

12 **ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AND CONSERVATION AT SANTA RITA COROZAL: RESULTS OF THE 2012-2013 BELIZE INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT**

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In 2012-2013, with funding from the United States Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, the Belize Institute of Archaeology conducted a major program of excavation and conservation of the site core at Santa Rita Corozal. In addition to confirming an early sequence of architectural modifications on Structure 7, our investigations discovered two burials and one cache in association with the building. In this paper we describe the results of our conservation efforts and provide detailed information on the significance of the burials and grave goods recovered in Structure 7 during the 2012-2013 work. We also contextualize these findings in terms of the excavation of Structure 7 undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project from 1979-1985, and we highlight the significance of Santa Rita Corozal within the early history of Belize.

Introduction

Beneath the modern suburbs of Corozal Town, in Belize's northernmost district, lies one of the most historically significant archaeological sites in Belize. Known as Santa Rita Corozal, this relatively unpretentious site represents the location where Spanish Europeans first made contact with native Maya people in what is now modern Belize (Figure 1). Unfortunately, time has not been kind to the once thriving prehistoric and contact period community and by 2012 most of the site had been largely destroyed by the combined forces of nature and modern urban development. Indeed, of the previously extensive and important 16th century community, only a few structures remained somewhat preserved. Alarmed by this rapid and continued destruction of the site, Mrs. Rosita Mai, a leading member of Corozal's Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA), petitioned the Institute of Archaeology in 2011 to intervene and assist the Corozal community with the protection and preservation of the remaining buildings in the site's epicenter. This concern over protecting Santa Rita from further destruction led Awe and other members of the Institute of Archaeology to apply for a conservation grant from the United States Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The primary focus of the project was to conduct conservation intervention for the epicentral mounded structures located within the 3.7-acre archaeological reserve, with particular emphasis on Structure 7, the largest building in the site core. Below, we provide a brief review of previous archaeological investigations at Santa

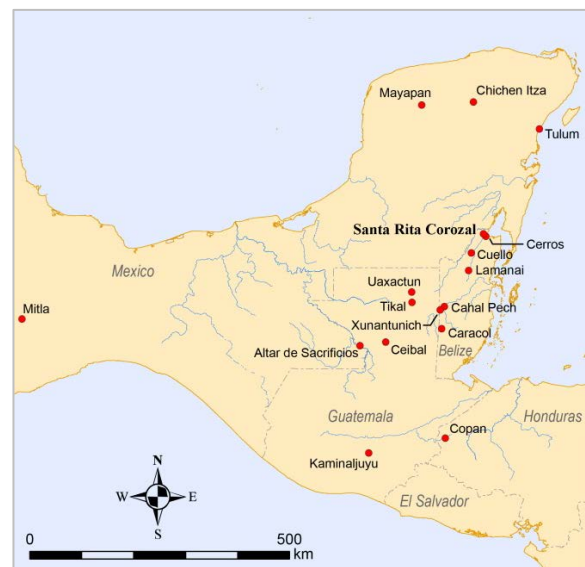


Figure 1. Map of the Maya area with sites mentioned in text (map by Claire Ebert).

Rita Corozal and we describe the results of our 2012-2013 excavation and conservation efforts.

Previous Archaeological Investigations at Santa Rita Corozal

Because Diane Chase's (1982:30-133) Ph.D. dissertation provides a detailed description of previous investigations at Santa Rita Corozal, we present here just a brief synthesis of previous research at the site. Her dissertation and other published reports inform us that the earliest excavations at Santa Rita were those conducted at the turn of the 19th century by Thomas Gann (1900, 1918), a British medical doctor, adventurer, and amateur archaeologist. During his time at Santa Rita Corozal, Gann dug into



Figure 2. The Santa Rita Corozal mural discovered by Thomas Gann in the early 1900s (after D. Chase 1981:25).

about 30 mounds, including Structures 1 and 7 (D. Chase 1982:30-74). One of Gann's most spectacular discoveries was an elaborate mural painted on the exterior walls of Structure 1. The mural (Figure 2), whose stylistic execution reflects Mixtec influences from Oaxaca (Miller 1982), as well as the "manuscript traditions of central Mexico" (Miller and O'Neil 2014:231), provides compelling evidence of Santa Rita Corozal's far-reaching cultural and commercial ties. Unfortunately, nothing of this beautiful mural remains today because it was destroyed by superstitious members of the Colonial period community shortly after its discovery. The only record that actually remains of the Santa Rita Corozal murals are drawings that were made by Gann in the 1900s. In Structure 7, which lies to the southwest of Structure 1, Gann uncovered a cache and a burial. Both of these features were located below the summit of the large mound, and likely dated to the Late Classic period. Gann did not dig deeper into Structure 7 because of the dense nature of the structure's core fill (Chase and Chase 1986). He also concluded that, in spite of the earlier finds within Structure 7, Santa Rita Corozal was a very important center during the Late Postclassic period.

Some 70 years following Gann's seminal investigations at Santa Rita, Ernestine Green (1973) visited the site and surface collected ceramics and other cultural remains within the site core (Chase 1986:74). Green also conducted limited survey of the center in an effort to determine "the location of settlements in relation to environmental factors" (Chase 1986:74). Green (1973) published brief comments in an article on northern Belize but did not follow up with additional information on the results of her work at the site.

Almost on the heels of Green's limited research at Santa Rita Corozal, Norman Hammond and his British Museum – Cambridge University Corozal Project conducted a partial survey of the site and conducted several test excavations on and around Structure 7 (Hammond 1973). The latter investigations were supervised by Duncan Pring (1973:62-67) who noted the presence of ceramics from the Preclassic, Early Classic and Postclassic periods.

A year after Hammond's Corozal Project, Raymond Sidrys from the University of California Los Angeles, returned to Santa Rita Corozal. Sidrys' 1974 Corozal Survey Project sought "to define specific economic trends that

existed among the ancient Maya inhabitants of the East Yucatan Coast from the Late Preclassic to the Postclassic Periods (300 B.C. – A.D. 1450)” (Sidrys 1976:276). In the course of his investigations, Sidrys conducted additional survey of the site, excavated in several mounds, and relocated and excavated what was left of Structure 1 (where Gann had found the painted murals in the 1900s). Sidrys (1976) later published the results of these investigations and included them in his 1974 Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA.

The first systematic excavations of Santa Rita Corozal were conducted between 1979 and 1985 by Diane and Arlen Chase under the auspices of the Corozal Postclassic Project. Besides producing a new and more accurate map of the site (Chase and Chase 1988), the Corozal Postclassic Project also excavated a comprehensive sample of the structures at the site. Results of these investigations served to establish that Santa Rita Corozal had a long history of occupation that began at the end of the Early Formative period (A.S.Z. Chase 2018; D. Chase 1981:26, 1990; Chase and Chase 2006). Following the Terminal Preclassic decline of Cerros across Corozal Bay (Walker 2016), Santa Rita Corozal rose to regional prominence and the site expanded considerably during the ensuing Early Classic period (Chase and Chase 2005). Santa Rita’s affluence continued unabated into the early historic period (Chase 1982, 1990, 1991; Chase and Chase 1986, 1988, 2004) when the site became the scene of several confrontations between the Maya and Spanish invaders.

The investigations conducted by Diane and Arlen Chase (1988) further indicated that modern Santa Rita Corozal was actually situated on the original location of the Pre-Columbian Maya city of Chetumal. The site was particularly prominent during the Postclassic Period, at which time most of its structures were occupied (Chase 1990; Chase and Chase 1988) and its populace engaged in temporally-based rituals that were expressed in the purposeful deposition of elaborate caches and censersware (Chase and Chase 2008a, 2021). This location on Corozal Bay placed Santa Rita Corozal along an important trade route that ran along the length of the Caribbean coast (Chase and Chase 1989).

Proximity to the mouths of the Rio Hondo and New River also allowed access to inland Maya centers such as Lamanai, and to other cities within the Peten Province of Guatemala. Santa Rita was particularly known for its production of high-quality cacao, which, along with marine products, anato, honey and vanilla, was exported to its neighbors in northwestern Belize, the Peten and Northern Yucatan (Chase 1986; Chase and Chase 1989).

Previous Investigations on Structure 7

As indicated above, Structure 7 was first excavated by Thomas Gann (1900, 1918) at the turn of the 19th century. Within the last construction phase of the mound (Structure 7-1st), which Chase and Chase (1986) suggest likely dated to the Late Classic period, Gann discovered a burial at the summit of the building. Further excavation into Structure 7-2nd also yielded a cache containing lip-to-lip ceramic vessels. In spite of these discoveries, Gann decided to discontinue excavations at the summit of the mound because of the difficulty in penetrating the dense core fill of the structure (Chase and Chase 1986).

In 1979, Diane and Arlen Chase conducted the second major phase of investigations in Structure A7. Their axial and horizontal excavations at the summit of the mound revealed that a “combination of Gann’s excavations and Belizean road building crews” had destroyed much of what remained of the final phase (Structure 7-1st) of architecture at the summit of A7, as well as large sections of Structure A7-2nd (Chase and Chase 2005:112). Fortunately, none of the latter activities had impacted Structure A7-3rd leaving this phase of architecture in a very good state of preservation. This allowed them to excavate and clear the roof-comb of 3rd, as well as to the discovery of “an Early Classic cist burial (S.D. P2B-1) that was associated with -2nd” (Chase and Chase 2005:112).

The Chases renewed their investigations of Structure 7, exposing sections of Structure 7-2nd and -3rd, during the 1984 and 1985 field seasons of the Corozal Postclassic Project. In the core of 2nd, they found an Early Classic cist with the remains of a poorly preserved adult individual, possibly female, with numerous grave goods. They subsequently excavated and conserved

several interconnected passageways and rooms at the summit of Structure 7-3rd. On the floor of the central room, they found a large quantity of smashed pottery and evidence for burning (Chase and Chase 1986:11). They also found a cache in a niche of the central room that contained five ceramic vessels (Chase and Chase 1998:300, fig.1).

Subsequent excavations below the floor of Structure 7-3rd uncovered two tombs. The first tomb, which had an east-west orientation, contained the remains of an elderly female accompanied by “impressive mosaic earflares”, five ceramic vessels, and a carved spondylus shell (Chase and Chase 1986:11). The second, and considerably larger and more affluent burial, also dated to the Early Classic period (ca. 480-500 A.D.). The vaulted chamber of the tomb had a north-south orientation and contained the remains of an adult male (Chase 1992:34-36) who was interred with a large ceremonial flint bar (Chase and Chase 2005:114, Fig. 7b; Stemp et al. 2014: Fig. 3), a stingray spine, a jadeite mask, a stone vessel with an image of god N, plus several other exquisite objects and ceramic vessels (Chase and Chase 2005:112-114, Figs. 6, 7a, 7b). Many of the artifacts found in the Early Classic burials at Santa Rita include exotic objects that reflect influences that derive from the central Peten of Guatemala, from southern Quintana Roo, Mexico, and from Teotihuacan in central Mexico. Besides demonstrating the growing affluence of the site’s elite rulers, they also attest to the commercial character and significance of the site during the Early Classic period.

The 2012-2013 Institute of Archaeology (IOA) Excavations on Structure 7

The primary objectives of the IOA’s 2012 - 2013 Santa Rita Corozal Project were to excavate and conserve the southern façade of Structure 7, to expose and conserve the base of two large platforms to the southwest of Structure 7, and to landscape the courtyard bordered by these buildings. These conservation goals were urgently needed because the summit of Structure 7 was rapidly deteriorating following heavy rains after two recent hurricanes, and because the Corozal BTIA was interested in using the site for cultural activities. Other important goals of the

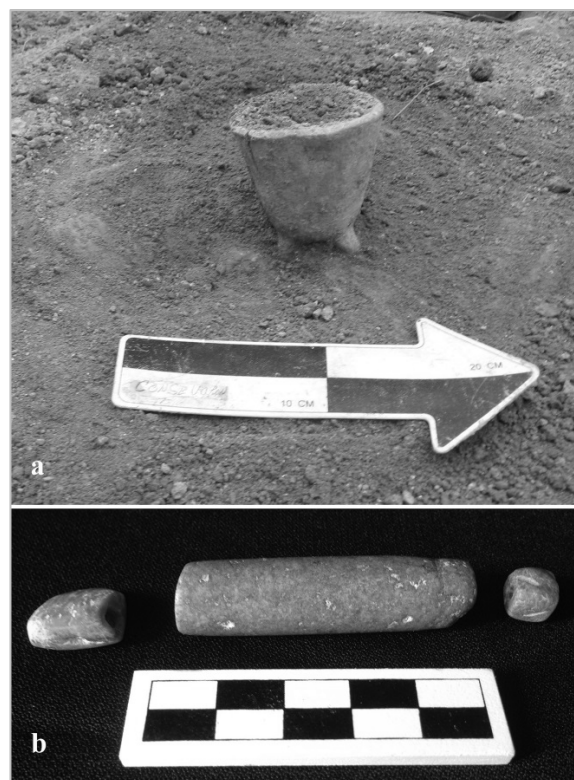


Figure 3a-b. Tripod vessel, tubular bead, and spondylus beads at base of Structure 7.



Figure 4. Censer fragments overlaying pit at base of Structure 7.

project were to construct a perimeter fence around the archaeological reserve in an effort to stop further vandalism and to convert the site core into an archaeological park that encouraged visitation and use by local and foreign visitors. From a national and historical perspective, we also recognized the fact that Santa Rita Corozal represented one of the few surviving monuments that marked the location where Spanish

Europeans attempted to dominate a local Maya community and failed. Conservation of the site would therefore contribute significantly towards the development of local and national identity, as well as benefit the teaching of Belizean history to local schools.

The IOA investigations on Structure 7 first concentrated on the southern base of the mound. This area was covered with several meters of collapsed architecture, as well as with backdirt from previous excavations. Below the collapsed architecture and backdirt, approximately 1.3 m south of the bottommost step of Structure 7-1st, numerous boulders were located that covered a large concentration of potsherds and a small Santa Unslipped tripod vase in association with a tubular jadeite bead and two spondylus beads (Figure 3). Most of these cultural remains were concentrated along the central axis of Structure 7; the ceramics consisted predominantly of large fragments of Kol Modeled incensarios (see D. Chase 1984). When the censer fragments were removed, it became clear that they had been placed over a deep, oval-shaped pit (Figure 4) that had been cut through several plaza floors and then filled with dirt. The pit measured approximately 1.0 m east - west by 1.4 m north-south and had been dug down approximately 1.3 m to bedrock. Just above the levelled bedrock a burial was encountered that was designated as Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 1 (Figure 5). The intrusive burial contained the disarticulated remains of a young adult, but the poor preservation of the pelvis and skull precluded identification of the individual's sex. Despite the poor preservation, however, the distribution of the human remains indicated that the individual may have been originally placed in a seated position in the pit. Accompanying the human remains were two ceramic vessels, one copper bell, and one jadeite bead (Figure 6). The ceramic vessels included a red-slipped dish and a red-slipped effigy vessel in the form of a pelican (Figure 7). Both vessels belonged to the Late Postclassic Rita Red ceramic group (see D. Chase 1984).

As excavation progressed towards the midsection of the large mound it became apparent that the stairway of Structure 7-1st was only preserved along the basal section of the mound. Given this situation, we decided to



Figure 5. Photo of Late Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 1.



Figure 6. Collage of artifacts found with Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 1.



Figure 7. Perspective views of the ceramic vessels from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 1.

excavate below the level of 1st to see if the earlier stairways of 2nd and 3rd could be located. After

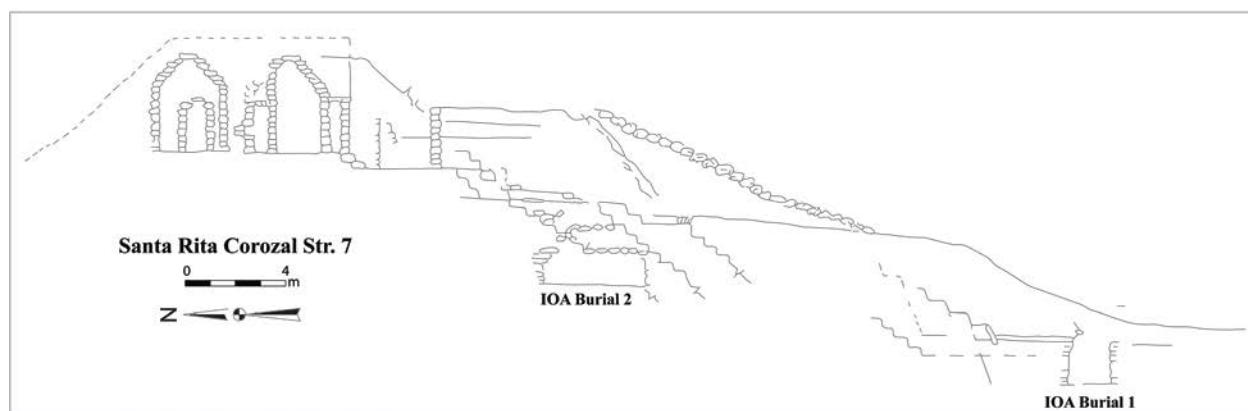


Figure 8. Schematic section of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 (drawing by Merle Alfaro, Jorge Can, and Claire Ebert).

finding the Structure 7-2nd stairway, which was in a better state of preservation than that of 1st, the excavation descended just over another meter where the stairway of 3rd was found (Figure 8). This stairway was intersected by a low wall which was discovered to be part of a stair block that was located about two thirds of the way up from plaza level to the summit of Structure 7-3rd. The floor at the top of the stair block was well-preserved except for the midsection where we noticed a depression in alignment with the central axis of the structure. Because offerings and burials are often discovered in stair blocks of non-domestic architecture (e.g., Awe 2013), the area marked by a depression was penetrated with a deeper excavation. Just over a meter below the floor of the stair block, several large capstones were encountered; a couple of these were broken. The capstones had been placed over a fairly large tomb with a north-south orientation (Figure 9).

This tomb was designated as Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2. On its floor were the remains of an adult male individual in an extended, prone, position with head to the north (Figure 10). About 60 cm north of the cranial fragments of this individual, the remains of a second, young-adult individual in a fetal position was located (Figure 11). Above the chest of Individual 2 was a pair of lip-to-lip vessels with drill holes, indicating that they had likely been tied together (Figure 12). The two unslipped ceramic dishes were similar to two pairs of lip-to-lip vessels with drill holes that Gann (1919:67-70) had previously discovered in

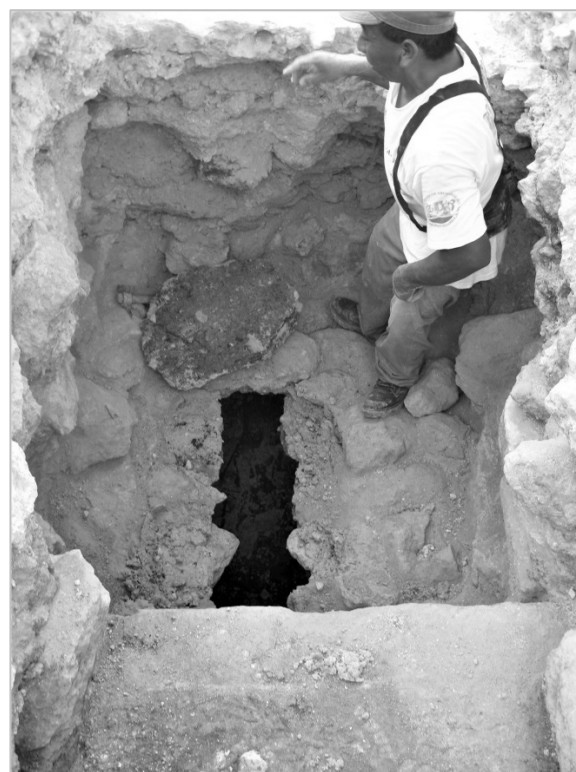


Figure 9. Photo showing capstones over Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.

a small chamber below the summit of Structure 7 (see also Chase 1982:42).

Most of the grave goods in the tomb were associated with Individual 1 (Figure 13). Over the chest area of Individual 1 two necklaces were recovered. The first necklace contained several hundred spondylus and conch shell beads. The second necklace had more than 40 jadeite beads and a carved, zoomorphic jadeite pendant (Figure

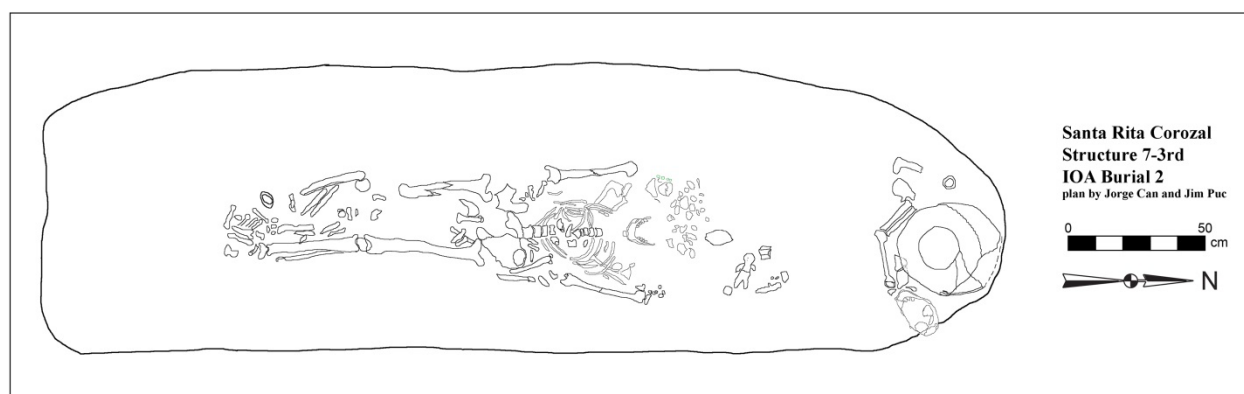


Figure 10. Plan of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2 (plan by Merle Alfaro and Jorge Can).



Figure 11. Photo of Individual 2 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.

14). Just east of the cranial fragments of Individual 1 were a large perforated cowry shell and two anthropomorphic figurines. One of the figurines appears to have been made from alabaster and the other from manatee bone (Figure 15). A cowry shell also accompanied the individual in the 1985 Santa Rita Corozal tomb recovered in Str. 7 (Chase and Chase 1988:33) and similar paired anthropomorphic figurines (albeit carved from antler) accompanied a



Figure 12. Lip-to-lip vessels with drill holes that were placed over Individual 2 in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.

contemporaneous tomb at Caracol (Chase and Chase 2008b:98). On the west side of the cranial elements were several fragments of painted stucco encrusted with small pieces of jadeite, spondylus, and pyrite. It is likely that the latter were part of a small wooden box that had rotted and fallen apart (Figure 16). Near the feet of Individual 1 were two small red-slipped ceramic cups and two fragmented pyrite mirrors with slate backing. The location of the tomb within the stair block of Structure 7-3rd suggests that this fairly affluent tomb dates to the Early Classic period, thus being contemporaneous with the other Early Classic burials that the Corozal Postclassic Project discovered in Structure 7 in the 1980s (Chase and Chase 2005).

After completing the excavations and conservation on Structure 7 (Figures 17 and 18), operations then moved to two interconnected



Figure 13. Collage of artifacts found with Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.



Figure 14. Jadeite necklace from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.

platforms lying to the southwest of Structure 7. Previous investigations by the Corozal Postclassic Project suggested that the two flanking structures may have served as elite residences. Unfortunately, following their investigation in the 1980s, both buildings had

been partly covered with dirt, likely by the local Ministry of Works road crew who had been using that section of the site as a depot for road fill. The 2013 excavations of the two platforms revealed that their basal architecture was still in a relatively good state of preservation. Because of this, the eastern walls of the two buildings were completely exposed and then conserved (Figure 19). The results of this operation served to dramatically enhance the courtyard south of Structure 7 and to prepare the area for public use.

Discussion

Previous research at Santa Rita Corozal documented a marked change in the socio-political structure of the site during the Early Classic period (Chase and Chase 2005). This change is manifested by increasing evidence for status differentiation between individuals occupying the site core in comparison to those in other residential areas; it is particularly evident when one compares the affluence found in the burials of Structure 7 with the relative dearth of



Figure 15a-b. Anthropomorphic figurines (a-alabaster; b-manatee bone) from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA Burial 2.



Figure 16. Fragments of small box from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 IOA BU 2.



Figure 17. Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 prior to conservation in 2013.

cultural remains in coeval burials outside the site core. Earlier excavations also established that, following its Early Classic rise, Santa Rita Corozal continued to flourish, but reached its actual apogee during the Late Postclassic period (Chase 1982, 1990; Chase and Chase 1988; Gann 1918). The 2012-2013 discovery by the IOA of



Figure 18. Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 after conservation in 2013.



Figure 19. Residential platform located southwest of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.

the Early Classic and Late Postclassic burials associated with Structure 7 serves to confirm the importance of both of these time periods. However, despite the site's archaeological significance during these two critical periods of Maya prehistory, for modern Belizeans Santa Rita has been, and will forever be, far more significant for its role in the early history of the country.

Historic Period

While several scholars (Chamberlain 1948; Jones 1984, 1989, 1998, Thompson 1972:5-6) suggested that Santa Rita Corozal was likely the location of the Pre-Hispanic community of Chetumal, the archaeological excavations of the Corozal Postclassic Project documented the recovery of material remains appropriate for a Postclassic capital and identified Santa Rita Corozal as Chetumal (Chase and Chase 1988:65-68). During the Late Postclassic period (1200-1500 A.D.) ancient

Chetumal was part of a federation of Maya principalities known as the League of Mayapan (Jones 1989; Thompson 1972). The federation was ruled by the powerful Cocom family who resided in their capital city of Mayapan, in the Mexican state of Yucatan. After the fall of Mayapan, (circa 1450 AD), Santa Rita Corozal/Chetumal became an independent polity under the rule of a chieftain/warlord known as Nachan Can.

During the early Colonial period, the site's strategic location in Corozal Bay attracted Spanish invaders who were interested in establishing a base there. Historical records note that in 1531, Francisco Montejo, who was attempting to subjugate the Maya of the Yucatan Peninsula, decided to launch an attack to take control of Chetumal (Chamberlain 1948; Jones 1998:26-29). The plan was for Montejo to advance toward Chetumal by sea and for his trusted Lieutenant Alonso Dávila to head overland from Campeche with 50 men and 13 horses to pacify and take control of the principality (Jones 1989:30). Montejo's party was the first to reach Chetumal, but they were attacked and defeated by the Maya, and forced to retreat further down the coast. They were also falsely informed that Dávila and his men had all been killed along the way. When Dávila's party eventually made it to Chetumal, they found that the town had been recently abandoned. The abandonment of Chetumal, however, was part of a well-thought out plan, for the Maya were apparently advised not to attack the Spanish in open battle since they had the advantage of superior arms and mounted horsemen. Finding the community abandoned, Dávila subsequently decided to establish his base there and to rename the town Villa Real. Artifactual materials that likely date to this Spanish occupation were recovered immediately west of Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 (Chase and Chase 1988:37).

According to information that was provided by Dávila's assistant Alonso Lujan to the Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, and from reports by Dávila himself, the Maya *cacique* of ancient Chetumal counted on the assistance of an unusual Spaniard named Gonzalo Guerrero (Chase and Chase 1988:65; Jones 1989:26-28). Guerrero and about 12 other Spaniards had been shipwrecked during a

hurricane in 1511, just south of Jamaica (Thompson 1972:7). It took the survivors about 13 days to reach the coast of Yucatan. Upon making it to shore, five Spaniards were captured and sacrificed by the Maya. The survivors reportedly escaped towards the south. When Hernan Cortes, conqueror of the Aztecs, landed on the coast of Yucatan in 1519, only two of the original Spanish shipwrecked survivors were still alive: Geronimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero (Thompson 1972:7). In need of interpreters, Cortes decided to try and ransom the two men (Awe and Helmke 2019:241; Diaz del Castillo 1956:41; 1962:60). Geronimo de Aguilar willingly rejoined his countrymen, but Guerrero apparently refused Cortes' offer and claimed that he was not free. According to Geronimo de Aguilar, who later became an indispensable translator for Cortes on his way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, Guerrero was ashamed to join Cortes because he had had his nose and ears pierced and his hands and feet tattooed in accordance with Maya custom. He also had a Maya wife and several Mestizo children (Jones 1989:27). Around the time of Dávila's attempt to conquer Chetumal, Guerrero had allegedly risen to become military advisor to Nachan Can, the *cacique* of Chetumal (Jones 1989:27; Scholes and Roys 1948:82; Thompson 1972:7). Today Gonzalo Guerrero is looked upon as "the father of the Mestizos" and as the first European to adopt Belize as his homeland and to fight in its defense.

Having established the outpost of Villa Real on the site of Santa Rita/Chetumal, Dávila sent a decree to Nachan Can demanding that he and his people return and submit to him – as well as to pay tribute to Spain. The records indicate that Nachan Can scornfully replied that he did not desire peace with the Spaniards and that the only tribute he would pay would be "turkeys in the shape of spears and maize in the shape of arrows" (Thompson 1972:6-7). The decision of the Maya to withdraw into the bushes and from there to conduct hit-and-run, guerilla-style warfare against the Spanish eventually proved successful. These guerilla tactics weakened the Spanish forces and as a result they essentially became prisoners in Chetumal. Eighteen months after their attempt to conquer northern Belize, the surviving and beleaguered Spanish departed the

town and fled south (Thompson 1972). Pursued by the Maya, the fleeing Spanish survivors barely managed to reach Omoa, Honduras.

Following the failed attempt to take Chetumal/Santa Rita Corozal, the Spaniards were later able to establish an outpost at Bacalar in the neighboring Mexican state of Quintana Roo. From Bacalar, the Spaniards were partly successful in their attempts to control Maya territories in northern Belize. This effectively cut off the ancient trade routes on which the prosperity of Santa Rita Corozal/Chetumal depended on and later forced the Maya to abandon the area in the latter part of the 1500's.

These interesting events are of particular historical significance to modern Belizeans because they tell us that about 500 years ago a small number of Maya in Santa Rita Corozal faced off against one of the greatest military powers of the time. In spite of overwhelming odds, the Maya of northern Belize fought courageously to defend their liberty. The preservation of Santa Rita Corozal and the development of the site as a historical monument, therefore, allows us to preserve the park in their honor and to contribute significantly to the development and enhancement of Belize's cultural heritage, and its national identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Santa Rita Corozal may not have the large monumental architecture evident at such major archaeological sites as Lamanai, La Milpa, Caracol, or Xunantunich, this site was equally important. What makes Santa Rita Corozal particularly significant are its long history of occupation and the historical events that unfolded there nearly five centuries ago at the time of Spanish contact. The decision of the early Santa Rita Corozal Maya to fight Spanish encroachment was to have far greater repercussions than the site's inhabitants could ever have imagined. Indeed, their decision to face the Spanish – and to defend their homeland against overwhelming odds – helped to fuel further uprisings against the Spanish. It was also because of their resolution to fight for their freedom that the land which eventually became known as Belize was never colonized by Spain; it is also why Belize eventually became the only English-speaking country on the Central

American mainland. For all these reasons, it is critically important that we continue to protect and conserve the small, but historically very meaningful, archaeological site that we have come to call Santa Rita Corozal.

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