

REASSESSING SAN ESTEVAN'S ROLE IN THE LATE FORMATIVE POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF NORTHERN BELIZE

Robert M. Rosenswig and Douglas J. Kennett

We reassess San Estevan's role within the Late Formative period political geography of northern Belize. This medium-sized site has been interpreted as a subsidiary center to Nohmul that ruled the area along with Cerros, Lamanai, and Colha (Scarborough 1991). It has also been suggested that scores of autonomous polities existed in the region at this time (McAnany 1995). We examine these contrasting models in light of our recent excavations in the central precinct of San Estevan. These excavations reveal a stratigraphic sequence of Middle through Late Formative period deposits. Excavations document that the central part of the site was plastered over after 50 cal. B.C.—at roughly the same time as monumental construction projects were also begun at Cerros, Nohmul, and Lamanai. San Estevan's central Mound XV was built on these plaster surfaces during the Late Formative periods as was the adjacent ballcourt. Based on our new excavation data we suggest that San Estevan was an independent polity during the Late Formative period. Further, we propose that San Estevan competed, and engaged in warfare, with other medium and large regional centers and was one of ~12 independent polities forming a patchwork across northern Belize.

Redefinimos el rol de San Estevan dentro del período Formativo Tardío en el norte de Belice. Este sitio ha sido interpretado como un centro subsidiario en la esfera política de Nohmul que gobernó el norte de Belice junto a Cerros, Lamanai y Colha (Scarborough 1991). Se ha sugerido también que unas veintenas de unidades políticas existieron en la región (McAnany 1995). Examinamos estos modelos contrastantes a luz de nueva evidencia de San Estevan. Nuestras excavaciones revelan una secuencia estratigráfica que se extiende a través de depósitos del Formativo Medio y Tardío. Y documentan que su sector central fue repellido luego de 50 cal. a.C.—dentro del lapso general en el cual dieron inicio las edificaciones monumentales en Cerros, Nohmul y Lamanai. El Montículo XV de San Estevan, se construyó sobre estos repellos durante el Formativo Tardío al igual que el cancha de pelota adyacente. Con base en nuestros nuevos datos de excavación sugerimos que San Estevan fue una unidad política independiente durante el Formativo Tardío. Asimismo, proponemos que San Estevan compitió y guerreo con otros centros regionales medianos y grandes, y fue una de aproximadamente 12 unidades políticas independientes en el norte de Belice.

Scholars disagree over exactly when centralized, state-level societies emerged among the lowland Maya. Many date this seminal transition to the Mirador Basin of Guatemala at approximately 300 B.C. (e.g., Hansen 2001; Hansen et al. 2002; Sharer and Traxler 2006:259, 262–263). However, Arthur Demarest (2004:87) proposes that state-level societies were in place “by the fourth century B.C. or earlier.” In contrast, Joyce Marcus (2003:81) cautions that: “The transition from chiefdom to state may have occurred during the Late Pre-classic, but we do not have enough evidence to be sure.” More important than the typological exercise of deciding when to divide chiefdom from

state is to understand how the lowland Maya region was organized during the Late Formative period (300 B.C.–A.D. 300) when monumental architectural building projects were undertaken over a large area and greater numbers of people lived in closer proximity to each other than ever before.

While Mirador Basin polities may have been the largest Late Formative period lowland Maya centers, documenting the forms of interaction between these peoples and those in neighboring regions is crucial to understand the emergence of Maya civilization (Figure 1). New evidence of Late Formative monumental centers has been reported to the north of El Mirador at as Champotón (Folan et al.

Robert M. Rosenswig ■ Department of Anthropology, The University at Albany – SUNY, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany, New York, 12222 (email: rrosenswig@albany.edu)

Douglas J. Kennett ■ Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon. Eugene, OR. 97403

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Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica with sites mentioned in the text.

2002) expanding the number of documented centers from the better-known Late Formative occupations at Calakmul (Folan et al. 1995) and Becán (Webster 1976). To the south, sites such as Homul and Cival (Estrata-Belli 2006), San Bartolo (Sarturo et al. 2006), and more recently at Chaak Ak'al (Johnston 2006), add to the long-known Late Formative period occupation of Uaxactún (Smith 1950) and Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1995; Laporte and Valdés 1993). An increasingly complex picture of Late Formative Maya political geography (Johnston 2006:177) is coming into ever clearer focus.

The subject of this paper is the Late Formative occupation of northern Belize, to the east of the Mirador basin. This region was intensively studied during the 1970s and 1980s, and publications from such sites as Cerros, Colha, K'axob, Lamanai, and Nohmul are voluminous compared to other areas of the Maya lowlands (see references below). We recently began investigating the Formative-period occupation of San Estevan, located in the very center of these sites in northern Belize. Below, we pre-

sent some preliminary results and evaluate three models that describe the local Late Formative political geography.

San Estevan and Northern Belize during the Late Formative Period

The San Estevan site is located on the New River, 30 km south of the Bay of Chetumal (Figure 2). William Bullard (1965) mapped its civic-ceremonial center in the 1960s and restored two Early Classic structures. Norman Hammond (1975) then excavated at San Estevan and expanded Bullard's map with several additional plaza groups around the site core. It was the ceramic collections from these excavations at San Estevan along with initial testing at Nohmul, Santa Rita, Colha, and Cuello that Duncan Pring used to first establish the Swazey, Bladen, Lopez Mamom, and Cocos Chichannel phases (Kosakowsky 1987:9). Hammond (1975:42) classified San Estevan as a Level 8 "medium major ceremonial center" larger than

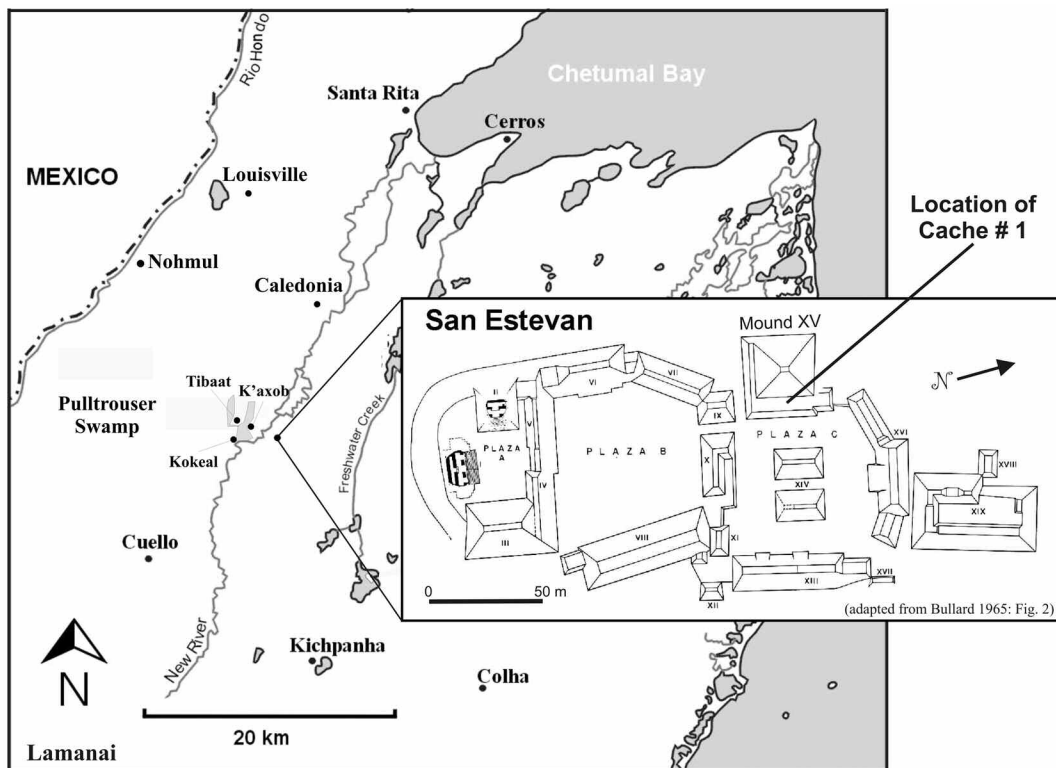


Figure 2. Map of northern Belize and sites mentioned in text; with map of San Estevan site center inset.

Colha and smaller than Nohmul. Next, Laura Levi (1993, 1996, 2002) mapped outlying house groups at San Estevan and excavated several domestic structures. Based on her analysis of the architectural layout of these groups, Levi (2003) argued that San Estevan, along with the southern portion of Pulltrouser swamp (i.e., K'axob and Kokeal), formed one political unit by the Classic period, and that Nohmul, along with the northern part of Pulltrouser swamp (i.e., Tibaat), formed another polity. Based on the wide distribution of Late Formative pottery across the site and civic ceremonial architecture of the same age, Scarborough (1991:181–190) suggested that this was a second-order center within the Late Formative Nohmul polity, subsequently an independent first-order center during the Early Classic period.

San Estevan is located close to midway between the two largest Late Formative sites on the New River: Lamanai ~40 km to the southwest (Pendergast 1981) and Cerros ~30 km to the northwest (Robertson and Freidel 1986). The site is also ~15 km overland from Nohmul (Hammond et al. 1988;

Pyburn 1989, 1990) to the northwest, and Colha is ~20 km to the southeast (Shafer and Hester 1983, 1991; Valdez 1988). San Estevan is thus located between the four largest Late Formative sites in northern Belize and is also close to Cuello (Hammond 1991a; Kosakowsky 1987; Kosakowsky and Pring 1991, 1998), Kichpanha (Reese and Valdez 1987), and sites within Pulltrouser Swamp (Turner and Harrison 1981, 1983), including K'axob only 4 km from San Estevan's core (López 1996, 2005; McAnany 2004; McAnany and López 1999).

During the late 1990s, much of the monumental architecture in San Estevan's core was bulldozed and a large crater was excavated for the underlying limestone marl (Figure 3). Mound XV, at 15 m, is the highest remaining structure. The damage is unfortunate but provides remarkable access to the earliest occupation at the site's center. In 1999, we noted an orange soil horizon below stratified occupation levels. Such orange soils are associated with Archaic deposits elsewhere in northern Belize (Rosenswig and Masson 2001). Taking advantage of the easy access to the earliest occupation levels,

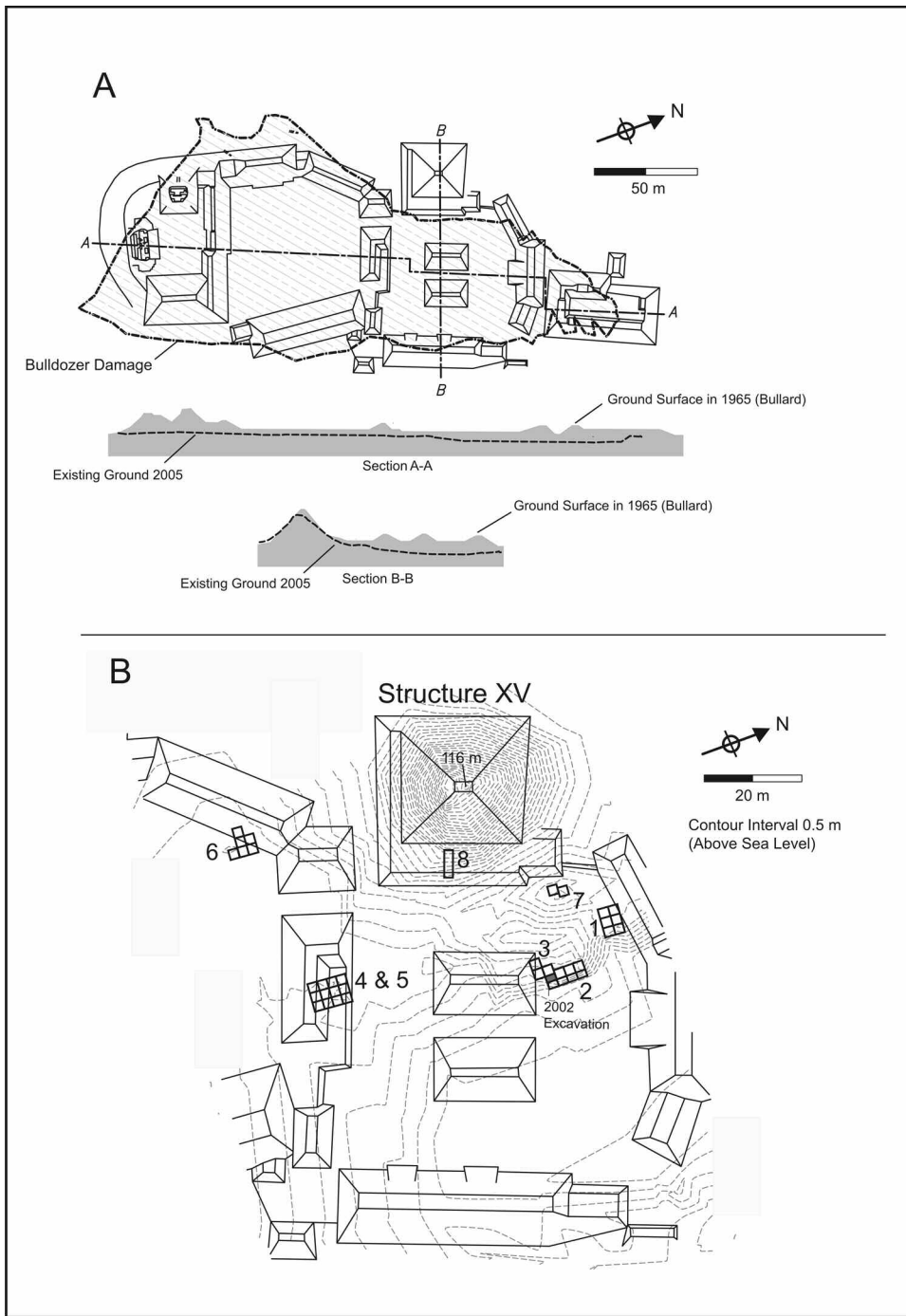
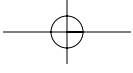
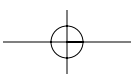


Figure 3. Map San Estevan from 2005 showing (A) extent of damage (B), and location of 2005 excavation units.



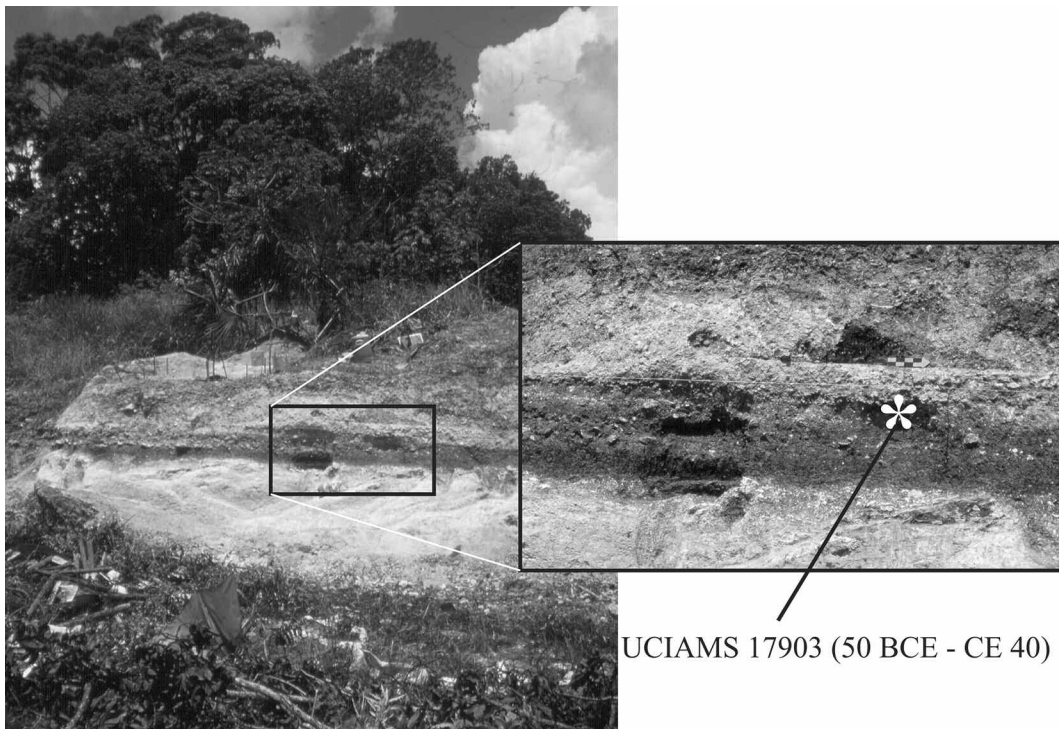


Figure 4. View of west edge of bulldozer damage profiled in 2002. Close up of soil samples recovered in set with location of AMS date (UCIAMS 17903) recovered from fill below ballcourt alleyway indicated.

Rosenswig and three workmen drew profiles produced by the bulldozer cuts and excavated two test pits in 2002 (Figure 4). These excavations confirmed the existence of orange soil as well as intact Middle and Late Formative period deposits (Rosenswig 2004).

During the summer of 2005, a University at Albany field school, in collaboration with Douglas Kennett and students from the University of Oregon, spent six weeks excavating Middle and Late Formative period deposits in the center of San Estevan (Rosenswig 2007a). Substantial Middle Formative period domestic deposits were documented including a 70-cm-deep midden and a cobble surface with an intact stone wall alignment (Rosenswig 2008). We also discovered that part of the west ballcourt bench remained intact despite the bulldozing, and further, established that this architectural feature had been built during the Late Formative period. During excavations in the middle of the Mound XV's east side we discovered a Chicanel period cache (Cache 1), associated with the Mound XV's earliest documented monumental construction episode.

We describe the contents and arrangement of Cache 1, present its stratigraphic context, and explore the relationship of Mound XV to the ballcourt and repeated Late Formative period plastering episodes of the site center. We also present the associated ceramic cross-dating assessments and AMS dates to help define these events temporally. Elsewhere, Rosenswig (2008) discusses evidence of the early and late Middle Formative (see Figure 5) domestic occupation recovered from dark midden soils below the recently bulldozed civic-ceremonial architecture.

The second half of this paper assesses San Estevan's place in the Late Formative political geography of northern Belize and outlines three hypotheses that describe its political organization. Our intention is twofold: to present recently recovered data from San Estevan, and to establish a framework for future research. Ultimately, it will be necessary to determine how Late Formative political centers in northern Belize articulated with the rise of the much larger polities in the Mirador Basin. However, for the purpose of this paper we assume that Late Formative period polities in north-

	San Estevan	Cuello	Colha	Cerros	Nohmul	Lamanai	K'axob
300							
BCE/CE	Late Formative	Cocos Chicanel	Onecimo	C'oh Ixtabai	Colmotez Chicanel Puncuy Tzec	Lag	Late K'atabche'k'ax Early K'atabche'k'ax
300	Late Middle Formative	Lopez Mamom	Chiwa		Mamom	Late Mesh	Late Chaakk'ax
600	Early Middle Formative	Bladen Swazey	Bolay		Bladen	Early Mesh	Early Chaakk'ax
900	Late Archaic		Late Preceramic Early Preceramic				

Figure 5. Formative chronology chart with phase names from sites in northern Belize.

ern Belize were operating independently of direct external interference and focus on local political organization. To bolster this contention of non-interference from distant polities, we point to the case Pyburn et al. (1998:53) make that it was only during the Early Classic period that settlement changes in the region (e.g., ruralisation at Nohmul and Albion Island and nucleation at sites such as San Estevan) are consistent with increased taxation of local elites from the expanding Petén polities.

San Estevan 2005—Mound XV and Cache 1

A 1.5-x-6 m trench, designated Suboperation 8, was excavated axially at the east base of Mound XV. At the bottom of this trench, a dark midden soil containing Middle Formative period pottery was documented between bedrock (2.3 m below the current ground surface) and two thin plaster floors. Above this, a series of four monumental construction episodes were documented. Each episode consists of limestone cobbles, earthen fill, and copious amounts of plaster. Distinct construction episodes were divided by even surfaces with evidence of dark organic soil on white plaster, which suggests occupied surfaces. Middle and Late Formative pottery sherds within the construction fill of the first two building episodes date these to the establishment of Mound XV in the Late Formative period. Cache 1 is consistent with those at Cuello as “dedicatory offerings for the successive raisings and enlargements of buildings” (Hammond 1999:60). That caches were interred at the time of monumental building episodes indicates that these construction events were imbued with ritual and/or political significance.

We discovered Cache 1 in the center of Mound XV’s east edge, within the top of the first monumental construction episode (Figure 6). This feature allows for the temporal assignment of Mound XV, by ceramic cross-dating, to the Late Formative period. It is possible that smaller, Middle, and/or earlier Late Formative period structures are buried within the core of this mound and predate the building episodes we have documented. However, the construction level that buried Cache 1 marks the first time that Mound XV reached its current horizontal dimensions.

Cache 1 Contents

Cache 1 consisted of five ceramic vessels and three ceramic disks. Two “bucket” vessels (Figure 7a–b) were originally placed lip to lip and are identical in size, form, and finish to Society Hall Red dishes reported from Cuello (Kosakowsky 1987:Figures 6.12 and 6.13). Three “amphora” jars (Figure 7c–e) also recovered from Cache 1 are virtually identical in shape to one found in Early Facet Chicanel Mass Burial 1 at Cuello (Kosakowsky 1987:Figure 29a). These vessels are all approximately the same size—the one from Cuello is 20 cm high whereas the San Estevan vessels are 17.5 cm (Vessel #3), 18.5 cm (Vessel #4), and 13.5 cm (vessel #5) in height (see Figure 7). These Sierra Red amphora vessels are rare, 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.”

Three ceramic disks were also recovered from Cache 1 (Figure 7f–h). Two were stacked, placed slip-side down within the lower bucket vessel and leaning against its east side. The third was placed

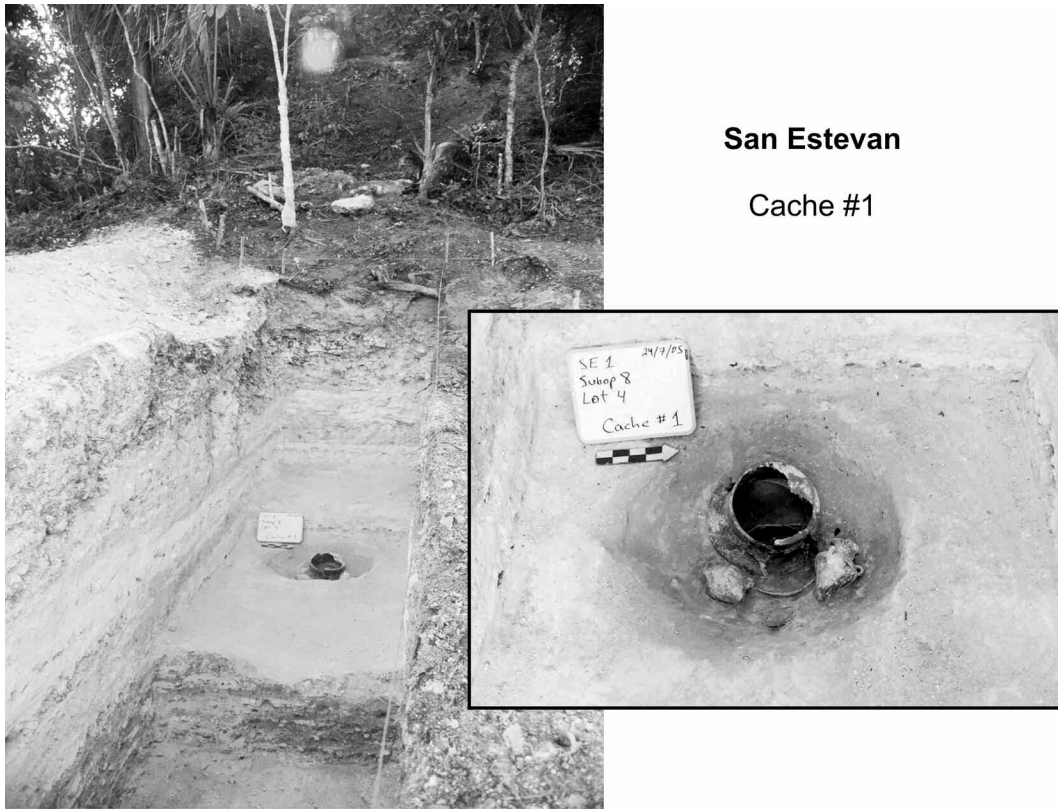


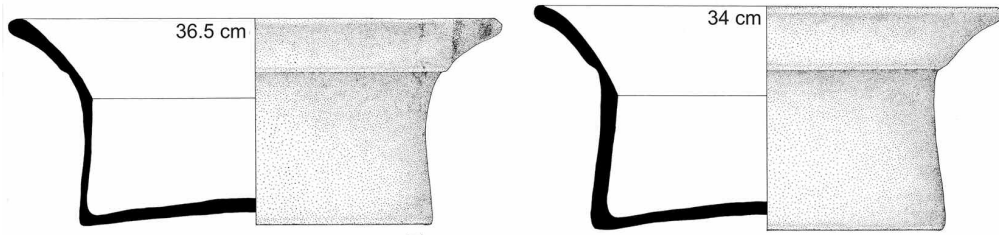
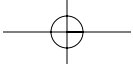
Figure 6. San Estevan Chicanel Cache # 1 as unearthed in Suboperation 8.

outside the bucket vessel and 10 cm to the east. The disks measure 8, 9, and 9 cm in diameter and fall within the range of the 123 disks from Cerros recovered from nondomestic contexts (Garber 1989:Figure 26). Ninety percent of the sherd disks larger than 5 cm in diameter documented at Cerros were recovered from Late Formative contexts (Garber 1989:Table 17). These ceramic disks could have served as lids for narrow-mouthed vessels (Garber 1984:83). The amphora jars deposited in Cache 1 have rim diameters of 8, 9, and 9 cm—precisely the same as the disks. The disks would therefore have provided perfect covers for the amphora vessels. It is plausible to suggest that these vessels contained a liquid employed in the ritual enacted after the construction episode that enlarged Mound XV to its current horizontal extents, and then, that the empty vessels and their lids were interred as part of a dedication ceremony. The disks were not directly associated with the amphora vessels, so that their use as lids is inferred based on size and shape. The fact that the disks were not found next to the

amphora vessels means that their placement in the cache was purposeful. In contrast, Cache 1 at Cerros's Structure 6B contained five ceramic vessels, three of which had sherd lids directly associated with vessels (see Freidel et al. 2002:Figure 3.16).

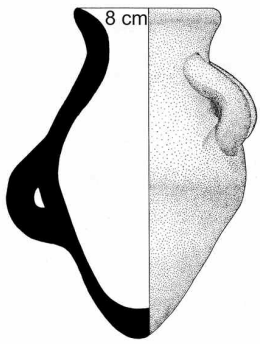
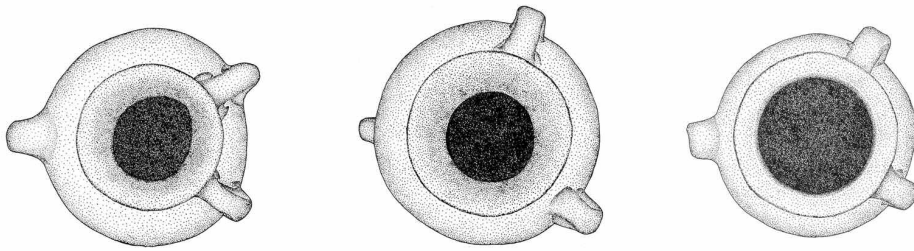
Arrangement and Orientation of Cache 1 Contents

The three amphoras were equally spaced around the bucket vessels and their openings all faced west, while the three disks were placed in the east side of the cache (Figure 6). The eastward orientation of the disks and westward-facing direction of the amphora vessel openings represent some aspect of the ideological system of the people who interred Cache 1. Chase and Chase (1998:314) note that the Late Formative caches associated with monumental architecture are the most elaborate excavated at Caracol and "have contents that are layered, and/or ordered in such a way as to suggest an intentional plan or design reflecting both directional order and placement." Freidel and Schele (1988:557) further

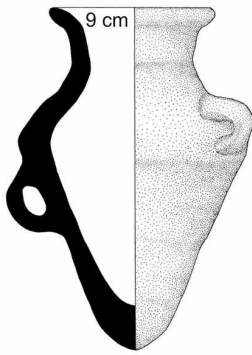


a - Vessel # 1
Society Hall Red

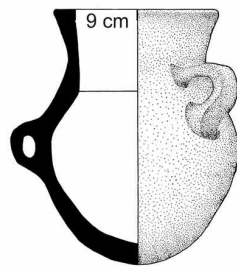
b - Vessel # 2
Society Hall Red



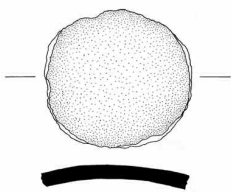
c - Vessel # 3
Sierra Red



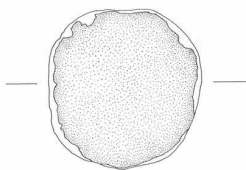
d - Vessel # 4
Sierra Red



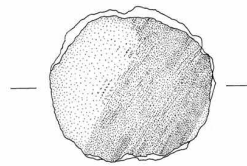
e - Vessel # 5
Sierra Red



f - Disk # 1



g - Disk # 2



h - Disk # 3

Figure 7. Drawings of the five vessels and three ceramic disks recovered from San Estevan Cache 1 (drawings by Wilberth Cruz Alvarado).

discuss the importance of east and west orientation of Late Formative Maya caches. East is the direction of the rising sun and the direction that later Mesoamerican peoples oriented their maps. The rising sun is associated with the emergence of life (Schele and Freidel 1990:66, 426), and so, could also have been metaphorically linked to the birth of a new (political) age at San Estevan when monumental architecture (and the political power that commissioned it) was first constructed.

The three amphora vessels were equally spaced around the two buckets and could be interpreted as the "Three Hearthstones" of creation represented celestially in Orion (Freidel et al. 1993:Figures 2:14, 2:15, 2:16, and 2:17). As Freidel et al. (1993:67) note: "As the hearthstones surround the cooking fire and establish the center of the house, so the three stone throne of creation centered the cosmos and allowed the sky to be lifted from the Primordial sea." This, they recount, is still relevant today among Yucatec farmers who pile stones to mark the center of their fields before clearing and planting them (Freidel et al. 1993:130). Regardless of the specific emic interpretation, Cache 1 was interred as part of the earliest monumental construction episode we have documented at San Estevan's Mound XV.

Dating San Estevan Cache 1 and Ballcourt

We argue that Cache 1 dates to the middle of the Late Formative period based on four lines of evidence. First, the three amphora vessels within Cache 1 are unusual; the only other vessel known of this type was recovered from the Chicanel Mass Burial 1 at Cuello. This amphora vessel was recovered at the feet of one of the two principle individuals interred in Mass Burial 1 (Robin and Hammond 1991:Figures 10.4 and 10.5). Cuello's Mass Burial 1 also contained a bucket vessel similar to those from Cache 1 at San Estevan (Kosakowsky and Pring 1991:Figure 3.39e).

Second, in addition to similarities in both vessel forms, the mass burial at Cuello "marked the construction of Platform 34 and a change in architectural layout from the Middle Preclassic patio group to the broad open platform of the Late Formative" (Robin and Hammond 1991:211). The same vessel types mark the transition to Late Formative period public architecture at both sites. At Cuello, another mass burial within a later Chicanel

platform occurs above the location of Mass Burial 1 and was later marked with a stone monument (Robin and Hammond 1991:211). This suggests ritual continuity at this location starting at the end of the Middle Formative period.

The third and fourth lines of evidence dating Cache 1 are stratigraphic. Cache 1 was found within the first Late Formative construction episodes of Mound XV (see Figure 6). This indicates that the cache predates at least one Late Formative period construction episode undertaken to enlarge Mound XV. The final line of evidence is that the construction episode that Cache 1 is associated with occurs directly on top of two widely occurring thin plaster surfaces in the site center that seal Middle Formative (900–300 B.C.) middens. The second plaster surface itself dates to cal. 50 B.C.–A.D. 40 (see below).

Suboperations 4 and 5, southeast of Mound XV, document three distinct plaster surfaces on top of a dark midden containing Middle Formative period pottery (Figure 8). The most complex Middle to Late Formative stratigraphy we documented was at Suboperation 3 (Figure 9). In these units, two thin plaster surfaces seal a dark midden containing a cobble surface and a stone wall alignment dating to the Middle Formative (Rosenswig 2008). On top of the second plaster surface are the remains of San Estevan's ballcourt and the first construction episode documented at Mound XV.

The stratigraphic sections exposed across San Estevan in 2005 indicate that a substantial portion (i.e., over 250 sq m) of what became the site center was plastered multiple times after the Middle Formative period, thus defining the center of the site (Rosenswig 2007a). This is similar to what occurred at Cuello beginning in the Late Formative period (Hammond and Gerhart 1990). At Suboperation 8, there was no evidence of occupation on the final plaster surface prior to the first monumental construction episode (Figure 6). At Suboperations 3 and 8, two plastering events are documented below Cache 1 and the ballcourt. At other areas, such as Suboperation 4 and 5, we documented three plastering episodes above a Middle Formative period dark midden (Figure 8). Architectural construction and large-scale plastering (and replastering) at the center of San Estevan thus occurred periodically. Both construction and maintenance would have required substantial labor expenditures.



Figure 8. Photo of Suboperations 4 and 5 with Middle Formative dark midden visible under successive Late Formative plaster surfaces.

AMS Radiocarbon Dates

Four AMS dates were run on wood charcoal recovered from flotation samples collected during the 2002 season (Rosenswig 2004). Three samples were taken from a 1-x-2-m test unit (#17900, 17901, and 17902) and a fourth (#17903) from soil collected from the profile at the edge of the bulldozed crater (Figure 4). Two of the samples contained modern carbon. These modern samples were from levels selected before we realized how extensively disturbance was. Of the two good samples, one dates to the Middle Formative period and the other to the Late Formative period (Table 1).

The Middle Formative date came from Stratum D, a 10–15 cm dark brown midden on which the cobble surface was built (see location in Figure 9). The age range for this date is 800–760 cal. B.C. (2-sigma calibrated). In uncalibrated radiocarbon years (in which Formative phase limits are often discussed) this 2-sigma date range is 640–580 B.C. This date fits with the established regional ceramic

chronology at the end of the early Middle Formative period. Stratum D contains diagnostic early Middle Formative pottery types with square rims, short, vertical-necked jars with exterior thickened rims, double cylinder strap handles (Copetilla Unslipped), as well as decoration executed using post-slip incisions (Backland Incised) (Rosenswig 2008). The cobble surface was laid down after this, and so, dates to the late Middle Formative Mamom period.

The charcoal that produced the Late Formative radiocarbon date was collected from a light gray fill beneath a plaster surface documented in the quarry wall on the west edge of Suboperation 2 and 3 (see location in Figure 4). This 5–10 cm thick level did not contain diagnostic ceramics and was designated Stratum C. It is located above the cobble surface and directly below the plaster floor that underlies San Estevan's ballcourt. The 2-sigma corrected date of 50 B.C.–A.D. 40 thus dates the ballcourt to the Late Formative Chicanel period. The

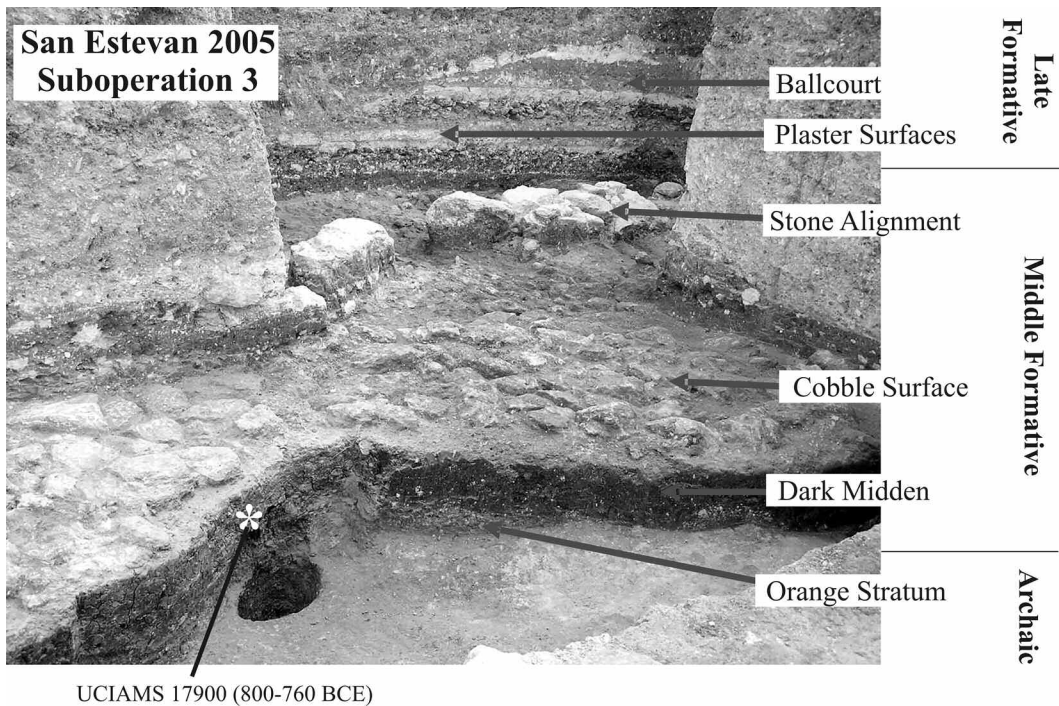


Figure 9. Archaic through Late Formative stratigraphy at Suboperation 3. Location of AMS date (UCIAMS 17900) recovered from Stratum D indicated by an asterisk.

date of 50 B.C. also corresponds to the major construction phase at Cerros (Scarborough 1983:736) and when the Late Formative Structure N10-43 was built at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981). This temporal correspondence in the initiation of monumental construction projects at the three largest sites on the New River suggests that inhabitants of this waterway were responding to similar local events by building the first monumental mounds at each site.

San Estevan and the Late Formative Political Geography

Major political changes occurred in northern Belize during the Late Formative compared to the preceding Middle Formative period. Scarborough (1983:720) described this "as a time of coalescence which culminated in the technological and sociological achievements of the Classic Maya." Cerros, with its elaborate stuccoed masks at Structure 5C-2nd, emerged as a center at this time (Schele and Freidel 1990). Freidel and Schele (1988:49) proposed that it was during the first century B.C.

that the concept of lordship (*Ahaw*) was instituted to explain the contradiction between an ethos of egalitarianism and the obvious social hierarchy established by the elite in the area. This resulted in a significant increase in mound construction at many southern lowland Maya centers. As noted above, this is precisely when monumental architecture was first built at Lamanai, Cerros, and San Estevan. It is also when the large central platform was built at Nohmul (Hammond et al. 1987, 1988; Pyburn 1990) and the more modest architecture erected at Cuello (Hammond and Gerhardt 1990). During the Late Formative, residents of the nearby community of K'axob also constructed a modest platform (Aizpurúa and McAnany 1999:122) and changed their burial tradition from isolated extended burials to pit burials containing multiple individuals (McAnany 1995:55). Two mass burials at Cuello also date to the Late Formative (Hammond 1999; Robin and Hammond 1991). Stone crypts were also first used to bury select individuals at Cuello at this time (Robin 1989:22). The "eye-catching" differences in Chicanel ceramics (e.g., vessel size, form, and surface finish) from

Table 1. AMS Radiocarbon Dates from 2002 Test Excavations at San Estevan. Radiocarbon Dates from University of California, Irvine AMS Facility Were Calibrated Using Calib 5.0.2 (Stuiver And Reimer 1993).

Sample #	Provenience	Material	14C	Error	2 sigma (B.C.-A.D)	2 sigma (BP)
UCIAMS 17901	Suboperation 1, Lot 4	Charcoal	-1365	20	Modern	modern
UCIAMS 17902	Suboperation 1, Lot 6	Charcoal	-3750	15	Modern	modern
UCIAMS 17903	Profile - Stratum C	Charcoal	1990	15	50 B.C. -A.D. 40	1990-1900
UCIAMS 17900	Suboperation 1, Lot 12 Stratum D	Charcoal	2565	15	800-760 B.C.	2750-2710

K'axob, Cuello, Colha, and Cerros are interpreted as creating distinct identities (Bartlett and McAnany 2000:108–114). Further, INAA suggest that ceramics from these same sites were less chemically diverse during the Late Formative compared to the earlier Middle Formative vessels sampled (Bartlett et al. 2000), suggesting increasingly formalized ceramic production occurred at this time. The first monumental architecture coupled with changing mortuary patterns and increased identity of elites at individual polities through the region indicates the changing social and political practices in northern Belize.

It is within this dynamic political and ideological environment that a large portion of San Estevan's central precinct was established by laying down a series of plaster floors and erecting a central mound and a ballcourt. We now review how scholars have interpreted the political geography of northern Belize during Late Formative period—and San Estevan's position within it by outlining two very different models that have been proposed to describe the political organization of the region and providing a third alternative to be explored with future work.

Four Polity Hierarchical Model

Scarborough (1991:Table 10) ranks Late Formative San Estevan as a second-order center within the Nohmul polity. This assessment was based on two assumptions: first, that Cerros, Lamanai, Colha, and Nohmul were the capitals of separate polities (see Scarborough 1991:Figure 8.1); second, that any other communities with monumental architecture located within the territorial limits of these four polities (defined by thessien polygons) were controlled by the closest centers.

San Estevan was certainly smaller than Scarborough's four first-order communities. For example, 700 structures dating to the Late Classic period were documented within a 35 sq km area at Nohmul

with half of them containing Late Formative period materials (Pyburn 1990:195). Further, at Cerros, 108 Late Formative mounds have been recorded within a 69 ha area (Scarborough and Robertson 1986:Table 5). However, while these four first-order sites are each larger than San Estevan, site size is only one (albeit a significant) variable, and alone cannot be directly equated with political hierarchy (Crumley 1995:2; Flannery 1999:16–18; Pyburn et al. 1998:38). Instead, indicators of political administration also must be considered. Such indicators might include the overall size of civic-ceremonial architecture; the form, arrangement, and redundancy of such architecture; the existence and distribution of monumental stucco masks as well as emblem glyphs (Marcus 1983:464–466, 1993); and the extents of courtyards (Scarborough and Valdez 2003).

McAnany (2004:12) recognized a size hierarchy among Late Formative sites along the New River. She classified Lamanai, Cerros, and Nohmul as first-order sites, San Estevan and Cuello as second-order sites, and small villages such as K'axob as third-order communities. However, she cautions that: "The extent to which this site hierarchy translated into active political control over lower-order centers is far from obvious" (McAnany 2004:12). We agree and argue that some form of social or economic stratification needs to be demonstrated to correspond with site size differences before conclusive claims of political hierarchy can be sustained. Taking a regional perspective, Sharer and Traxler (2006:279) identify El Mirador as a first-order site; Tikal, Uaxactun, San Bartolo, and Lamanai as second-order sites; Cerros as a third-order site; and K'axob and Kichpanha as fourth-order settlements. They observe that "some 3rd and 4th order settlements must have been subordinate to larger political capitals, but others may have been outside these orbits and remained relatively independent" (Sharer and Traxler 2006:279). In this

paper, we focus on local political organization, as discussed previously.

Scarborough designated Lamanai, Nohmul, and Cerros as first-order political centers based on the extent of their settlement and the size of their civic-ceremonial architecture. However, the assumption that Colha was a Late Formative political center is not based on its architecture but instead on the fact that the site presumably controlled the distribution of high-quality chert and the tools manufactured from it (Shafer and Hester 1983, 1991). Our reason for pointing this out is not (necessarily) to argue for a lowering of Colha's position in the local hierarchy but instead to note that different criteria were used in designating this site as a first-order political center. Kichpanha was also the locus of chert tool workshops (Shafer and Hester 1991) but had modest Late Formative architecture and was designated as a second-order site. Scarborough has more recently elaborated on the various political and economic criteria that can contribute to political hierarchy (Scarborough and Valdez 2003).

Scarborough's original claim that San Estevan was subordinate to Nohmul during the Late Formative period requires closer examination. Scarborough (1991:Table 10) assumed that San Estevan was a second-order center within the Nohmul polity, which is located on the south shore of the Río Hondo (see Figure 2). Their political association seems inconsistent with the more general observation of the spatio-political organization of northern Belize where "the river systems are believed to have bound most communities into a shared regional orientation" (Scarborough 1991:181). Given the logic of river-oriented travel, San Estevan would more likely have been subordinate to Lamanai or Cerros, both also on the New River. Economic ties between sites along the New River are documented by ceramic petrographic data linking pottery production at K'axob to Lamanai (Bartlett 2004). Given the efficiency of water transport (Ames 2002), river-oriented polities seems a reasonable default assumption for northern Belize until evidence is presented to support an alternative.

Expectations. Scarborough uses settlement area, settlement location, and the size of civic-ceremonial architectural to define the four polities that ruled northern Belize during the Late Formative period. Presumably mortuary customs and architectural

styles would have also been more similar within (and less similar between) the primary and secondary centers of each of the four polities. Further, economic integration should be greatest within (and less between) the four polities, and second- and third-order sites must be shown to be subordinate to political centers. Subordination might be demonstrated through varying levels of monumental architecture at sites at different tiers within each polity. In addition to the ranking of site sizes, more diverse monumental architecture could indicate that more public/administrative functions were carried out at primary centers and that only a subset of these was carried out at subordinate centers. Further, monumental masks might only be expected to adorn pyramids at primary centers. Social subordination could also be evidenced by intra-polity ranking of burial treatment showing that higher-status rulers were interred at primary centers and that lower-order leaders were buried at subordinate centers. Economic subjugation might be demonstrated by documenting that higher-order sites gained wealth and lower-order sites lost assets in accordance to their place in the settlement hierarchy (i.e., the payment and receiving of tribute). Wealth accumulation via tribute should be linked to the highest-ranked centers. Social, political, and economic hierarchies were likely interrelated, but each should be documented separately, and it should not simply be assumed that all aspects of hierarchical organization correspond. One of the greatest impediments to documenting these relationships is incomplete data. For example, many Formative period burials have been recovered from Cuello (Hammond 1999; Robin and Hammond 1991) and K'axob (McAnany et al. 1999), whereas none are currently known from San Estevan. There are also few Late Formative burials documented from Cerros, Kichpanha, or Colha, and Late Formative mortuary data from Lamanai remain unpublished.

Rural Autonomy Model

An alternative to Scarborough's hierarchical model is that smaller sites were the centers of autonomous polities. McAnany (1995:144–145) makes a case for such an interpretation positing a continuum of hierarchy across the greater Maya area and that K'axob and other small, rural communities in northern Belize remained politically autonomous throughout both the Late Formative and Classic

periods. Such a proposal of rural autonomy is quite different from Scarborough's model. McAnany (1995:155) suggests that in northern Belize "the class concept itself was much less established than it was in other parts of the lowlands, such as central Petén" (also see McAnany 2001). From this perspective, San Estevan would have been autonomous of Nohmul and K'axob would have been autonomous of San Estevan—and each site would have been the center of its own independent micro-polity. Although she does not explicitly present it as such, McAnany's (1995) rural autonomy model challenges Scarborough's (1991) hierarchical interpretation of northern Belize political organization. The two models cannot both account for the way Late Formative polities were organized in northern Belize. Instead, the models represent two ends of a continuum that describe very different levels of hierarchical organization.

Some details of McAnany's local autonomy model require closer inspection. K'axob is only 4 km from the center of San Estevan—a one- or two-hour walk depending on road conditions. San Estevan and the K'axob and Kokeal branches of Pulltrouser Swamp had a shared architectural tradition during the Classic period with basal platform complexes and large composite groups consistently arranged in proximity to monumental architecture (Levi 2003:85–91). In Levi's (2003:91) words, "settlement at Kokeal and K'axob mimicked the distributional patterns found at San Estevan almost to the last detail." In contrast, architectural form and distribution in Tibaat, Pulltrouser's third zone, was distinct, and "from a San Estevan perspective, settlement in the area just looked wrong" (Levi 2003:91), with many more basal platform groups arranged more evenly across that branch of Pulltrouser Swamp. Tibaat was, however, both physically closer and structurally more similar to Nohmul. Levi (2003:92–93) observes:

Tibaat was situated a little less than 4 km east of Nohmul's acropolis, a radial distance that Anne Pyburn (1989) used to define the perimeters of the Nohmul settlement system. Unlike the San Estevan-K'axob-Kokeal community, but in keeping with Tibaat, Nohmul lacked clear subsidiary monumental precincts. As was true of Tibaat, Nohmul's basal platform groups achieved a wide areal distribution. In the same vein, the relatively high incidence of Classic

period nonplatform dwellings at Tibaat was mirrored in the settlement along Nohmul's northern perimeters. These observations only hint at what was probably a vastly different spatiality for the Nohmul community.

Levi employs this shared building tradition to argue that K'axob was part of the San Estevan polity during the Classic period, a relationship that we propose was established during the Late Formative.

The Late Formative residents of San Estevan and K'axob likely shared kinship ties that went back to the Middle Formative. However, the subordinate economic position of K'axob during the Late Formative is suggested by a general decrease in the quantity of nonlocal materials used by inhabitants of the site compared to their Middle Formative ancestors (McAnany 2004:416–417). In particular, shell-bead working, a significant craft activity during the Middle Formative, decreased significantly through the Late Formative period (Aizpurúa and McAnany 1999). In contrast, there was an increase in the quantity of nonlocal obsidian, jade, and chert at Cuello during the Late Formative (Hammond 1991a:247). An increase in wealth during the Late Formative period is also evident at Cerros where there was a rich array of goods acquired from distant lands during this time (Garber 1989). Additionally, there was an increase in the quantity of ritual ceramic wares at Cerros during the Late Formative and they were concentrated in elite contexts suggesting that an intracommunity socioeconomic hierarchy was in place by this time (Robertson 1983; Scarborough and Robertson 1986). The relative quantity of exotic and other prestige goods thus appear to have been increasing at larger centers and decreasing at subordinate villages during the Late Formative. Differences in wealth items and exotic goods between sites of different sizes provides a straightforward manner in which to test McAnany's claim that K'axob was politically autonomous through the Late Formative and Classic periods. Elsewhere, McAnany et al. (2002:134) model the difference between trade and tribute relations (from their work on cacao in the Sibun River valley) based on the fact that the latter results in local poverty and the former in local wealth. We predict the same for the Late Formative polities of northern Belize. In addition, K'axob's first pyramids were not built until the Early Classic period (Bartlett and McAnany 2000:107). Therefore, it

seems likely that this rural locale was part of the large Late Formative polity centered at San Estevan, as we argue at greater length below.

McAnany (1995:155) states that the inhabitants of K'axob "probably thought of their world in a more circumscribed way. The larger places of Nohmul to the northwest and San Estevan to the southeast framed the regional picture from the perspective of the place we now call K'axob." Regardless of how the residents of K'axob conceived of the rulers at Nohmul and San Estevan, as far as Levi's architectural analysis is correct (and we think it likely is), they were more closely integrated into the San Estevan polity by the Classic period. Beginning in the Late Formative, we propose that tribute obligations had likely been imposed on K'axob's residents, resulting in their economic exploitation by political superiors at San Estevan. The San Estevan elite were likely linked to K'axob in a web of kin ties, but, we posit that class concerns superseded such social ties during the Late Formative. Documenting the elevated economic position of the San Estevan elite (specifically in relation to K'axob) is one of our primary goals for future research at the site.

Expectations. In contrast to the four polity model, the rural autonomy scenario suggests relative parity between all centers purported to be independent polities. Therefore, crucial political/administrative functions should be replicated at each independent polity and expressed materially by key civic-ceremonial architectural features at each autonomous political center. Burials should not show clear ranking from smaller to larger sites—each site should have buried leaders who had interacted as peers during their lives. Most importantly, any claim of political autonomy for scores of polities implies that either there was no tribute system operating in northern Belize at the time or that each autonomous center benefited from tribute relations. The most convincing manner to demonstrate political power is to force others to act in a way that is not beneficial to their economic well being. Economic exploitation is thus the clearest manner to demonstrate that political power was being exercised.

Political Patchwork Model

The models discussed above represent two ends of a continuum that could describe the Late Forma-

tive political geography of northern Belize. We have lifted the models from Scarborough's and McAnany's publications and have emphasized the differences between them. Here, we propose a third model that is roughly midway in the degree of political centralization. We posit that both first- and second-order sites, as defined by both Scarborough (1991) and McAnany (1995), were independent polities that subsumed smaller nearby communities to create a patchwork of 10 to 12 independent polities across northern Belize. In this scenario, we suggest that during the Late Formative period, San Estevan was the center of an independent polity whose elite dominated the economic and political affairs of nearby rural villages, such as K'axob. We propose this as a hypothesis to be evaluated, as we do not currently have the detailed economic data from San Estevan to demonstrate this conclusively.¹ We do propose, however, that a convincing circumstantial case can be made at present.

San Estevan is strategically located midway between Lamanai (40 km to the southwest) and Cerros (30 km to the northeast) on the New River. It is also midway between Nohmul (15 km to the northwest) and Colha (20 km to the southeast)—each an overland hike. If travel by canoe is assumed to be roughly twice as fast as by foot (especially when laden with cargo), then the four centers are approximately equidistant from San Estevan in terms of travel time, each of the four first-order centers within approximately a half day's walk or paddle. As Scarborough (1991:183) discusses for the Cerros polity: "Travel time by canoe to second- and third-order communities along the coast in the Cerros territorial sphere was shorter than by trekking on less-direct overland routes." The speed and ease of transporting goods and people is also the basis for positing that polities were distributed along the major river systems in northern Belize.

We further argue that San Estevan appears to have been strategically located between the four largest polities in the region. This location would have been an ideal meeting ground for people from these polities to exchange goods from the complimentary exchange networks that intersected in northern Belize. First, there were the maritime trade routes that the inhabitants of Cerros were involved with (Freidel 1978; Freidel and Scarborough 1982). Second, there were the Petén-focused trade routes of Lamanai and Nohmul (Pyburn 1990:194), from

which direct contact with more hierarchical polities provided examples to be emulated. In fact, from the Río Hondo and up the Río Azul, it is then approximately a 75 km (i.e., 2–3 day) overland hike to either Tikal or El Mirador. Third, chert extraction and production formed the base of Colha's economy (Shafer and Hester 1983, 1991). An independent, market community might thus reasonably describe San Estevan's position in the local Late Formative political and economic landscape of northern Belize.

Scarborough (1991:182) posits that the Late Formative period second- and third-order communities in northern Belize likely "maintained economic autonomy but were linked by stronger socio-political ties to the major centers." This proposal would be hard to evaluate archaeologically as it is based on the concept of "an aerial bond of social solidarity and ideological identity" (Scarborough 1991:183). Both are difficult to document convincingly, using site extents and architectural size, without the help of written documents. In fact, McAnany (2001) uses the lack of written documents (along with the poverty of palaces and lavish tombs) to argue that in northern Belize, during both the Late Formative and Classic periods, "local leaders existed, but kingship, institutionalized rulership, never crystallized" (McAnany 2001:145).² Scarborough (Scarborough and Valdez 2003:7) has recently described the political organization of north-western Belize as politically autonomous and economically interdependent communities specializing in the heterogeneous environment of bajo, terrace, and aguada. Scarborough's thinking on the nature of political organization has changed over the past two decades as he now explores the contested nature of power relations.

The second-order communities of Louisville and Caledonia, each located midway between Cerros and Nohmul, were both said to have been "politically contested" as they were equidistant between these two first-order centers (Scarborough 1991:183, Table 10). San Estevan is easily added to the list of contested sites with its Late Formative monumental architecture (Mound XV, a ballcourt, etc.) and intermediate location between the four largest sites in the region. In fact, in terms of travel distance, San Estevan appears to have been the most "contested" site in northern Belize at this time. The more large, second-order sites there were at

intermediate locations (thus lacking obvious spatial association to a larger centers), the less the four polity model seems an appropriate description of the political landscape. The more second-order sites were contested, the more it can be expected that conflicts between these centers would have erupted.

It is certainly the case that even the largest polities in northern Belize never rivalled Petén centers such as El Mirador (Hansen 1990, 2001; Matheny 1987). It is also quite likely that during the Late Formative period even the largest polities in northern Belize were not organized as states. Our guess is that they were complex chiefdoms whose rulers likely had aspirations of achieving the types of status and control of wealth enjoyed by the rulers of El Mirador and other regional centers farther afield in Mesoamerica. Following the New River to Lamanai and then continuing overland would have made the Late Formative Petén polities only a few days voyage from San Estevan. Furthermore, travel on to Chiapa de Corzo, Izapa, Kaminaljuyu, Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, or any of the other newly emerging states in Mesoamerica during final centuries B.C. and initial centuries A.D. would not have been an insurmountable undertaking. In fact, all those centers seem to have been participating in related structures of royal life (Clark and Hansen 2001). Therefore, the forms of hierarchical political organization that were crystallizing throughout Mesoamerica during the Late Formative period would have been known to the inhabitants of northern Belize. With no single primate* center, prominent elites at numerous sites in northern Belize likely jockeyed for position in a balkanized political environment.

Scarborough (1991:183) had proposed that military coercion was not employed during the Late Formative. This was partially based on his interpretation of the large trench around Cerros as an irrigation canal. However, he (Scarborough 1983:736; Scarborough and Robertson 1986:170) did explore the alternative possibility that the canal that cuts off Cerros and its peninsula from the mainland was a defensive moat. In fact, Scarborough (2003:80–82) has astutely noted more recently that irrigation features often also fulfill a defensive function and that the two roles are not mutually exclusive (see also Keeley et al. [2007]). It is therefore significant that the canal/moat and most of Cerros's civic-ceremonial architecture was built late in the

C'oh phase (200–50 B.C.), precisely when monumental architecture was being erected across northern Belize (Scarborough 1983:736) and when Freidel (1986:101; Freidel and Schele 1988:449) note the emergence of public expressions of the so-called “jaguar war complex” expressed in the stucco facade at Cerros and Structure 34 at El Mirador (Hansen 1990:119; and see Estrada-Belli [2006]). The construction projects that generated large mounds and elaborate public art undoubtedly made a statement about the political power and social status (either real or desired) of the elite. The ditch at Cerros served as a conduit for water, which would have both drained nearby agricultural land and impeded attack. Its width (6 m) and depth (2 m) are reminiscent of other Late Formative Maya defensive features such as those at Becán (Webster 1976). Hansen (2001) also reports a 2-km-long wall west of the El Mirador site center. Defensive features at political centers, and the aggressive behavior implied by investing considerable effort in these constructions, are consistent with our model of regional competition between a patchwork of independent polities.

We propose that another, somewhat more subtle, defensive pattern in northern Belize is that neither San Estevan's nor Nohmul's civic-ceremonial precincts were built on the edge of the New and Hondo Rivers. Instead, each was positioned approximately 2 km away, on elevated ground, with a clear view of the river. These 2 km buffer zones would have helped protect against any rapid water-born attacks from the meandering rivers. Similarly, Lamanai was located on a lagoon that would have given sentries posted atop any of the large mounds a view for many kilometers. The large pyramids built next to the sea at Cerros would have served as effective watchtowers for water-born attack while the ditch protected the land-side of the site. Competition resulting from the social and political changes evident in the Late Formative archaeological record likely resulted in the type of strife usually associated with times of increased social stratification (e.g., Kennett 2005; Kennett and Kennett 2000; Rosenswig 2007b).

There is other evidence for increased violence in northern Belize during the Late Formative period. At Colha a woman was buried in a seated flexed position surrounded by decapitated heads (Sullivan 1991). The two mass burials and decap-

itated individuals from Cuello have already been discussed (Hammond 1999:55–56). Hammond (1999:59–60) notes that “mass sacrifice was introduced at the same time as monumental architectural construction begins to reflect the reality of political power.” Similarly, Webster (1999:311) notes in a comparative treatment of the Maya that “ritual war and territorial aggrandizement complement each other in a syndrome of competition that was widespread in many cultures.” That the Cuello mass burials consisted of males with high incidence of healed fractures further indicates violence (Saul and Saul 1997:43).

We suspect that competition and violence were significant factors in the Late Formative political landscape of northern Belize—regardless if one considers these polities to be incipient states or complex chiefdoms. This typological distinction does not strike us as particularly insightful for exploring the structure of political relations at the time. We propose that the elite who ruled the dozen or so independent polities would have advertised their power with newly established civic-ceremonial architecture and done battle with each other from time to time. Determining the extent to which violence and warfare played a part in political interactions in northern Belize will be important in understanding the reorganization of society in northern Belize (and elsewhere) during the Late Formative period.

Summary

Despite the impressive quantity of archaeological work carried out in northern Belize, there is still no consensus about the Late Formative period regional political organization. Scarborough (1991) has argued that there were four large states in the region at this time. McNany (1995, 2004) proposes an alternative where scores of politically independent entities of different sizes and varying levels of political complexity coexisted. Surprisingly, these two models have never been explicitly evaluated one against the other to see which better describes the available data. In this paper, we propose a third model in which second-order centers such as San Estevan, Louisville, Caledonia, Kichpanha, and Cuello were also independent polities interacting and competing with each other as well as with the larger centers of Cerros, Lamanai, Colha, and Nohmul. Each of these independent polities would

have attempted to absorb people from small nearby communities as rulers jockeyed for social status and economic wealth. Such a patchwork of competing polities implies a balkanized political landscape where conflict and violence between neighbouring elites would have been the norm. Future settlement studies, coupled with detailed comparisons of elite objects from multiple sites, will be required to determine which alternative best describes the Late Formative political geography of northern Belize. The crucial economic pattern we will need to document is whether goods moved between sites of different sizes due to trade or tribute. The former creates a web of mutual benefit to neighbouring elites whereas the latter impoverishes some to the benefit of others. Tribute is the clearest indication of political power exercised by dominant groups over subordinate ones as working to enrich others would only occur if the former had power over the latter.

Discussion and Thoughts for Future Work

Warfare seems to be a universal characteristic of human relations. Conflict, raiding, and murder between neighboring groups of chimpanzees is well established (Wilson and Wrangham 2003), suggesting that our most distant ancestors engaged in such behavior. Warfare is also common in middle-range societies and often plays a role in the emergence of states (Arkush and Allen 2006; Carniero 1970; Kennett and Kennett 2006; Kennett et al. 2006). Conflict and warfare are generally associated with increased political complexity as polities exert their autonomy (or else lose it) when competing with neighbors (e.g., Carniero 1992:182–186; Cohen 1984; Earle 1997; Kolb and Dixon 2002; Webster 1999). Archaeologically, the most convincing material evidence of war and violence is its depiction in iconography, the placement of sites in inaccessible locations, the presence of fortifications, and mass graves of clearly slaughtered people (Keeley et al. 2007). No longer viewed as peaceful philosophers living in vacant ceremonial centers, Maya rulers are now interpreted as engaged in organized warfare (Freidel 1986; Webster 2000).

Across Mesoamerica the Late Formative period seems to be when violence is attested to in the iconography of such sites as Izapa where Stelae 3

and 4 show rulers wielding knives in menacing poses, and Stela 21 where one such ruler holds the head of his victim while blood flows from the decapitated body (Lowe et al. 1982). Violence is further evidenced as part of public ritual by the eviscerated *danzantes* that were long ago interpreted as “chiefs or kings slain by the earliest rulers of Monte Alban” (Coe 1962:95). As noted above, Freidel (1986:101; Freidel and Schele 1988:449) suggests that the Late Formative stucco facades on public buildings depict an analogous complex of publicly displayed war imagery. With such public representations of violence and defensive features at sites like Cerros, Becán, and El Mirador, we feel it reasonable to conclude that the Maya were like most other emergent civilizations and that warfare was a significant part of political life.

While warfare was one context of interaction between the elite of neighboring polities, trade likely formed another significant forum of contact between groups both close and far. Aizpurua and McAnany (1999) and Freidel et al. (2002) have all proposed that shell beads and other ornaments were important long-distance trade items during the Formative period. These authors further emphasize how shell beads are important due to their interchangeability and their labor-invested, exotic nature contributes to their use as both prestige and currency goods. However, while *Strombus* shell is documented during the Middle Formative period, it was only during the Late Formative that the less-common marine shell *Spondylus* is documented at K'axob (Aizpurua and McAnany 1999), Cerros (Freidel et al. 2002:44), and at Cuello (Hammond 1991b:185). Further, *Spondylus* is also first documented at Tikal (Moholy-Nagy 1989) and Nakbé (Hansen in Freidel et al. 2002:44) only during the Late Formative period.

Shell was a common trade good and the temporal concordance of the first use of *Spondylus* during the Late Formative period at sites in northern Belize and Petén centers, not to mention the depiction of shells in public art (Freidel and Schele 1988), indicates its involvement in the emerging Maya elite culture. The use of shell objects as accoutrements of rulership and their trade over long distances is documented in other areas of Mesoamerica at this time. For example, Zeitlin (1990) proposes a similar scenario between coastal and inland regions of Oaxaca. Feinman and

Nicholas (1993), Spencer (1982:170–173), and Winter (1984:204–205) all provide evidence of Pacific Coast shell transported inland during the Late Formative period. It appears to have been a widespread practice that shell ornaments were employed by emerging elites at many early Mesoamerican states.

For the purpose of this paper, local patterns of shell transport and production are equally important. While marine shell is documented at all northern Belize sites during the Late Formative, more is documented at inland locations such as K'axob and Cuello compared to the coastal center of Cerros. As Hammond (1991b:185) observes:

In Cocos times a coastal community such as Cerros (Fig. 1.1) could have been a supplier, since although a surprisingly small number (Garber 1989: Table 11) of shell objects were found there, many have close parallels to Cuello.... Unexpectedly, stone beads outnumbered shell at Cerros, unlike the Cuello inventory where stone, pottery and bone beads...were rare."

Due to local availability, shell and shell beads may not have been as sought after by the inhabitants of Cerros for local consumption as was the case of people further inland in Belize and Guatemala. This pattern suggests that traded goods acquired more value the farther they were transported from their source. Marine shell appears to have been used in greater quantities by Late Formative residents of Cuello and K'axob than by those at Cerros. From a broader geographical perspective, the residents of northern Belize generally found *Spondylus* to have been less valuable than did the Guatemalan elites such as those in the Mirador Basin. Marine shell would thus have provided a perfect export commodity for the northern Belize elites who wanted to trade with their neighbors to the west.

Patterns of shell consumptions and exchange are also significant for examining how local trade relations functioned between Late Formative polities in northern Belize. If coastal elites, such as those at Cerros, wanted to trade marine shell to Guatemala, they would have had to pass San Estevan and Lamanai on the New River or Nohmul on the Río Hondo. It might have been more efficient for the rulers of Cerros to focus on the local production of *Spondylus* and other marine shells (and

exchange of such resources from the north and south along the Caribbean coast) rather than making the two-week return trip to the Petén. The Cerros elite might have just delivered such products to San Estevan, a one-day return voyage away. This would have reduced travel time and the risk of plunder during trading trips. Shell trading might have been in finished jewelry and beads or in raw material. Distinguishing between these two possibilities is an empirical matter of documenting relative quantities of shell reduction debris recovered at various sites. Data from Cuello and K'axob suggest that unworked shell was traded at least that far inland to be fashioned into prestige items that could then have been traded into Guatemala as finished products.

The inhabitants of northern Belize possessed many products not available to the inhabitants of the Petén. Both Colha and Kichpanha were located along the northern edge of a very high-quality chert bearing zone. Their positioning at the northern margin of this zone (rather than further south) might have been to provide efficient access to the New River trade routes. Again, San Estevan would have been a one-day return trip overland for the residents of Colha to deliver chert tools for transport both downriver to Cerros and the Caribbean trade networks as well as upriver to Lamanai and on to the Petén. It seems that the reduction of high-quality chert into tools was being undertaken intensively at Colha (Hester and Shafer 1983, 1991). The degree to which chert from this source was also worked into tools at San Estevan (or other sites in the region) is a relatively simple matter of analyzing reduction debris. Salt is another likely candidate for a locally abundant product not available in the Petén. However, salt consumption leaves little archaeological residue and only intensive production of this necessary resource leaves clear material evidence (McKillop 2002).

Summary

In spite of the extensive damage to the San Estevan site core during the 1990s, the site holds considerable potential for contributing to our understanding political and economic organization in northern Belize. Excavations in 2005 have confirmed that all of the monumental architecture in the site core, except the central Mound XV, has been

destroyed (Figure 3). We have documented several Middle Formative domestic features and midden deposits below what later became the site core (Rosenswig 2007a, 2008). These deposits were sealed by a series of plaster surfaces covering more than 250 m², which are a stratigraphic marker that defines the beginning of monumental architecture during the Late Formative period after approximately 50 B.C. Mound XV and a ballcourt were built directly on top of these plaster surfaces and Cache 1 was interred in the center of the east side of Mound XV.

This paper also outlines three alternative models that describe the Late Formative political landscape of northern Belize. These are (1) a hierarchical four polity model, (2) a rural autonomy model, and (3) our newly proposed political patchwork model. Each model describes different levels of political centralization with a different number of autonomous polities. Each model provides a different set of expectations for San Estevan. In the first, San Estevan is defined as a secondary center within the Nohmul polity (or possibly Cerros or Lamanai if rivers defined political units) that also subsumed tertiary centers such as K'axob. In the second model, San Estevan and K'axob were two among scores of independent polities in the region. An underlying assumption of both models is that a degree of stability and peace (through coercion and cooperation respectively) was present for each political structure to remain unchallenged over numerous centuries. The third model introduced in this paper proposes that second-order sites such as San Estevan were independent polities that competed with first order sites and extracted tribute from rural populations in their vicinity (such as K'axob in the case of San Estevan). More work is certainly needed to assess San Estevan's position in relation to these alternative models. However, due to both the quantity and quality of published work from many sites in northern Belize, there already exists a great deal of Late Formative data to draw upon. The archaeological evidence currently available from northern Belize appears to us most consistent with the political patchwork model that posits a competitive (and regularly violent) political environment with 10 to 12 competing polities coexisting during the Late Formative period.

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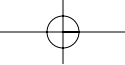
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Notes

1. As this paper goes to press, we have just returned from spending January and February 2008 collecting such data.
2. Despite McAnany's proposal that the northern Belize rulers were not literate, the Kichpanha bone provides an early example of Maya writing (Guernsey 2006:12–13). Recent discovery of writing dating to 400 B.C. at San Bartolo (Saturno et al. 2006) demonstrates how finding such evidence is serendipitous and that the absence of evidence can certainly not be taken as evidence of absence. Further, the presence of bark beaters dating to the Middle Formative at K'axob (McAnany and López 1999:157), Cuello (Hammond 2006:26), and one we recovered from a Middle Formative



context at San Estevan all suggest that the use of paper (if not necessarily writing) was established in northern Belize prior to the Late Formative period.

Dates

