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# ***1 THE CONTEXT OF RITUAL: EXAMINING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD AT CARACOL, BELIZE***

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*Purposefully placed archaeological deposits recovered at Maya sites are often viewed as having resulted from ancient ritual acts. These deposits are generally associated with specific buildings and locales in the archaeological record. Whether the rituals took place in public or private settings, however, is subject to interpretation on a variety of levels. Yet, the deposits themselves – their location, form, and contents – can help to answer questions about their purpose and the role of ritual in ancient society. This paper reviews archaeological deposits from Caracol, Belize and places them within a broader temporal and social context. It specifically reviews evidence of caching practices, burial practices, tomb re-entries, the use of incensarios, the placement of child sacrifices, and problematic contexts in the archaeological record. The overall objective of this examination of deposits recovered at Caracol, Belize is a greater understanding of the ancient Maya use of private and public ritual.*

## **Introduction**

For the ancient Maya, ritual behavior surely accompanied the placement of burials, caches, and certain other remains. The results of these ritual actions are often found in the archaeological record and, while the motivations behind some rites and customs can be deduced in certain archaeological situations, the deeper religious structure behind the ritual is more difficult to discern (Insoll 2004; Fogelin 2007). However, because ritual involves repeated, almost rote, behavior, it is possible to observe patterning in the material remains associated with ceremonial behavior in the archaeological record (e.g., Marcus 2007:68). It is also possible to observe how this patterning changes over time.

Many ritual deposits have been archaeologically recovered from Caracol, Belize. Most of these may be labeled as “caches” and/or “burials,” but others are more problematic. Because there is change in contents, positioning, and iconography associated with these deposits over time, it is possible to gain some insight regarding ancient Maya ritual behavior and to also speculate in some instances as to the purpose of these deposits. Furthermore, the positioning of special deposits provides insight into the private and public nature of these rites and behaviors. Often, the act of placing a cache was witnessed by a very limited audience, either within a public venue or within view of the household in a residential compound. Similarly, funerary activities and interments could be privately and

publically placed within public architecture, but were likely restricted to the participation of household members in residential groups. Other ceremonial acts visible in the archaeological record had a public - and political – component, whether undertaken within the site epicenter or in surrounding residential constructions. Thus, a contradiction emerges in terms of a consideration of the public and private components of ritual. While many rituals may have been undertaken for the public good, the archaeological deposition of the results of such ceremonial acts was generally a fairly private restricted matter. The archaeological record at Caracol, Belize provides tantalizing clues to the maturation of ritual activities at the site, suggesting a cyclical pattern of dynastic and community ritual linked with the political and economic history of the site.

## **Consecrated Space**

Ritual was used by the ancient Maya to imbue their surroundings with sanctity and “power” and to assure meaningful interactions with an animate universe (Marcus 2007:51). For the Maya, ritual acts were interactive and to some extent additive. A single deposit might be placed within a public building for the purposes of centering that space - and each building within a public group might be individually consecrated. In some cases, deposits were added to already consecrated space over time as buildings were substantially modified. In other cases, separate ritual acts were carried out within

the same structure again and again, probably in alignment with a specific temporal cycle.

Thus, Maya centers were a combination of both consecrated space and useable secular space. The public sanctified space served as the representational foci for the community at large, and the center of a Maya city needed to be positioned within Maya cosmology, meaning that the kinds of deposits placed in these epicentral buildings generally differed from those found within outlying residential groups. The initial cosmological founding of a center, especially in the southeast Peten (Laporte 1996) and east-central Belize was accomplished through the establishment of an "E Group" (A. Chase 1985). E Groups served notice to the Maya world that a specific group of Maya had established their place within the cosmos (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; Aimers and Rice 2006). At Caracol the final establishment of its E Group was timed to coincide with the onset of the 8<sup>th</sup> Baktun and was bracketed by a series of 4 elaborate caches all placed on axis to the central building in the middle of the first century A.D. (A. Chase and D. Chase 2006).

Through the Early Classic Period, public buildings at given Maya sites were consecrated using a symbol set that positioned each specific ediface, and sometimes entire groups (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998), into the world order. By the Late Classic most public buildings had been consecrated and the focus shifted to family ritual. Thus, there was a distinct move from public to private ritual over the span of the Classic Period. At least for Caracol, the uniformity of ritual acts carried out within residential groups served to integrate the broader community. Thus, the change may more appropriately be characterized as a transition from focused ritual associated with public architecture and public spaces to decentralized and disseminated, but unified, ritual localized within private residential spaces. Because there was broader ritual integration, it probably should not be referred to simply as "domestic ritual" (Plunket 2002; Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007). In the Terminal Classic Period, another shift occurred; public and private ritual both focused on the use of incensarios and on the deconsecration of early ritual nodes (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). In contrast to the Late

Classic Period, Terminal Classic ritual was again focused in public buildings that altered cosmological meanings and associations.

### **Temporal Cycles**

Maya concepts of time differed from those used today. In Western society, time is often viewed as linear - in conformance with a life cycle involving key events such as birth, puberty, marriage, birth of children and grandchildren, or death. However, the Maya did not view things in a similar simple linear progression (e.g., A. Chase 1986; Rice 2007). Only in death does the archaeological record offer distinct rituals clearly related to an individual's life-cycle event. And, even the Maya dead can be categorized in terms of "earth offerings" (Becker 1993) and temporal cycles (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b), thus removing their interments from the strict constraints of linear time.

Less than 10% of the individuals who lived in a residential group were physically buried in that residential group (D. Chase 1997). Thus, the individuals who were interred in a group were chosen for that honor. Of even more interest is the fact that burials were not placed in Caracol's residential groups to coincide with actual death events. Rather, the interments appear to be purposefully placed at certain temporal intervals. Thus, the Caracol contexts suggest a different view of mortuary ritual. First, the remains of important decedents were collected and curated, presumably in the eastern mausoleums of each residential group. Sequential burials in eastern buildings in Caracol's residential groups indicate that burials were generally deposited on a temporal cycle of some 40 to 52 years (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b). Thus, while we may interpret these deposits as the burials of one or more deceased individuals, the ancient Maya may have rather viewed them as temporally significant earth offerings providing both ancestor veneration and community-wide integration. Ritual, at least during the Late Classic Period at Caracol, was community-based rather than dynastic in focus.

A tie between special deposits and temporal cycles has been demonstrated for caches associated with more than 100 stelae at Tikal, Guatemala. These stone monuments were

erected on a regular 20-year temporal cycle. The caches associated with these stelae contained repetitious patterned combinations of eccentric cherts and obsidians, presumably representing the nine lords of the night – and the nine different eccentrics associated with each stela can be placed into a clear temporal seriation (Moholy-Nagy 2007).

### Burials

The burials found in both the public and residential buildings of any given Maya site usually constitute the largest body of archaeological data relating to ritual. Between 60%-80% of the residential groups at Caracol are associated with eastern constructions that functioned as shrines or mausoleums (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994). Most eastern structures at Caracol contain one or more tombs and one or more additional interments. A typical temporal sequence for the deposits in these buildings has been derived from the archaeological record (Figure 1). The tomb was the initial construction. If the tomb had an entryway, then it often continued to be used over time, but it also may have been sealed after the interment of the initial occupant(s). Next, burials were placed in the front of the building, first at the base of a stairway and, then, intruded into the front of the structure itself. If an architectural expansion took place, the new stairway also became a likely locale for an additional burial. The positioning of these burials within a given construction was temporally spaced. Late Classic Period interments were often associated with either a finger bowl or a face cache to the front of the eastern structure; other cache forms were sometimes placed within the initial step of the building. Broken vessels were also sometimes placed directly atop burial capstones and sealed in the fill of a building.

Another fairly common ritual practice associated with Caracol's interments was tomb re-entry (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003). In some cases, there was little disturbance of the original tomb contents; in other cases, new artifacts like cache vessels or censers were added to the chamber's burial assemblage; in still other cases, the contents of the tomb and the chamber itself were drastically altered. We have been able to distinguish minimally two types of re-entry.

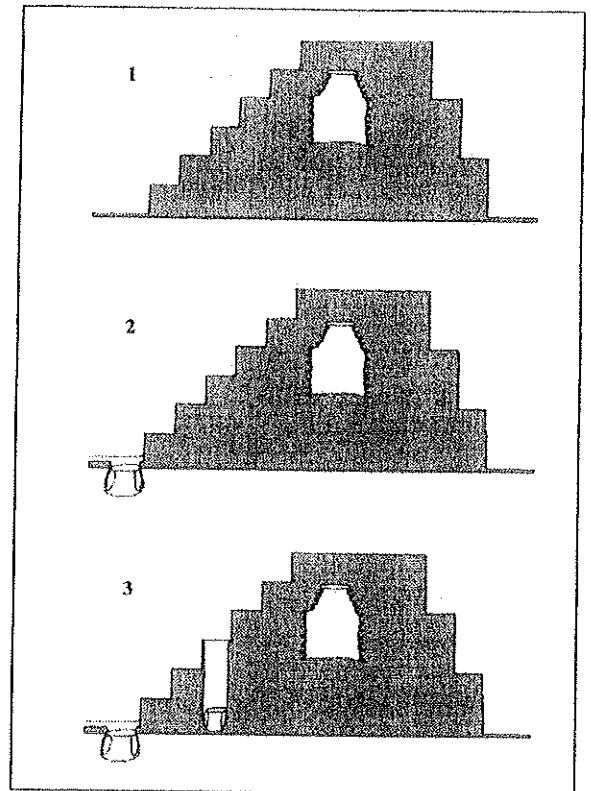


Figure 1. Idealized sequence of interments in eastern shrines of residential groups at Caracol, Belize: (1) tomb is sealed within the core of the building; (2) a burial is placed at the base of the front step of the building; (3) one or more burials are placed through the stairway (after D. Chase and A. Chase 2004:206).

The first we call “accidental,” being either caused by structural roof collapse or by rebuilding efforts. This kind of re-entry usually resulted in the removal of the entire roof and in the infilling of the chamber with stone and earth directly over the *in situ* bones, ceramics, and artifacts. The second kind of tomb re-entry is called “transformational” and there were different degrees of disturbance associated with this kind of re-entry. In several cases, tombs were re-entered, the contents of the chamber were broken and strewn about, and then the chamber was resealed. In other cases, the chamber was re-entered and desecrated and then was infilled with broken and burnt bone, pottery, and artifacts.

### Child Sacrifice

Diego de Landa noted that the Maya practiced child sacrifice in 16<sup>th</sup> century Yucatan (Tozzer 1941). Archaeological contexts at Caracol also provide evidence that sacrificial

victims, both adults and children, could be placed within consecrated spaces as “earth offerings.” For the Central Acropolis at Caracol, we were able to demonstrate that the diets of sacrificial victims differed from those who were occupants of the burial chambers within the groups (A. Chase et al. 2001). Thus, the sacrificial victims were not eating within the residences and were likely not members of the residential group. While the sacrificial victims were buried in front of the structures containing eastern tombs in the Central Acropolis, the skeletal remains of children were also found in association with re-entered tombs. Presumably sacrifices, these sub-adult remains were deposited in the fill directly above the infilled, accidentally re-entered chambers in at least two instances (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003).

### Caches

Purposefully placed materials are common in the fill of Caracol’s buildings and plazas. If these special deposits did not involve the interment of human remains, then they are commonly referred to as “caches.” At Caracol, the majority of caches were formally encased within specialized pottery containers. These containers varied in size over time, but for the most part consisted of either faced and unfaced urns and dishes or small lip-to-lip cups (Figure 2). Urns and large lip-to-lip dishes often contained and/or were surrounded by other artifacts or ecofacts. Small cups and dishes generally contained the skeletal remains of human fingers. The practice of caching human fingers at Caracol extended from the Late Preclassic through the Late Classic Period. In the early temporal horizons, finger caches usually accompanied other urns, but during the Late Classic Period, they were often deposited as individual offerings.

For the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic Periods, caches tended to be made in association with undecorated lidded urns. The earliest cache vessels from Caracol derive from Structure A6, the Temple of the Wooden Lintel, and were recovered from four axial deposits (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995, 2006); they are well-defined in terms of stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates. Two were sealed within the earlier construction. Social memory must have

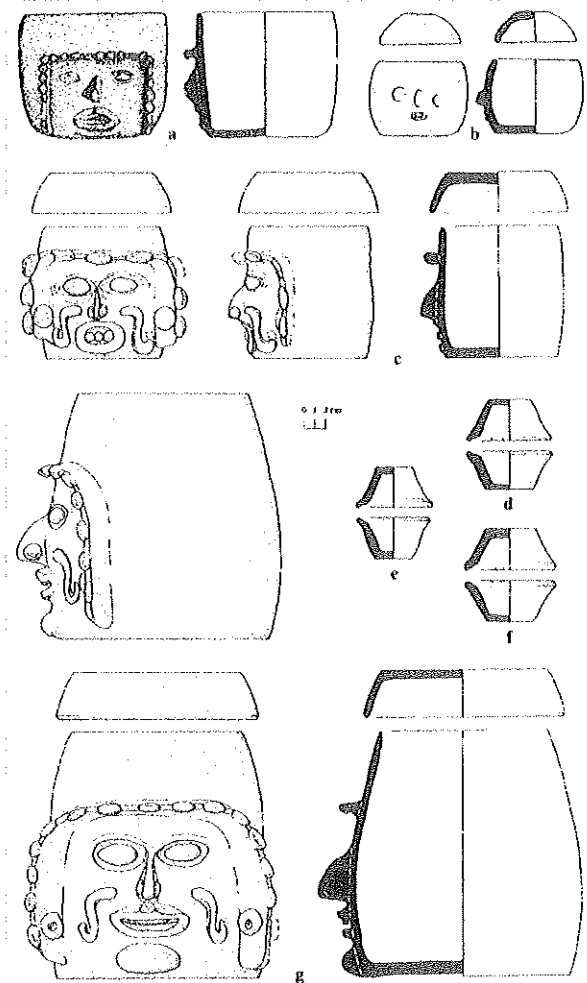


Figure 2. Typical ceramic cache vessels from Caracol, Belize, dating to the Late Classic Period: a, b, c, and g are “face caches”; d, e, and f are “finger caches.”

recorded the location of these caches, for the next two deposits were set in a perfect line with the earlier two (even though they would not have been visible). These subsequent caches accompanied the latest version of Structure A6 that was constructed on or about in A.D. 41, the onset of the 8<sup>th</sup> Baktun. The initial deposit for the final building was placed in front of the rear wall within a sealed stone geode and consisted of a jadeite face set between two spondylus shells; an earflare was set above the shells and 684 grams of mercury and pieces of malachite were placed beneath the shells. The second cache was dug into the fill in the area of the front door and was situated within a vaulted cavity. This cache consisted of a large barrel-shaped urn placed on a bed of shells. The contents of the urn were layered (see D. Chase

1988 and Mathews and Garber 2004) with a beehive occupying the upper hollow and malachite pebbles on the bottom of the vessel. In between these two layers were set mirrors, seashells oriented in four directions, a central jadeite earflare, jadeite and shell Charlie Chaplins (as defined by Moholy Nagy 1985), other shell and jadeite objects, sharks' teeth, pine needles, and pumpkin seeds. These last two caches served to center Structure A6 for the onset of the 8<sup>th</sup> Baktun.

Early Classic caches tended to represent two extremes: either their contents were austere or the urns were filled with shells and carved items. The majority of Caracol's Early Classic caches contained a diverse set of shells, mirrors, jadeite figures, and Charlie Chaplins (see A. Chase and D. Chase 2005). These complex caches were usually deposited one to a building and are believed to have served to center the public construction in terms of the Maya universe. In one case, a lidded square box was cached within a triple-lifesize seated stucco figure, that served as a locus for ritual. The ceramic box contained two large obsidian points, a large jadeite chest pendent, two smaller jadeite carvings, and "cache dirt," consisting of many small bits of jadeite and spondylus (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008).

At the onset of the Late Classic Period, a significant change in the focus and context of caching practices occurred in Caracol. Late Preclassic and Early Classic Period caches tended to be focused in monumental epicentral architecture and to have included varied, but predictable, interior elements; when caches from these earlier temporal horizons are located in residential structures, the caches are not uniform in their appearance or contents. Some of the early caches were clearly associated with temporal/calendric celebrations. In the Late Classic Period, monumental architecture tended not to be a locus for caching; instead caches were dispersed into residential units and similar cache containers were used throughout the landscape in association with rituals focusing on eastern mausoleums. Thus, there was disseminated, but uniform, ritual activity centered in residential units during the Late Classic Period.

In the early part of the Late Classic Period, caching patterns at Caracol emphasized urns with modeled faces, which were sometimes associated with eccentric obsidians (Figure 3) and, in one case, malachite pebbles. Earlier faced urns tended to be larger in size and also to be more elaborately modeled. The faces included a mix of various human representations, as well as the Maya sun god and visages of birds. Birds were portrayed with a simple beak and eyes. Human visages were often depicted with earrings and nose beads. A beaded border, similar to contemporaneous representations of the site's rulers on carved stone monuments (e.g. Caracol Stelae 5 and 14; Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981: figures. 6 and 14), framed a number of other faces. Still other portraits seem to represent dead trophy heads. Representations of the Sun god are smiling with barbules placed at the edges of their mouths. During the late Late Classic Period, cached urns portrayed either the most elemental of faces or reverted to their undecorated state. Rather than being barrel-shaped, they were also more bulbous in form. In general, however, the majority of these face caches were placed in front of Caracol's eastern constructions, showing a clear association with the burials and tombs that were placed within these structures. These ceramic vessels were also uniformly manufactured with the same paste and general style, probably indicative of production within a single ritual workshop, and they must have been readily available to the site's populace based on their widespread distribution.

### **Incensarios**

The burning of incense was a common Maya ritual practice and specially formed ceramic vessels were made for this purpose; these "incensarios" offer an interesting contrast to Caracol's cache vessels. In the late Early Classic, at a time when caches were undecorated, hourglass incensarios were modeled with the face of the sun god with nighttime jaguar aspects. Spiked hourglass incensarios also appeared at this time and continued to be used into the early Late Classic Period. The most common incensario found in the early part of the Late Classic Period was not decorated and consisted of a plain ring-based

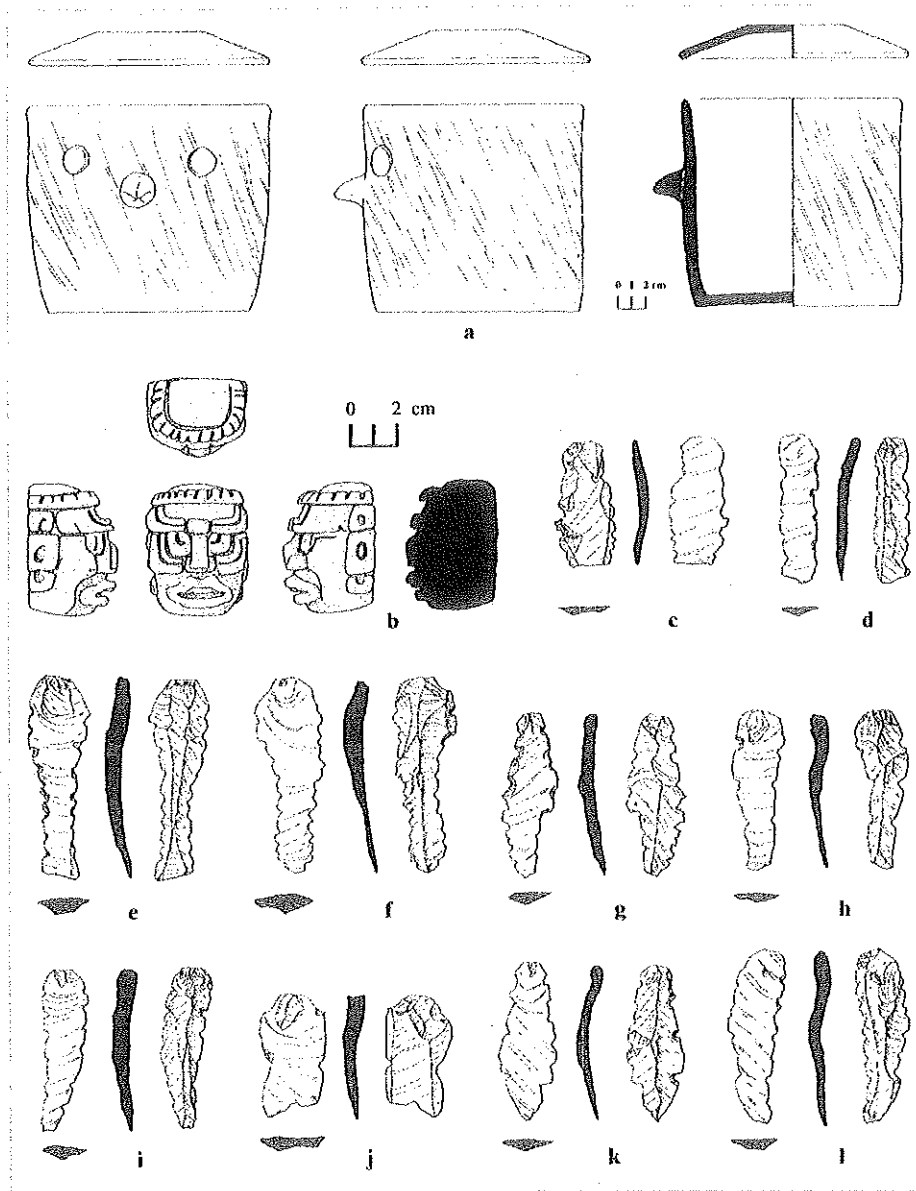


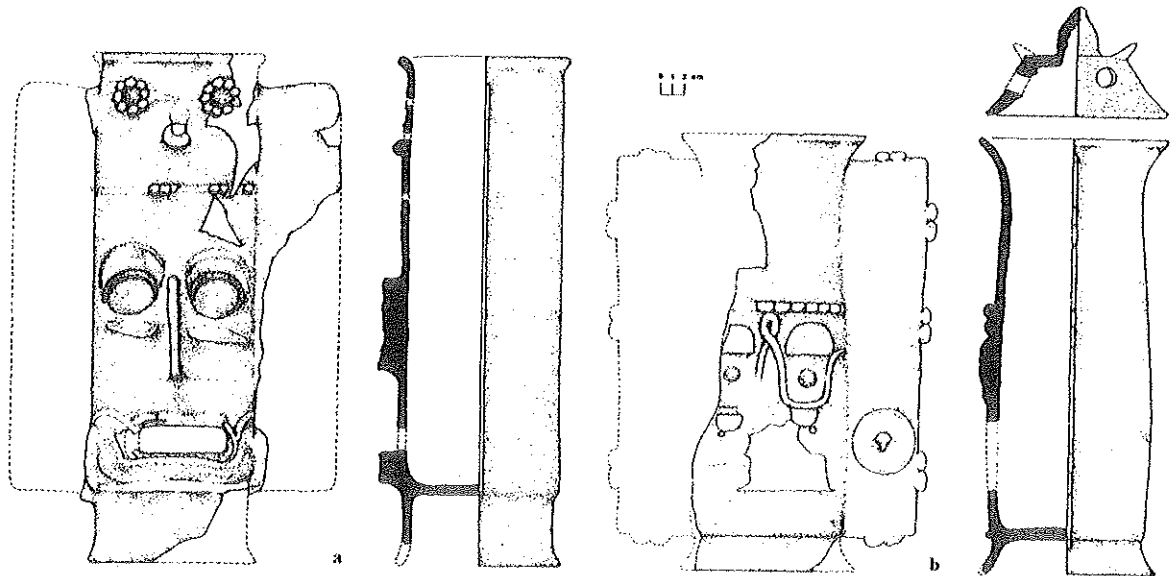
Figure 3. Lidded ceramic face cache, representing a bird, and its contents from Caracol Structure 15. The modeled head of Kinich Ahau is carved from limestone and was set atop the ten obsidian eccentrics inside the urn.

urn. By the late Late Classic Period, however, incensarios had morphed into flanged ring-based cylinders that were decorated with a series of faces, again usually the sun god with jaguar aspects (Figure 4). These censers often appeared in association with Caracol's latest deposits. In the epicenter, they were often paired as part of the final artifactual materials left in temples before their abandonment, but within the outlying residential area, flanged cylinder incensarios appeared singly in association with the stairs of several

mausoleums (perhaps also serving a similar purpose).

#### Other Ritual Practices Recovered in the Archaeological Record

Some of Caracol's archaeological deposits are more challenging to discern, define, and interpret; yet, these contexts clearly fall within the realm of ritual and help to broaden our understanding of ancient Maya ritual practices. Unlike situations at other sites, where artifactual materials included within fill are



**Figure 4.** Late to Terminal Classic Period modeled and flanged ring-based cylinder incensarios from epicentral Caracol (after A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:14,25).

problematically assigned a ritual function (e.g. Lucero 2006), the context and content of these materials can be archaeologically established and shown to be purposeful. At Caracol, such contexts include deposits of burnt materials purposefully placed in structural fills, extensive episodic caching, and cache materials placed within structural and plaza fills without the benefit of a ceramic container.

Located on the southwestern edge of Caracol's epicenter, Structure D2 appears as a large elevated pyramid. Excavation within this construction demonstrated that it had been built in the Early Classic Period. Deep within its core was a feature placed directly into the construction fill. It consisted of a crude ring of stone, measuring approximately 1.2 meters in diameter, which housed fill that had clearly been burned and was full of broken burnt pottery and obsidian. When analyzed and reconstructed, the burnt, broken, and dispersed materials within this ring yielded 16 whole obsidian lancets, 25 obsidian blade fragments, 1 jadeite ball, 1 broken jadeite bead, 2 limestone bars, and 14 reconstructible ceramic vessels. Ten of the reconstructible vessels were in typical Early Classic cache vessel form and 4 were polychrome ring-base dishes. This deposit was

directly above an Early Classic urn cache that would have served to center the building.

Dating to the very onset of the Late Classic Period within Structure B19 was an intensive caching episode associated with an earlier building. The floor of the earlier building was pierced numerous times for the deposition of a large number of finger caches and jadeite beads. The floor was then strewn with stingray spines and eccentric obsidians and extensively burnt. This entire episodic cache deposit was then covered by fill from a single construction episode that raised the building's surface over a meter to a new floor surface. This new surface was then also pierced to place a spiked incensario above a finger bowl cache with the remains of a child. No other deposits were then placed in the building for an extended period of time, even though the building was again raised another meter in height. Only in the Terminal Classic Period was the latest floor again pierced to place a deposit within the building's core that consisted of a series of 5 Terminal Classic vessels (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004:figure 16.2).

Some caches are deposited directly into building fill without the benefit of a container; however, the artifactual materials and their proximity to each other make it clear that they

were purposeful deposits. While infrequent at Caracol, this kind of cache does occur. Within the core of Structure B19, a ritual deposit was placed into the fill above red-painted earlier stairs; this deposit consisted of spondylus shells, eccentric obsidians, and jadeite chips strewn directly into fill. A similar deposit was placed directly into the summit fill of Structure A2 and consisted of eccentric obsidians and rounded limestone balls. Perhaps the most elaborate “fill” cache recovered does not come from the epicenter, but was rather found in the plaza of a residential group. Placed in front of Structure C21 and dating to the Early Classic Period, were a concentration of items that, upon analysis, proved to consist of 3 chert eccentrics (Figure 5), 8 obsidian eccentrics, 6 spondylus shells, 3 stingray spines (along with 52 “fish” vertebrae, probably indicating the presence of whole stingrays [e.g., Teeter 2001]), 1 jadeite bead, 1 stone ball, 1 piece of brain coral, 128 hematite mirror pieces, and “cache dirt” consisting of 4,571 small chips of spondylus and 747 small chips of jadeite. The chert eccentrics within this deposit constitute the only known examples from Caracol after 25 years of continuous research.

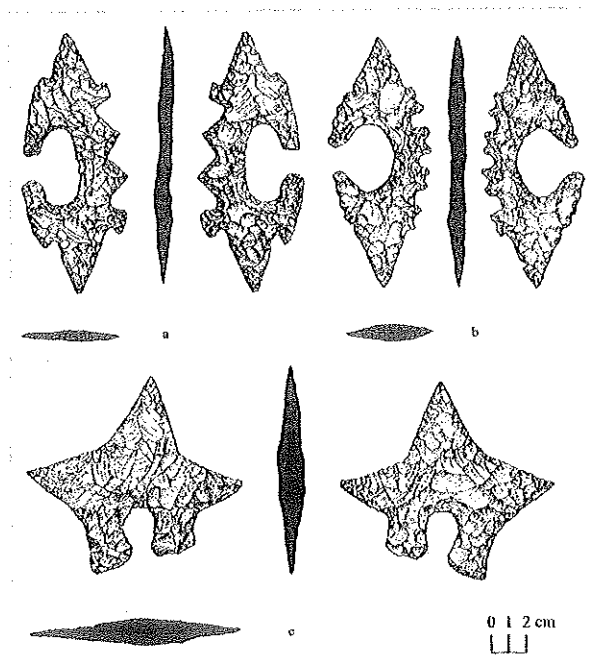


Figure 5. Three chert eccentrics dating to the Early Classic Period from a plaza cache placed in front of Structure C21, located within a non-epicentral residential group.

Within Caracol’s residential settlement, variations occur on the standard cache pattern of one or two deposits being placed in front of the eastern building. In a few residential groups, excavation has demonstrated that multiple caches had been sequentially placed both in front of and within a single structure. In one case (Structure J20), a central shrine construction housed at least 32 distinct finger caches as well as a single set of large lip-to-lip bowls. In another case (Highrise residential group), the eastern building contained at least a dozen sets of caches placed on the front central axis to a building, some with eccentric obsidians (Jaeger 1991). In a third case (Structure I5), at least eight caches were located on axis to the building. Many of the Structure I5 caches were associated with other items, such as shells, jadeite, limestone bars, and a multitude of eccentric obsidians; also recovered in these caches were a shark’s tooth and a limestone carving of “Kinich Ahau” (Figure 3b).

#### Private and Public Aspects of Ritual in the Archaeological Record of Caracol

The archaeological contexts related to ritual practice at Caracol can be used to show that ritual deposits at the site were used to establish group solidarity on a variety of levels. Depending on the context and the time period, the public and private aspects of the rituals varied. However, a distinction can be made between ritual carried out in epicentral architecture as opposed to ritual undertaken in residential architecture - although, in all contexts, the inferred ritual acts are to some degree mixed as to their public and private nature during the Late Classic Period.

We would see the placement of certain caches within Caracol’s epicenter, especially those dating earlier than the Late Classic Period that were placed during the construction of buildings, as being representative of private ritual. The physical placement of the cache and the contents included within the cache could not have been witnessed by more than a few people; yet, the location of the cache was symbolically necessary for the well-being of the public at large. Thus, these rituals had perceived impact far beyond those who witnessed the final interment of ritual offerings.



Caracol's elite would have tightly controlled the "centering" of the major constructions at the site during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic Periods – and this ritual practice would have provided the elite with a source of both knowledge and power that was largely hidden from the bulk of the population." However, privately deposited materials may have been part of wider public ritual events. This is particularly true of the ubiquitous "blood-letting" ascribed to the ancient Maya. Archaeological contexts indicate that blood-letting with the use of stingray spines and lancets was not generally a public ceremony (e.g., D. Chase 1994), but rather one that was participated in by only a few people and one that was presumably carried out in hidden locations. At Caracol, stingray spines are only infrequently found in tombs and more often occur as contents within Early Classic urns in association with the centering of the site's buildings, indicating again the participation of specific and restricted individuals in the rituals necessary to undertake this task.

Whether elaborate public rituals were carried out in the public spaces of Maya sites should remain an open question; it should not simply be assumed that epicentral plazas were venues for such practices. Some models of Maya political organization, such as those that refer to "galactic polities" (Demarest 1992) or to "theater states" (Inomata and Coben 2006), are based to a large extent on the postulation that charismatic elites carried out substantial, impressive rituals in these public spaces. We would caution, however, that spectacle and ritual are not necessarily the same things. While Maya iconography is replete with elaborate costuming, these costumes are for the most part specifically associated with rituals that celebrated temporal cycles (and not political spectacles). The rituals involved in these temporal cycles, however, were clearly in the public domain. This can be seen through placement of the stelae that commemorated these cycles in public epicentral plazas and in the repetitious cache patterns associated with stelae at sites like Tikal, Guatemala (Moholy-Nagy 2007).

Another form of public ritual in the epicenters of Maya sites probably accompanied interments that were conspicuously placed

within public buildings. The construction activities and modifications that were made to place such deposits would have been publically viewable. At Caracol, this is presumably true for the tomb intruded into Structure A3 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:15) and also for the burial intruded into the steps of Structure B5 during the Terminal Classic Period (A. Chase 1994). Public ritual display was also associated with certain specific epicentral venues for more than a single point in time. The rear alley of Structure A1 was the location of a publicly-viewable, thrice life-size, red-painted stucco statue dating to the end of the Early Classic Period. A cache had been secreted in the chest of the statue and another was secreted in the construction that covered it. When the statue was engulfed, a tomb was built immediately in front of the statue and it is likely that Stela 1 and Altar 1 were also erected immediately in front of this locus at this time. Subsequently, this tomb was infilled from a top constructed chute with burned bodies, vessels, and obsidian lancets placed within a dirt and stone matrix, representing the results of repeated rituals that were possibly associated with the accession of K'an II (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008). Thus, public ritual appears to have been necessary to establish the legitimacy of this ruler.

Yet, the physical construction of some features within buildings is suggestive of private ritual, particularly with regard to some interments. At Caracol, several epicentral buildings included pre-planned tombs within the cores of these edifices that were only accessible by means of carefully hidden, but easily accessible, entryways. Thus, the dead could be placed within these chambers with or without public fanfare.

Residential architecture at Caracol was also a widespread venue for ritual acts during the Late Classic Period. These rituals were focused not on the legitimacy or deification of the ruler, but rather on the integration of the inhabitants of Caracol through disseminated, but unified, ritual actions. The majority of Caracol's residential groups had their own shrines and mausoleums that were the focus of family ritual. Like the site epicenter, this localized ritual also had a temporal aspect to it; the burials were not timed with lifespans, but rather with time

periods (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003). Whether one considers the ritual carried out within residential groups to be private or public is a matter of semantics. The ritual acts carried out within the residential group were presumably only participated in and knowable by the group itself. Thus, each residential group carried out their own private rituals, but these rituals were public to members of the residential group. Similar ritual acts took place in each of the residential groups within Caracol's metropolitan area, including those located in the epicenter. In a twist on epicentral caching, the most public aspect of residential ritual would have been the placement of face and finger caches in front of eastern mausoleums. The placement of interments in these living areas was also in the public venue for group residents, as it is likely that bundled dead were stored in constructions on top of the eastern buildings and that all of the members of a group knew when (and where) they were actually buried. That there was a social memory involved in these interments is also reflected by the placement of incensarios in accidentally entered tombs and in the deposition of what appear to be child sacrifices in the fill directly above reburied chambers. However, the distinction between private and public ritual becomes moot at the residential level. It is only an issue for community-wide ritual conducted by the elite living within public architecture.

### Conclusion

Most of the buildings and plazas that constituted the site of Caracol may be thought of as consecrated space. Whether public or private, ritual governed the temporal cycles associated with both residential groups and public architecture. While it is evident that ritual deposits were placed in both public epicentral architecture and private residential locations, the distinction between public and private ritual is often difficult to establish. Ritual in public places may have had both public and private aspects. Publically necessary ritual may have been witnessed by a select few, but would have had an impact on many. Likewise, residential ritual may have been public to the residents of a plazuela group; yet, by virtue of the limited size of the group's occupants, such ritual was more restricted and private in nature. Importantly,

caches placed within public architecture were generally deposited inside these constructions outside of public view; however, public display may have been conjoined with private offerings and private deposition. Even more haziness is apparent when cache contents are considered, as there are parallels between epicentral public architectural and residential caching. Only with the Late Classic Period proliferation of face caches at Caracol does there appear to be a clear distinction between rituals carried out in public as opposed to residential space. Yet, even here, the replication of caching practices among residential units makes it evident that private ritual reinforced uniform and unified public functions and beliefs. Thus, this paper provides a cautionary note regarding the simple assignation of the terms "public" and "private" to ritual, suggesting that only extensive excavation samples and detailed analyses of archaeological contexts can help illuminate past practices.

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