

## Archaeology:

# A RICH PAST PRODUCES A RICH HERITAGE

**D**ispersed about the bluff which encircles Corozal Town is perhaps one of the longest occupied and unusual sites in Belize. Although presently represented by many smaller and lower structures, Santa Rita Corozal at one time had many impressive larger constructions; of its tall structures, today only Structure 7, some 15 meters in height, survives. Soon the third building within this mound will be open to the public for viewing. It consists of four rooms, two of which are largely intact and complete with their vaulted ceilings.

The archaeological site of Santa Rita is spread through a number of modern villages on the outskirts of Corozal Town, from Paraiso on the north through San Antonio to San Andres at which point the site swings eastward to the bay. Three seasons of excavation have been spent at the site by the Corozal Post-classic Project, the most recent being this past summer. The reasons for interest in the site are many, but particular mention must be made of its late, Post-classic Period occupation (A.D. 1250-1530). In fact, the wealth of Postclassic remains at the site have led to its identification as the late Post-classic capital of the Maya province of Chetumal. Besides its abundant later remains, Santa Rita Corozal also manifests a very long history; the earliest remains of buildings and burials date to approximately 2000 B.C.

The present site of Santa Rita represents but a shadow of its former glory. The years of urban expansion and road-building around Corozal Town have led to the destruction of larger portions of the site. In spite of this, however, much information remains on its past inhabitants. Archaeologists working at Santa Rita are noted for their zealous pursuit of broken pieces of pottery and poorly preserved remains of house walls or floors, all of which are patiently excavated and recorded and all of which are important in reconstructing the way the ancient

Maya lived at the site. Most of this necessary work is tedious and slow and does not yield results which are easily seen. However, this years work at Santa Rita Corozal has also produced several spectacular finds.

Excavations in the remains of one building Santa Rita Structure 37, contained nine human burials. In addition to these, however, excavations in the same structure at the end of June (witnessed by most residents of San Antonio) also produced a spectacular Late Postclassic cache. The cache had been placed by the Mayan inhabitants in a pit dug into an earlier building. Excavations first revealed an unpainted pot with a lid. When the pot was transferred to the lab, the inner vessel was carefully removed and was revealed to be a magnificent effigy piece.



A representation of a Mayan diving god found at Santa Rita Corozal. This artifact dates back to 1450 A.D.

This inner pot is made of clay and stands approximately 7 inches high. It depicts a human being diving down. It is only due to incredible circumstances that the paint, all applied after the pot had been fired, is still well preserved. The individual is coloured a gruesome combination of light and dark red, black, light and dark blue, and white paint. Inside the vessel were a number of other smaller items including beads and part of a copper ring.

While other modeled figure caches have been found in the Santa Rita excavations, this is the best preserved piece from the site and perhaps for the whole Mayan era during the Postclassic Period. While spectacular to look at the cache is also important for the information it relays about past Maya customs. In fact, archaeological work and historic documents suggest that caches at Santa Rita are the remains of rituals carried out on specified calendar days and particularly at the Maya New Year. It was during this time of year that offerings were made to dieties between two plates; the effigy found between these vessels were probably representations of messengers between the people and their gods.

Yet another important find was encountered at Santa Rita in a Classic Period building (Structure 7). As with the cache, this deposit was also cut into an earlier construction and consisted of an elaborate and specially constructed tomb that housed the burial of an elderly individual, probably a female. The tomb was built at approximately A.D. 350-400. Placed about the extended body were five pottery vessels; three of these were black-slipped vessels extremely unusual in form, and two were plates with multi-colored exteriors. A worked piece of shell was placed over the face. Around the neck was a necklace comprised of large shell beads with a center mosaic jadeite ornament. Large and elaborate ear ornaments lay on either side of the head. The design on these was formed from an elaborate jadeite and shell mosaic and pictures an individual with an eagle headress and "panache", complete with minature and talons. Around all of the bones was a brownish substance, most likely the remains of a wood or cloth container for the body.

Like the Postclassic cache, the Santa Rita Corozal tomb is impressive both for its contents and for the information it provides us about the Early Classic (A.D. 300-600) Maya of Belize. In combination with previous finds from the site, it indicates the central role that Santa Rita

played in the northern part of Belize during the beginning of the Classic Period and also reveals ties to the inner Peten heartland which differ from those found further south at Altun Ha or Lamanai.

The fact that it is the first tomb found to the north of Altun Ha or Lamanai also reaffirms the importance of the site during this time. All of this is surprising given the tendencies of archaeologists in the past to assume that much of northern Belize had been abandoned during the Early Classic Period; much of this supposition had been based on the fact that little, if any, Early Classic remains had been recovered at Cerros, an eminent Late Preclassic (300 B.C. - A.D.) center on the opposite side of Corozal Bay from Santa Rita. Whatever the case, Santa Rita was not only thriving during the Early Classic Period, but also appears to have been the major center for the region during this era, complete with long distance trade routes into the interior of the Maya realm.

While it is easy to focus on the more flashy aspects of archaeological finds, it is not as easy to stress the amount of time, recording, and effort that go into every aspect of an excavation in order to understand and appreciate the past. With three seasons of excavation and as many seasons of analyses at Santa Rita Corozal, it is only now possible to begin to make sense of the site's overall development through time and over space. What is now understood about the site points to its over-whelming importance in Belize during the Early Classic and late Post-classic Periods. While much has been destroyed at the site, much still remains. A part of this past, Santa Rita Structure 7, is being consolidated so that visitors will be able to see the structure and walk around in its rooms. In this way, it is hoped that an appreciation will be gained for what remains of this unique piece of Belizean heritage.

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