

Royal Mayan Tomb

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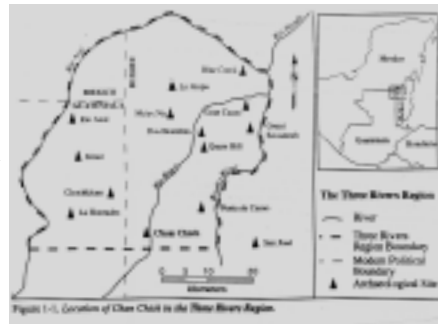
ABSTRACT

Little is known about the Mortuary practices of the ruling elite during the Proto-classic time period (AD 150- AD 250) in Mayan history. The goal of the project was to increase our knowledge of the mortuary practices by extensively analyzing eleven mortuary vessels uncovered in a tomb at the site of Chan Chich in north-western Belize. This paper consists of a comprehensive descriptions of each vessel. The descriptions include the color and surface decorations, the general body shape and paste characteristics. The study of these mortuary vessels is very important. They have allowed us to date the tomb with accuracy, to determine how the body was laid out, and to determine the social status of the individual interred within.

INTRODUCTION

My research project focuses on the mortuary pots recovered during an archaeological tomb excavation at the site of Chan Chich in northwestern Belize. My primary research goal was to increase our understanding of royal Mayan burial practices during the proto-classic time period, from AD 150- AD250.

The ruins of Chan Chich are located in the Orange Walk district of northwestern Belize, four kilometers east of the boundary with Guatemala. The site is situated in the midst of a dense tropical rainforest at the bend of the Chan chich creek. The Chan Chich creek joins with the little Chan Chich River to become the Rio Bravo River. The ruins are located near the southern boundary of a geographically defined area known as the three rivers region, including the Rio Azul, the Rio Bravo and Booth's river.



The site of Chan Chich has 253 mapped structures covering a total of 1-mile N/S by .6 miles E/W. The site contains two causeways, a ballcourt, residential housing groups, a ceremonial center and two main plazas. The major architectural concentrations are located in the western half of the mapped site. It is with one of these major architectural area's called the Upper Plaza (A-2) that I am concerned.

The Upper Plaza lies 7.21 meters higher than the main plaza and is an area of about 100 meters (E/W) by 125 meters (N/S). The Upper Plaza is believed to have been occupied by the elite of the site and has five large structures, which are situated to form a square, all facing a central courtyard. The largest structure in the upper plaza is A-15 at 15.5m high. It lies on the southern edge of the plaza and has a pyramid-like form. I am concerned with this structure, not only because it is the largest at the site but also because the tomb that I have studied is

situated four meters south of the base of the southern slope of the structure. Excavations began on the test pit that would eventually become the tomb in May of 1997. We decided to put the pit at this position in front of structure A-15 because we noticed an 80 cm diameter circular hole, which was present on the ground surface. In our quest to understand what the hole feature represented we discovered the Proto-classic tomb.

To uncover the tomb itself we had to dig down through six different floors of the plaza until we reached a depth of 2.4 meters. At this point we encountered a rather large, rectangular sized stone. This was to be the first of nine capstones. Only three of the capstones were found in their original position, sealing off the top of the tomb. The other six had collapsed into the tomb to various depths. It has been determined that the collapse of the capstones had precipitated the creation of the "hole" feature, which we initially wanted to investigate. Once we hit the capstones we had to remove all of them. After these had been removed we encountered a very pristine white sediment at a level of about 15cm above the tomb floor. It was in this layer that we found the individual that was interred and the artifacts he was buried with. The tomb contents include two jade earspools, a long hollow jade bead, a jade pendant, a serpent shaped object, a possible paper fragment, many small green and red "stucco" fragments and 11 ceramic vessels.

METHODS

In order to provide a comprehensive description of each vessel, I needed to use a method that measured a number of individual attributes for each vessel. The attributes included the color and surface decorations, the vessel form, paste characteristics and the context of each vessel in the tomb. To study the color and surface decorations I conducted a surface treatment analysis on each vessel. I did this by noting the vessels specific colors and the occurrence of any decorations such as incising, stamping or paint.

To document the different vessel forms I looked at the individual vessel attributes such as the rim, base, the appearance of any feet and the general body shape. I then took precise measurements of these attributes. To examine the paste characteristics I needed to find a place where the vessel was cracked or chipped so I could examine its profile under a microscope at a magnification of 20. To gain an understanding of each vessels context I noted it in relation to other objects in the tomb and by the N/S, E/W tomb walls.

This descriptive analysis that I will present is very important because it will allow me to further my research for my senior thesis. The descriptive analysis gives me the foundational information to take this assemblage and eventually compare it to similar assemblages from other sites. Obtaining the information that these comparisons will provide will help us all to learn a great deal about this time period of Mayan history.

RESULTS

Vessel #1

Vessel #1 is a spout and bridge jar with a red rim and buff colored body. The vessel is so named because of the spout-like feature with the bridge connecting it to the vessel itself. The diameter of the rim measures 1 cm. The rim gives way to a long neck, which has a diameter of 8 cm. The neck leads into a globular body with a diameter of 16.3 cm and a wall thickness of .6 cm. A ring base pedestal measuring a diameter of 7.9 cm supports the globular body. The spout of the vessel has a wall thickness of .6cm and a diameter of 2.0 cm. Vertical incisions can be detected where the neck meets the globular body. The incisions were probably

placed there to aid in carrying the vessel. The temper has been determined to be calcite with a few dark inclusions. This vessel is located in the northern portion of the tomb, on the west-ern side of the serpent-like feature.

Vessel #2

Vessel #2 is a mammiform support bowl with a height of 12.5 cm total, and is red in color. The term mammiform refers to the bulbous shape of the feet. The vessel has a flat lip with width of .9 cm and a rim diameter of 22.7 cm. The rim leads down to slightly flaring sides, which have a wall thickness of 1.8 cm. The sides give way to a small basal break of .9 cm in length, which curves under to form the rounded bottom of the vessel. This vessel has four mammiform feet attached to the bottom, each one measures to a height of 7.5 cm. Each of the mammiform feet has a small rectangular slit cut out of the side of it with a small ball on the inside of the hollow foot. The balls act as tiny rattles, I determined the temper to be calcite with no sign of inclusions. The bowl is situated in the north end of the tomb, just on the west side of the serpents head. This vessel was found touching vessel #3.

Vessel #3

Vessel #3 is another spout-and-bridge jar, also dichrome (two colors) with a buff colored body and a red rim. The rim has a diameter measuring 10.7 cm with the wall thickness measuring to .6 cm. This vessel has a globular body which measures 13.2 cm in diameter at 3 cm up from its base. The base is a ring pedestal measuring 8.65 cm across. The spout of the jar is 9 cm in length with its opening lying about 1 cm higher than the rim of the vessel. The thickness of the spout is .4 cm and the distance between the spout and the vessel is 2.8 cm. The temper of this vessel is sand with a very few calcite inclusions. This vessel is located right next to vessel #2, in the NW corner of the tomb.

Vessel #4

Vessel #4 is also a red mammiform support bowl. This one is unique in that the mammiform feet have been removed. The entire vessel (without the mammiform feet) measures to a height of 7.6 cm. The vessel begins with a flattened rim with a wall thickness of .8 cm. The rim leads into slightly flaring sides with a small basal flange. The basal flange protrudes for .8 cm and then curves under into a "bowl" like shape which form the bottom of the vessel. The vessel has no base pedestal just four circular marks where the mammiform feet were once attached. The vessel was entirely whole, so I could not determine the temper or the occurrence of any inclusions. This vessel is located at the midpoint of the tomb on the west-ern side.

Vessel #5

Vessel #5 is a red basal flange bowl with a flat rim measuring 25.8 cm in diameter and 1cm in thickness, which seems consistent throughout the entire vessel. Basal flange refers to the angled projection near the bottom or basal portion of the vessel. The rim gives way to flared sides which includes the basal flange about 4.6 cm down from the rim. The flange has a length of 2 cm and a thickness of 1.1 cm. The flange contains seven-one half circle shaped incisions. The incisions are a pattern of two half circles, one lying about .5 cm inside of the other, while both of the circles have of their ends touching the outside of the flange. All seven of the sets of incisions lie between 6.0 and 9.75 cm apart with varying thickness' (the

thickness being the measurement from one edge of the outer circle to the other) from 2.0 to 2.9 cm. The vessel was also whole, so I could not examine its temper. The vessel is located in the center at the southern end of the tomb. The two earspools, jade bead, and jade pendent were all found situated around the northern 1/2 the vessel.

Vessel #6

Vessel #6 is a red ring base jar with 8.4 cm diameter opening with a thickness of .7 cm. The vessel then goes to a globular body which is 12.7 cm in diameter at the most. The wall thickness at this point of the body is .4 cm. The globular body rests on a pedestal ring base 6.45 cm in diameter and .5 cm high. The temper of this vessel is calcite with a few unidentified dark inclusions. This vessel was found on the eastern portion of the tomb about 63 cm from the southern end.

Vessel #7

Vessel #7 is a red basal angle bowl, which means that the bottom portion of the bowl curves under at a considerable angle. The diameter of the rim is 19 cm with a wall thickness of .8 cm. The rounded lip is continuous with the rim which 2.7 cm down gives way to a basal angle. The angle has a length of 1 cm and is roughly an angle of 45 degrees which eventually flattens out to the bottom. This vessel was also whole, so no temper could be determined. It is located at the northern end, sitting on top of the back portion of the serpent-like feature.

Vessel #8

Vessel #8 is a red Mammiform support bowl. Four mammiform feet support the bowl, each about 6.1 cm in diameter with heights of 7 cm. Each of the feet has a small ball in it, which acts as a rattle. The feet are attached to a rounded base that leads to a small flange with a length of .7 cm. The flange leads upward at a very slight outward angle. The rounded lip is continuous with the walls of the vessel. The entire vessel is 10.8 cm in height with a wall thickness of .8 cm. The temper of the vessel is a mixture of calcite and sand with a few dark inclusions. This vessel is located in the northern end of the tomb and sits on the eastern side of the head of the serpent feature.

Vessel #9

Vessel #9 is also a red mammiform support bowl with four feet. The diameter of the rim of the bowl is 20 cm with a wall thickness of .8 cm. The rounded lip goes straight down to the body of the bowl. The body of the bowl lasts for 3.2 cm before a basal break of 1 cm in length occurs. The bowl then has a rounded underside to which the four mammiform feet are attached. The feet are all 7.1 cm in length with widths of 6.3 cm. The feet have the traditional rectangular slit curved out of them and each contains a small ball that acts as a rattle. The vessel has a few rim breaks, which allowed me to determine the temper to be calcite and sand. The bowl was found lying on its side right next to vessel #4 in the western portion of the tomb, the jade pendent was found just a few centimeters from the vessel.

Vessel #10

Vessel #10 is a Red basal flange bowl. Unfortunately, I could not obtain any accurate measurements because the bowl was undergoing reconstruction at the time I was in Belize. This vessel is located across from #4, at the midpoint of the tomb.

Vessel #11

Vessel #11 is a dichrome mammiform support bowl, with buff and red colored exterior. It is in a much different shape than the others of the same type (2,4,8,9). The vessel is in a very deteriorated state, but I estimate the diameter of the vessel rim to be about 16.3 cm. Almost the entire body of the vessel is missing except for approximately 1.5 cm around the entire vessel above the basal break and one thin section that is whole from rim to feet. The thickness of the body is large at 1 cm. The basal break leads to a rounded bottom where the four feet are attached. The feet are 6.5 cm high but have diameters of only 4.6 cm, because of the poor condition I was able to measure the thickness of the feet, they were .5 cm. The temper of the vessel is calcite with a lot of dark inclusions. This vessel was uncovered in the northern end of the tomb, touching vessel #7.

DISCUSSION

The information that the tomb contents, especially the 11 vessels yielded is extremely important. The ceramic vessels were especially significant because radiocarbon dates have proved to be inconclusive so the only way we have been able to date the tomb is by the study of these vessels. The vessels show us that the tomb dates to the Proto-classic time period in Mayan prehistory, from AD 150- AD 250. Many ceramic studies have been done which show the changes and evolution of ceramics over time. Archaeologists have been able to break up time periods and identify specific ceramic patterns that are unique to them individually. Our vessels have characteristics that are consistent with those found during the Proto-classic time period. Those characteristics are the four mammiform feet, the hard "glossy" appearance of the slip on the vessels, the specific colors used on the vessels and the basal flange bowls.

The vessels were able to tell us something else about the burial, how the body was placed in relationship to the other tomb contents. We could not simply examine the body itself to determine this because it was so deteriorated and bone remained in only a few concentrated areas. In order to determine the orientation of the individual in the tomb we had to carefully examine the vessels. The first thing we realized was that the four vessels in the center of the tomb, numbers 4, 7, 9 and 10 had bone fragments lying in them. The rim of vessel #5 had bone resting on it. We also found concentrated areas of wood in the sediment, which we feel is the remains of a wooden litter. This leads us to believe that the individual was placed on a litter and put into the tomb after the vessels were already in place on the tomb floor, the raised litter straddled the vessels.

Finally, the vessels along with the jade pendent with the carving of a face on it gives us very important and useful information regarding the status of the individual interred in the tomb. It has often been disputed as to when the practice of kingship was instituted in the Mayan world. Our finding asserts that the practice was already instituted by this proto-classic period because of the jade pendent and our vessels. We know from textual information and from the work of Freidel and Schele that when a king was "crowned" he was given a white headband with five jade carvings inlaid in it, these jade carvings were called diadem jewels (1988). The diadem jewels were always made out of jade and had a carving of a face on them, our pendent is a diadem jewel. The fact that this man was buried with his jewel or pendent shows us that he was in fact a King and we can further say that he was a King during the Proto-classic time period because of the pendants association with the proto-classic vessels. This conclusion is congruent with the work of David Freidel and Charles Suhler who asserts that by this time period the diadem jewels (or pendants) were associated exclusively

with gods and kings(n. d.). Our tomb shows that dynastic kingship was in place by AD 150.

Our tomb and vessels are very significant because very little is known about the mortuary practices of the ruling elite during this period and they greatly increase the small sample of information that dates to the Proto-classic. They are helping us to understand Mayan elite burial Practices at a time in history that is relatively silent

In conclusion, my research Project on the ceramics of the Chan Chich tomb is far from Over. My study will be ongoing with future work dealing with a complete residue analysis Of each vessel and a thorough comparison of our tomb vessels to those of other sites. All of this will become my senior thesis-fulfilling graduation requirements for my program.

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CITATIONS

Feidel, David A and Linda Schele. Kingship in the Late Preclassic Maya Lowlands: The Instruments and Places of Ritual and Power. American Anthropologist 90 (3): 547-567.

Freidel, David A. and Charles Suhler. (n.d.) Crown of Creation. Manuscript Submitted for Edited Volume, Nikolai Grube, Editor.