RECENT EXCAVATIONS AT SAN ESTEVAŃ, NORTHERN BELIZE

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This paper presents the results of excavations at the San Estevan site that were carried out during the summer of 2005. San Estevan was targeted as a likely location to recover Pre-ceramic deposits below the first Formative village levels at the site core. Pre-ceramic remains turned out to be more scant than we had hoped and only a few stone tools, including a single constricted uniface, were recovered from secondary contexts. Formative period deposits however were extensive. A large cobble surface dating to the Mamón horizon was documented with a stone wall alignment built atop it. In addition, an early Chichenel era cache was documented within the plaster floor associated with the first building episode of the large central mound at the site. Hints of a Late Archaic occupation and plentiful Middle and Late Formative deposits make the San Estevan an ideal location to study the development of sedentary village life and the origins of complex society in the region.

Introduction

This chapter reports on our 2005 work at the site of San Estevan (Figure 1). Located midway between Lamanai and Cerros, and containing substantial Late Formative ceremonial architecture, this site was a secondary center or a small independent polity that emerged on the east shore of the New River (Rosenswig and Kennett 2007). San Estevan is also located relatively close to Nohmul, Cuello, Kichkanha, Colha, and the sites found within Pulltrouser Swamp, including Kaxob. As a result of much previous work, the early occupation and Formative ceramic sequence have been extensively studied in the region (e.g., Hammond 1991; Hammond et al. 1988; Hester et al. 1996; Iceland 1997; Kosakowski 1987; Levi 1993; Lopez 1996; McAnany 2004; Pendergast 1981; Pohl et al. 1996; Pring 1976; Pyburn 1990; Reese and Valdez 1987; Rosenswig and Masson 2001; Sydrys 1983; Turner and Harrison 1983; Valdez 1988; Zeitlin 1984).

William Bullard (1965) excavated and restored two Early Classic structures (I and II) at San Estevan in 1962. Norman Hammond’s (1975) Corozal Survey generated a map of the site in 1973 and, in 1989 and 1990, Laura Levi (1993, 1996, 2002, and 2003) mapped outlying groups in details and excavated a sample of domestic structures. At the first Belize conference in 2003, while presenting evidence of the Archaic occupation in Northern Belize, I showed images of the damage to center of the San Estevan site (Rosenswig 2004). I noted that the damage to the site was unfortunate but provided remarkable access to the earliest occupation at the site’s center.
including the tell-tale orange soils associated with Archaic occupations elsewhere in Northern Belize (Rosenswig and Masson 2001).

Taking advantage of the easy access of normally deeply buried deposits, in 2002 we scraped down and drew the most informative section of the profile (Rosenswig 2004). We noted what appeared to be a cobble surface above the orange soil stratum and a plaster surface above that. A test pit placed 1m behind the profile confirmed this stratigraphy and documented that the cobble surface extended west and dates to the Middle Formative and the plaster surface to the Late Formative. The remainder of this paper reports results from a six week University at Albany field school undertaken in 2005 in collaboration with the University of Oregon.

Results of the 2005 Excavations

Very few Archaic tools were recovered from our excavations at San Estevan, and none were found in the orange stratum. Four patinated, unifacial tools are all we encountered in 2005 and each was found in later period fill; including one example of a constricted uniface pictured on the left of Figure 2.

Bulldozing damage at San Estevan is extensive and the site is littered with Classic period sherds. We spent a number of days at the beginning of the 2005 season trying to figure out the extent of the damage of the mounds in the site core. After scratching our heads for many days, a bulldozer showed up and we realized that what appear to be mounds, when overgrown with chest-high vegetation, are actually recently bulldozed garbage piles (Figure 3). Therefore, during the 2005 season we documented that Mound XV is the only remaining mound of all those included on Bullard's map of the site core (see Figure 1).

Figure 2. Archaic patinated unifacial tools recovered at San Estevan

Figure 3. Bulldozer pushing garbage and soil into linear piles that resemble long mounds when overgrown with vegetation.

Middle Formative Midden - Suboperation 6

The one advantage of this massive destruction to the site core is that remains of early domestic activity are now visible on the surface. To the south of Mound XV, approximately under where Mound VII stood or in the adjacent portion of what used to be Plaza B (see Figure 1), domestic remains were exposed by the bulldozing.
These domestic remains consisted of a plaster floor, dark midden-like soils and Middle Formative ceramics and excavated as the Suboperation 6 complex.

Late Middle Formative Mamon ceramics are documented at the top of this deposit. A partial Guitara Incised (Kosakowsky 1987: 44-50; Pring 1976: Fig. 2c, d; Valdez 1988: 43) dish was recovered on the current round surface from within a dark midden like soil (Figure 4a). Based on this freshly exposed evidence of domestic occupation, we opened six 2 x 2 m excavation units and documented this occupation surface and the dark brown midden below. We brought two of the units down to bedrock and thus recovered 8 sq m of Middle Formative midden from seven 10 cm thick levels. The top of this midden contained late Middle Formative Mamon deposit, including a mostly complete Muxanal Red-on-cream (Kosakowsky 1987: Fig. 5.9; Pring 1976: Fig. 2f, g; Valdez 1988: 44) dish recovered from approximately 25 cm below the level the bulldozer exposed (Figure 4b).

From the bottom of this midden we recovered early Middle Formative ceramics (see discussion in Hammond 1991: 7) such as the Copetilla Unslipped (Figure 5a). Note the characteristic square rim; short, vertical-necked jars with exterior thickened rims as well as the distinctive double cylinder strap handle (Kowsakowsky 1987: Fig. 3.1; Pring 1976: Fig. 1e, h; Valdez 1988: 42). In addition, this example of a Backlanding Incised, outflaring dish is distinctive also of the Swazey phase (Figure 5b). Such post-slip incision is one of the defining characteristics of early Middle Formative ceramic decoration across Mesoamerica (Rosenswig 2005). In addition to the physical proximity of the sites, we use Cuello ceramic type names for my description of the San Estevan ceramic assemblage as Pring (1976) originally used ceramics from San Estevan, Cuello, Nohmul, Colha and Santa Rita to establish his Formative ceramic types (see Kosakowsky 1987: 9).

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**Figure 4.** Late Middle Formative ceramics recovered from San Estevan (drawings by Wilberth Cruz Alvarado).

**Figure 5.** Early Middle Formative ceramics recovered from San Estevan (drawings by Wilberth Cruz Alvarado)
Cobble Surface, Wall Alignment and Ballcourt Remains – Suboperation 3

Following up on the 2002 test unit that documented a cobbled surface above the orange stratum, we opened up a larger horizontal exposure of the area from the edge of the backhoe cut east-northeast of Mound XV. The disturbed overburden was cleared off, which exposed the plaster surface we had documented in 2002 and dated to the Late Formative. Below this, we documented 13 sq m of the Middle Formative cobbled surface (which extends even further to the south and west) as well as a stone wall alignment (Figure 6). From the dark soils below the cobbled surface many more early Middle Formative ceramic sherds were recovered. Furthermore, we documented that part of one of the benches of the ballcourt was still intact. Levi (1993) reports that the earliest remains she encountered at San Estevan were from excavations in the alley of the ballcourt, which would have been nearby to these excavations. She (Levi 1993: 99) originally identified an early Middle Formative structure that, with larger excavations, we have determined to be a large cobbled surface. Figure 6 thus shows the complex stratigraphy at Suboperation 3. Hints of an underlying Preceramic orange soil horizon was found below a Middle Formative midden and cobbled surface. Above this, two Late Formative plaster surfaces and what remains of the western ballcourt bench were documented. Similarly, late Formative plaster plaza floors over Middle Formative cobbled living surfaces and wall alignments were also documented at Cuello (see Hammond et al. 1991).

Late Formative Axial Cache East of Mound XV – Suboperation 8

A 2 x 6 m trench was excavated east of Mound XV (Figure 7). When bedrock was reached (2.3 m below current ground surface) we found the Middle Formative dark soil under two thin plaster floors and then a series of four Late Formative monumental construction episodes. Each construction level was full of large Formative period ceramic sherds. Deposited within the top of the earliest documented monumental construction episode we recovered an axial cache designated Cache 1.

![Figure 6. Stratigraphy documented at Suboperation 3, San Estevan.](image)

Cache 1 consisted of five vessels and three ceramic sherds formed into round disks (Figure 8). The two bucket vessels were originally placed lip to lip. These vessels are identical to Society Hall Red dishes from Cuello in terms of size, form and finish (Kosakowsky 1987: Fig. 6.12 & 6.13). The three “amphorae” jars documented in Cache 1 at San Estevan are identical to one found in the early facet Chacnacel Mass Burial 1 at Cuello in Platform 34 (Kosakowsky 1987: Fig. 29a). These Sierra Red vessels are a very peculiar form and, in her ceramic monograph, Kosakowsky (1987: 83) commented on the one from Cuello that: “I know of no other vessel of this shape from the Maya Lowlands.” Based on the early date of Mass Burial 1 at Cuello that contained the distinctive amphora vessel, and the fact that this cache was recovered from the first
monumental construction episode of Mound XV, we tentatively dated San Estevan Cache 1 to the beginning of the Late Formative period (and see Rosenswig and Kennett 2007).

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7.** Trench excavated east of Mound XV.

Three disks were also recovered from the cache. Two were placed upside down within the lower bucket vessel and leaning against its east side. The third was placed outside the bucket vessel and 10 cm to the east. These disks measure 8, 9 and 9 cm repetitively in diameter and fall within the average range of the 123 such disks (from non-domestic contexts) reported from Cerros (Garber 1989: Fig. 26). Also consistent with the three disks from San Estevan, ninety percent of the sherd disks larger than 5 cm in diameter were recovered from Late Formative contexts at Cerros (Garber 1989: Table 17). The three disks from Cache 1 could have served as lids for narrow-mouthed vessels as some suggest (e.g., Willey et al. 1965; Garber 1984: 83). In fact, the three amphorae jars recovered from Cache 1 also have rim diameters of 8, 9 and 9 cm, and so, the disks would have provided perfect covers before they were used and then deposited as shown in Figure 7.

The three amphorae vessels were equally spaced around the bucket vessel and their openings faced west. The amphorae vessels might therefore be interpreted as the three hearth stones of creation. Further, the east direction indicated by the placement of the cache relative to Mound XV and the placement of the three disks as well as the west direction indicated by the openings of the amphorae vessels were not random. The people who interred these objects were purposefully indicating aspects of their ideology.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8.** San Estevan, early Chicanel Cache 1 arranged in a recreation of the original placement and orientation of vessels and ceramic disks.

2005 Results and Future Research Prospects

The hint of Preceramic deposits which originally drew me to San Estevan disappointing as no tools were recovered from the distinct orange soil horizon. While there were clearly Archaic peoples living in the region (Rosenswig 2006; Rosenswig and Masson 2001), they appear not to have been intensively occupying the area that was later to become the site core of San Estevan. The early horticultural inhabitants of the region likely more intensively occupied areas close to water such as the New River 1.5 km to the west or Chan Lagoon 3 km to the east.

Damage to the San Estevan site center is massive and all of the Classic
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Figure 9. Artifacts recovered from San Estevan in 2005: (a) shell artifacts and lithic perforators as well as (b) Formative period unifacial tools.

period architecture documented by Bullard has been obliterated. However, due to intervention by the IA, the Late Formative Mound XV has been preserved. Our excavations shows that part of the east bench of a ballcourt remains intact as does the platform on which Mound XV was built. This means there are substantial Late Formative deposits preserved from the very centre of the site.

Further, in 2005 we confirmed that while all of the large mounds in the site core, except Mound XV, have been destroyed, the nearby architecture is still intact, including three large elite group next to the ceremonial core. We have also documented that intact, and now easily accessible, Middle through Late Formative deposits still exists at the San Estevan site core. This makes the site an ideal location to research both the origins of settled life and the development of this polity on the New River.

Artifact analyses, currently in progress, establish a shell working industry at San Estevan where worked shell was produced with lithic perforators like those shown in Figure 9a. There also appears to have been a continued use of unifacial lithic tools (Figure 9b) through the Formative period that were presumably employed for the same agricultural activities as during the previous Archaic period (McAnany 1992; Potter 1991). Future work at the San Estevan site should shed light on these local economic and political developments and shows great potential to contribute to the understanding of how settled life and cultural complexity developed in northern Belize.

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