

15 *SITUATING PRECLASSIC INTERMENTS AND FIRE-PITS AT SANTA RITA COROZAL, BELIZE*

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Excavations were carried out at Santa Rita Corozal from 1979 through 1985 by the Corozal Postclassic Project. Although the original project sought to excavate only Postclassic occupation, substantial Preclassic remains were also incidentally recovered and recorded during field investigations. This Preclassic data was mentioned in passing in subsequent publications, but was not fully illustrated or published because of the original focus on the Postclassic Period Maya. Approximately 31% of the burials recovered during 4 years of excavation at Santa Rita Corozal by the Corozal Postclassic Project dated to the Preclassic Period. A total of 41 Preclassic burials were recovered from Santa Rita Corozal; 5 of these dated to the early Middle Preclassic Period; 4 dated to the later Middle Preclassic Period; and 32 dated to the Late Preclassic Period. The majority of these interments were accompanied by one or more ceramic vessels that permitted the dating of the deposit. This paper presents the archaeological data relating to the Preclassic burials recovered at Santa Rita Corozal and also positions these interments in terms of the broader Maya world.

Introduction

Of all the practices carried out by ancient and modern peoples, ritual acts probably comprise the most conservative, meaning that, once ingrained in the social fabric, they are the hardest to change. Almost by definition, ritual becomes a codified form of action that is completed in a prescribed way and often at prescribed times, thus permitting researchers to identify these patterns in the archaeological record. Perhaps most significant to the ancient Maya were the ritual acts associated with death and burial. The living treated the bodies of their dead in particular ways, placed them in certain areas, in certain conditions, and with certain objects. It is likely that ritual acts were carried out that related to the memory of the dead, to the transition of the dead into some other state of being, and to their lasting relationship with the living (e.g., Metcalf and Huntington 1991). The Preclassic archaeological record of the ancient Maya has yielded a series of early burials, the patterning of which provides insights into early Maya ritual. In addition to helping understand early ritual behavior, parallels to some of these patterns can be established in later time periods in the Maya archaeological record. Among the more interesting of these parallels is the identification of an early ritual pattern that linked the use of fire – and fire-pits – to Preclassic burials, a linkage that we see as continuing in various modified form throughout Maya prehistory. Yet another area of interest relates to the primary and secondary nature of

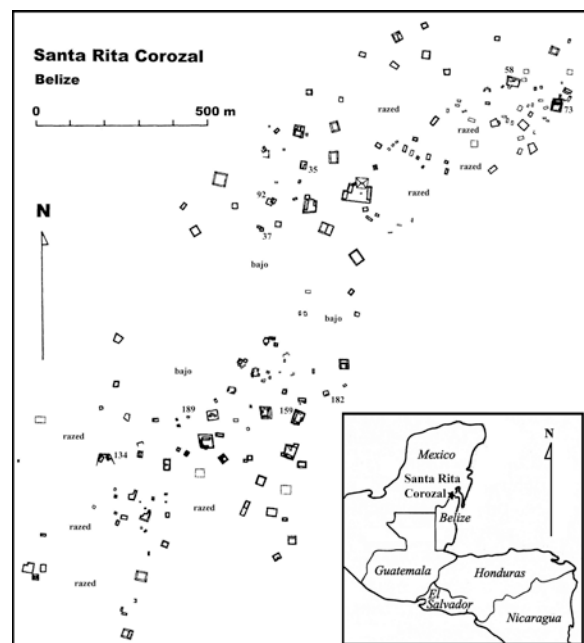


Figure 1. Map of Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, created by the Corozal Postclassic Project (after D.Z. Chase and A.F. Chase 1988), showing labeled structures associated with Preclassic materials: Burials only: Structures 37 (Op. P22), 73 (Op. P6), 92 (Op. P24), 159 (Op. P19), and 182 (Op. P28); Fire-pits only: Structure 58 (Op. 3); Burials and Fire-pits: Structures 35 (Op. 10), 134 (Op. P12), and 189 (Op. P30).

interments and the implications of these patterns for the interpretation of mortuary ritual, particularly in relation to the antiquity of double funerals (e.g., D. Chase and A. Chase 1996: 76-77).

The site of Santa Rita Corozal (Figure 1) has had a long history of intensive research: initially being dug by Thomas Gann at the

transition of the 19th to 20th centuries (1900, 1918); being subject to test-pitting and limited excavations by several projects in the early 1970s (Green 1973; Pring 1973; Sidrys 1983: 124-158); then being the focus of four seasons of excavation by the Corozal Postclassic Project from 1979 through 1985 (D. Chase 1981, 1985, 1986; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988); and, more recently seeing further research during the course of stabilization by the Belize Institute of Archaeology in 2013. While the site is best known for its extensive Postclassic remains (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2004a, 2008), Santa Rita Corozal has yielded spectacular Early Classic materials (D. Chase and A. Chase 2005) as well as some of the earliest evidence of settlement known from northern Belize (D. Chase 1981; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2006; Reese-Taylor 2016). This paper builds on earlier research carried out by the Corozal Postclassic Project that was briefly presented in a two articles summarizing the Preclassic and Early Classic Period remains recovered at the site (D. Chase and A. Chase 2005, 2006). The earlier work served to establish the widespread remains at Santa Rita Corozal for both of these time periods. This paper seeks a more synthetic statement concerning the associations and implications of the 41 Preclassic burials recovered at the site (Table 1).

Contextualizing Santa Rita Corozal's Preclassic Burials

Preclassic treatment of the dead at Santa Rita Corozal is relatively consistent throughout the site (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2006). A total of 41 interments may be assigned to the Preclassic Period with 3 more assigned to the Protoclassic era; of the Preclassic interments, 5 date to the Early Middle Preclassic, 4 to the Middle Preclassic, and 32 to the Late Preclassic Period. For all of the individuals interred during the Preclassic Period, 26 were in flexed position, 1 was in extended position (see Figure 2), 5 were disarticulated, and 9 were of indeterminate position. The majority of the interments were of a single individual, but two interments contained more than one individual. In both cases, a fully articulated individual was buried with the partial remains of either one or two others. These interments suggest that subsequent later (Late

Classic Period) practices identified at sites such as Caracol, Belize – where multiple individual interments and two-part burial practices associated with double funerals are common (e.g. D. Chase and A. Chase 1996, 2011) – may have had great antiquity.

No clear correlation of body orientation with age, sex, date, or burial offerings exists within the Santa Rita Corozal dataset; the heads of the deceased were nearly evenly split between those with head to the north and south, with a more limited number with heads to the northwest and east. Twenty-nine burials were accompanied by one or more ceramic vessels; six burials had more than one vessel with one burial being accompanied by 8 vessels. In the Middle Preclassic a single smaller vessel was often set upright near or on the chest of the interred individual (Figure 3). In the Late Preclassic, very large shallow bowls or platters were inverted over flexed bodies, minimally capping the head and sometimes the entire body (Figure 4). Some aspects of the Late Preclassic burials show continuity with later periods; in the subsequent Classic Period at Santa Rita Corozal, inverted bowls were often used to cover the skull of both flexed and extended interments. The earliest Middle Preclassic burials recovered at Santa Rita Corozal were associated with a Middle Preclassic raised eastern construction, but most of the other recovered Preclassic burials were associated with open spaces and not with raised constructions. Given the research focus of the the Corozal Postclassic Project, excavations generally did not focus on the penetration of Preclassic constructions; thus, further excavation at the site may yield other burial patterns typical of those found at other Preclassic sites in northern Belize.

When Santa Rita Corozal's burials are compared to other sites with excavated Preclassic Period burials in northern Belize (see Figure 5), the variability in burial patterns among these sites is striking (Table 2). At Cerros, across the bay from Santa Rita Corozal, 32 Preclassic interments were recovered (Walker 2016: Table 3.1); 11 were interred in a seated position; 8 were encased in ceramic containers (see Cliff 1982 for the context of the burial vessels and Carr 1989 for an analysis of the associated faunal material in these vessels

Table 1. Preclassic burials from Santa Rita Corozal (41 burials with 44 individuals; 3 individuals are associated with S.D. P10B-6 and 2 with S.D. P19A-10).

Burial	# Individuals	Body Position	# Vessels	Phase
P6E-2	1	Disarticulated	1	Late Preclassic
P10B-2	1	Flexed	0	Late Preclassic
P10B-3	1	Extended	1	Late Preclassic
P10B-4	1	Flexed	0	Late Preclassic
P10B-5	1	Flexed	0	Late Preclassic
P10B-6a	3	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P10B-6b	(1)	Disarticulated	0	Late Preclassic
P10B-6c	(1)	Disarticulated	0	Late Preclassic
P10B-8	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P12B-10	1	Flexed	1	Middle Preclassic
P12B-11	1	Flexed	1	Early Middle Preclassic
P12B-13	1	Flexed	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-14	1	Indeterminate	1	Late Preclassic
P12B-15	1	Flexed	1	Early Middle Preclassic
P12B-16	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-18	1	Flexed	1	Middle Preclassic
P12B-19	1	Indeterminate	0	Middle Preclassic
P12B-24	1	Flexed	1	Early Middle Preclassic
P12B-25	1	Indeterminate	0	Early Middle Preclassic
P12B-26	1	Flexed	1	Early Middle Preclassic
P12B-27	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-28	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-5	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P12B-6	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-7	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P12B-8	1	Indeterminate	0	Late Preclassic
P19A-10	2	Flexed+Skull	1	Late Preclassic
P19A-4	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P19A-5	1	Flexed	5	Late Preclassic
P22A-4	1	Disarticulated	1	Late Preclassic
P22A-5	1	Flexed	8	Late Preclassic
P22A-6	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P24A-1	1	Flexed	1	Middle Preclassic
P24C-1	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P24C-2	1	Indeterminate	1	Late Preclassic
P24C-3	1	Disarticulated	1	Late Preclassic
P28B-3	1	Indeterminate	1	Late Preclassic
P28B-5	1	Indeterminate	1	Late Preclassic
P30D-2	1	Flexed	2	Late Preclassic
P30D-6	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P30D-7	1	Flexed	1	Late Preclassic
P30D-8	1	Flexed	2	Late Preclassic
P30D-11	1	Flexed	4	Late Preclassic



Figure 2. Preclassic burials recovered in Operation C10B in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 35, showing an extended and two flexed individual interments, as well as a spouted “chocolate pot” (vessel cross-section shown in A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b: fig. 2b).



Figure 3. An Early Middle Preclassic burial recovered from Operation C12B in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 134 showing the placement of a shallow bowl on the chest of the individual (vessel cross-section similar to that shown in A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b: fig. 2a).

[considered to be food]); 4 were in a flexed position; 2 were extended; 1 was disarticulated in a pit; and 6 burials were of indeterminate position. Only one of the seated burials appears to have used a large shallow bowl as a covering device (Walker 2016: Fig. 3.6). Walker (2016:70) noted that burials contained within ceramic vessels tended to be placed within buildings while seated burials usually derived from open spaces. For K’axob, 101 Preclassic burials were recovered (Storey 2004: Table 6.4): 26 were in extended position, 15 were seated, 10 were flexed, 3 were indeterminate, and 47 others were disarticulated. At Cuello, 157 burials can be assigned a Preclassic date (Robin 1989: Table 10; Hammond et al. 1991, 1992): 27 of these were interred in a seated position; 47 were

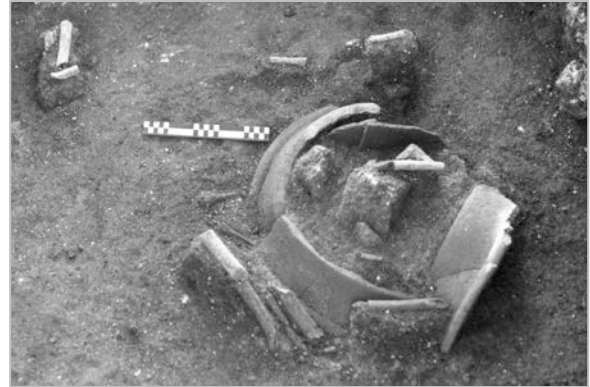


Figure 4. An example of a Late Preclassic burial in Operation C10B in Santa Rita Structure 35 covered by an inverted red-slipped platter (vessel cross-section shown in A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b: fig. 2c).

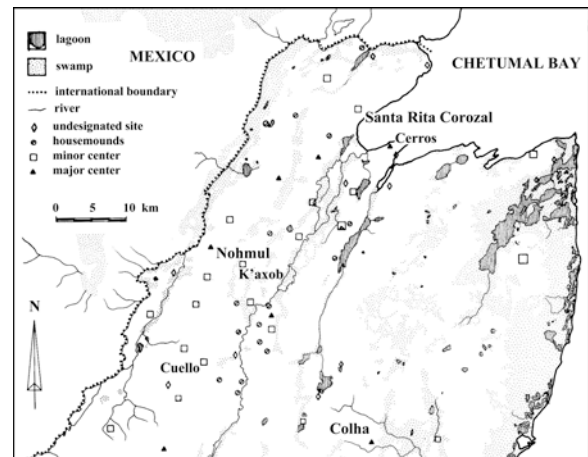


Figure 5. Map of Northern Belize, showing location of comparative sites (after Hammond 1975: Figure 11.1).

extended; 26 were flexed; 18 were disarticulated bundles; 20 were simply disarticulated; 15 were indeterminate as to position; and, 4 consisted only of skulls (possibly caches; see Haviland 1990). However, aside from a semi-frequent placement of inverted bowls over crania, no additional correlations of body orientation with age, sex, date, or burial offerings emerge from the large sample of burials at Cuello (Robin 1989:152).

These data show the great variability in burial patterns found at sites in northern Belize during the Preclassic Period. K’axob also illustrates the interment of multiple individuals within a single grave pit during the Late Preclassic Period, signaling the retention of bundled remains to accompany the burial of, what has been interpreted to be, an individual of

Table 2. Comparison of Preclassic burial contexts between sites in northern Belize. Cerros data from Walker 2016: Table 3.1; K'axob data from Storey 2004: Table 6.4; Cuello data from Robin 1989: Table 10, Hammond et al. 1991, 1992; Santa Rita Corozal (SRC) data presented in this paper. The disarticulated total for Santa Rita Corozal does not include 2 disarticulated individuals placed with a flexed burial in S.D. P10B-6 or a skull placed with a flexed individual in S.D. P19A-10).

Site	Seated	Ceramic Container	Flexed	Extended	Disarticulated	Indeterminate	Total Preclassic
Cerros	11	8	4	2	1	6	32
K'axob	15	0	10	26	47	3	101
Cuello	27	0	26	47	38	19	157
SRC	0	0	25	1	3	12	41



Figure 6. Example of a sherd-lined fire-pit in the basal portion of Operation C3B in Structure 58 of Santa Rita Corozal.

higher status (McAnany et al. 1999; Storey 2004). While earlier arguments were made that seated burials represented individuals of some authority (e.g., McAnany et al. 1999:133), their widespread distribution in northern Belize and their co-existence with other patterns does not support this assertion. In fact, different segments of Preclassic Maya society may have practiced varying burial patterns. At Cuello, in contrast to the wide variety of interment patterns recovered during initial research (Robin 1989), subsequent excavations in more formal buildings of Middle Preclassic date, almost exclusively recovered extended individuals in cist burials (one interment in 1992 contained 2 flexed individuals), most with vessels covering their skulls (Hammond et al. 1991: Fig. 5; 1992). This association is likely significant and suggests that there may have been distinct societal divisions at this early date that to some extent may be correlated with burial type; two “rich” child burials (with multiple grave goods)

in this sample also “suggest that some degree of social ranking existed in the Maya Lowlands by the later seventh century B.C.” (Hammond et al. 1991:362; 1992:961). At Santa Rita Corozal cist and simple burials both may be found to contain additional grave goods; however, as noted, the sample resulted from research focused on the Postclassic Period instead of focusing specifically on the recovery of early remains. Thus, at least some of the variability in interment patterns seen in the Preclassic archaeological record of northern Belize may correlate with differing social levels recovered at the various sites.

Fire-pits

One of the more interesting features at Santa Rita Corozal are a series of fire-pits associated with the Preclassic Period levels of the site (Figure 6). These features have a widespread occurrence in the archaeological records of northern Belize but are consistently associated only with Preclassic activity. Fire-pits generally consist of circular or hemispherical depressions lined by stones, ceramics, or both that usually show evidence of having been subjected to the high heat of a fire (the soil, rocks, and ceramics are discolored; in addition, ash may be present). The ceramics can be piece-meal in the feature or, alternatively, represent the almost intact base of a plainware vessel (at K'axob, a series of Sierra Red shallow bowls were recovered in a sherd-line pit [Berry et al. 2004:211]; nothing like this was found at Santa Rita Corozal). At Cuello, Gerhardt (1988:90-91) describes these features throughout her Preclassic sequence and originally assigned them a domestic function related to “cooking

and washing;” they were later recognized as spanning “a wider range of functions ... and were not simply hearths” (Hammond et al. 1991:355). Some of these Preclassic features at Cuello do not appear to have been fired, leading to subsequent speculation of their uncertain function (Hammond 1991:236). Fire-pits are also known to appear at Cerros (Robertson, personal communication, 2015), Colha (Hester et al. 1981), Nohmul (Pyburn 1989), and K’axob (Bobo 2004).

The K’axob “sherd-lined pits” underwent intensive analysis by Victoria Bobo (2004:104), who argued that they were “involved in multiple functions involving steaming, soaking, and burning.” The assumption that these pits were used for domestic activities is clear from their earliest definition by Gerhardt (1988:90) and their explicit association by Pyburn (1989) to ancient Maya cuisine, although Bobo (2004:87) does say that they possibly could relate to “ceremonial undertakings.” Bobo notes that she had a difficult time with her analysis of “sherd-lined pits” because these features were referred to as either “hearths” or “fire-pits” at other sites; however, she (2004:89, 92) provides detailed information for 5 of these features from Colha, 26 of these features from Cuello, and 30 more sherd-lined pits from K’axob. Even though the one published picture of these features for K’axob shows them in association with a burial, Bobo (2004:93) did not engage in a discussion of their possible ceremonial nature. While Bobo (2004) argues that some of her pits occur within buildings, the majority of them are actually outside of constructions, a finding consistent with pits from Nohmul (Pyburn 1989), Cuello (Hammond and Gerhardt 1990), and Santa Rita Corozal.

For Santa Rita Corozal, 12 sherd-lined fire-pits were recovered in four distinct locales: one from a deep cut in the axial trench through Structure 58; two from the axial trench through Structure 35; five from an axial trench through Structure 134; and four from an axial trench through Structure 189 (see Figure 1). At Santa Rita, fire pits are broadly located at the site, but always in association with Preclassic stratigraphic levels. Given that the excavations undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project were focused on the Postclassic Period and often

did not strive to open earlier levels, the amount of fire-pits recovered suggests that they were quite common. Intriguingly, the one areal excavation of a sizeable Preclassic construction (Operation 24) was not associated with a fire-pit (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2006:92). In only one excavation were the recovered fire-pits in direct association with structural remains; most were not clearly in association with Preclassic buildings. However, all recovered fire-pits at Santa Rita Corozal were found in areas of Preclassic interments, suggesting to us that these features may not have had a purely domestic function.

The one case in which fire-pits are clearly associated with a construction is in excavations of the earliest known structure at Santa Rita Corozal, dating from the early part of the Middle Preclassic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006). The five fire-pits are on axis to the two earliest phases of Structure 135, which is associated with five Middle Preclassic interments. Three of the fire-pits in Structure 135 are directly above an Early Middle Preclassic burial and the other two are on axis to the construction. In our estimation, this constitutes a strong argument that the interment and the fire-pits were linked. Similar linkage is also seen in Structure 189 where another fire-pit directly overlies a Late Preclassic burial. Thus, we believe that these fire-pits are the Preclassic equivalent of the ritual burning that is seen throughout the Classic Period archaeological record in “ritual” contexts.

Burning within architectural contexts has been recorded for most excavated sites within the Maya lowlands and has often been conjoined with other ritualized acts within the Maya archaeological record. Many researchers have noted the association between fire and ritual buildings and contexts, often ascribing these acts to termination deposits (i.e., Mock 1998; Harrison-Buck 2012). While clearly dating to a different temporal era, Late Postclassic and historic contexts also incorporate the ritual destruction of items by burning (e.g., Tozzer 1941). But, there are differences in scale in these acts, as well. William R. Coe (1990: 937) documented the extensive burning and scorching that was associated with Tikal’s North Acropolis and specifically commented on numerous empty burnt pits, noting that “an interesting coupling

also exists between ignition and several interments.” At Caracol, Belize burning was intimately associated with the interment of individuals; censers filled with burnt ash, probably derivative from some ritual related to interment, were sometimes placed within tombs and other burning occurred after the placement of the burial (e.g. A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a: 26-27); in other cases an entire burial was incinerated before being incorporated into the archaeological record (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2011). In the Postclassic era, ritualized burning is sometimes literally incorporated within the body of the dead; one of the skulls recorded from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itza had a circular hole in its top and had been repurposed as an incense burner (Coggins 2004). Thus, the association of purposeful fire with ritual activity and death has a long tradition in Mesoamerica.

Fire is not only associated with mortuary rituals, but also with other ceremonies, including world renewal activities that took place at regular temporal intervals throughout Mesoamerica (Christenson 2016; Elson and Smith 2001; Stuart 1998; Vail andLooper 2015). Evidence for the episodic deposition of both interments and caches associated with temporal cycles has previously been identified for Late Classic Period Caracol, Belize (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2013; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b, 2011). A future line of research may draw similarities between the Preclassic and Classic practices.

Conclusion

Maya ritual has shown great continuity and persistence over time, and analysis of Preclassic burial patterns provides insight into early Maya ritual patterns. Some of these patterns, such as flexed burials and the placement of inverted vessels over the individual’s head and upper body, continued into later time periods. Similarly, the few multiple individual interments with mixed articulation recovered at Santa Rita Corozal suggest that the curation of the dead and the double-funeral practices common in the Late Classic Period at many sites can trace its ancestry to practices already under way in the Preclassic Period. Given the persistence of burial ritual, differences

and similarities within and among sites are significant. As noted above, Preclassic Period interments from Santa Rita Corozal, at least those thus far sampled, are somewhat less varied than those at some other Maya sites in northern Belize. While this may be due to sampling or wealth variations, it may also be due to greater cohesion in ritual practices among some sites and not others.

Initial data analysis and research on Preclassic burials in northern Belize attempted to identify correlations between measured categories that included age, sex, date, or burial offerings; often the results were inconclusive. However, the primary additional pattern identified at Santa Rita Corozal was the association between fire-pits and Preclassic burials. This linkage between fire and interment can be seen as continuing in various modified forms throughout Maya prehistory, although the fire-pits themselves are most evident in Preclassic contexts. Thus, we believe that these fire-pits are the Preclassic equivalent of the ritual burning that is seen in throughout the Classic Period archaeological record in “ritual” contexts. A question to be answered by later research is whether the conjoined burning and human interment activities were part of wider calendric and world renewal ceremonies that were continued in somewhat different form throughout the rest of Maya prehistory.

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