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Gainesville

NEW ARTIFACTS REPORTED FROM CERROS, BELIZE

by Debra S. Walker

Introduction

Cerros is a coastal Maya site in northern Belize (Figure 1) noted for its precocious Late Preclassic Tulix Phase florescence that recent ^{14}C dates put at between 150 BCE and 150 CE.[1] First excavated by David Freidel between 1974 and 1981, the site produced over 300,000 artifacts, pottery sherds and other categories of materials. After excavation, the entire collection was shipped to Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas for analysis except for selected items that were left in the Belmopan, Belize vault. Ten dissertations and many publications were written using these materials; subsequently the collections were put in long term storage making them inaccessible for further research.

After lengthy negotiation with the Belize Department of Archaeology, ownership of the Cerros collection was transferred permanently to the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. Since its arrival in late 2009, the extensive collection has been reorganized and housed in new cabinets and shelving, making it accessible to students and researchers once again. Considerable work remains to document the original collection and make it publicly available by provenience.

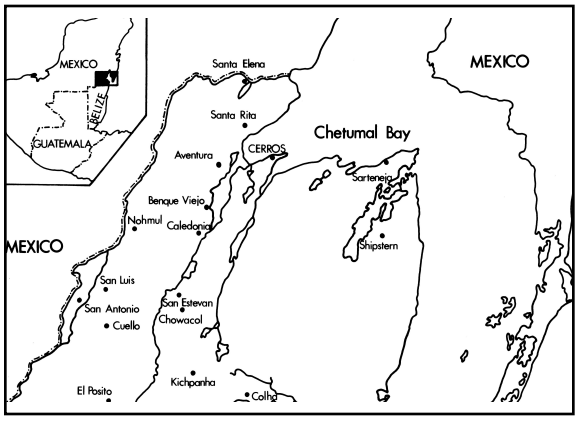

Figure 1. Map of northern Belize locating Cerros. CROC archive.

To facilitate the reorganization, FLMNH Latin American Curator Susan Milbrath and Cerros researcher Debra Walker recently received National Endowment for the Humanities Grant #PW-51116-12 to digitize notes and images for public access on the web. Known as the Cerros Research Online Catalogue (CROC), a preliminary version is now available for public view.[2] The two year grant runs through 2014.

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[1] Walker, Debra S, *Sampling Cerros' Demise: A Radiometric Check on the Elusive Protoclassic*. Final Report of FAMSI Grant #03064. Published online www.famsi.org/reports/03064/index.html, 2005.

[2] www.flmnh.ufl.edu/latinarch/cerros/gallery.htm.

Figure 2. Cerros as it might have looked around 1 CE. Facing north; image created by Jeffrey Vadala.

Figure 3. Cerros from the air. Photo taken in the late 1950s by the Thompson family.

his parents at Cerros.

Thompson's parents owned the Cerro Maya Plantation in the 1950s where they cultivated coconuts and cashews and did some significant logging. The family visited occasionally and brought the kids, including teenager Rick, for some of these visits. Thompson provided copies of slides taken during these visits (Figure 3). The plantation was destroyed in 1961 by Hurricane Hattie after which the Thompson family sold the property.

Rick's father employed local resident Arturo Flores to run the plantation. During one visit he found the jade head pendant lying on the beach by the north face of an

As part of a corollary student project, UF graduate students Lucas Martindale Johnson and Jeffrey Vadala organized a temporary exhibit for the FLMNH entitled "An Early Maya City by the Sea: Daily Life and Ritual at Cerros, Belize."[3] The exhibit runs May through October 2012. It includes a selection of artifacts from both Late Preclassic Tulix Phase as well as Postclassic Kanan Phase occupation. Vadala produced a video recreation of how the site looked at various points in the past (Figure 2).

<u>Cerros Artifacts Reported in Local Collection</u>

Gainesville resident Rick Thompson saw a press release on the Cerros exhibit in May 2012. He is a long time supporter of the museum and contacted them to discuss artifacts from Cerros in his possession that he offered to add to the exhibit. At his invitation, Milbrath, Walker and Vadala visited his home to view the collection. He has many materials on display from his travels, but was quite certain about which artifacts in a single case were collected by

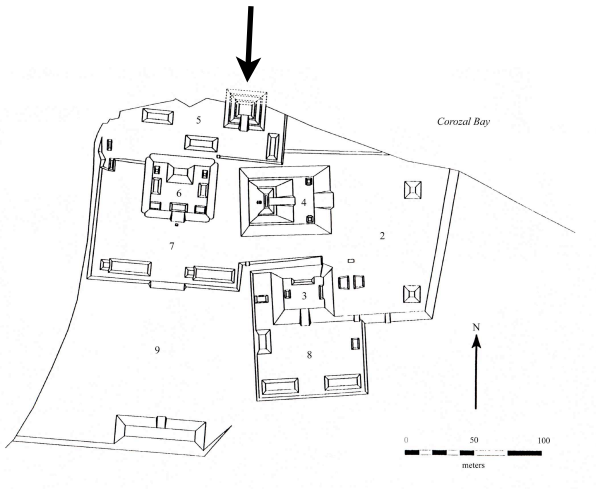

Figure 4. Map of Cerros Monumental Center illustrating probable dimensions for eroded Structure 5C. Arrow indicates location reported by Thompson. Drafted by Kathyrn Reese-Taylor.

[3] www.flmnh.ufl.edu/exhibits/limited-time-only/mayacity

Figure 5. Cerros Structure 5C-2nd from air facing north, circa 1978. Eastern masks are visible; western masks are protected under canopy. CROC archive.

Figure 6. Profile of northeastern mask illustrates building remains after 2000 years of coastal erosion. Facing west; CROC archive.

eroding building. Flores excavated a bit more and recovered more artifacts. When Walker showed Thompson a map of Cerros and asked him where Flores collected the artifacts, Thompson pointed to the north face of Structure 5C (Figure 4).

Arguably one of the most famous of Maya buildings, pyramidal Structure 5C-2nd retains well preserved Late Preclassic masked facades on two tiers (Figure 5). The building was already seriously damaged when Freidel excavated in the mid-1970s. The northern upper tier of the building and mask was almost entirely eroded from behind before excavation (Figure 6). The building is now stabilized and the facades are carefully preserved behind modern reproductions that tourists may view (Figure 7).

Researchers had long known that part of the site eroded into Corozal Bay over the last two millennia. In the 1970s, excavators encountered evidence that village habitation may have extended more than 10 meters north of the current coastline. During one field season, when conditions produced a very low tide, an entire submerged dock was revealed several meters from the current beachfront. Over the years excavators recovered a significant number of tools, pottery vessels, jewelry and other artifacts in Corozal Bay, including the remains of several burials.

Figure 7. Structure 5C in 2007 after consolidation and mask reproductions were completed. Photo by the author.

In view of the long history of hurricanes in Belize, the eroded condition of Structure 5C and materials collected from nearshore waters, as well as the 1950s era slides, the Thompson family's story seemed highly plausible and FLMNH accepted some pieces to add to the current exhibit. Their story is told separately at one end of the exhibit; it features a variety of artifacts as well as some family photos from the 1950s.

Figure 8. Spherical jade beads from Thompson collection. Photo by the author.

Figure 9. Tubular jade beads from Thompson collection. Photo by the author.

Figure 10. Jade ear flare from Thompson collection. Photo by the author.

Thompson Collection on Display

The collection on exhibit said to be from Structure 5C includes 16 large round jade beads of varying diameters (Figure 8), 8 smaller tubular beads (Figure 9), one jade ear flare (Figure 10) and one jade portrait head (Figure 11). Besides the jade items, four large whole incised *Oliva* shells are said to be from the same locale (Figure 12).

Figure 11. Jade portrait head from Thompson collection. Photo by the author.

Although the materials have not been illustrated in detail yet, size estimates can be made from the museum's photo record with an inch ruler as scale. The ear flare is about 6 cm in diameter while the jade portrait head is about 8 cm long. The large spherical jade beads appear to measure between 3 and 5 cm in diameter; the smaller tubular beads are likely between 1 and 2 cm long. The drilled and incised *Oliva* shells are quite large, probably 8 to 10 cm in length.

Figure 12. Incised *Oliva* shells from Thompson collection. Photo by the author.

Analysis

Thompson's collection likely constitutes part of a rather sumptuous necklace and ear flare set, although only one ear flare is present. The necklace would have been composed primarily of large beads with smaller tubular beads inserted as spacers or strung separately, perhaps as anklets or wristlets. Some tubular beads may have comprised parts of the counterweight apparatus for ear flares. As the *Oliva* shells have drill holes suitable for stringing, they may have been part of a belt ornament or another piece of jewelry. Most likely the jade head pendant was a central element for the necklace.

Burial Context

If the finds are indeed from Cerros Structure 5C, there are only two kinds of contexts from which these materials are likely to have eroded: a burial or a cache. There is a case to be made in support of a burial. Structure 5C presumably sat on the coast during the Late Preclassic before part of it eroded into the bay. Nearly all the 30+ Late Preclassic burials recorded at Cerros were found very near the coastline as well.

Mr. Thompson has no memory of a discussion of bone remains when the items were discovered, but this is not surprising. During Freidel's excavations, bone preservation was found to be very poor at Cerros; several presumed burials recovered from Corozal Bay were not given formal burial numbers because little or no bone was recovered. Similarly, if 5C had eroded away around a burial, the lighter bone remains probably would have been washed away while the heavier burial furniture remained in place.

There are substantive arguments against a burial, however. Pottery vessels were the most common form of burial furniture at Cerros (Figure 13), yet none are securely associated with this deposit. As ceramic vessels are heavier than each individual jade object in the collection, one would presume they would have remained associated if present.

Thompson recalls that his father reported collecting a "polychrome plate" about the same time as the jades were discovered. The elder Thompson did not describe it as part of the same beach collection and did not keep it. Early Classic polychrome plate fragments were located several places along the eroding seawall by Freidel's crew members, but not near the monumental center, which is primarily Late Preclassic in date. Unless more information becomes available, there is little else to be said about ceramic associations.

Figure 13. Pottery vessels from Cerros Burial 20. Discovered eroding along the coast near village Structure 2A-sub 3-4th. CROC archive.

In sum, the quality of the jade and shell artifacts in the Thompson collection is consistent with a Late Preclassic royal burial, yet none were encountered during excavation at Cerros. Freidel searched for a royal tomb but never found one. He suspected that 5C was the most likely mortuary building, although he also searched Structures 3, 4 and 6. Individuals recovered in the Cerros interments represented a normal egalitarian demographic curve. None could be considered royal by any stretch of the imagination. Most Cerros burials held only pottery vessels and perhaps one or two personal items.

Figure 14. Bracelet from Cache A, and early house dedication. CROC archive.

Furthermore, jade is a very rare component in Cerros burial furniture; only one small jade bead has been recovered in association with a burial. Found along with seven other shell and coral beads from the same provenience, it was probably part of a bracelet worn by the middle aged woman interred in Burial 1.[4] The beads themselves are in storage in Belize and unavailable for illustration.

A set of beads from Cerros Household Cache A provides a relevant comparison. It consists of two jade, one coral and 10 *Spondylus* shell beads (Figure 14). Cache A has been

[4] Cliff, Maynard, Lowland Maya Nucleation: A Case Study from Northern Belize, pp. 242-247. Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, 1982.

interpreted as one of the earliest dedicatory offerings at Cerros[5]. It was found articulated as if it was deposited while strung on a cord. No burial or other furnishings were found associated, although a new residential building was constructed on top of it.

Cache Context

Cache A is the earliest in a series of dedicatory deposits associated with the construction of new buildings at Cerros. If the Thompson collection does not represent burial remains, it is most likely the result of a similar dedicatory cache offered during some phase of construction at 5C. Whole jade beads are not common at Cerros, but most of them were deposited in dedicatory caches. Of the 32 whole jade beads recovered by Freidel's excavations, 46.9% came from cache contexts (Table 1).[6]

Context	Number	% of Sample
Cache	15	46.9%
Termination Deposit	6	18.8%
Burial	1	3.1%
Domestic Debris	5	15.6%
Surface or Fall	5	15.6%
TOTAL	32	100.0%

Table 1. Contexts for whole jade beads excavated at Cerros during all phases. Data from Garber 1989.

All three Tulix Phase cache contexts containing whole jade beads came from dedicatory events during building construction. Besides Cache A, which underlay residential Structure 2A-sub 12-2nd-D in the village, Caches 9 and 1 stem from monumental construction in Structures 5C and 6B respectively.

Cache 9 from Structure 5C-1st consisted of a covered bucket which contained one 4.8 cm long tubular jade bead, perhaps from an ear flare counterweight, one shell cutout and several specular hematite fragments from a mirror that may have been attached to the shell. Cache 9 was incorporated into construction fill on the central summit of 5C-1st, the remodeling event that encased and preserved the famous facades of Structure 5C-2nd.[7] Both Cache 9 vessels and the contents are stored in Belmopan, Belize.

Figure 15. Savannah Bank Usulutan bucket which held the objects from Cache 1. CROC archive.

Cache 1 was placed in a similar context atop Structure 6B. Excavation confirmed that it was interred as part of a single construction event at the complex which raised the basal platform to its current height and incorporated eight superstructures on top of it simultaneously.[8]

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[5] ibid. pp. 311-313.

[6] Garber, James F., *Archaeology at Cerros, Belize, Central America. Volume II: The Artifacts*, pp. 113-115. Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, 1989.

[7] Freidel, David A. Monumental Architecture. In R. Robertson and D. Freidel, eds., *Archaeology at Cerros, Belize, Central America. Volume I: An Interim Report*. Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, 1986.

[8] ibid.

Material	Items	Count
ceramic vessels and lids	1 bucket, 1 bowl, 1 three-handled jug, 4 cups, 5 lids, 1 square lid/plate	13
ceramic sherds	19 sherds from one incomplete vessel	19
jade	5 spherical beads, 1 tubular bead, 2 ear flares, 5 fragments, 1 drilled fragment, 5 portrait heads, 5 mosaic fragments	24
shell	4 drilled shell pendants, 6 shell cutouts+ fragments, 1 *Spondylus* bead	11
specular hematite	84 fragments of at least two mirrors	84

Table 2. Contents of Cache 1. Compiled by the author from CROC archive.

Cache 1 was composed of a covered bucket similar to Cache 9 (Figure 15), but excavators found a wider range of contents inside it as well as additional vessels around it (Table 2). All cache contents and vessels are stored in Belmopan, Belize except for the bucket itself, which is housed in Gainesville.

Cache 1 is widely known for the 5 jade portrait heads (Figure 19), but it also held other jade jewelry that may be compared with the Thompson collection.

Figure 16. Spherical and tubular beads from Cache 1. CROC archive.

Five spherical jade beads were recovered from Cache 1 (Figure 16). They average 1 cm in diameter which is about 1/3 to 1/5 the size of the beads in the Thompson collection. There are no beads from Cerros excavations nearly as large as those from the Thompson collection. The largest whole spherical bead recovered by excavation is 2 cm in diameter, still half the size of Thompson's. It stems from a find in the humus lens of Structure 112A, a building located on the bay near the eastern mouth of the Cerros canal. The only tubular bead from Cache 1 is 2 cm in length (Figure 16), a bit larger than Thompson's. It is tapered in a manner that suggests it was part of an ear flare counterweight.[9]

Figure 17. Pair of jade ear flares from Cache 1. CROC archive.

At about 3.5 cm in diameter, the matched set of ear flares from Cache 1 (Figure 17) are about half the size of the Thompson flare. They are "a fine-quality dark green jade with light green swirls."[10] In contrast, the Thompson flare is an apple green color. Another fragmentary jade ear flare recovered at Cerros may be more similar to the Thompson flare (Figure 18). Estimated to have been about 10 cm in diameter, it has the same apple green color. It is noteworthy that

[9] Garber ibid.

[10] ibid. p. 41

Figure 18. Jade ear flare fragment recovered from the Cerros seawall. CROC archive.

this fragment was a surface find located along the seawall not far from the reported find spot of the Thompson flare.

Of course the most compelling items from Cache 1 are the five jade portrait heads, each with drill holes for stringing on a cord or cloth. They were found arranged in a quincunx pattern in the bottom of the Savannah Bank Usulutan bucket (Figure 19). The four smaller heads range from 4 to 5 cm in length and about 2.5 in width. The larger central pendant is about 5 cm square.[11] The four smaller heads are thought to have originally decorated a white headband seen on royal portraits.[12] The larger central pectoral has offset drill holes and was probably worn on a cord as a pendant. By comparison, the Thompson pendant is estimated to be about 8 cm in length, larger than those from Cache 1.

Figure 19. Interior of Cache 1 bucket with five jade heads arranged as found. CROC archive.

Figure 20. Comparison between Thompson pendant and Cache 1 jade head SF-158. Size approximate. Left photo by author; right CROC archive.

When shown a photo of the new pendant, Freidel noted that it was most similar to SF-158 from Cache 1, an image which has an offset topknot.[13] Both are strikingly similar despite the difference in size (Figure 20), and both share a similar style of manufacture. Garber has described SF-158 in detail, specifically noting the deep set eyes and large flat nose and wide mouth characterizing the image portrayed.[14] Besides an offset topknot, the two portrait heads share these other elements. Both also wear bibs below the chin.

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[11] ibid. p. 116.

[12] Freidel, David A. and Linda Schele, Kingship in the Late Preclassic Maya Lowlands: The Instruments and Places of Ritual Power. *American Antiquity* 90(3):547-567, 1988. Freidel is the first to discuss the headband.

[13] pers. comm. by email, 7/3/2012

[14] Garber, ibid. p. 44.

The only other items from Structure 5C on display are four large *Oliva* shells, estimated to measure up to 10 cm in length. Compared to the seven whole *Oliva* shells recovered during excavation at Cerros, which averaged about 2 cm long (Figure 21), the Thompson shells are 5 times larger and much thicker as well. Nothing remotely similar was recovered from excavated context.

Figure 21. *Oliva* shell from residential debris along the coast. CROC archive.

Summary

The items attributed to Cerros now on display at the Florida Museum of Natural History provide some new perspectives on our understanding of the city. Although they may represent burial furniture, the most likely interpretation is a dedicatory cache for Structure 5C. While any clear sense of the original context of these finds is impossible to ascertain, as a whole they are within the range of what might be expected of a Late Preclassic dedicatory offering for 5C-2nd. The building carried important masked facades that were preserved only because they were carefully encased by the later construction of 5C-1st. It stands to reason that those who took so much care to bury the masks had taken equal care to dedicate the building properly.

In his summary of the residential village construction sequence, Maynard Cliff noted in several instances that new construction "followed the deposition of a large sand lens....possibly resulting from a heavy storm."[15] One very heavy sand lens, for example, buried the ancient dock. The possibility that hurricane damage to 5C-2nd led to the construction of 5C-1st should be considered. Damage to some of the masks prior to their careful burial is difficult to justify otherwise. It is, then, somewhat ironic that persistent damage from hurricanes over the millennia led to the erosion of the very building they were trying to protect from further damage, possibly revealing a dedicatory cache for the Thompson family to find on the beach at Cerros in the late 1950s.

Acknowledgments

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[15] Cliff ibid. p. 434.