

New Finds at Santa Rita Show Corozal Site to be Thriving Maya Center

Within and surrounding modern Corozal Town lie the remains of an extremely important archaeological site which was probably the regional Maya capital at the time of the first Spanish intrusions into the Yucatan. Although badly damaged through both modernization and looting in the intervening centuries the site of Santa Rita still has much to offer. Excavations undertaken during the 1979 and 1980 seasons have demonstrated that Santa Rita was a large site with a long history of occupation crucial to our understanding

of the Maya living within the geographical boundaries of modern Belize as well as the relationships between these Maya and those living in Mexico and Guatemala.

Thomas Gann, a British medical doctor stationed in Corozal Town, began work at Santa Rita at the turn of the century. His excavations, although not nearly as well recorded as those of today, pointed to a long site history, but also, more importantly, to the existence of a unique group of people during Postclassic times (ca. A.D. 1000

— Historic Spanish occupation and contact). The most spectacular of his finds were strange modeled and painted ceramic figures as well as one structure with painted murals preserved on its outer walls. The mural structure has been the source of much discussion among both archaeologists and art historians to the present day as the figures represented in the murals were Mexicanized in form while the hieroglyphic writing accompanying the figures seemed to be pure Maya. Unfortunately, these murals were destroyed shortly after they were first uncovered, reportedly for their "curative" properties. Long after Gann had dug at Santa Rita, short seasons of work were carried out at the site by a number of archaeologists, notably Ernestine Green, Raymond Sidrys and Duncan Pring.

The Corozal Postclassic Project developed as a means for finding out more about the Late Postclassic Maya for which Santa Rita was noted. Although most of the larger mounds from the site center had been removed in land clearing for house plots prior to 1979, work was begun mapping and excavating the less elevated mounds which still existed in the belief that intensive work would produce the evidence of occupation for which the project was searching. The beginning of the first season in 1979 was haunted by the unspoken fear that Santa Rita was too badly destroyed to produce archaeologically useful data. This fear, however, quickly proved to be unfounded and the success of the first season paved the way for a second this past summer; more are planned in the years to come. What was discovered during these past two seasons was not, with a few exceptions, the large impressive architecture expressed in Gann's early work and visible at Altun Ha and Xunantunich, but rather low-lying, but frequently large, platforms and the lower courses of walls upon which perishable buildings rested. Everywhere, however, evidence pointed to the existence of a large, organized population with a vibrant culture.



Part of a large face, probably representing the Maya sun god. Preservation and consolidation of structure 7 at Santa Rita would result in the exposure of such art to the public gaze.

Early Spanish accounts record what little is known of the political organization of the Postclassic Maya. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Maya had a number of territorial divisions or provinces. The northern portion of Belize and a small portion of Mexico east of Lake Bacalar formed the province of Chetumal. The capital of this province was also named "Chetumal" and was known as an important port of trade. The actual location of prehistoric Chetumal is still uncertain although J. Eric Thompson has made a strong case for its location at the site of Santa Rita based upon documentary evidence. Work by the Corozal Postclassic Project would appear to confirm Thompson's hypothesis.

People were drawn to Santa Rita Corozal in Postclassic and earlier times for some of the same reasons that keep a thriving population in Corozal Town today. The bay provided important food resources and the nearby rivers offered access to other population centers and trading opportunities. The area was also productive agriculturally: the province of Chetumal was noted as being rich in honey and cacao, which the Postclassic Maya used as money. Undoubtedly, the sea also produced rich harvests of marine materials which were probably used domestically and traded to less

fortunate inland villages in the form of both foodstuffs and manufactured shell ornaments. In return for their honey, cacao, and marine resources, the Maya of Santa Rita Corozal received both domestic goods not locally available, such as hard stone for manos and metates as well as obsidian, and the archaeologically recovered status items of jade, turquoise, and copper.

Archaeological investigation at Santa Rita, even in the excavation of relatively small structures, suggests that the Postclassic Period at the site was a thriving one. Contrary to traditional views, the Postclassic people at Santa Rita are not clearly decadent in comparison with the earlier Classic Maya. Their architecture is not as fine or large as in the Classic Period (ca. A.D. 300-900) buildings at the site, such as Structure 7, but these changes can be demonstrated to illustrate a re-organization and perhaps a shift in emphasis from the religious to the secular and more practical aspects of Postclassic life. Postclassic ceramic items actually suggest a period of more artistic creativity when compared to earlier materials encountered at the site. Trade was evidently widespread and extended both locally and over long distances. Many of the excavations in Postclassic Santa Rita are in areas where

people were actually living rather than in specialized ceremonial structures. These structures, as seen archaeologically, consist of little more than lines of stone with plaster floor fragments and, with luck, a garbage dump of broken ceramics and used stone tools. Careful recording and excavating of these types of remains is yielding important information on Postclassic life and activities.

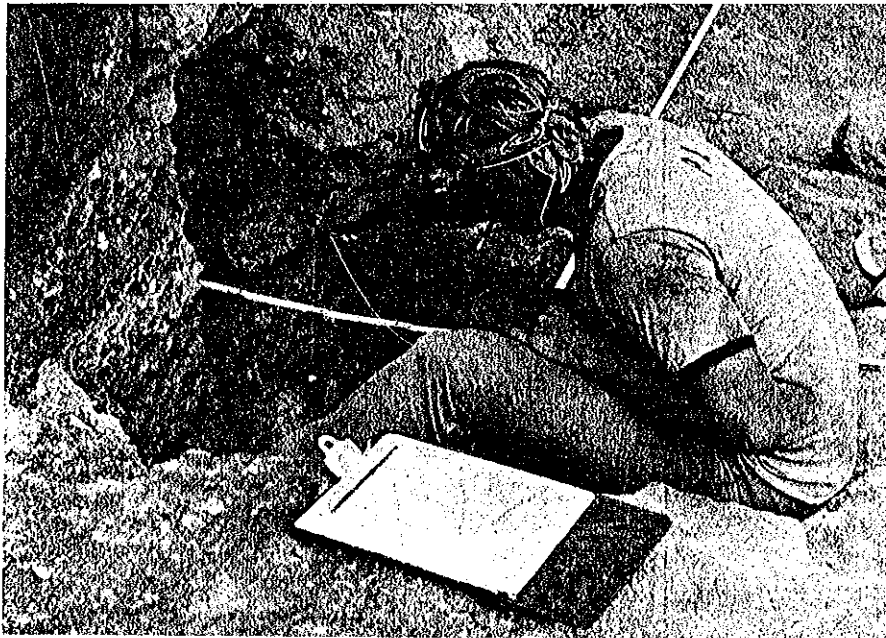
Although investigations at Santa Rita were oriented towards finding Postclassic Maya, excavations revealed earlier and later remains as well. Some of the more interesting earlier remains include a Classic Period burial and stuccoed

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mask (ca. A. D. 600) from Structure 7. Excavations in this mound revealed four different buildings, each on top of the other. Although much of the latest structure had been destroyed before 1979, there appears to be enough well preserved architecture to allow for partial rebuilding of one of the earlier buildings. It is hoped that this will fit in well with plans to develop this area as a community park.

Work on the Corozal Community College grounds did not provide much information on Postclassic Santa Rita, but added to the overall site history. One of the structures excavated in this area yielded two consecutive buildings. The earlier of the two structures is unusual in that it had a large round interior. Constructions like this are virtually unknown in the Maya area during the time that this building was in use (ca. A. D. 500). A smaller mound, also located on the College grounds, proved to be extremely complex to excavate as there were a series of buildings and building stages evident in the investigation as well as twenty-two burials. Occupation of this structure appears to span from the early Postclassic (ca. A. D. 1200) back to early Preclassic (ca. 2000 B. C.). When combined with other excavations undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project, it would appear that Corozal Town had one of the longest histories of continuous occupation in Belize.

The Project plans to return to Corozal Town in the near future to do further mapping, excavation, and consolidation of structures. Work in 1979 and 1980 clearly shows the



Archaeology involves the careful recording of any excavated remains. Arlen Chase is here recording a Postclassic burial.

importance of preserving the cultural heritage remaining at the site for future generations. After two seasons of work in Corozal Town, the project is pleased to report something on its finds and feel secure in the knowledge that the people of Corozal Town and elsewhere will continue to help us in our efforts to preserve, understand, and reconstruct the remains of the ancient community of Santa Rita Corozal.

Diane Z. and Arlen F. Chase are the Directors of the ongoing Corozal Postclassic Project. Their previous archaeological experience has included work in Guatemala, Mexico, Arizona, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. Both are

currently completing their Ph.D.'s at the University of Pennsylvania. They are assisted in the field by a dedicated crew of volunteer field supervisors and wish to state their appreciation to the men of San Pablo and Xaibe who have worked with them as well as to Mr. Whitfield Miguel, Mr. Louis Ramirez, and Ms. Jo Wilson of the Caribbean Motel and Trailer Park for permission to excavate their land, to Dr. David Freidel, Mr. Ma, and Mr. Harriot Topsey and the Department of Archaeology for their aid, and to the people of Corozal Town who made their work more pleasant and productive.