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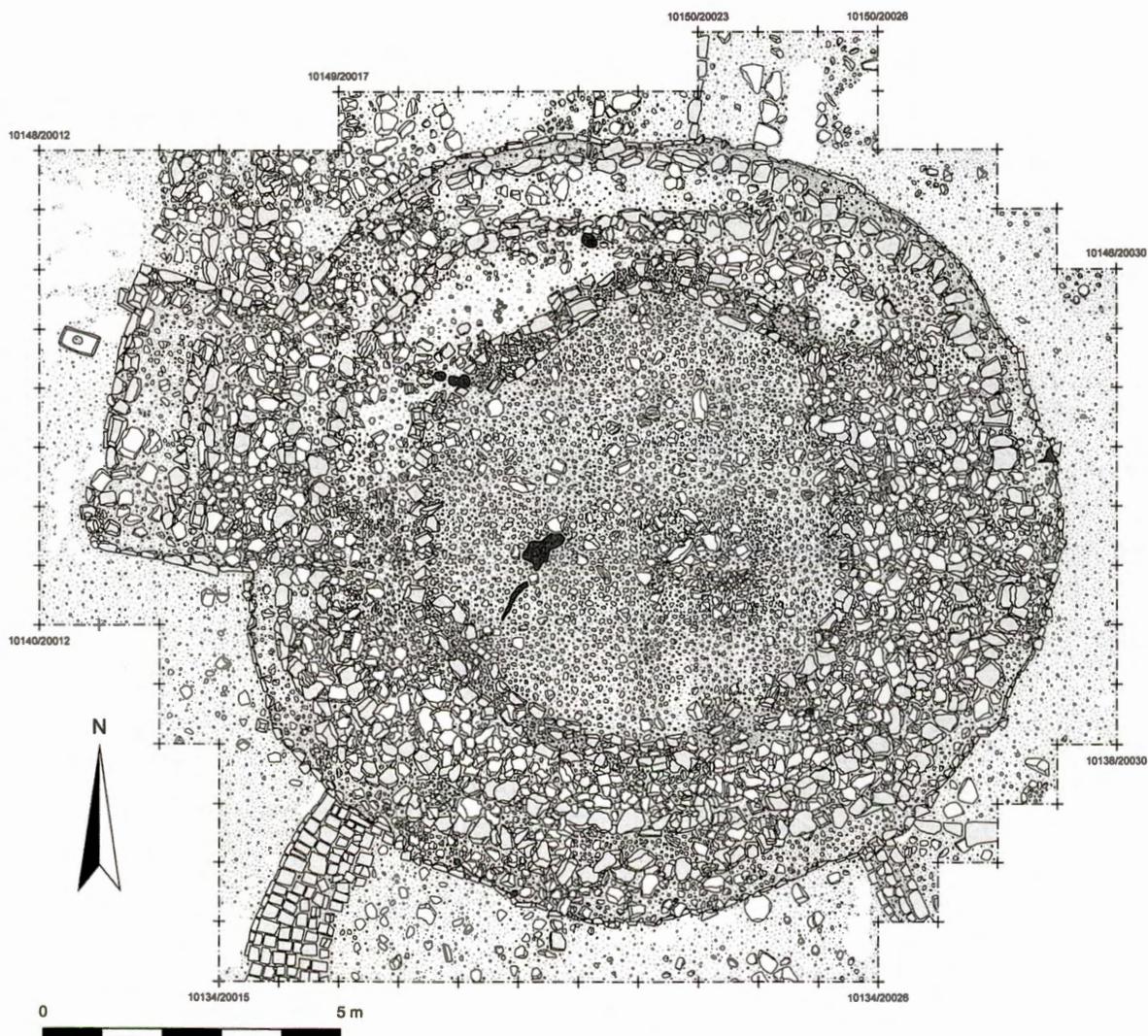
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### A New Terminal Classic Carved Altar from Caracol, Belize

Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase

Even after 31 years of continuous research at the site of Caracol, Belize, there are still new and amazing finds made. In January of 2015, the project was made aware of the existence of a new carved monument in the site epicenter. This monument was located immediately west of the project camp on the summit of Structure A13. Structure A13 had been carefully cleaned of leaves and low brush and its summit mapped and archaeologically tested during the 2002 field season. These investigations had resulted in the recording of three low substructures on the summit of A13 and an axial penetration of the central substructure that yielded 1 lidded barrel and 1 lip-to-lip set of cache vessels dating to the later part of the Early Classic Period. What the 2002 investigations had not

located was a small carved monument located immediately south of the southern line-of-stone substructure on the summit because it was buried beneath the humus.

We were made aware of the possibility of a new Caracol monument by Jaime Awe in late January. He emailed several cell phone pictures of the eroded monument taken by tour guide Jorge De Leon. These initial pictures were in full sunlight and did not show the full detail of the monument. From them, we could make out 2 figures and the presence of a hieroglyphic text that appeared to open with the date of 8 Ahau 8 Mol, which we took to be the calendar round date of 10.2.15.0.0 or A.D. 884. If confirmed, this date would add some 25 years to the epigraphic history of Caracol (Chase et al. 1991; Grube 1994; Helmke 2006; Houston 1987, 1991; Martin and Grube 2000) and provide one of the latest known dates in the Southern lowlands – and certainly the latest known date in Belize.

The new Caracol altar was “found” on Structure A13 during the first day of the 31<sup>st</sup> field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project (2015 blog at <http://www.caracol.org>). The monument had clearly been moved from its original location and was laid out on the ground in two major pieces adjacent to a disturbed and refilled area that we took to have been the excavation that recovered it. The altar was missing a small piece of its carved design in the headdress area of the left figure. Formal excavation of the disturbed area recovered the missing carved piece of the monument as well as half a dozen pieces of shaped stone that fit the outer edges of the altar, making it slightly more oval in appearance than is indicated in the photographs as well as confirming the original altar location.

Caracol Altar 26 (Figures 1 and 2) measures 73.6 cm in height by 63.6 cm in width and is only 12.5 to 13.5 cm thick. Its maximum carving depth is 1.2 cm. Most other small altars and ballcourt markers from Caracol were much thicker with rounded bottoms that would have been embedded in plastered floors. The iconography on Caracol Altar 26 is consistent with the Terminal Classic iconography found elsewhere at the site on its late monuments. Caracol's Terminal Classic monuments were re-established at the site after being de-emphasized during the late Late Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008). Two general iconographic themes prevailed during the Terminal Classic era at Caracol. One pairs two prisoners opposite each other, as on Caracol Altar 23 dating to 9.18.10.0.0 or A.D. 800 and Caracol Altar 22 dating to 9.19.0.0.0 or A.D. 810. A second prominent theme pairs two individuals facing each other; in each case the individual on the right has an arm across their chest in a gesture of friendship or submission (A. Chase 1985; A. Chase et al. 1991). This pose is found on Caracol Altars 12 (dates to 9.19.10.0.0) 13 (9.19.10.0.0) and the prophetic 10.0.0.0.0), and 10 (10.0.19.6.14) as well as on Caracol Stela 17 (10.1.0.0.0) and Cahal Pichik Altar 2 (10.0.5.0.0). The new altar also contains a similar set of paired individuals with the individual on the right having their arm across their chest. On Altar 12, the Caracol ruler makes such a gesture and is paired with an individual from Ucanal (Grube 1994:6). Caracol monuments Stela 17, Altar 12, and Cahal Pichik Altar 2 all name the same Caracol individual, *Tum(n)-ol*. On Stela 17, the individual on the right making a gesture of submission is probably a secondary elite individual who lived in Caracol's



Fig. 1. Photograph of Caracol Altar 26.

Machete Terminus (the likely location of this monument); the headgear for the right individual signals a lower status than the individual on the left (see A. Chase and D. Chase 2001:127), who is probably the Caracol ruler. Caracol Stela 17, Caracol Altar 13, Caracol Altar 22, and Cahal Pichik Altar 2 are all monuments erected by secondary elite at the site, signifying the importance of these individuals during the Terminal Classic Period, similar to what occurred with the secondary elite at Copan, Honduras (Fash 1991).

The new monument, Caracol Altar 26, is slightly different. Like text on Caracol Stela 17, the text on Caracol Altar 26 opens with the middle clause that contains the calendar round date of 8 Ahau 8 Mol and information on the event or ceremony that took place; it then continues in the left clause that names a protagonist. Stephen Houston reviewed photographs of the text and records the event as “u-CHOK-wa ch’a?-ja?” which indicates an event in which incense is thrown or used. The text then continues on the left side with a “K’INICH-chi-ni” title for the protagonist who is later named as being a **bacab**. A final text below the main clause likely provides the name of the current Caracol ruler based on the presence of a final Caracol Emblem Glyph.

Of the two animated individuals portrayed on Caracol Altar 26, the one on the right is iconographically more prominent and most likely represents the Caracol ruler at the time. The two individuals both appear to be actively engaged in a conversation. The individual on the left, named in the text that occurs immediately above his headdress, is probably a lord from a foreign polity or site who was present when the monument was placed; this layout is similar to what occurs on Caracol Altar 12. The two hieroglyphs below the central glyph blocks are thought to be the name of the final Caracol ruler accompanied by an eroded representation of the Caracol Glyph. These two hieroglyphs are not raised like the other textual material and it may be that they were added at a later

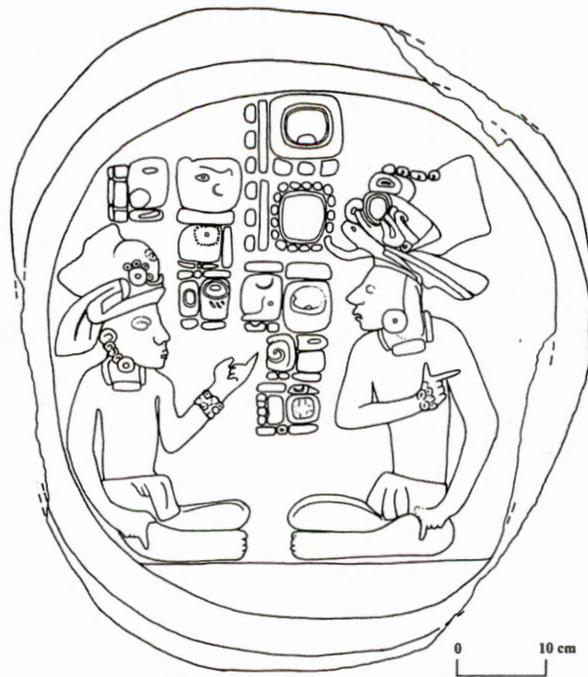


Fig. 2. Line drawing of Caracol Altar 26.

date, after the altar had been formally placed as part of a joint political ritual between Caracol and another site. The three stelae placed in front of Structure A13 commemorate an earlier time of transition at the beginning of the Late Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008) and it may be that the placement of Caracol Altar 26 on the southern summit of Structure A13 also commemorated a time of transition, but, given the altar’s summit location, one that was not meant to be seen by the general populace.

With a date of 10.2.15.0.0 or A.D. 884, the recovery of Caracol Altar 26 lengthens the site’s epigraphic record by 25 years beyond the all-glyphic Stela 10 dated to 10.1.10.0.0 or A.D. 859 (Houston 1987). Caracol’s Terminal Classic occupation is widespread in the site’s epicenter (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004, 2007) and this monument helps to confirm the vibrancy of the occupation at that time. Given the presence of yet another Terminal Classic ruler for the site on this carved stone, it also lends credence to the idea that rulership in Terminal Classic Caracol rotated on a 20-year cycle and was no longer dynastic, potentially having shifted to a *batabil* form of government that is noted among the Postclassic Maya in the Yucatan Peninsula (A. Chase et al. 2009:181). The iconographic themes found on Caracol’s latest monuments also strongly hint at both intra- and inter-site political alliances after some conflict at the onset of the Terminal Classic Period. The need to make iconographically explicit intra-site alliances and relationships strongly suggests a period of internal unrest at Caracol after Late Classic policies relating to symbolic egalitarianism were undone (A. Chase and D. Chase 2009). At the same time, making manifest exterior political relationships, as we believe that Caracol Altar 26 does, helps confirm the widespread trading relationships that are found within the Terminal Classic archaeological record of Caracol’s epicentral buildings. Turner and Sabloff (2012) have suggested that the collapse of Classic Maya civilization was

probably the result of complex socio-political processes and Caracol Altar 26 must be interpreted within this milieu.

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