

Santa Rita Corozal may be viewed as a microcosm for analyzing changes in the Maya

field over the last two decades. Some of the hallmarks of Postclassic Period archaeology – such as its focus on low-lying architecture and vacant terrain – have received some emphasis in work on earlier horizons; indeed, sites, such as Classic Period Caracol, have simple line-of-stone constructions in their epicenters that have now been investigated. Also emerging in the last 20 years has been a focus on the recovery of functional assemblages that are a recognized part of abandonment processes. Archaeological identification of abandonment has been a focus of investigation by a number of researchers (Cameron and Tomka 1993; Inomata and Sheets 2000) and it is evident now that abandonment materials can be recovered for early time horizons (Brown and Sheets 2000) and not only late phases like those recovered at Santa Rita Corozal. There are, however, some aspects of the Santa Rita Corozal research that have not yet seen widespread adoption, specifically our focus on using archaeology as a critical methodology for testing historic statements. This was a particularly effective methodology at Santa Rita Corozal with regard to community organization and ritual activity. In recent times, only the work of the Rices and their students (1998) in the central Peten has attempted a similar conjunctive approach. The contextual approach that we used at Santa Rita Corozal

has also been employed at Caracol (A. Chase 1994) and has seen increased usage by other projects (e.g., Iannone 2002); this methodology, however, could have greater applicability to Maya archaeological research as a whole.

Within this paper we would like, first, to review the site's occupational history and, then, to focus on specific aspects of the organization of the Postclassic community. In this way we hope to place some of the Corozal Postclassic Project work within the context of current archaeological work in Belize and in the Maya area.

Santa Rita Corozal

Santa Rita Corozal is located in and around modern Corozal Town in Northern Belize. The site is auspiciously located between the New and Hondo Rivers on Chetumal Bay. Santa Rita was first investigated by Thomas Gann, a medical doctor stationed in Corozal Town. In his reports (Gann 1900, 1911, 1914, 1918; Gann and Gann 1939), Santa Rita was notable for its Late Postclassic material remains – specifically, its numerous modeled and painted ceramic effigy cache figures and a series of painted murals on his Mound 1, thought to be indicative of the Mixteca-Puebla style (Nicholson 1955, 1960, 1961; Quirarte 1974, 1982; Robertson 1970). Santa Rita Corozal was the site of later investigations by Ernestine Green (1973), Raymond Sidrys (1976:332-344, 1983:124-159), and Hammond's (1982) Corozal Project (see also Pring 1973:62-67). Santa Rita Corozal was selected for intensive investigations by the Corozal Postclassic Project between 1979 and 1985 because of the previously documented existence of Late Postclassic material at the site. Four full field seasons of excavation were undertaken in 1979,

1980, 1984, and 1985 with laboratory work and mapping being tackled during the interim years.

Work at Santa Rita Corozal focused primarily on intensive excavations that generally consisted of areal clearing and/or trenching. In all, 46 structures were investigated. Work focused on Postclassic occupation and nearly all excavations contained remains from this period. Of the 152 Special Deposits encountered by the project, 15 were Postclassic caches and 42 were Postclassic interments; the remainder of the deposits dated to earlier periods of occupation.

Although best known for its Late Postclassic Period (post A.D. 1250) remains, Santa Rita Corozal maintained an exceedingly long sequence of occupation. There is evidence for human habitation at the site from the Early Preclassic through the present.

Occupation History of Santa Rita Corozal

The first evidence of occupation for Santa Rita Corozal dates to the Early Preclassic Period or approximately 1200-900 B.C. (similar dating as ascribed to the early remains at Cuello; see Hammond et al. 1995). The early inhabitants of the site occupied a high bluff well above Corozal Bay. Excavations encountered four early burials deeply buried in Structure 134 (Operation P12) (D. Chase 1982:403-405; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:62-63). There was a single slipped ceramic vessel in two of these burials (S.D. P12B-24 and S.D. P12B-26); S.D. P12B-24, the burial of an adult female also included a shell necklace and two shell bracelets. The ceramics clearly belong to the Swasey Ceramic Sphere (Kosakowsky 1987; Kosakowsky and Pring 1998; Pring 1982). When it became clear that the bluff area in the Southwest Sector at Santa Rita Corozal contained primarily non-

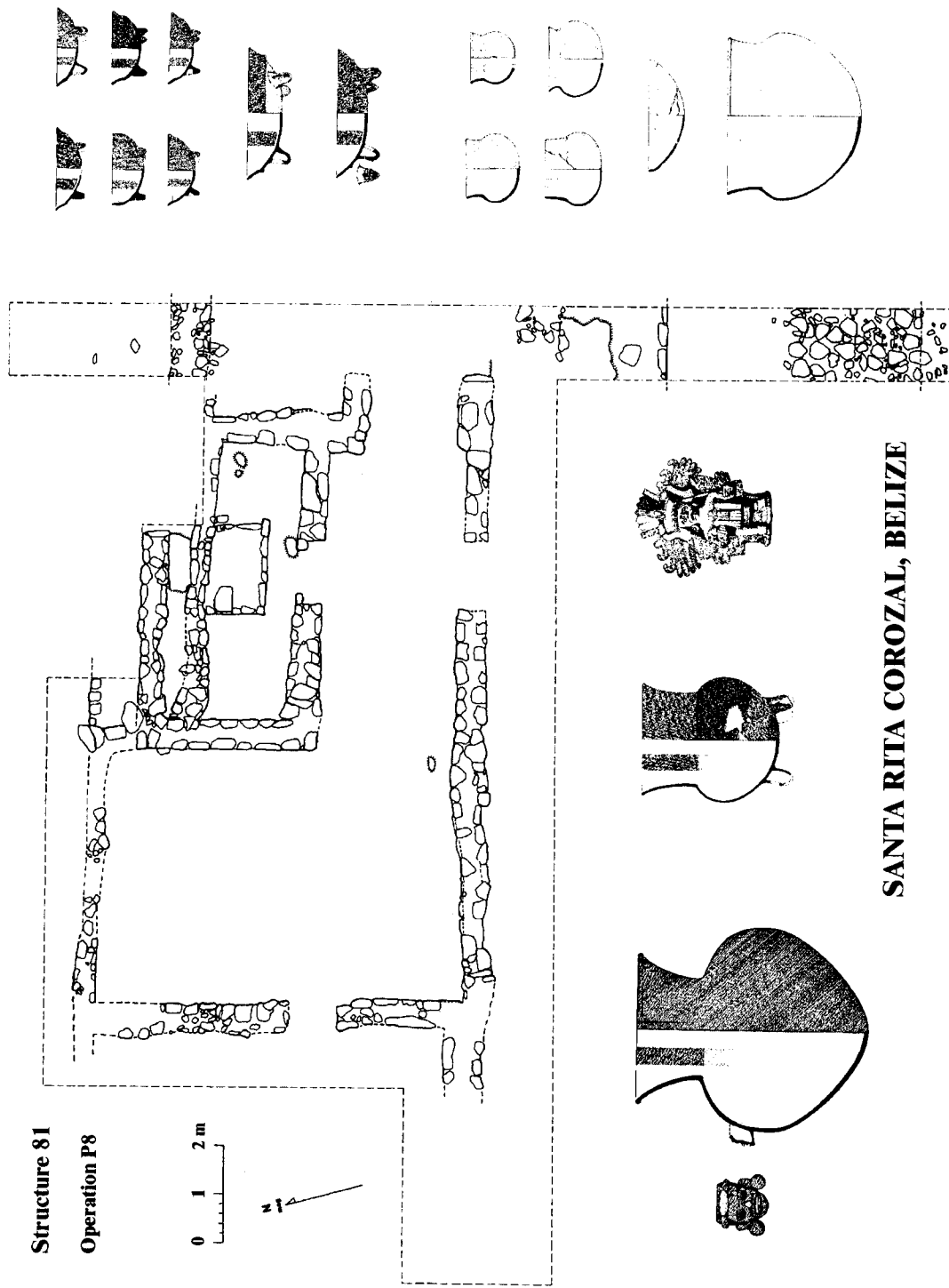


Figure 1. Plan of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 81 with some of the vessels that were recovered from inside this building (after D. Chase and A. Chase 2000).

Postclassic materials, no new investigations were undertaken. It is suspected that there was only a small village in this area during the Early Preclassic Period with an estimated population of approximately 150 people (D. Chase 1990:Table 10.1 and 10.3).

Evidence for Middle Preclassic Period (900-300 B.C.) occupation was found in two very distinct locations at the site, in the North Central (Structure 92; Operation P24; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:38-39) and Southwest Sectors (Structure 134; Operation 12B; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:62-63; D. Chase 1982:403-405). Five burials may be dated to the Middle Preclassic Period; there were ceramics in most of these interments. The pottery (see D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:Fig38) represents a blending of Swasey and Mamom traditions as opposed to the distinct Mamom Ceramic Complex identified for Cuello by Kosakowsky (1987). Population during this time was likely about the same size as in the earlier Early Preclassic Period (D. Chase 1990:Table 10.1 and 10.3).

By the onset of the Late Preclassic Period (300B.C.-A.D.200), however, there is evidence for a substantial population increase at Santa Rita Corozal. Late Preclassic occupation levels were recovered in 12 locales; 32 Late Preclassic interments (representing 34 individuals) were recovered. Pottery included within burials is typical of Sierra Red pottery found throughout the Maya lowlands. Estimated population for the site during this era was approximately 1,000 people (D. Chase 1990: Table10.1 and 10.3).

Four constructions and four burials were encountered that could be related to the Protoclassic (A.D.200-300). All of these locales were found in extremely low-lying constructions beneath vacant terrain Postclassic Period buildings. In spite of the paucity of recovered deposits, it is suspected that the population during this period increased over the preceding Late Preclassic Period (D. Chase

1990: Table 10.1 and 10.3). Early Classic Period Santa Rita Corozal (A.D. 300-550) contained a population of only approximately 1,500 people, but the village was much changed. Monumental architecture was constructed in the area of Structure 7; trade items increased; and, the 13 interments from this time indicate the existence of a wide social dichotomy. Three interments were encountered in the summit excavations of Structure 7 (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:31-35); they are sumptuous in contrast to those located elsewhere at the site. One interment, dated to A.D. 450 housed the remains of what must have been one of Santa Rita's great rulers. His tomb contained virtually all of the possible burial offerings for a high-ranking individual of his time (A. Chase 1992). This Early Classic data is important in that it indicates that a relatively small population may support monumental architecture and be associated with an established social dichotomy. The relative wealth of the Structure 7 interments is likely related to Santa Rita Corozal's pivotal location relative to trade along the Rio Hondo and New River (D. Chase and A. Chase 1989) rather than Santa Rita's control over local labor and politics. It would appear that Santa Rita supplanted Cerros as the key site of Chetumal Bay at the beginning of the Early Classic (D.Chase and A. Chase 1989; Walker 1998).

Late Classic Period (A.D.550-900) occupation is widespread at Santa Rita Corozal, as evident from data found in 14 different excavations and in 28 burials (with 29 individuals). By A.D. 750 there were probably close to 2,500 people living at the site (D. Chase 1990: Table 10.1 and 10.3). The social dichotomy that characterized the Early Classic Period had, however, disappeared and a wider portion of the population had easier access to material items.

The Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic Period (A.D. 900-1200) occupation at Santa Rita Corozal is somewhat problematic

compared with that of earlier and later eras. As at other sites in northern Belize (Graham 1987; Pendergast 1986) it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish Terminal Classic from Early Postclassic occupation. Part of this analytical difficulty may be due to the blending together of regional traditions in northern Belize by outside populations moving in at the time of the collapse. Evidence for habitation during this period was found in 14 structures. However, burials were substantially less prominent, apparently being placed in different locations. Only 6 interments from this period were encountered and most of these were found in atypical structural positions. Population estimates for this Period are approximately 2,000 (D. Chase 1990: Table 10.1 and 10.3).

Four constructions and 4 interments (with 5 individuals) were recovered that can be dated to the early-facet of the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1200-1300). The ceramics associated with this facet of the Late Postclassic appears to be closely related to materials found in other areas of the eastern Lowlands, specifically at the sites of Tulum (Sanders 1960) and Colha (Valdez 1987) (see D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:Fig. 4). This facet is not as abundant as the late-facet Late Postclassic, but is nevertheless well placed via stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates. Population estimates for this facet are approximately 1,800 (D. Chase 1990: Table 10.1 and 10.3).

It is during the late-facet of the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1300-1530) that the largest occupation of Santa Rita Corozal occurs. Virtually all excavation locales produced remains dating to this time. Thirty five structures had direct evidence of late-facet Late Postclassic habitation. Thirty-eight interments, representing 64 individuals, were recovered. Most constructions were located either in low-lying mounds with less than a 20 cm elevation rise above the surrounding surface or in vacant-terrain areas where no mounding was discernable. What appeared at first to be isolated structures, upon excavation could

generally be placed as one of a series of structures in a *plazuela* group. Some of the most elaborate deposits – both burials and caches – were found in places where no structure was visible prior to excavation, but where wall foundations were subsequently identified through areal clearing. Postclassic buildings in these locations also generally covered earlier hidden constructions. Thus, the problem of identifying non-mounded structures was not limited to the Postclassic Period at Santa Rita Corozal. The projected population for this time is conservatively estimated at 6,800 (D. Chase 1990: Table 10.1 and 10.3).

There has been substantial speculation as to the identification of the Protohistoric Maya capital of the province of Chetumal. Evidence for the identification of Santa Rita Corozal as Chetumal has been summarized elsewhere (see D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:65-68 for a discussion). Regardless of whether Santa Rita Corozal can be identified as Chetumal, the site was clearly the most significant center of occupation and ritual activity within its immediate area. The only site for which there exists a greater documented Late Postclassic population and for which a larger number of Late Postclassic caches have been recovered is the site of Mayapan, Mexico, which functioned as a regional capital in the early 15th century.

A sizeable Historic occupation also exists at Santa Rita Corozal. Limited artifacts of Spanish origin (olive jar sherds, an olive jar, majolica, and a spur) have been recovered. The site also has yielded numerous artifacts related to subsequent, mid-nineteenth century, British occupation.

The Organization of Late Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal

The late-facet Late Postclassic occupation of Santa Rita Corozal is the most extensive occupation of the area prior to the 20th century. Even given the loss of information due to the destruction caused by

modern construction activities and through erosion of land on the edge of Corozal Bay, there is substantial evidence for habitation and ritual activity extending through all mapped sectors of the site.

The majority of housing at Santa Rita Corozal during the Late Postclassic was made up of a series of buildings surrounding central plaza areas. A focal point in the most elaborate residential groups was a multiple room palace construction - often with a central, interior shrine. These buildings clearly served a combination of residential, ritual, and possibly administrative functions. Separate shrines were also located within plaza groupings. Other buildings generally consisted of single-room constructions with generalized residential debris. No clear kitchen areas could be identified, although nested domestic vessels were found in the corner area of one multi-room building (Structure 81). Artifacts were found *in situ* on a number of floors and represented domestic activities, lithic production, and ritual refuse. Burials were most often located below or behind structures and/or platforms. The most elaborate of burials were generally encountered in association with specially constructed stone shrines - usually, but not always, inside multiple-room buildings.

There are a series of important lessons to be learned from the Corozal Postclassic Project investigations. The first of these is that low-lying line of stone constructions may be associated with individuals of high status. Virtually all Late Postclassic Period caches and burials encountered in Corozal Postclassic Project excavations were from low lying line-of-stone base wall buildings. These included multiple room buildings that likely functioned as palaces. Excavations in these constructions revealed sumptuous burial offerings. This is most evident in Structure 212, a vacant terrain palace, where the burial of two flexed males was encountered within a crudely constructed stone shrine. The primary individual in this interment was accompanied by earplugs made

of gold, turquoise, and obsidian as well as a *spondylus* shell bracelet and a jade and *spondylus* shell pendant. Copper clasps indicate that he was wrapped in a textile shroud. An accompanying individual, presumably a sacrificial victim, had thirteen stingray spines and one copper needle located among his bones. Significantly, the vacant-terrain Structure 212 building also overlay a buried Early Classic Period cut-stone construction, indicating the degree to which surface remains may not be indicative of actual occupation.

Yet another outcome of the Corozal Postclassic Project investigations was the demonstration of the importance of contextual analysis and of the relationship between excavation strategy and interpretation. The significance of contextual analysis is perhaps best demonstrated by investigations into Structure 81, a multiple room palace building located on the north side of a *plazuela* in the Northeastern Sector of Santa Rita Corozal. It was a Late Postclassic Period construction built with Terminal Classic - Early Postclassic fill. The structure was the locus of residential and ritual activity; it contained one burial and two caches. One of the caches consisted of a stirrup-spouted vessel from South America; the other was a typical Late Postclassic diving-figure cache vessel. Thirty-two reconstructible vessels were found smashed on the floor throughout the building; the majority of these vessels, however, were concentrated in the area in and around a central shrine room. The context has an archaeological signature that would suggest contemporaneously used and abandoned materials as opposed to accretional deposition were it not for the presence of sherds sealed below a plaster floor and located

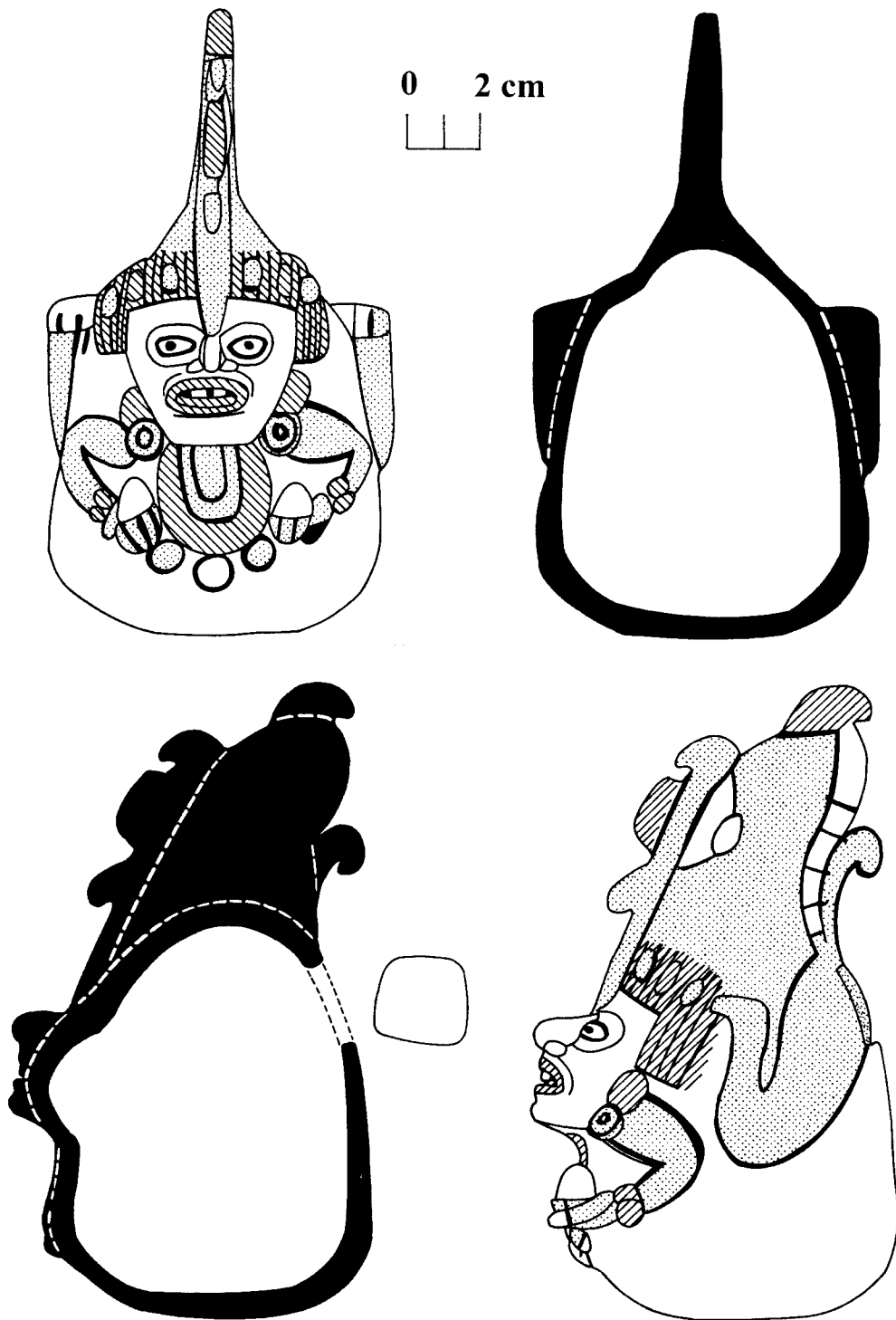


Figure 2. Perspectives on an inner Postclassic cache figure representing a combination corn deity – diving figure from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 37.

inside an intrusive, but sealed, burial cist, that fit to several of the smashed on-floor vessels. The investigations demonstrate that the material found on floors may have accumulated for an extended period of time – at least long enough to have undertaken building modification and to have placed a burial. The Structure 81 investigations have importance on a number of levels beyond simple recovery of archaeological data. First they point to the importance of contextual analysis and of large-scale clearing. They also indicate the difficulty of interpreting the amount of time taken in the deposition of artifactual remains. Finally, as will be indicated below, these investigations highlight the relationship between history and archaeology.

Archaeology and History

Not only can historic statements be used to complement archaeological excavations, but archaeology can be used as part of a critical methodology to test historic statements. Structure 81 also provides potential confirmation of early Historic descriptions of speaking idols based on ritual remains and building plan. Remains of two reconstructible incense burners were located in front of the shrine room, and a plaster-floored passageway or room large enough to contain a ritual specialist was located directly behind the shrine room, but was not visible from the shrine itself.

Thus, religious personnel could have hidden in the rear room to provide the voices for stucco or ceramic idols located within the shrine.

A similar conjunctive approach can be used to elucidate Late Postclassic ritual organization - and *wayeb* rites. Contrary to early descriptions of the Late Postclassic and Early Historic Maya as disorganized idol worshipers, investigations at Santa Rita Corozal suggest that ritual was a regular and patterned activity. Both partial and reconstructible effigy incense burners are found

at Santa Rita Corozal. As has been noted previously, reconstructible Postclassic effigy incense burners were generally found in pairs (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988: 72). One of the effigies of the pair is generally more complete and the other more fragmentary. This has led to the suggestion that these paired *incensarios* may have served as current and outgoing *k'atun* idols associated with calendric ritual, something described by Landa (D. Chase 1985a, 1985b; Tozzer 1941:166-169).

A somewhat similar pattern of censer deposition has also been noted for Classic Period Caracol (D. Chase 1988; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998; A. Chase and D. Chase 1999). The correlation of incense burners with *k'atunob* has been further suggested by the presence of a pair of smashed incense burners below Caracol Altar 16, a giant *ajaw* marker that marks a *k'atun* (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:72). Not all incense burners, however, would have been *k'atun* idols. There were other kinds of Late Postclassic ritual ceramics, such as Cohokum Modeled containers and Kol Modeled cups that were associated predominantly with burial contexts.

Analysis of Late Postclassic caches at Santa Rita Corozal suggests that these generally do not appear to have been placed as building dedications, but were rather involved in community integration presumably related to calendric ritual. In contrast to Classic Period caches, the symbolism of the contents of Postclassic Period caches at Santa Rita Corozal are readily identifiable. Ceramics are modeled into the shapes of items that would have served as offerings or which indicate activities that would have taken place. Perhaps the best example of conjoined historic and archaeological data can be seen in reconstruction of *wayeb* rituals.

As we have noted elsewhere, Landa appears to have described the caching of objects within ceramic containers when he wrote about offerings made between two

platters (Tozzer 1941:143,165). Descriptions of activities and events associated with the calendric ritual of the unlucky *wayeb* days marked the completion of one year and the beginning of the next and can be correlated with data from both archaeology and Maya codices. Landa described the sacrifice of a man or a dog and the descent of a frightful looking angel to receive the sacrificed heart during *K'an* years. The descending angel has been suggested as being the Postclassic diving god depicted on page 35 of the Madrid codex (corresponding with *K'an* years). This figure matches ceramic cache figures recovered from Structures 37, 58, 81, and possibly 218 at Santa Rita Corozal (Figure 1).

The most detailed correlation of Landa's account, codex pages, and archaeological materials is found in accounts of ceremonies associated with *Muluk* years. During these years, Landa described offerings of cloth, dogs, and squirrels. There were also dances involving warriors, women, and stilts. The companion page in the Madrid codex (page 36) shows bolts of cloth, footsteps to indicate dance, stilts, weapons, and a stingray spine. The archaeological caches from Santa Rita Corozal thought to be associated with the *Muluk* years come from Structures 183 and 213 and contain, among other things, combinations of ceramic warriors, women with cloth in front of their faces, *pisotes* (probably Landa's dogs), and individuals performing penis perforation.

Late Postclassic caches at Santa Rita Corozal were located inside shrines, platforms, and multiple room buildings (D. Chase 1985a, 1985b, 1988; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Their location within residential *plazuela* groups is not solely a Postclassic characteristic, for caches are also common in Late Classic residential buildings (e.g., Caracol; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). However, Postclassic caches are found in buildings at the north, south, and west sides of the plaza rather than associated with the eastern building, which is the ubiquitous location for Classic Period

caches at Caracol. The symbolism contained in Late Postclassic cache contexts is generally easily visible to a foreign eye and, thus relatively easy to interpret. Thus, the combination of cache contexts and ethnohistoric statements make it possible to assign meaning to these caches in a way currently not possible for the Classic Period. Eventually, analysis of Postclassic caches should help with interpretations of Classic Period caches.

Archaeology can also be used to challenge and correct historic statements. At Santa Rita Corozal this is best viewed in terms of site organization. Descriptions of Maya site organization traditionally reference Landa's description of a concentrically organized Maya town. He stated that those of highest status were located closer to the central plazas of a given community (Tozzer 1941: 62), a description he may have plagiarized and borrowed from other Central American contexts (D. Chase 1986). Landa's concentric pattern for a Maya center, in which the elite clustered around the downtown area and the poor lived further away, openly contrasts with Burgess's (1923) concentric model of an urban city, which suggested that there would be clusters of poorer workers near downtown areas and that the suburban elite would be located at some distance from city centers. Investigations at Santa Rita Corozal by the Corozal Postclassic Project suggested that this Maya community was not organized according to Landa's concentric mode, another case where the archaeology can provide data to test historic statements. Partially because of Landa's pronouncements, however, the organization of Classic Period sites has been similarly controversial. Recent investigations at Caracol have used settlement patterns, artifact and feature distributions, and stable isotope characterizations of diet to suggest that the Late Classic Period Maya community of Caracol likewise did not mirror the concentric pattern described by Landa, but rather mirrored

Burgess's (1923) concentric settlement pattern in conjunction with an edge city pattern defined by Garreau (1991; A. Chase et al. 2001).

Conclusions

Corozal Postclassic Project investigations at Santa Rita Corozal continue to be relevant to present day archaeology. Santa Rita Corozal data and interpretations have implications for viewing the Late Postclassic Period Maya and also for interpreting earlier archaeological remains. The research underscores the importance of excavating in low-lying constructions. This is evident in current research by ourselves and others (such as Pyburn 1990) that continues to investigate line-of-stone and vacant terrain constructions. The intensively excavated structures and contextually recorded caches, burials, and refuse deposits from Santa Rita Corozal are a substantial resource for interpretations of the Late Postclassic Maya. Reconstructions of Maya ritual and community organization shed light on the functioning of contact era Maya communities and also have applicability for studies of the Classic and Preclassic Period Maya. The methodology employed at Santa Rita Corozal - contextual analysis conjoined with critical evaluation of historic data - could well see further fruitful application in the analysis of Classic Period hieroglyphic texts.

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