

Refining Maya Prehistory: Archaeology At Santa Rita Corozal

Belize is blessed with scores of archaeological ruins representing Maya civilization as it existed before the advent of Europeans in the sixteenth century. Notable among these remains is the site of Santa Rita, Corozal. This site encircles and lies under modern-day Corozal town and clearly shows a vibrant prehistoric past.

The present community of Corozal exists in one of the more pleasant environments of Belize, blessed as it is with sea breezes, balmy tropical weather, and proximity to international trade with Mexico. The earlier inhabitants of Corozal also recognized its excellent weather and advantageous position for trade, but they were most concerned with the site's location on the sea between the New River and the Rio Hondo water systems. In fact, this strategic location between these two major river systems had a profound impact on its development for Santa Rita was able to gain control of the access to these two primary inland waterways at least twice in its prehistory.

Across the bay from Corozal in northern Belize is Cerros, a major Late Preclassic (300 B.C.—A.D. 300) site. Cerros may have enjoyed the earliest control of at least the New River water system. The archaeological data, however, make it clear that Santa Rita may have been directly responsible for the apparent abandonment at Cerros as Santa Rita gained control of the Rio Hondo drainage trade route at the onset of the Early Classic Period, thus minimizing Cerros' control of the New River system. The burgeoning center of Altun Ha, to the south of Cerros, may have provided the coup de grace to Late Preclassic Cerros by monopolizing whatever trade had once gone up the New River. Whatever the case, Santa Rita Corozal prospered during the Early Classic.

Archaeological remains dating to the Early Classic Period are quite common at Santa Rita. The most spectacular remains, however, have been recovered from Santa Rita Structure 7, locally known as Santa Rita Hill. Three major burials have been found by the Corozal Postclassic Project in this building, one each in 1979, 1984, and 1985. Only the one found in 1985 is of a male; the other two were of women and indicate that females played a major role in Maya society.

The 1985 tomb dates to the Early Classic Period (A.D. 250-550) and was located approximately 10 meters beneath the summit of Santa Rita Structure 7. Above the tomb was a cache, or specially placed deposit, of six paired vessels containing jade and shell beads, a series of natural shells, and many stingray spines used for ritual blood-letting by the Maya elite. Two meters below this cache, a huge, open air vaulted-roof chamber was found. On the floor of this specially built tomb lay the remains of one of Santa Rita Corozal's Early Classic Kings. He was positioned on his back with his head pointing northward resting on the debris of a wooden pallet. In death, he wore a set of jadeite and mica inlaid earflares, as well as other jade ornaments. At his right shoulder were instruments representing his status and office, in particular a flint ceremonial bar weighing over 35 pounds. A stingray spine (10 cm in length), used in ritual blood-letting activities, was positioned in his pelvis. Three large flint spearpoints, dipped in cinnabar, a red pigment, lay at his hip. Eight pottery vessels and one carved stone vessel were also placed around his body as well as a host of shell and stone beads.

It is possible that the individual in this tomb was the son of the woman found buried in a tomb in Structure 7 in 1984. Based on the amount of effort that went into his tomb, it is also probable that he was the person responsible for the emergence of Santa Rita Corozal as one of the strongest city-states in northern Belize during the onset of the Maya Classic Period.

Following the Early Classic Period, the site of Santa Rita Corozal lost much of the singular control it had enjoyed in northern Belize, possibly to the site of Aventura near the modern village of San Joaquin. People continued to live at the site, but it is clear that they were under the dominion of some other site. The Late Postclassic Period (A.D. 1350—1540), however, witnessed the resurgence of Santa Rita Corozal as a major power on the eastern sea coast. In A.D. 1520, ancient Santa Rita Corozal was the capital of an area that was over 8000 square kilometers in size; the site was then known as Chactemal or Chetumal.

It was in order to investigate this Late Postclassic capital city that the Corozal Postclassic Project began work at Santa

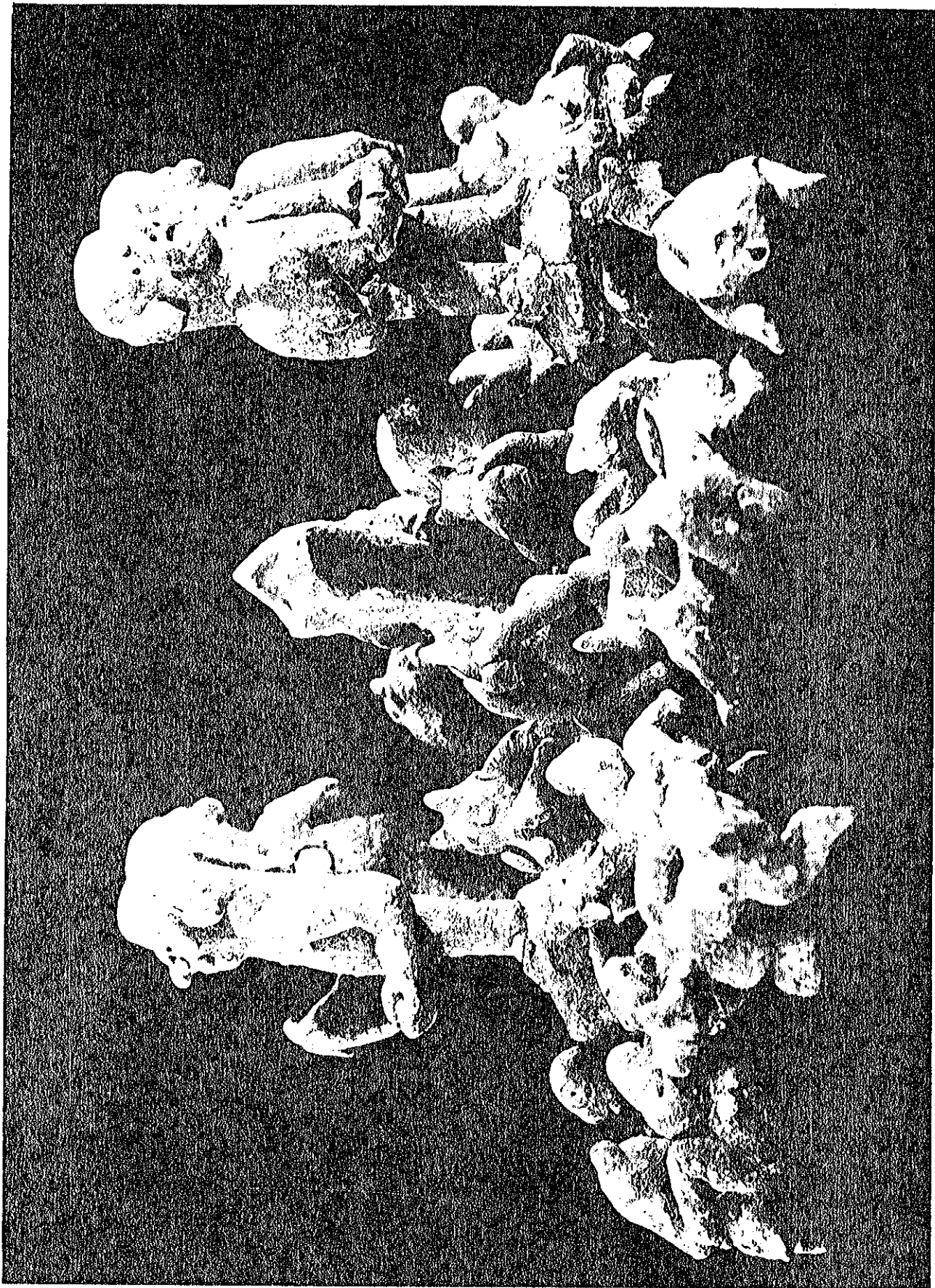
Rita in 1979. The final season of work at the site in 1985 especially underscored the important role that Santa Rita Corozal played in northern Belize just prior to the European conquest of the New World. All of the 1985 excavations uncovered impressive Late Postclassic buildings and remains of day-to-day activities as well as earlier deposits. More important from an archaeological standpoint, however, were the recovery of seven Late Postclassic caches and numerous burials dating to the same time period.

Two of the late caches consisted of ceramic figurines carefully positioned in or around pottery urns. One of these caches contained 28 figurines while the other had 25 figurines. This kind of cache had been found before at Santa Rita by Thomas Gann, Corozal's medical doctor at the turn of this century. Dr. Gann was not a trained archaeologist, however, and did not record his finds in a way that is done today; thus much of the information concerning such caches was not made available in his publications. We believe that if such figurine caches could be found and recorded *in situ* that they would provide new light on Maya religious practices and beliefs. This is in fact the case.

One of the other major finds from the 1985 season was the recovery of a burial of a Late Postclassic ruler with gold and mosaic earflares. This interment was not located in a sumptuous tomb or in a magnificent building. Instead, two flexed and bundled bodies had been placed in a simple grave and a small shrine was built above them. One of the persons may have been a blood sacrifice for the other as the body of one of the individuals was associated with at least 13 stingray spines and one very long copper needle, all used in ritual blood-letting by the Maya elite. Unlike the secondary individual, a single stingray spine rested in the pelvis of the primary individual and a pair of gold earflares or earrings rested beneath his skull. Each earflare measured approximately 4 centimeters in height by 2 centimeters in width and had a depth of 1 centimeter. The surrounding gold ornamentation cradled jadeite and turquoise mosaic work set on jet-black stone.

The gold earflares found in this deposit are the first recovered archaeologically in the Maya area. Since metal does not

cont'd on page 17



One of the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1350-1550) caches from Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, contained twenty-five modeled figurines which have been repositioned as they were found for this photograph; a series of dogs, deer, and pisotes are in the foreground while four upright figures, representing the Maya "bacabs" who held up the sky, surround a central figurine concentration which focused on a seated man blowing a conch shell.



A stunning, carved limestone bowl portrays a Maya deity emerging from a shell; it was found above the head of an Early Classic (A.D. 250-550) ruler at the site of Santa Rita Corozal in Belize, Central America.



One of two hieroglyphic texts appearing on the carved limestone bowl found inside the Early Classic (A.D. 250-550) tomb of a Maya ruler from the site of Santa Rita Corozal in Belize, Central America; such texts often allow archaeologists to decipher personal events about elite individuals.

occur naturally in the Maya lowlands, the earflares must have reached Santa Rita Corozal through trade. Ethnohistoric records for the Aztec of central Mexico, with which the Santa Rita burial is contemporary reveal that this kind of earflares was restricted in use to the highest nobles and priests of Aztec society. For such earflares to occur in a burial more than 750 miles away from central Mexico indicates the importance of the buried individual and also suggests his status as Maya provincial ruler. It is appropriate for such an individual to have been buried at Santa Rita Corozal for the site was the capital city for the Maya province of Chetumal at the time of the Spanish conquest.

The archaeology that has been undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project at Santa Rita Corozal is beginning to answer many questions about the nature of the Maya Postclassic Period. In conjunction with other research, such as that being done by the Pendergasts at Lamanai, long-held concepts about the nature of Postclassic society, once thought to be "decadent, depopulated, and declining," have been challenged. The archaeological data relating to the Postclassic Period that has instead been found portrays a populous vibrant society integrated into Mesoamerican-wide networks of trade and communications.

Because of a past archaeological inability to recognize Postclassic Period sites unless

substantial architecture was present, existing information dealing with the Postclassic Maya has largely been skewed in favour of ethnohistoric or ethnographic interpretations. At least for Santa Rita Corozal, the archaeological record of the Maya before contact is often at odds with the ethnohistoric records of the Spanish or the ethnographies dealing with a Hispanized Maya. For instance, it would appear that the Postclassic Maya elite lived on the outskirts of their urban centers and not in the middle of their cities as recorded by the 16th century Spanish clergy.

Many Maya archaeologists believe that the Postclassic Maya did not have an organized religion, but were instead disparate idol worshippers. The archaeological data from Santa Rita Corozal not only demonstrate continuities in religion between the Classic and Postclassic periods, but also stress the important role that a unified religion played in Postclassic Maya society. One continuity between Classic and Postclassic Maya ceremonies is an especially strong emphasis on the passage of time; another is the emphasis on elite blood-letting. During the Classic Period, however, religion was practiced by the elite. During the Postclassic Period, on the other hand, an attempt was made to initiate other groups of people into the ideological underpinnings of Maya religion. This resulted in large festivals and public ceremonies in Postclassic regional capitals

and the creation of special figurines representing Maya religious thought, such as those recovered from special caches at Santa Rita Corozal.

Scientific understanding of Postclassic Maya society is at a turning point. The finds from Santa Rita Corozal support the view of increasing cultural complexity throughout Maya prehistory and suggest that the transition from the Classic to Postclassic Periods—sometimes referred to as the "Maya Collapse"—actually saw the rapid development of a Maya society formerly comprised of a series of regional city-states into a secular unit that was integrated with the rest of Mesoamerica and more cosmopolitan in its outlook. Similar events are, in fact, now taking place in modern-day Corozal for, as the town expands in size to match its former boundaries, the omnipresent television is re-orienting the present-day community from a local orientation to one that is international in scope.

This report was prepared for the New Belize Magazine by Diane Z. and Arlen F. Chase of the University of Central Florida.

The publication welcomes contributions from readers.

The Minister of Local Government, Social Services and Community Development Mr. Philip Goldson is determined to get more grass-roots participation in the development process.

Along with his senior staff he has been travelling around the country meeting with people in the towns and rural communities to motivate them into making their inputs in the national development process.

Mr. Goldson holds the view that this could be an effective way of having government by the people "by helping people at every level to participate in the work of government."

Mr. Goldson has had a long political career (of more than twenty years) as an opposition representative in the Legislature. This is his first term of office as a Minister of government.

The Chief Information Officer Mr. Norris Hall interviewed Mr. Goldson:

C.I.O. *Mr. Goldson, let us talk about the human development programme of your ministry and tell us what are your concepts and ideas for the implementation of this programme.*

Mr. G. The basic concept is that the country has many resources; it has its natural resources, economic resources, financial resources and so on, but the most important of these resources is the human resources. As my ministry is the one that has been given the responsibility to deal directly with the people through local government, social services and especially community development, we conceive it

to be our responsibility to help to mobilize the human resources of the country and put those resources at the disposal of the government and of the people for the benefit of the country.

C.I.O. *How does this programme relate to say the Village Council or the alcalde system?*

Mr. G. The Village Council is the basic grass-root structure that was organized about 30 years ago. It has since developed and has produced a calibre of leadership upon which we can now expand.

C.I.O. *How do you plan to expand this leadership in your programme?*

Mr. G. First of all we seek to strengthen the Village Council system to broaden the base of the work of the Village Council and various village communities and then bring these to the level of a district council system. This is a step above the village council system.

It gives the village councillors and the village communities an opportunity to participate in the work programmes and development of a district as a whole.

C.I.O. *Since you took office as minister in this particular ministry you have been doing a lot of leg work. You have been travelling around the country meeting with*