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The Maya Postclassic at Santa Rita Corozal

by DIANE Z. CHASE

Every viewer of archaeological “docu-dramas” knows the story: sometime in A.D. 900 the flourishing Maya mysteriously disappeared and the once great civilization was no more. The obvious question is “what happened to them?” Archaeologists have sought to answer that by looking at internal conflicts, environmental issues and social upheavals. The period which could tell the most about the collapse of the Classic Maya, if it could even be called that, is the time following A.D. 900 up until the historic Spanish incursions and the conquest of Mesoamerica in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But remarkably this Postclassic period has not yet been fully understood or investigated. Until recently archaeologists tended to characterize the Postclassic, especially its latest part, as an age of decadence, decline and depopulation. The “three D’s” loomed large in the literature published by the Carnegie Institution based on their pioneering excavation at the site of Mayapan

during the 1950’s. Recent work on the Yucatan peninsula has stressed active mercantilism, trade and cost control, but the “3-D” framework has not yet been fully buried. For the past two years, the Corozal Postclassic Project has attempted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this period, specifically for northern Belize. The site selected for initial research was Santa Rita Corozal.

Santa Rita Corozal had been excavated at the turn of the century by Thomas Gann, a British medical doctor stationed in nearby Corozal Town. Even at this early date, many of the structures at the site had been destroyed and Maya stone had been reused to build houses and water tanks. Gann investigated just under 30 mounds, each containing the remains of Maya structures. His excavation techniques, however, usually consisted of large pit-like trenches which frequently destroyed as much information as they recovered. Postclassic habitation surfaced in 12 of Gann’s investigations; 7 of



Illustration made by Thomas Gann, the original excavator of Santa Rita in the early 1900's, represents the Postclassic murals for which Santa Rita was famous. These colorful polychrome murals have been destroyed.



Field Director Arlen Chase excavates one of the earliest burials uncovered in the Maya area. Visible in the foreground is a redware dish and a multitude of shell beads which comprised a large necklace and two bracelets.



This low-lying platform at Santa Rita was associated with a round composite altar and represents typical Maya Postclassic architecture.

them yielded Postclassic caches. Gann discovered an impressive amount of modeled Postclassic ceramic sculpture in the Santa Rita caches, but unfortunately he failed to tie this material to the rest of the archaeological record. For more than 70 years, Gann's various finds were left floating in prehistory until attempts were made by several archaeologists in the early 1970's to carry out additional excavations and weave them into the fabric of Maya culture. By then Santa Rita was badly destroyed and little of what Gann saw was paralleled with the exception of a portion of one lone jaguar figure. Although Santa Rita was definitely an important Postclassic site, its interconnections to other lowland Maya sites were merely hypothetical and based on artistic similarities.

Two years of excavation at Santa Rita have reaffirmed the significance and unique nature of the site—particularly during the Late Postclassic period (post A.D. 1350). So far investigations point out problems with present models of the Postclassic period. Based on present theoretical underpinnings, Maya archaeologists have tended to stress uniformity at the expense of variety, specifically in their focus on mercantilism and mass production of material goods. The picture which emerges from Santa Rita, an area believed by many to be a port of trade, is profoundly different. Looking at the artifacts and architecture, one cannot but be impressed by the difference between such sites as



The bearded man and jaguar figure (cover) were found inside this in situ cache at Santa Rita. The cache consisted of two lip-to-lip plainware vessels which held the modeled polychrome figure; the entire package was mortared into a pot and was probably subsequently covered by a new flooring.

Santa Rita, Tulum-Tancah, Cozumel Island's various sites, and Mayapan. Even allowing for the uniqueness of each and every site, the extant variability and spatial differences are striking. Each of these lowland Maya Postclassic sites is clearly a distinctive center responding to different patterns of development during their histories. In the most general sense, these centers share a common cultural base, reflective of the "international style of the Postclassic," yet they are neither uniform nor decadent nor "a pale reflection of earlier glories."

It was J. Eric Thompson, perhaps the most famous British archaeologist to work in the Maya area, who first suggested that the site of Santa Rita fit the documentary descriptions of Chetumal, one of the regional capitals of the Maya during the early 1500's. When visited by Francisco de Montejo, who was authorized to explore, conquer and colonize the Yucatan Peninsula by Charles V of Spain and the Council of the Indies in 1527, Chetumal was a town of 2,000 houses. Although not rich in gold as the Spanish had hoped, the area produced much cacao, honey and maize and was in an easily defensible location within the harbor. Montejo was so impressed with Chetumal that he decided to establish a town at that spot in the near future. In 1531 he sent his second in command, Alonso Dávila with about 50 soldiers to the east and south from Campeche to explore,



An archaeologist holds the unique Postclassic figure after it was removed from the cache (above) at Santa Rita.



Although the Postclassic period is important at Santa Rita, earlier remains abound. This trench excavation uncovered 4 constructions and 22 burials ranging from the Early Preclassic in the second millennium B.C. to the Middle Classic period (ca. A.D. 600).

search for gold and set up a town at some suitable location along the coast. When he finally neared Chetumal, Dávila sent a message requesting alliance with the cacique or chief there. But the townspeople preferred war and responded that if the Spaniards were to proceed they would be greeted with tribute of "fowls in the form of their lances and maize in the form of their arrows." Upon reaching Chetumal three weeks later, the Spaniards found the town newly abandoned. Its occupants had left to better prepare for their future defense, aided by Gonzalo Guerrero, a Spaniard who had been shipwrecked off the coast of Yucatan some years earlier. Even though abandoned, Dávila was pleased with Chetumal and its location and established the town of Villa Real there. It was kept as a base of operation for approximately 18 months until the Spanish, suffering tremendous losses in local skirmishes, de-



Many burials were encountered at Santa Rita including this Postclassic female grave in the typical flexed position. She wears two copper rings; the one visible on her finger is decorated with interlocking scrolls.



This unusual censer was found in a very late Postclassic deposit and seems to be unique to Santa Rita. Height, 30 centimeters.

cided to retreat to the south to Honduras by sea. By 1618 when Friars Bartólome de Fuensalida and Juan de Orbita passed by Chetumal on their way to the Itza capital of Tayasal in Guatemala, the ill-fated Spanish town had already faded into the realm of memory.

Investigation into the lowland Maya Postclassic period is still in its inception. Perhaps the most intensively studied geographical region has been the Yucatan Peninsula. The site of Mayapan provided a base for later research. More recently, a



The Postclassic period occupation sites in the Maya area indicates that the Maya continued to exist after the "collapse" in A.D. 900.

program of excavation was undertaken at Cozumel Island by Jeremy Sabloff of the University of New Mexico and William Rathje of the University of Arizona to investigate what has been interpreted as a Maya port of trade based on ethnohistoric records. The architecture of Cozumel has been well documented by David Freidel of Southern Methodist University. On mainland Yucatan, Arthur Miller of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania has undertaken an exhaustive survey of Postclassic mural art of Tancah and Tulum. Joseph Ball of San Diego State University has been instrumental in redefining Yucatan's Early Postclassic (A.D. 900-1200), especially in the Puuc area, by illustrating the complex ceramic picture of the northern Yucatan. In Guatemala, work at Topoxte and Macanche by William Bullardt, Prudence Rice of the University of Florida and Donald Rice of the University of Chicago, and at Tayasal and Flores by Arlen Chase of the University of Pennsylvania, and earlier by George Cowgill of Brandeis University, has served to add to the complex picture of the Postclassic period in the central Peten. In Belize, work by ceramicist James Gifford first recognized the existence of a Postclassic southern lowland tradition at Barton Ramie barely 20 years ago. More recent work by David Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum at both Altun Ha and especially Lamanai has yielded much Postclassic material.

Taken together, all of this work serves to illustrate the multitude of sites that relate to the Maya Postclassic. They underscore the general difference between solid stone-walled and roofed Classic buildings and the low platforms and impermanent architecture of Postclassic times. Settlement patterns also differ greatly between the Classic and Postclassic—a greater emphasis on defensible positions is found in the later period as well as the tendency to settle near bodies of water. In the ceramics, monochrome redwares replace the Classic polychromes. The exact relationship between the Classic and Postclassic Maya periods, however, is still not defined and the question still remains whether or not there is a continuity of people and tradition.

Perhaps more than any other lowland Maya site, Santa Rita—badly destroyed by excavation and modernization—holds the key to a number of yet unanswered questions about the Postclassic period. Investigations in 1979 and 1980 included an on-going mapping and survey program which assessed damage and added to both the number of recorded structures and extent of the site, much larger than indicated on any of the previous maps. In fact, Santa Rita extended both north and west of Corozal Town, primarily along a natural ridge, although occupation also included land now submerged in Corozal Bay. By 1979 many of the structures investigated by Thomas Gann no longer existed, including his well-known Mound 1—and all were disturbed. Gann's most remembered excavation, Mound 1 produced a buried structure whose outer walls were painted with "Mixteca-Puebla" style murals paradoxically containing Maya glyphs. Whether these murals were simply representative of the international style of the Postclassic or represented foreign peoples at the site remains unknown, although archaeological evidence favors the former interpretation. What remained of Mound 1 and indeed a large portion of the site was bulldozed in 1975. Fortunately other portions of the site remain barely touched by modernization. One such area exists in the extreme northeast sector of the site and has been extensively worked on in the last two years.

Excavations within this sector of Santa Rita and elsewhere suggest that a variety of Postclassic constructions remain at the site. Most common are the small rectangular platforms composed of lines of stone which demarcate the structural base for a building. Stone coursing is rare but does occur in some of the more substantial constructions. Excavation revealed that these platforms rose only 20 to 40 centimeters above the accompanying floors. Sometimes the rear wall of the platform or structure is demarcated by two parallel lines of stone about 30 centimeters apart, which served as a secure base wall for the accompanying perishable building with its plastered and painted walls. The surface of these low platforms was once covered with a heavy coating of plaster. Secure evidence for postholes through plaster surfaces has not been recovered. Posts most likely rested on the floor



This head of a Postclassic Maya god with a frog in his headdress is typical for this time. Height, 14 centimeters.

rather than intruding through a floor with the exception of the double-lines of stone which served to bracket them. The rectangular "lines of stone" platforms form a basic architectural unit and are found in combination with others to form plaza groups; they also occur on large raised platforms either alone or grouped together. These larger platforms are quite massive and suggest more than a fleeting labor investment. The builders advantageously utilized natural contours and high bedrock in these expansive constructions.

Excavations at Santa Rita have not yet uncovered Postclassic architectural types more along the lines of the substantially taller structures found by Gann. Most of these, like Mound 1, have long been destroyed. Excavations did, however, uncover a third type of Santa Rita architecture—low-lying elaborations of the double-line of stone architec-

tural unit—which seems to be a variant of the colonnaded hall structures found at Mayapan. Colonnaded halls were singled out by Tatiana Proskouriakoff of Harvard University as comprising a part of two standard building assemblages at Mayapan—the "temple assemblage" and the "basic ceremonial group." These structures are usually long, independent buildings roofed with perishable materials. At Mayapan their function was either men's houses for training Maya youth in ritual and war or as residences for Maya lords. The Santa Rita low-lying structures no doubt served some sort of ritualistic function. One last type of architectural unit found at Santa Rita was the rounded stone altars associated with Postclassic construction discovered in the northeastern sector of the site.

All of the structures and platforms at Santa Rita obviously served a wide variety of functions. Some



This cache consists of two vessels, one inside the other, and aptly illustrates the innovative Postclassic style. Height, 18 centimeters.

were apparently domestic structures while others were used specifically for storage and food preparation. Still others functioned as shrines or had shrines within them. The known presence of stone turtles in three geographically peripheral locations points to the possibility that there may have been boundary shrines at certain limits. At Mayapan an association was demonstrated between carved stone turtles and shrines; work on the east coast of Yucatan has further suggested that some outlying shrines may serve an additional function of marking boundaries. Modern ethnographic studies demonstrate the practice of denoting village boundaries. The distribution of the shrine/turtle combination at Postclassic Santa Rita reveals that a similar practice may have existed for the site. Within these hypothesized boundaries, the community of Santa Rita built other structures with combined

administrative, domestic and ceremonial functions. Life at Santa Rita during Postclassic times evidently involved a range of activities—signs of a vibrant community during a supposedly desolate chapter in Maya history.

Perhaps Santa Rita's most unusual footnote to Postclassic times is the caches of innovative modeled and painted clay figures found throughout the site. Discovered only in caches and never alone, these figure vessels and their associated paraphernalia must have been made especially to be deposited by the Postclassic Maya. Although whole cache figurines have been noted for Mayapan, this caching practice contrasts greatly with the Postclassic caches of used and broken objects found at Cozumel. Four caches were located by our project at



Copper ring found with the Postclassic burial of a woman at Santa Rita. Such rings were uncommon even in Postclassic times. Diameter, two centimeters.

Santa Rita while seven had been encountered by Gann in his excavations. These caches were found in similar locations as in Classic times suggesting at least some continuity in religious beliefs. A plainware vessel and lid often accompanied the clay figures. The variation of figure type and number, and type of vessel may simply reflect slight temporal changes within the Postclassic period or may suggest cultural factors existing at Santa Rita during the same time. The modeled and molded cache figures themselves have individually modeled appliqué features and are elaborately painted, although this paint is not always preserved. Cache vessels, usually incorporating the characteristics of a human being and one or more animals, were frequently filled with smaller objects such as jade, spondylus beads, turquoise, metal, and copal incense.

A total of 20 Postclassic burials were encountered at Santa Rita among the 61 burials recovered in the last two years. Burials usually contained one or more individuals; single individuals were on occasion also buried with additional "spare parts." Burials are generally flexed and articulated and were placed in pits dug into earlier constructions; some were buried in an extended position on their backs. Pits were either simple or lined with stone. Interestingly, graves were found in many of the same locations as would be expected for earlier times and were sometimes provided with burial goods, although most individuals were interred without non-perishable objects. One Postclassic burial contained a *tinaja* or water jar with a traditional "kill-hole" in the base; "killed" vessels are common in Classic burials. Thus far, however, no Postclassic burial includes an inverted vessel placed over the head of the individual which was the predominant pattern for the Classic burials at Santa Rita. Objects found in Postclassic burials include ceramic objects—purposefully smashed pottery, an incised ceramic bead, copper rings and a copper bell, and spondylus or jade beads.

The view of Santa Rita Corozal garnered so far through archaeological work is one of a thriving Postclassic cultural center with long distance trade

connections and well-defined ceremonial practices. The large organized site is in many respects unique in both plan and artifacts, but is clearly part of a wider tradition in Mesoamerica. This variability in material remains during the Postclassic period at Santa Rita cannot be overemphasized. There is little duplication of ceramic vessels save in the most general forms. Even the settlement pattern is seemingly at odds with most other Postclassic sites in both the general almost regular layout of the structures as well as the extensive use of simple "lines of stone." The plan of the site is also not the regularized street layout seen at Tulum to the north, and building groupings differ from Mayapan and Cozumel. Evidently each Postclassic site was the unique result of differing selective patterns.

Although warfare may have been important in Postclassic politics, it is difficult to reconcile what has been found at Santa Rita with the traditional view of Postclassic Maya art as being indicative of "the credulous, inartistic and militant character of this age." Postclassic art in fact underscores both the attention being paid to detail, variability and the shifting of media. While variation in Classic ceramics consists primarily of elaborate painting upon vessels of similar form, creativity in Postclassic Santa Rita is evident in variation of form, use of modeling and, in the case of incensarios and cache vessels, use of elaborate post-fire pigment which frequently washes away with time.

The material remains of trade are clearly present at Santa Rita in non-local objects, which would have made life both more pleasant and perhaps even enviable—obsidian, both gray and green, manos and metates, jade, spondylus shell, turquoise, copper, and other metals. Perishable objects such as cacao, honey, salt, textiles, and feathers were also important trade commodities according to the documentary sources. While there was definitely a concern for foreign trade at Santa Rita, there is no evidence to suggest that there were merchant rulers as has been suggested for Cozumel. It is instead possible to explain the development of Santa Rita simply through its role as a regional capital. Perhaps the nature of this role and the pressures which formed it could best be investigated by looking at what are usually thought of as peripheral Maya settlements. Nearby Ambergris Cay, for example, located at the outermost limits of Chetumal harbor and known for trade objects not present at Santa Rita, may provide a more complete picture of trade within the Maya province called Chetumal. Santa Rita was no doubt the major consumer in the region but foreign interaction most likely took place on the fringes of its realm. As for cost-control, this view stresses the impermanence of Postclassic buildings and the reuse of objects in caches—what had formerly been considered an aspect of decadence might actually reflect more skillful management of human and material resources. But certain aspects of Santa Rita culture are still puzzling, such as the presence of specialized cache vessels,



A rectangular Postclassic Maya house platform with the double-line back wall which served as a foundation for the perishable structure wall.

which does not comply with such a model.

Clearly there is no one answer in reconstructing Santa Rita's Postclassic times and its evolution from the more familiar Classic period. The archaeological remains at Santa Rita have shown that the site was an active participant in the wider Mesoamerican Postclassic tradition while at the same time maintaining its independence. This echoes an ethnohistoric description of a Postclassic Maya

realm which was comprised of regional divisions tied together by a political and cultural bond. Today some of Santa Rita's potentially most important unexcavated Postclassic mounds lie in the path of urban expansion. Time and money are against the cause, but it is essential that an attempt be made to preserve the elusive memory of these particular people and their institutions which once flourished at Santa Rita.

FOR FURTHER READING on the Maya in general: Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan: 1517-1550* (Octagon Books, New York 1966, originally published in 1948 by the Carnegie Institution of Washington as Publication No. 582), is a useful basic source book on the conquest of the Maya area.

On Postclassic sites: Thomas Gann, *Mounds in Northern Honduras, 19th Annual Report, 1897-1898* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 1900): 661-692 and *The Maya Indians of Southern Yucatan and Northern British Honduras* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 64, 1918), contain Gann's original statements of excavations at Santa Rita; although flawed archaeologically they are still the source of much knowledge about the site; Arthur Miller, *On the Edge of the Sea: Mural Painting at Tancah-Tulum* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C., in press), this upcoming volume gives an art historical perspective to relationships between Santa Rita and other Postclassic sites along the east coast of Yucatan based on mural painting; Tatiana Proskouriakoff, "The Death of a Civilization," *Scientific American* 192 (1955):

82-88, while not the most detailed presentation on Mayapan, this article provides a description of the "decadent" Postclassic period; William Rathje, "Last Tango at Mayapan: A Tentative Trajectory of Production-Distribution Systems," in Sabloff and Lamberg-Karlovsky, editors, *Ancient Civilization and Trade* (School of American Research, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque 1975): 409-448, discusses the "cost-control" model for the Postclassic Maya; Jeremy A. Sabloff and W. L. Rathje, editors, *A Study of Changing Pre-Columbian Commercial Systems: The 1972-1973 Seasons at Cozumel, Mexico* (Monographs of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, no. 3, 1975), is the preliminary report and gives the theoretical background of the project.

On the Mixtec style of art for which Santa Rita is noted: Henry B. Nicholson, "The Use of the Term 'Mixtec' in Mesoamerican Archaeology," *American Antiquity* 26 (1961): 431-433; Donald Robertson, "The Tulum Murals: International Style of the Late Postclassic," *37th International Congress of Americanists, Band II* (Munich 1968): 77-88.