

FAMSI © 1999: Brett A. Houk

Chan Chich ProtoClassic Tomb Project



Vessel 1, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

Research Year: 1998

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Protoclassic

Location: Orange Walk District, Belize

Site: Chan Chich

In June 1997, the Chan Chich Archaeological Project (CCAP) unexpectedly encountered a collapsed Protoclassic tomb in the Upper Plaza at Chan Chich, Belize. Time and financial constraints prevented the completion of the excavations that season. FAMSI supported the 1998 excavations and analysis of the tomb and its contents. The tomb contained badly preserved skeletal material, four pieces of jade, 11 vessels, a fragment of amate (fig tree) paper with blue and black brush strokes, fragments of stucco, a small piece of a pine wood believed to be part of a litter, and a badly preserved wooden artifact resembling a serpent.

Eleven ceramic vessels were found on the floor of the tomb. They have all been dated to the Protoclassic by Fred Valdez, the project ceramicist. The assemblage included four red mammiform support bowls (one of which had the feet removed prior to its placement in the tomb), one red basal flange bowl, one red-and-incised basal flange bowl, one red basal angle bowl, one red ring base jar, one red-and-buff mammiform support bowl, one red-rimmed buff spout-and-bridge jar, and one red-rimmed buff-incised spout-and-bridge jar.



Vessel 2, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.



Fragment of amate paper (magnified 4X) with blue and black brush strokes, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.



Fragment of Wood Litter, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

The jade artifacts included two ear spools, one tubular bead, and a sculpted pendant. Of particular interest is the jade pendant of a type known as helmet-bib, based upon the head bearing a helmet-like headdress, and having a bib-like object surrounding the lower portions of the face. This type of artifact has been dated to the Late Preclassic and is generally found only in elite contexts.



Vessel 3, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.



Vessel 4, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.



Vessel 5, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

The construction of the tomb involved the excavation of a rectangular shaped hole, 3.6 meters long, oriented 10 degrees east of magnetic north, through four Late Preclassic floors and 1.15 m into the underlying limestone bedrock. The intrusion had a width of ca. 1.6 m as it penetrated the fourth and oldest floor. Upon reaching bedrock, the excavation narrowed to 1 m in width.

The section of the tomb which was exposed during the 1997 field season had been covered by nine large, rectangular limestone slabs, or capstones, oriented east-west and laid out side-by-side, across the top of the tomb. The plan view shape of the tomb was ellipsoidal, with the capstones covering the center of the tomb being slightly longer than those at either end. The tomb and the large-stone matrix placed above it were completely sealed by the construction of a Protoclassic floor. Subsequently, still in the Protoclassic, a small, low structure having stone walls was constructed upon this floor.



Vessel 6, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.



Vessel 7, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

Three of the tomb capstones were found in-place in their original positions, revealing the tomb's original configuration. The majority of the capstones had collapsed to various depths within the chamber. The capstones in the center of the tomb had collapsed the farthest, and their fall had precipitated the creation of the hole on the surface of the

plaza. It should be noted that the capstone that fell the farthest did not fall all the way to the tomb floor. It landed, instead, upon a distinctive whitish, marly sediment at a level of about 15 cm above the tomb floor. It is unclear if this marl was deposited through natural or cultural processes. Whatever the case, the layer of fill protected the contents of the tomb from being smashed by the collapsing capstones. On the other hand, this marl deposit formed a very harsh depositional environment which probably accelerated the deterioration of the human skeletal material and several of the other artifacts.



Vessel 8, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

The north 1.5 m of the tomb, which were excavated in 1998 may have actually been a separate ante-chamber. This supposition is based on what appeared to be a crudely formed wall dividing the north section from the rest of the tomb. Alternatively, this may represent a fortuitous arrangement of collapsed capstones. The north end of the tomb, which was exposed and excavated in 1998 contained no artifacts or skeletal remains, but was capped in the same manner as the rest of the tomb.

The badly deteriorated human bone that was recovered from 30 separate locations within the tomb was analyzed by Julie Saul. Her analysis indicates the tomb had a single occupant, a robust male in the age range of 30 to 45 years who was interred in an extended, supine position. The head of the deceased was oriented toward the south. Thirteen maxillary teeth were found near the south end of the tomb marking the position of the skull. Three mandibular teeth were found in the area of the jade, indicating that after the mandible separated from the skull it fell or was otherwise moved to the chest area of the individual. Three of the recovered teeth were decorated.



Vessel 9, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

The size and complexity of the chamber and the exotic artifact assemblage clearly denote that the burial is that of an elite person at the site. The helmet-bib pendant is particularly important for understanding the social or political status of the tomb's occupant. Schele and Freidel have interpreted similar artifacts found at Cerros as being royal insignia jewels worn by the first king of the site. Generally, such artifacts are found only in elite contexts such as caches and tombs.

The wooden artifact in the shape of a snake is another potential status marker. Although we have not found any reference to similar artifacts in the literature, we believe that the wooden snake may have counterparts on other media. For example, Maya rulers are often depicted holding a double-headed serpent bar on Classic period stelae. Other examples include the so-called vision serpent on the Hauberg Stela, a monument roughly contemporaneous with Tomb 2 at Chan Chich. Classic period art often depicts rulers holding manikin scepters, and some Postclassic wooden scepters have been recovered from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichén Itzá. It is possible that the artifact is a staff or similar object which, like the helmet-bib pendant, is directly associated with the Protoclassic Maya concept of kingship.

While the interpretations here are preliminary and will require a tremendous amount of comparative research, the discovery of Tomb 2 at Chan Chich will ultimately provide important data about the Protoclassic period and the development of the concept of divine kingship among the lowland Maya. Regardless of the origin of the concept, whether it be a Maya invention or a cultural institution borrowed from others, the Maya at Chan Chich were participating in a great cultural revolution. This revolution transformed their political and social structure and resulted in a new concept of identity for the Lowland Maya.



Vessel 10, Tomb 2, Chan Chich, Belize.

More in depth report: [Chan Chich Archaeological Project](#)

Submitted 01/01/1999 by:
Brett A. Houk
Texas Tech University
bretthouk@gmail.com

C South Group
Extractable P mg/kg

