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Archaeological Reconnaissance at Chau Hiix

Research Year: 1995

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Early Preclassic to Post Classic

Location: Belize

Site: Chau Hiix

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Project Summary

The goal of the project was to collect basic data about the newly discovered site of Chau Hiix through a program of settlement mapping and testing and area excavation of five monumental buildings. These data are relevant to current understanding of the rise of complex society. Chau Hiix has evidence of a very long continuous occupation from Early Preclassic (ca 1200 BC) to Late Post Classic (ca 1600 AD). The schedule of reconnaissance was designed to investigate the relationship between Chau Hiix and its neighbors Lamanai and Altun Ha through comparison of architecture and portable artifacts and delineation of Chau Hiix's settlement.

Analysis of data collected shows that Chau Hiix was strongly influenced by Altun Ha until the collapse of that site in the 9th century, at which time the central structure at Chau Hiix was remodeled to more closely resemble Lamanai. This suggestion of political and possibly economic ties is strengthened by the discovery of an intensive agricultural system at Chau Hiix that would supply far more than the obvious subsistence needs of the local population, and hint at a level of economic integration not previously documented for the Prehispanic Maya. Chau Hiix was also found to have the second largest Post Classic settlement known from Belize. These data bear significantly on the nature and causes of the Maya collapse, which is the focus of ongoing research at the site.

In particular, support from the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) has allowed excavation and research at Chau Hiix to proceed

without further looting. The salary for the site guard not only provides livelihood for him, but demonstrates to the village that I have an ongoing commitment to the site and to their interest in its development. This reassurance buys more site protection that can be provided by the guard himself.

The Chau Hiix Project: Not "Pure Science" but Ethical Science

The Chau Hiix Project is founded on an ethical commitment to stewardship of the archaeological record as outlined by the code of ethics of the Society for American Archaeology. Public outreach and education are inherent in this commitment. The archaeological record is threatened everywhere by destruction due to development and looting, but this situation is worsened by local conditions of poverty and deprivation, such as those that exist in Belize.

The Chau Hiix Project has established an education and development program aimed at offering sustainable tourist development as an economically viable alternative use of cultural resources to looting and site destruction. This program is beginning to succeed: Chau Hiix has been promoted in several international magazines and Belizeans have become enthusiastic about its protection. Most importantly, the Belizean public has become interested in the culture history of the site, which has bearing on the "Maya collapse:" a subject with great popular appeal. At the same time, an understanding of the political and economic situation that led to such a dramatic cultural decline and alteration in the 9th century has considerable portent in the political present.

Specifically, a trial use of an ancient canalized field is scheduled for 1996. This test should prove interesting and educational to visitors, but may also become a valuable source of information on intensive agriculture in tropical alluvial soils in the present day. Second, data from Chau Hiix should have an impact on national development policy, since it appears that the rapid decline of centers like Altun Ha may have been the result of the failure of a centralized hierarchy to make decisions that were viable at the local level. Local systems can only be micromanaged from outside if managers have a great deal of microenvironmental sophistication. Such mistakes are frequently recognized on a small scale in the present; Chau Hiix may provide the first view of the cataclysmic results of uninformed economic policies carried out on a large scale in the past. The Chau Hiix project includes a commitment to science, to preservation, and to learning from the past.

For more information about Chau Hiix visit: [Chau Hiix Site Overview](#).

Submitted 11/01/1995 by:
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