

Newsday

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Geneva Consensus: Keep Talks Secret

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AP Photo

Shultz and Gromyko at U.S.-hosted reception after their arms-talk discussions proved unexpectedly lengthy

Clues To Maya Mystery

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New Clues Refute 'Decline' of Mayas

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a period of precipitous decline that has puzzled scholars for decades.

"People tend to speak of the period in words like decadence, depopulation, decline—assuming the people were a lot worse off," says Diane Chase. "I don't think we can make value judgments."

At Santa Rita in Belize, the Chases see evidence that the Maya thrived until the Spanish arrived around 1500. Another archeologist working in Belize agrees that Maya culture persisted there longer than prior archeologists had thought. At Lamanai, a Maya site about 40 miles upriver from Santa Rita, David Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto found evidence of "a maintenance of the same kinds of activity that had gone on all along... It continued to be a very rich community" long after the supposed demise of Maya culture in the region.

Santa Rita is a suburb of Corozal, which Diane Chase calls "a sleepy little town" in Belize, a country the size of Massachusetts located on the Atlantic coast below Mexico. There, the Chases direct the efforts of a team of 17 excavators from five colleges, as well as a member of the Belizean department of archeology and about 30 Belizean excavators. From the grassy mounds between new suburban houses they are unearthing the remains of Chetumal, a thriving Maya capital and center of trade from the early Preclassic period (around 300 AD) until the late Postclassic, when the Spanish arrived.

If Santa Rita ever contained the magnificent temples common at other Maya sites, they have been obliterated long since by later development. Nonetheless, since at least 1900, Santa Rita has been recognized as a rich site of Postclassic Maya activity which might hold clues to the demise of the culture. The research team also hopes that, as one of the longest-occupied Maya sites, Santa Rita will ultimately provide a kind of master calendar of Maya history, as the researchers compare their findings with the records of the earliest scholars of the Maya, the Spanish invaders of South America.

Foremost among these "ethnohistorians" was the Spanish missionary Diego de Landa, the first provisional minister of Yucatan. In 1562, Landa launched a year-long inquisition during which he tortured the Maya to confess their pagan practices. When the first bishop of Yucatan arrived the following year, he excommunicated Landa, who had to return to Spain to defend his actions. (Landa was acquitted, and later became the second bishop of the region.)

While in Spain conducting his defense, Landa wrote down his discoveries about Maya religious practices, which held the secrets of their complicated cal-



The mound called Structure 7 at Santa Rita, a Maya capital being excavated by Arlen and Diane Chase. Photos by Diane Chase

endar and thus were central to the function of the entire culture. Since that time, archeologists have relied on Landa's documents as the key to interpreting their discoveries. But Landa wrote down his observations long after he made them, and he is known to have relied on hearsay. How reliable is he as a source?

As one of the most long-lived of known Maya settlements—and as an important site very late in Maya culture, until 1500—Santa Rita can be used both to test Landa's observations and to clock changes in Maya culture throughout its eminence. Starting with Landa and the newest remains in Santa Rita, says Diane Chase, "we're sort of working backwards in time" to learn what really happened to the Maya.

"The suggestion has always been a breakdown, a collapse in the culture," she adds. "We see a continuity. They may not have been building stelae, but the pattern continued in other ways. They made burials in the same places as before, and the burials also contain pottery... They made caches along axial center lines or in doorways; they continued to do that, and filled them with jade or obsidian, much like we make foundation stones today."

Many of these burials contain small images of Maya gods, once covered with bright paint ("a grue-

some combination of light and dark red, black, light blue and dark blue and white paint," the Chases wrote in a Belizean newspaper). Earlier excavators and even Landa interpreted these as the objects of idol worship in the last days of Maya culture, signs of decadence. But Landa felt that the late Maya made a god of almost every object in their lives.

To Diane Chase, however, the caches at Santa Rita evoke vivid images of the Maya rituals Landa described, and indicate not a decadent society but a highly ordered one. By recording carefully where and what they have found, and comparing their observations with Landa's records, the Chases conclude that these figures were merely symbols used in the rituals that perpetuated the calendar that ordered daily activities.

The small figures and incense burners unearthed at Santa Rita do not litter the site like refuse. They had been buried with care, often inside a pair of bowls suspended on each other so that they form a hollow vessel. Diane Chase believes that these are the "offerings between two platters" described by Landa, an important part of the New Year rituals central to the Maya calendar.

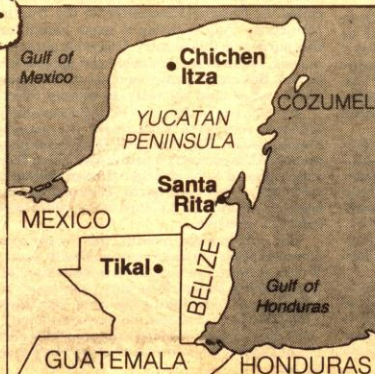
These rituals took place during the last five days of the old year, which were seen as unlucky. Particularly after a calamitous period, Landa said, either a dog or a man was sacrificed by being thrown down from a height onto a pile of stones. The heart was then taken out and buried—offered to the god—between two vessels. Landa said the Maya believed an angel would "dive down" to collect these offerings, and many of the caches found at Santa Rita contain pottery images that seem to represent an angel diving.

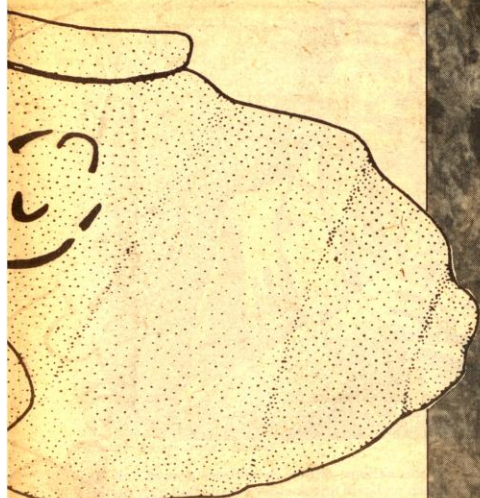
The pagan gods of the Mayans, as Landa described them, reigned over the fates of the people in a cyclical pattern set by the calendar. According to Landa, the Maya observed detailed rituals that ordered them to move the images of various gods to particular geographic locations. Taking all the evidence together—both the geography of the buried caches and the nature of the pottery images inside them—the Chases have found strong associations with the rituals Landa described. They believe that one of the buildings they have excavated, which they call Structure 7, was the resting place of gods no longer in circulation.

But other things Landa reported have not been confirmed at Santa Rita. He wrote that Maya towns were constructed as concentric circles, with the reli-



Drawing of a ritual cup from Santa Rita. University of Texas Press





University of Texas Press

Drawing of a typical small Maya sculpture

gious leaders at the center and the common folk on the outside. The Chases' excavations do not support this; the large, important houses were mingled with the simplest dwellings.

The late Postclassic relics the Chases have unearthed at Santa Rita since 1979 now number in the hundreds of thousands. They are not as impressive, perhaps, as the giant Maya ruins that rise from deep jungle at Tikal in Guatemala or Chichen Itza in Mexico. But they do bespeak a rich culture, one in which the people were surrounded by numerous objects of distant trade — obsidian, jade, turquoise, copper, textiles and salt — and in which the ornate paintings and architecture of prior Maya periods were replaced by an impressive variety of sculptural styles.

There is evidence of civil wars among the Maya regions during the Postclassic period, Arlen Chase says, but many current archeologists do not view these wars as fundamental to the change in Maya culture. The important facts behind the apparent Maya "decline" centuries before the Spanish incursion, according to modern theory, were probably shifts in custom and trade, and a fundamental change in the nature of Maya society. These changes led to a culture that simply left behind fewer of the kind of relics that tend to impress people.

"We can't bring out the reasons [for the changes in Maya culture] and maybe we never will," says Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum. "Quite often a decline can't really be seen in archeology. A change in the quality of leadership doesn't leave any evidence."

He thinks the evidence adds up to a nonviolent middle-class uprising against the religious political authorities. Diane Chase agrees: "Basically we're talking about a change in political structure from the Classic to the Postclassic. It's clear the rulers no longer had the power status they had before. It's implicit from the readings on the stelae that they moved from a god-king to a more secular orientation, which looks more like our own political structure."

When the Spanish reached Chetumal in 1527, they found a thriving port town of some 2,000 dwellings. It was not rich in gold, as they had hoped, but the region was wealthy in simpler things the Maya needed: cacao, honey and maize. When the Spanish returned four years later, intending to settle, the town had been abandoned. By 1618, all traces of it were gone.

"There are substantial populations there when the Spanish come," says Diane Chase. "They don't embrace the Spanish with open arms; they retreat. Unlike the American Indians, they don't accept traded goods; they hide."

Rather than a dying culture snuffed out by the Spanish, Chase sees the late Postclassic Maya as an interesting civilization that, if left alone, might have achieved great and different things. "I wonder what they would have done had the Europeans not intervened," she adds. "There were 16 or 18 states, and Santa Rita was the territorial capital. They might have developed a very interesting culture." ■



Trench led to a tomb, apparently of a female leader.

Santa Rita Find: The Tomb of A Woman Leader

ONE OF the most fascinating finds at Santa Rita, Belize, comes from the Maya early Classic period, around AD 350. In a prominent place in an important ceremonial building, archeologists Arlen and Diane Chase have found the elaborate, specially constructed tomb of someone who must have been a leader — and was a woman.

The way she was buried clearly indicates her prominence. The tomb is far richer than others at the site: Numerous vessels and jadeite ornaments were buried with her, and a necklace of shells and jadeite was around her neck. She was buried wearing large, inlaid earrings depicting a snake with the head of an eagle — the image of a god said to appear to Maya in visions during religious rituals.

Where she was buried is important, too: Her tomb is under the entry to the most impressive building at Santa Rita. On the basis of images from Maya art and findings at other sites, the Chases believe this was the site for rituals in which the leader literally shed blood, probably by piercing her tongue. The purpose was partly mystical, to conjure up visions of the gods who were the source of her power, and partly symbolic, an offering made for the people. One secluded room in the dwelling — the only one left intact when the rest of the house was filled with dirt after her burial — was probably the chamber where she performed the ritual.

Although Maya art depicts women in positions of leadership, they are often pictured next to an important man or buried beside one. At Santa Rita, there is no man in evidence. The Chases believe that during her reign, the woman was in charge.

Archeologist George Stuart of the National Geographic Society says this tomb is an important find. "It's rather rare to find Maya burials; you don't get very good preservation down there," he remarks. "Usually it's hard to tell it's a female — the skeleton is too badly decomposed." In this case, enough of the bone structure survives to confirm that the person in the tomb was a woman.

—Lois Wingerson

COMPUTERS

A Program For The New Year

By Lou Dolinar

COMPUTERS, when abused, can be dangerous to the sanity of you, your loved ones and your friends. Forthwith, a list of New Year's resolutions for the computer user.

For home computer users:

I will endeavor to speak English at all times. There are enough words unique to computers that must be used; do not clutter up your speech with useless technobabble, as in, "I booted the program and interfaced with my time-sharing service." Say instead: "I called up a big computer by phone." Interface, used as a verb, is particularly insidious and tends to infiltrate everyday language, as in, "I interfaced with the boss today and got a raise." It is acceptable only in situations when it is used to conceal meaning, as in saying to one's spouse, "I'm ready to crash. Let's go upstairs and interface."

I will save to disc frequently, back up my data and write-protect my programs. (See how easily resolutions are broken?) Those who bought their computers in 1983 know what failure to do this means, having lost the first draft of at least one novel or their company's 5-year master plan. Those who bought computers this past Christmas will find out shortly.

I will not trust any mathematical model I design with a spreadsheet; because my computer is no smarter than I am. The Commodore 64 set can probably relax here, because their computers don't have enough memory to make truly hideous mistakes. For the IBMers and Clonoids, however, the possibility of serious error rises exponentially with the increase in memory. In other words, a 256K mathematical model is 12 times as likely to contain a major error as a 64K model . . . or is it 256 times?

For corporate computer users:

I will buy at least one product that is not sold by IBM. Anything will do. Just one Macintosh for your secretary. A monitor. A memory expansion board. A cable. Really, how can an IBM cable be any different than a non-IBM cable? Do it or by next year, the purchasing department will be ordering IBM-screen-washing fluid at \$12 a pint, instead of supermarket window-cleaner.

I will not buy a local area network, Unix, or an 8087 co-processor until I know what they are.

Whatever status may accrue, I will not wear the key to my new IBM-AT on a gold chain around my neck.

I will refrain from making invidious comparisons between the size of my memory and that of my co-workers'.

For software house executives:

I will make programs that are easy to use, and write manuals that anyone can understand. Our idea of a good manual is one that contains the name and home phone number of the person who wrote it, so that the author can be reached 24 hours a day to discuss bugs. Any takers? Better yet, any legislation?

I will not make undocumented ROM calls. This ban on nonstandard programing techniques is for commercial programmers only; most computer users suffer only the effects: When they buy their new, \$600 copy of Kit-chenCinque integrated software, they find it does not run on a supposedly compatible Katakana-PC. If at all possible, in the interest of promoting computer literacy, we may provide the victims with the names and phone numbers of the offenders.

Bits and Bytes

Eek! Another mouse. The critters have been scurrying atop desks for about a year, but now comes a company that puts one on the floor, where mice belong. Versatronic Corp. of Healdsburg, Calif., says the foot-operated-gadget takes the place of standard cursor controls, and is plugged between the keyboard and computer. So far, it's available for the IBM-PC for \$225 retail. . . . For the hard-core hacker, some interesting technical data on the IBM-AT and the AT&T PC is currently lurking on the New York Amateur Computer Club's bulletin board (718) 539-3338. ■