

An Ancient Maya Seaport at Isla Cerritos, Yucatan

by Anthony P. Andrews



In 1987, the Milwaukee Public Museum presented an exhibit on “Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá,” at which several colleagues and I were invited to give talks on current research in Maya archaeology. My talk was on our recent excavations at Isla Cerritos, which we believed to be the port of the large inland Maya capital of Chichén Itzá. The exhibit included a large number of exotic trade goods, which powerful Itzá Maya merchants had imported from distant regions of Mexico and Central America. Our own fieldwork was closely related to this trade, as many of these fancy imports had likely been channeled through the trading port of Isla Cerritos.

Chichén Itzá was one of the largest and wealthiest urban centers in ancient Mesoamerica. Its main period of grandeur took place between A.D. 750 and 1200, when it grew to cover 20 square kilometers and include a population that numbered in the tens of thousands. Around A.D. 1000 it was the foremost political capital of the lowland Maya, and its domain included a large part of the northern Yucatán peninsula; its influence extended far beyond its immediate territory, as its merchants participated in land and maritime trade networks that girded the peninsula and reached far beyond, to the highlands of Central Mexico and Guatemala, and to the lower reaches of Central America. The Itzá Maya merchants controlled the salt beds of northern Yucatán, which were the richest in all of Mesoamerica; this salt and other local goods (cotton, honey, spices, and slaves) were eagerly sought after in foreign markets. In exchange, a cornucopia of trade goods flowed into Chichén Itzá: marine products from the coasts, fine

orange pottery from Tobasco, plumbate pottery, obsidian, and jade from the Guatemalan highlands, obsidian and turquoise from Central Mexico, and copper and gold from lower Central America.

While Chichén Itzá is located far from the coast – some 100 kilometers inland from the north coast – evidence suggests that its economy was closely tied to the exploitation of the salt beds and marine resources, and to coastal trading activities. Thus, it was logical to suspect that it had one or more ports on the coast, but archaeologists had no idea where they were located.

From the 1960s through the early 1980s, several colleagues and I conducted a series of surveys of coastal sites on the Yucatán peninsula, a program of research that I am still actively involved in. At the time, one of my objectives was to locate coastal settlements that were contemporary with Chichén Itzá. We located several, but I kept returning to one site which my father, brother and I had located in the course of a shelling expedition in 1963.

This was Isla Cerritos, a small island some 200 meters in diameter located some 500 meters off the north coast, five kilometers west of the modern fishing village of San Felipe. This island had a small group of rubble mounds, and a rich assortment of ceramics and artifacts on its surface. These materials were closely related to similar goods found at Chichén Itzá, and the location of the island almost due north of the capital suggested that it was a likely port for the Itzá. The island was also located in a very strategic position, at the mouth of the Rio Lagartos estuary. This estuary was a major

Navigational conduit for the salt of Las Coloradas, the largest salt beds in Yucatán.

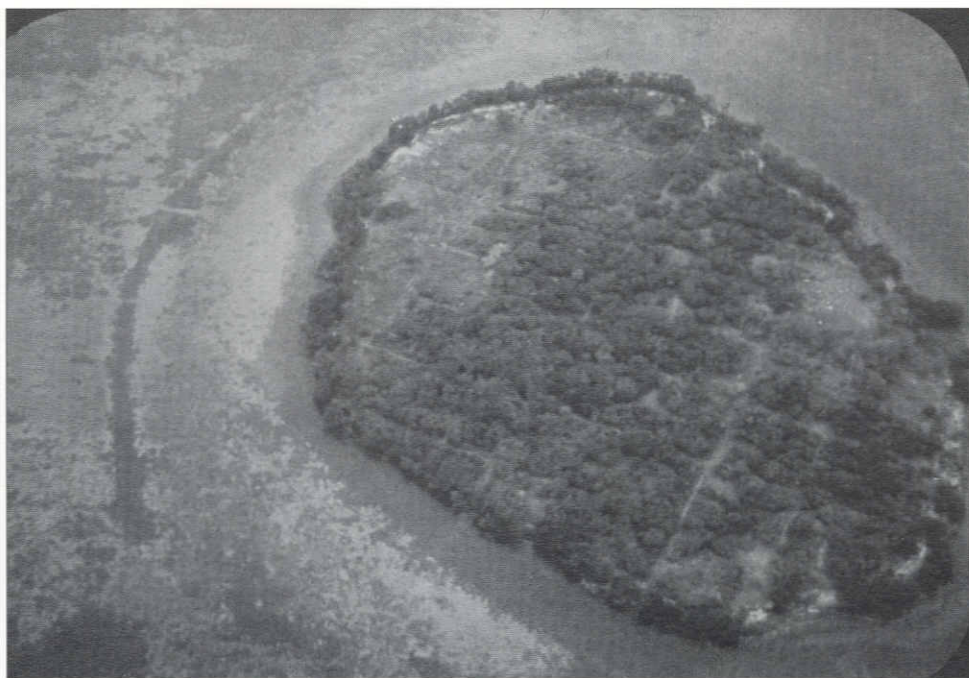
In 1976, in the course of a helicopter survey of the coast, we noticed a site on the mainland near Isla Cerritos, with the remains of salt pans, stone walkways, and a causeway leading to the interior; even more surprising was the discovery of a submerged sea wall off the south shore of the island, which created an artificial harbor that could have served as a refuge for trading canoes. By this time we began to seriously suspect that Isla Cerritos may have been a prominent Itzá port.

In the years that followed we conducted more surveys in the region, and eventually formed a team to carry out a program of excavation on the island and its vicinity. Tomás Gallareta and I served as co-directors, with Fernando Robles as a ceramicist. Rafael Cobos was the project malacologist, and Pura Cervera served as a lithics analyst. All of the team members were experienced surveyors and excavators. The nearby fishing village of San Felipe offered a good base camp, where we were able to rent several houses that served as dormitories and laboratories; the island was only a 40 minute boat ride away. We conducted our first field season on the island during the summer of 1984, assisted by a crew of laborers – mostly fishermen – from San Felipe.

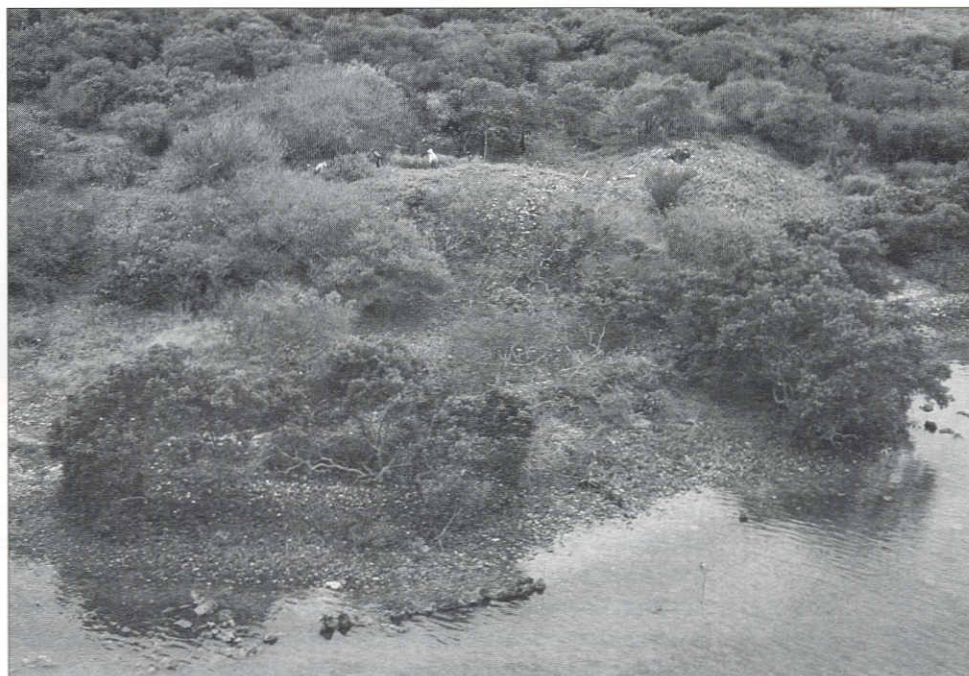
Survey and Mapping

The first season was dedicated to mapping the island and surveying the adjoining mainland. We cut a 25 square meter grid of trails through the thick scrub bush that covered most of the island, and mapped every structure and significant feature we could find. One of the beauties of mapping such a small site was that we were able to map every surface detail with considerable accuracy. This work also involved mapping the offshore sea

wall, and a series of shoreline piers and docks that ringed the island. In mapping the sea wall, we discovered that it contained a main passageway in its center, flanked by two platforms which may have supported wooden structures, perhaps towers; it also had two smaller entrances on its flanks.



Aerial view of the land, showing the survey grid and sea wall on the south side of the island; note main opening in center.



Aerial view of NW corner of island, showing shoreline features and mound groups in background.



Right:
Test Pit No. 8, Str. 19

Below:
Walkway across the
swamps near Paso
del Cerro.



The mapping revealed a total of 25 structures on the surfaces of the island (we were later to discover that the remains of many more lay beneath the surface). The larger mounds had been heavily looted by local folks removing the stone for modern construction in San Felipe. Still, we were able to ascertain that several of the mounds were masonry buildings supported by columns. A couple of other structures also had columns framing their doorways. The majority of the mounds were the remains of low platforms which once supported masonry or perishable wattle-and-daub structures covered by thatched roofs. The picture that began to emerge was that the island had a small civic-ceremonial complex around the main plaza, surrounded by several groups of elite residential structures.

Another task we carried out during this first season was a systematic surface collection of the entire island. There was considerable material on the surface, much of it from looter's pits or eroded shoreline cuts, which provided a good cross-section of the different time periods in which the island had been occupied. From this



collection, we were able to determine that the island had been occupied from the Late Preclassic period (ca. 100 B.C.) until the end of the Early Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 1200). There were also scattered remains of later activities, including

ample evidence of the use of the island as fishing camp in the late 19th and 20th centuries. This evidence included a fine collection of historic bottles and other artifacts, and was corroborated by local oral history accounts.

Our survey of the nearby region included a detailed map of the adjoining mainland site, known as Paso del Cerro. This site had several housemounds, walls, walkways, and salt pans. One major walkway and a *sacbé*, or causeway, led across the coastal swamps to the higher ground on the mainland; the walkway had a couple of small rubble mounds at intervals along its length, possible "entry" shrines for visitors headed to the coast. Another walkway led from Paso del Cerro to the east, to a *petén*, or hammock, which contained an *ojo de agua*, or freshwater spring. This may have been the main source of drinking water for Paso del

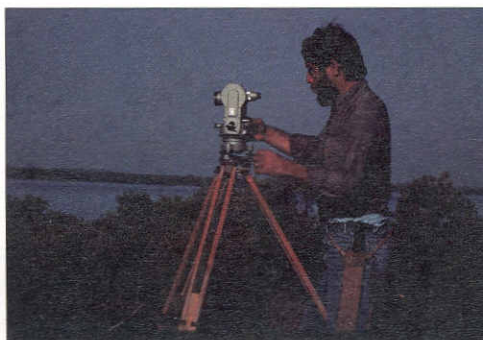


Left:
Burial 7, Str. 8.

Below:
Tomás Gallareta, running
a transit line.

Cerro, and possibly Isla Cerritos. There are no freshwater sources on the island, though freshwater springs periodically bubble up to the surface in the shallows near the mainland shoreline. From our survey data, we concluded that Paso del Cerro had been a mainland way station for travelers to the island, and perhaps a hamlet for saltmakers.

The survey of the mainland was continued by Gallareta and Cobos and a group of students in the Spring of 1985, resulting in the location of a small site known as Chincalco, some three kilometers south of Paso del Cerro. This site, which had an approximate extension of one square kilometer, contained a central mound group surrounded by several dispersed housemound clusters. From surface materials collected at the site, it appears to date from A.D. 800 to 1500. Given its location on dry ground with pockets of black soil, this appears to have been a farming village which likely supplied the coastal sites with agricultural produce and meat from game animals. Later excavations on the island revealed remains of deer and other mammals.



The Excavations

In the summer of 1985, we returned to the island to conduct an extensive test-pitting program. The purpose of these excavations was to obtain a comprehensive chronological profile of

the history of occupation of the island, date the surface structures, and recover artifacts and ecofacts that would provide us with a glimpse of life on the island in prehispanic times. In designing our excavation strategy we were guided by three basic objectives that would produce: 1) a sampling of the different areas of the island; 2) a sampling of the different types of structures; and, 3) a representative sample that would disclose the construction of the visible surface structures. We also excavated a couple of pits in open areas, to identify subsurface features. In all, we excavated 17 test-pits; these measured 2x2m, and were excavated down to bedrock, which in some areas was as deep as 3.5m.

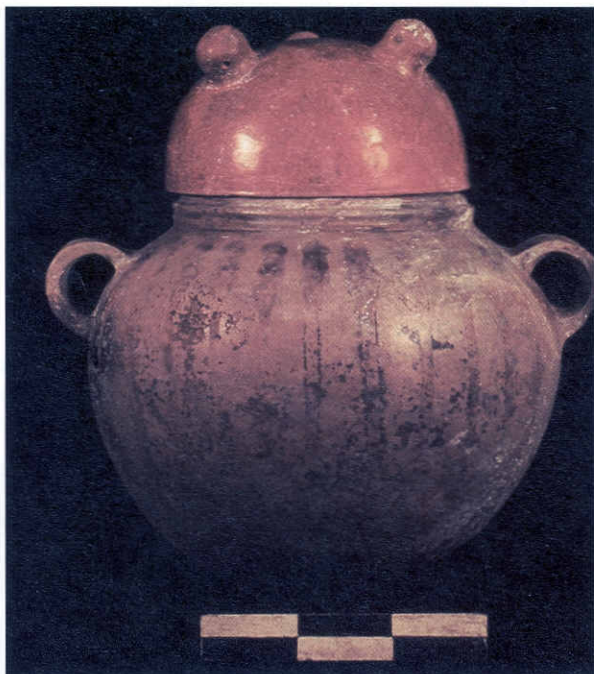
The richness of the stratigraphy as Isla Cerritos is unlike anything the project staff members had previously encountered in their combined field

Plumbate
Vessel, from SW
Guatemala



Silho Fine
Orange vessel,
from Tabasco

Muna Slate &
Chichén Red
Vessels



Cerritos was most likely a trading port, it is quite probable that these people were traders, perhaps merchants with strong ties to the elite of Chichén Itzá or other more distant trading centers of Mesoamerica.

Trade

The heavy volume of imported ceramics and artifacts at Isla Cerritos clearly corroborates the notion that it was an important trading node associated with the Itzá capital. The ceramics include many wares that are frequently found at Chichén Itzá, including imported types from Guatemala and the Gulf

coast of Tabasco (Plumbate and Fine Orange). All of the metates and many of the manos were made of basalt, a volcanic stone the nearest sources of which are in Chiapas, Veracruz, and Belize. Some of the chert we recovered may have also come from Belize, and the greenstone artifacts were imported from the Motagua Valley in the eastern highlands of Guatemala. Two turquoise beads came from northern Mexico or the southwestern United States; finally, our single gold object — a frog effigy pendant — came from lower Central America.

X-ray fluorescence and neutron activation analyses of a large portion of the obsidian

indicate that the majority of the obsidian from the island can be traced to deposits in Central Mexico; smaller amounts came from sources in the Guatemalan highlands. This analysis was of special interest to us, as most of it came from Chacpel and Jotuto phase deposits, and suggests that Isla Cerritos – and by extension Chichén Itzá – was heavily involved in trading activities with Central Mexico at the time. Since much of the Central Mexican obsidian trade was dominated by Toltec merchants, this information suggests that there were close ties between Chichén Itzá and Tula, the capital of the highland Toltec state. It is most likely that the turquoise also came through Toltec channels, as merchants from Tula maintained a regular trade with northern Mexico. Even though our sample of exotic trade goods is relatively small, it nonetheless matches the entire range of foreign goods found at Chichén Itzá. And how did these goods reach Chichén Itzá?

In the spring of 1988 we undertook a survey between the north coast and Chichén Itzá; the survey area covered some 4,000 square kilometers. We were joined on occasion by Peter Schmidt and James Callahan, who had done earlier survey work in this region. For a period of several months we scoured the countryside, visiting some 40 known sites and locating 35 new ones. The main objective of the survey was to obtain as much data as possible on the sites in the survey area, attempt to define a site hierarchy, and set up a chronology of occupation of the region from surface ceramic collections. In the end we were able to isolate those sites with prominent occupation contemporary to Isla Cerritos and Chichén Itzá, and plot likely routes between the capital and the coast. The main route appears to have gone through a string of major towns at Ichmul de Morley, Xuenkal, Xlacah, and Panabá. The trade goods would have traveled on the backs of bearers, who could have walked the 100 kilometer distance in from the coast in three days, with major rest stops at Panabá and Xuenkal.

Conclusions

In retrospect, this was such a tidy little project that one could almost wrap a ribbon around it. We began with a hypothesis, developed a workable research design, conducted the research with a small (though highly professional) crew in a relatively short

period of time with simple logistics and moderate funding. In the end we were able to demonstrate, pretty conclusively, that Isla Cerritos was a major trading port. But was it the principal port of Chichén Itzá? This cannot yet be determined, until we excavate other contemporary coastal sites and compare the results. However, our surveys of other coastal sites have not turned up a site even remotely comparable to Isla Cerritos, which makes us suspect that it was indeed the principal trading port of the Itzá. □

Acknowledgments

The fieldwork at Isla Cerritos was sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, with additional assistance from the Research Council of the University of South Florida and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Fifield. The Fifields also provided several overflights of the island and adjoining region.

Further Reading

Andrews, Anthony P., T. Gallareta N., F. Robles C., R. Cobos P., and P. Cervera Rivero.

Isla Cerritos: An Itzá Trading Port on the North Coast of Yucatán, Mexico. National Geographic Research, 4 (2): 196-207. 1988

Coggins, Clemency C., and O.C. Shane III (eds.)
Cenote of Sacrifice. Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá.
University of Texas Press, Austin. 1984

Morley, Sylvanus G., G.W. Brainerd,
and R.J. Sharer
The Ancient Maya. 5th Edition.
Stanford University Press, Stanford. 1994

