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17 **CLASSIC PERIOD CERAMICS OF NIM LI PUNIT: CHANGES IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AT A SOUTHERN BELIZE POLITICAL CAPITAL**

Luke R. Stroth, Mario R. Borrero, and Geoffrey E. Braswell

Pottery recovered from 2012 to 2019 at Nim li Punit, Toledo District, demonstrates that it was occupied from AD 150/250 to AD 830+. We identify long-term changes in the kinds of material produced, used, and discarded over the 600- to 700-year occupation of the site. During the last century of the Classic period, Nim li Punit witnessed a decline in the diversity of ceramic practice. This could reflect a shift in feasting behavior, perhaps due to the political and demographic instability experienced throughout Maya lowlands during the eighth century. Alternatively, this could be the result of new networks of alliance and exchange that arose during this turbulent time. A third possibility is that distinct communities of potters occupied Nim li Punit at different times. To test these different interpretations, we track changes in the ceramic collection at the type: variety level. We discuss similarities and differences seen in the pottery of Nim li Punit and that of other political centers of the Southern Belize Region, and note design and style elements that are shared with other parts of the Maya world.

Introduction

Nim li Punit is a Classic Maya site located in the Southern Belize Region (SBR) of Toledo District (Figure 1a). The five principal centers of the SBR are Pusilha, Lubaantun, Nim li Punit, Uxbenka, and Xnaheb. Since 2000, Braswell has conducted archaeological survey and intensive excavation at the first three of these sites under the Pusilha Archaeological Project and its successor, the Toledo Regional Interactional Project (or TRIP). Since 2009, TRIP investigators have focused on Nim li Punit (Figure 1b).

Important questions that motivate our research include: (1) Were all the sites occupied at the same time?; (2) From where did the people of the SBR come and when? (2) Were each of the large sites independent capitals or were at least some of them part of the same polity?; (3) To what extent were the economies of each site connected?; and (4) How did interaction with larger and more powerful polities outside the region shape southern Belize? (Braswell 2020).

A Brief History of Classic Period Southern Belize

Studies of pottery, obsidian, hieroglyphic texts, human teeth, and other material remains have allowed us to answer some of these questions. First—and thanks to parallel research directed by Keith Prufer (Braswell and Prufer 2009; Jordan and Prufer 2017; Thompson et al. 2018)—we know that the first two substantial

sites in the region were Uxbenka and Nim li Punit. Neither site has yet yielded any pure Preclassic contexts (Braswell 2022a; Jordan 2019:109, 208). The oldest ceramic artifacts at both Uxbenka and Nim li Punit date to the dawn of the Classic period, ca. A.D. 150-250, and are assigned to the Peripheral Chicanel sphere (Jordan 2019:429-430). The earliest pottery of Nim li Punit and Uxbenka is sufficiently similar to suggest that the first settlers of both sites came from the same general area, perhaps the other side of the Maya Mountain in southeastern Petén. Hieroglyphic texts and ceramics indicate that Pusilha was established roughly 400 years later, and is essentially a Late to Terminal Classic site. Although ceramics evince the closest ties with southwestern Petén (Bill et al. 2005), isotope analysis reveals that the royal family of Pusilha had marriage ties with Copán (Somerville et al. 2016). As construction activity at Uxbenka declined during the eighth century, settlers from that site established Lubaantun on the Río Grande. The Late Classic ceramics of these two sites are virtually indistinguishable (Jordan 2019:450; Braswell 2022b).

Although significant research has yet to be conducted at Xnaheb, our working hypothesis is that it was established by colonists from Nim li Punit, perhaps to guard the frontier from encroachment. Given that rulers raised stelae at Xnaheb during a 50-year period of epigraphic silence at Nim li Punit, we wonder if Xnaheb was the capital of the polity during the middle to late

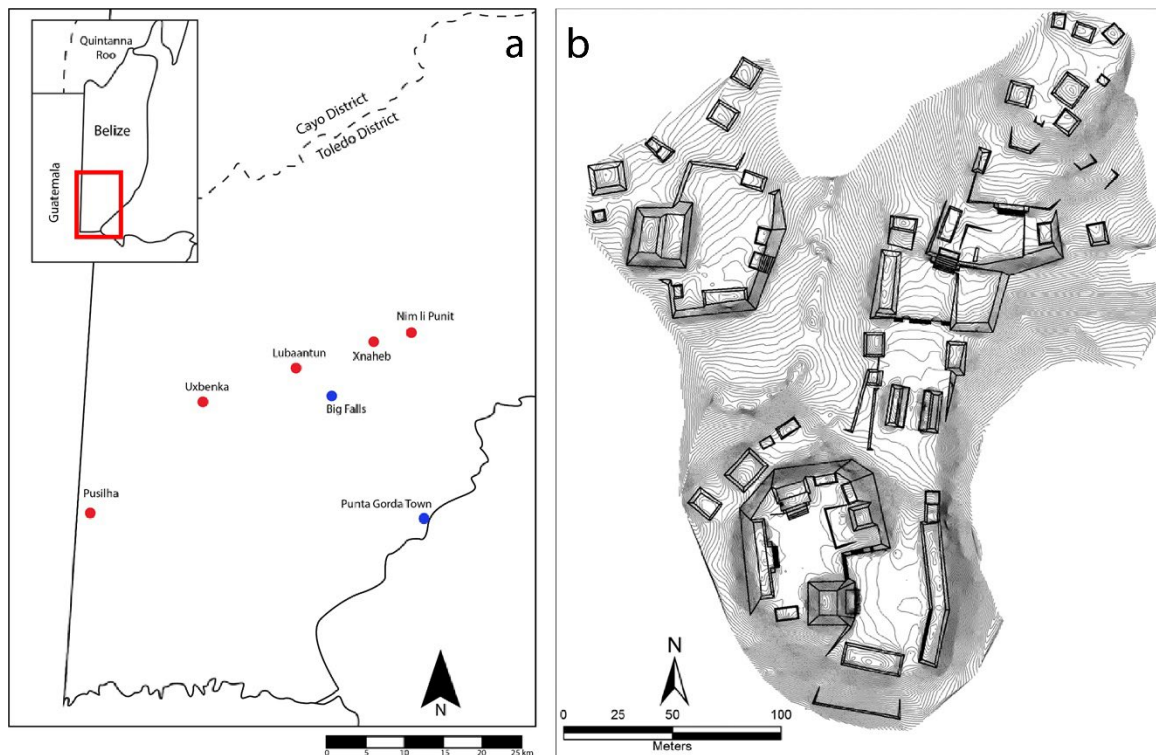


Figure 1a. The Southern Belize Region: (a) sites mentioned in the paper; (b) Map of Nim li Punit (surveyed by James T. Daniels, Jr. and Geoffrey E. Braswell).

eighth century. Finally, collapse and political fragmentation began at the two sites furthest from the coast: Pusilha and Uxbenka. In contrast, Nim li Punit and Lubaantun were able to persevere later because of their easy access to marine resources. Late to Terminal Classic Lubaantun, in particular, evinces strong ceramic ties to the coastal and island sites long-studied by Heather McKillop and E. Cory Sills (McKillop 2002, McKillop and Sills 2021:5-6). These include unit stamped red-slipped monochromes and mold-made figurines.

Although founded at different times, we interpret the five Toledo sites as forming three independent and contemporary Late Classic polities centered at Pusilha, Uxbenka/ Lubaantun, and Nim li Punit/Xnaheb. Our ceramic studies, as well as those conducted by Jillian Jordan at Uxbenka (2019) and Norman Hammond (1975) at Lubaantun, support this conclusion. The three Late Classic kingdoms of the SBR do not clearly mention each other in any hieroglyphic text, and pottery suggests that economic interaction among them was quite limited. A single stela at Uxbenka suggests artistic and perhaps political connections

with Tikal at about AD 400, but later material culture paints a picture of building isolation. As noted, the royal family of Pusilha had marriage ties with the Copán region during the seventh century and fought and lost at least one important battle against the Water Scroll site, most likely Altun Ha (Helmke et al. 2018; Prager et al. 2014). The strongest evidence for distant political and economic ties, however, is found at the small site of Nim li Punit. There, ceramics indicate indirect ties to or knowledge of Teotihuacan at about AD 400. The famous jade Wind Jewel implies dynastic ties to Cahal Pech and probably Caracol in the seventh century, and several eighth-century hieroglyphic texts mention *ek' xukpi'* lords, a title later used at Quirigua, as well as the Water Scroll site. Throughout its history, the pottery of Nim li Punit reflects its wider ceramic connections, but all of the sites seem to have developed ceramic ties with western Belize during the period of contraction and collapse ca. AD 780-850.

Excavations at Nim Li Punit

Braswell began excavations in 2010 at Nim li Punit with a series of test pits, and

followed this from 2012 to 2018 with horizontally extensive excavations in the South Group. In 2019, we began excavations in the West Group. To date, five structures have been excavated and consolidated to protect them for the future (Figure 2). These are Structure 8 (the council house), Structure 7 (the administrative palace), Structure 7A (a low entrance platform at the top of a set of stairs leading up to the group), Structure 6 (a platform of uncertain function), and Structure 50 (an elite residential platform). As at most Maya sites, evidence for the earliest occupation of Nim li Punit was found below architectural fill at the site epicenter. The earliest occupational level in the South Group, found on top a buried A-horizon soil sandwiched between architectural fill and bedrock, yielded resist-decorated Usulután sherds, mammiform supports, sherds with thickly-slipped and waxy slips, all found in association with polychrome sherds. This indicates a Terminal Preclassic to Early Classic beginning for the site, conceivably as early as AD 150 but probably closer to AD 250. About 2 m above this early surface and cut into Structure 7-sub, we found Tomb IV. It contains solidly Early Classic vessels dating to around AD 400, including Teotihuacan-related, direct-rim tripod vases and orange-slipped polychrome bowls. Another meter higher in Structure 7 we found Tomb V, a cenotaph dedicated to an anthropomorphic eccentric. Tomb V contained the Wind Jewel, 25 ceramic vessels, and other objects. Among the pottery are a Belize Red pyriform vase and Fine Orange supersystem vessels, implying a date of around AD 830. Thus, six to seven centuries of construction and occupation are represented in the South Group. In contrast, the West Group and Structure 50 are entirely Terminal Classic, based on the presence of Belize Red sherds found both in plaza fill and on top a deeply buried A horizon above bedrock. Structures in both plaza groups were modified in their last phases, roughly dated to AD 800+, seemingly due to earthquake damage.

The Ceramics of Nim Li Punit

Based on our excavations in the South and West Groups, we have a six-phase ceramic chronology, starting with the Preclassic to Early Classic transition (provisionally called EC1), two solidly Early Classic phases (EC2 and EC3), a yet



Figure 2. Structures excavated and consolidated at Nim li Punit from 2010 to 2019: (a) Structure 6; (b) Structure 7; (c) Structure 7a; (d) Structure 50.

undifferentiated Late Classic phase (LC), and one or two Terminal Classic ceramic phases (TC1 and possibly TC2). The 2021 laboratory season entailed processing ceramic material recovered from 2012-2019, focusing on temporally secure contexts. The ceramic analysis was conducted at three levels of granularity each with distinct goals. First, Stroth identified the paste-wares in the collection by examining the fabric of the sherds. Second, he conducted a more common type:variety study so as to have data comparable with other sites in the SBR and beyond. Finally, Stroth carried out a detailed modal (or attribute) analysis in order to refine our chronology, differentiate among sites in the region, and possibly to identify distinct workshops within the Nim li Punit polity. Comparison of our pottery with material from other sites allows us to better understand the economic role of Nim li Punit within the larger course of the development of the Southern Belize region, and the Maya lowlands.

Paste-Wares

Ceramic classification creates hierarchically organized sets of attributes that are used to construct meaning from a collection of

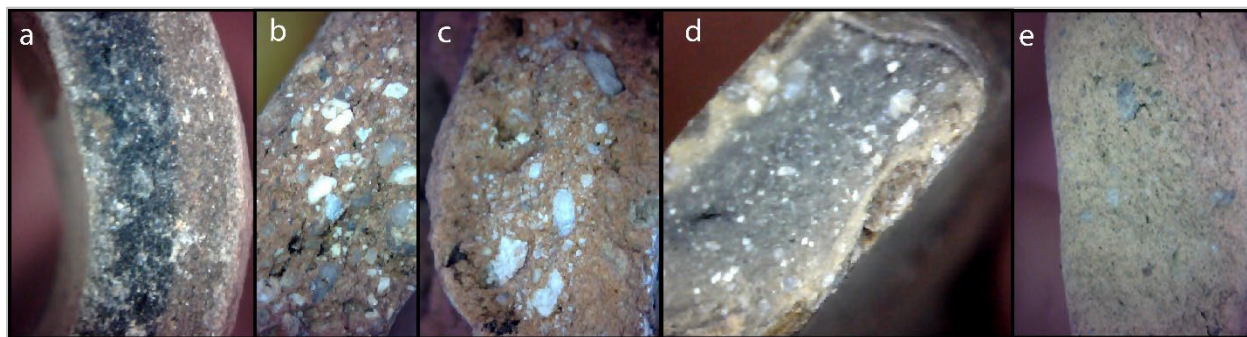


Figure 3. Photos of fresh breaks on sherd profiles taken with a Dinolite microscope: (a) Remate Redux paste-ware group; (b) Toledo Coarse paste-ware group; (c) Punta Gorda Orange paste-ware group; (d) Eggshell Gray paste-ware group; (e) Belize Ash paste-ware group (photos are not to scale).

sherds. The system is flexible and, based on the research question, archaeologists can choose different attributes to define each level of classification. We follow Prudence Rice (1976) and James Aimers' (2007) methods of classification in which paste-ware is a large and primary organizing principle.

Paste-ware refers to the physical properties of the ceramic fabric, including hardness, color, characteristics and kind of inclusions, and porosity. It is a recipe for pottery manufacture emphasizing how it looks inside rather than its external appearance. I have identified seven major paste-ware groups at Nim li Punit. Most locally produced vessels are assigned to the paste-ware Remate Redux (Figure 3a), which includes our local variations of the slipped and unslipped Remate and Turneffe groups identified first at Lubaantun by Hammond (1975). Less common, but second in overall frequency, is a locally produced paste-ware called Toledo Coarse (Figure 3b), containing large inclusions of quartzite or similar minerals. Coarse tempered pottery increases in frequency over time but never dominates the collection.

A relatively common paste-ware that we suspect was locally produced at Nim li Punit is Iron Hondo, our name for the Hondo Group defined by Hammond (1975) at Lubaantun based on just 14 sherds. Another interesting paste-ware group is Punta Gorda Orange (Figure 3c), limited to the earliest contexts at Nim li Punit. Some sherds of this paste-ware group evoke pottery from northern Belize and the Petén region. It is not yet clear if these are imports or locally made imitations, and if the latter, they may hint at the

origin of the first Classic period inhabitants of Nim li Punit. Less common paste-wares are more likely imported. Eggshell Gray is a fine-grained, gray-fired paste often used to build thin-walled vessels with painted designs (Figure 3d). A resist-ware decorated sherd found in a near-bedrock context dating to the EC1 phase is assigned to the Eggshell Gray group. From the latest contexts is Belize Ash, a paste-ware group that includes ash-tempered Belize Red pottery (Figure 3e). This material is present only in architectural contexts dating to about AD 780 and later, especially during the TC1 phase.

Type-Varieties

After Stroth classified the collection from Nim li Punit into paste-ware groups, he then assigned each sherd to a specific type based on vessel form and surface treatment. He further divided types are then divided into varieties, based on decoration. This follows Culbert and Rands's (2007) system of multiple classifications that joins the type: variety system to paste-ware analysis. It is likely that similar forms and decorations appear across multiple paste-ware groups which may help distinguish between imported and locally produced material.

Early Classic Type-Varieties

The earliest contexts of Nim li Punit include a wide variety of material. Types present in these contexts include unslipped bowl forms assigned to the Remate Redux paste-ware group, Toledo Coarse red-slipped bowl forms, and Punta Gorda Orange red-slipped bowl forms. At Uxbenka, Jordan and Prufer (2014) characterize

Early Classic I by, among other things, sharply everted rim forms on Santa Cruz Red vessels. At Nim li Punit, he has found everted rim sherds in the earliest contexts. These may be unelaborated or decorated with interior grooves (Figure 4a).

Several interesting pieces suggest connections to the larger Maya world. These include single a mammiform support body decorated using the resist-ware Usulután technique (Figure 4b). The well-fired matrix, dark paste, thin wall, and fine parallel lines visible on this sherd indicate a refinement of Usulután style seen during the Caynac period dating to between 100 BC and AD 250 (Demerest and Sharer 1982). Stroth assigns this sherd to the Eggshell Gray paste-ware group, and to the Red-slipped unspecified type: resist-ware variety.

Also present in these contexts are a number of Punta Gorda Orange sherds and strap-handles that are red-slipped and punctated, and have stud appliques and overlapping or nested v-shaped incisions (Figure 5). These pieces closely resemble members of the Sapote Striated type corresponding to the Barton Creek ceramic complex at Barton Ramie and thin-walled varieties identified in Preclassic complexes at Tikal. Although low in overall frequency, these sherds have high ubiquity in early contexts. These vessels were locally produced in low quantities, or widely-available imports.

Plates were the primary vessel form used to display polychrome designs in the Early Classic. These vessels are red- or orange-slipped, and typically have basal flanges. Member sherds of the Remate Redux paste-ware group exhibit decorative elements of Dos Arroyos polychromes, and in few cases the E-shaped painted designs reminiscent of Actuncan polychromes, suggesting an affiliation to the Tzakol 1 sphere circa AD 250. An orange-slipped, incised, and painted basal flange belonging to the Remate Redux paste-ware group (Figure 6) shows that local paste recipes and were used to produce elaborate vessels with polychrome designs.

Late Classic and Terminal Classic Type-Varieties

During the Late Classic period, vases and bowls became the primary media for displaying polychrome designs at Nim li Punit. Plates made during these centuries are assigned to the Toledo



Figure 4. Sherds belonging to Early Classic I contexts from Nim li Punit: (a) Everted and grooved rim (Remate Redux paste-ware group, Black-slipped everted vessel type: grooved variety); (b) Usulután-style sherd (Eggshell Gray paste-ware group, Orange slipped unspecified vessel type: resist-ware variety).



Figure 5. Sapote-style sherd recovered from Early Classic I context, assigned to the Punta Gorda Orange paste-ware group, Red-slipped restricted bowl type: Incised, punctuated, and applique variety.

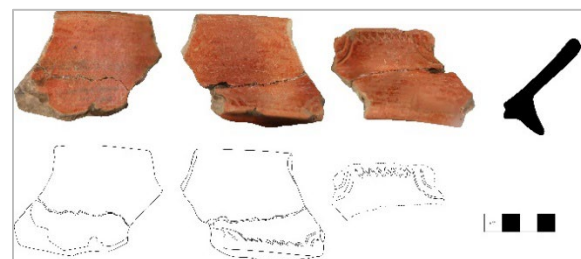


Figure 6. Elaborate flange from an Early Classic vessel, assigned to the Remate Redux paste-ware group, Red-slipped plate type: incised and painted variety.



Figure 7. Two Puluacax-style sherds assigned to the Toledo Coarse paste-ware group, Puluacax type: variety unspecified.

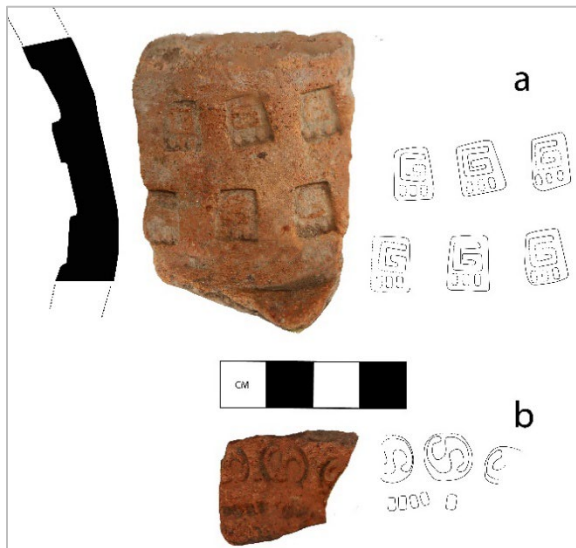


Figure 8. Two unit-stamped sherds showing meander (a) and circular (b) motifs. Both sherds are assigned to the Remate Redux paste-ware group, Red-slipped jars: stamped variety.



Figure 9. Two modeled-carved sherds, resembling members of the Ahk'utu modeled-carved complex. Both are assigned to the Belize Ash paste-ware group, Red-slipped vase type: modeled-carved variety.

Coarse and Temash Pebbled paste-wares, and frequently have micaceous flakes mixed into their paste. Flanged vessels are less common and less elaborate. A new paste-ware, Sandy Yellow, appeared during the Late Classic. Vessels are typically unslipped or striated, and often

decorated by punctated designs reminiscent of Triunfo Striated. The Late Classic is difficult to distinguish entirely from the Early Classic period, but may be characterized by the appearance of polychrome vases and Puluacax sherds. Unlike the later Terminal Classic, the Late Classic collection lacks Belize Red pottery.

The Puluacax Group was first defined at Lubaantun in 1975 based on its coarse fabric dominated by inclusions, z-angled restricted jars and vases, and thick rims that taper to thin vessel walls (Figure 7). Coarse-tempered fabrics with sand- and quartzite inclusions are present in the earliest context at Nim li Punit and Uxbenka, and the development of the Puluacax bowls and jars is consistent with the long-term pottery traditions of the southern Belize region. We redefine Puluacax as a type within the Toledo Coarse paste-ware group.

The Terminal Classic at Nim li Punit is marked by the arrival of Belize Red pottery, which we assign to the Belize Ash paste-ware group. Stamped designs on Remate Redux and Sandy Yellow vessels are also diagnostic of this period. Coarse tempered paste-wares such as Toledo Coarse and Temash Pebbled were more common than in earlier periods, although the well-sorted, medium grained, and incompletely oxidized Remate Redux remained the most common paste-ware of the Terminal Classic. Remate Redux red-slipped jar types: stamped varieties are decorated with geometric designs including meander (Figure 8a) and circular (Figure 8b) motifs, usually accompanied by regular punctations. These are part of a shared southern Belize stamped tradition described by Cassandra Bill (2013), but differ from the animal motifs common of Lubaantun (Hammond 1975) and the triangular and s-shaped stamps from Uxbenka (Jordan 2019:449).

The earliest modeled pottery at Nim li Punit dates to the Early Classic period, but this decorative technique became much more common during the Terminal Classic. Apparently absent from our collections are the mass-produced vessels belonging to the Pabellon Modeled-Carved and Sahcaba Modeled-Carved systems that display “mexicanized” designs within the Maya region during the Terminal Classic periods. Instead, Terminal Classic modeled vessels from Nim li Punit appear more

similar to the Ahk'utu modeled-carved complex described by Helmke and Reets-Budet (2008). This conclusion is based on the inclusion of Classic Maya iconography, a barrel-shaped profile with restricted orifice, and construction using British Honduras Ash ware (Figure 9).

Conclusions

We have discussed the presence of certain decorative techniques, paste-wares, and vessel forms that are similar to those reported from throughout the Maya lowlands. Some vessels are very likely to have been imported, including ash-tempered Belize Red. Others may be locally produced imitations of pottery produced elsewhere, such as the Sapote-style type: varieties within the Punta Gorda Orange paste-ware group. We may posit a Petén origin for the inhabitants of Nim li Punit, but subsequent generations developed a local ceramic tradition in dialogue with contemporary Toledo centers, northern Belize, and the southeast periphery. The potters of Nim li Punit incorporated techniques from the larger Maya region as interpreted through the southern Belize pottery tradition. Doing so, they created site-specific varieties of regional paste recipes and decorative techniques. Future analyses and the application of radiometric dating may help us better determine the absolute chronology of each ceramic phase, and to better define and perhaps split the Late Classic into more than one phase.

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