1 THE EARLY CLASSIC PERIOD AT CARACOL, BELIZE: TRANSITIONS, COMPLEXITY, AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY

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Although not the huge sprawling metropolis that it became in the Late Classic Period, Caracol had a fairly substantial population during the Early Classic Period. The archaeological data demonstrate that major shifts in ritual patterns occurred between the Early and Late Classic Periods at the site – both in residential groups and in the site epicenter. Ceramic distribution patterns found in the Early Classic mirror those found later in the Terminal Classic in that status-linked pottery appears to have been employed; this practice creates methodological problems for the identification of the time period in the archaeological record. However, contextually recovered materials and deposits found over 20 years of research at the site have helped us begin to understand the nature of the Early Classic Period at Caracol.

The Early Classic Period is difficult to define for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is a widespread preconception that can be found among many Maya archaeologists that the Early Classic either does not exist at some sites or that it represents a drastic reduction in terms of population numbers. Why and how this myth came into existence is partially a result of historical accident and partially a result of excavation and analytic methodology that does not take into account the very real cultural changes that occurred during the onset of the Early Classic Period.

We tend to look at the Early Classic Period through a Late Classic lens. In general, this lens works fairly well in terms of excavation methodology for the later part of the Early Classic Period, at least in terms of elite remains. However, this Late Classic lens tends to cloud our view of the first half of the Early Classic, where the excavation methodology needs to be substantially altered in order to encounter these earlier remains. Much like the Terminal Classic era (D. Chase and A. Chase in press), the transition from the Late Preclassic to Early Classic followed different frames of reference – frames that are only barely understood, but that do not lend themselves to being found with excavation methodology honed in the Late Classic Period. Analytically, the Early Classic has some similarities to the Terminal Classic Period in the use of status-linked ceramic materials (see Lincoln 1985, A. Chase and D. Chase 2004, in press). Given the conjoined problems of excavation and analytic methodology, it is not surprising that many scholars have had difficulty isolating, let alone finding, the Early Classic era.

Background

Identification of Early Classic remains and the transformation from the Preclassic to the Classic Period is not solely a modern concern. It was very much an interest of initial Carnegie researchers at Uaxactun, the site that came to form the baseline of later definitions of the Early Classic Period. The transition into the Early Classic was notoriously difficult to define at Uaxactun. Robert Smith (1955), the ceramic analyst at Uaxactun, was unsure of the nature of continuities from the Late Preclassic into the Early Classic. Aware of

Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology, Vol. 2, 2005, pp. 17-38.

earlier transitional ceramics from Holmul, Guatemala (Merwin and Vaillant 1932), he suspected that an entire ceramic phase, one he called "Matzanel," was missing from the Uaxactun sequence. Although he subdivided his Early Classic phase into three parts, he had trouble defining its earlier two subdivisions (Tzakol 1 and Tzakol 2). Temporally, he saw the Early Classic as running from A.D. 278 to A.D. 593, largely defined on the basis of his understanding of hieroglyphic texts and stone monuments at Uaxactun. Thus, while Uaxactun clearly had substantial deposits dating to Tzakol 3 (his latest subdivision of the Early Classic), the transition out of Late Preclassic Chicanel ceramics was problematic; and, importantly, most of the Tzakol 3 materials at Uaxactun derived from high status tombs.

Sequencing problems recognized in the ceramics at Uaxactun were also indirectly extended to other analytic realms. Uaxactun's E Group was thought to have functioned as an architectural complex for measuring solstices and equinoxes. Even though a Late Preclassic building was stratigraphically related to this function, because 8th cycle stelae were associated with a later rebuilding of this complex, Uaxactun's E Group came to be defined as an architectural hallmark for the Early Classic Period. However, subsequent work on E Groups (or "architectural commemorative complexes") at other sites demonstrated that these complexes all had Preclassic origins (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; Hansen 1998; Laporte and Fialko 1995).

Subsequent archaeological projects widely used the Uaxactun ceramic sequence, but did not substantially refine its complexes or dating. Fourteen years of excavation at Tikal by the University of Pennsylvania largely replicated and amplified the Early Classic sequence seen at Uaxactun. The earlier parts of the Early Classic at Tikal (Manik 1 and 2) were curiously under-represented in the archaeological record recovered by the University of Pennsylvania team (later recognized as a sampling problem) while the latest Early Classic facet (Manik 3) was especially well represented in elite tombs (e.g. Culbert 1993). A focus on these elite tombs resulted in rampant speculation that the great central Mexican site of Teotihuacan had directly impacted the southern lowland site of Tikal in some way based largely on similarities in ceramics and iconography (Coe 1972; Coggins 1975). Sanders and Price (1968), in fact, argued that Teotihuacan intervention in the Southern lowlands, either directly from Teotihuacan or indirectly through the site of Kaminaljuyu, gave rise to the first true Maya state. While epigraphers have perpetuated this view of interventionist history (Schele and Freidel 1990; Stuart 2000; Martin 2003), the archaeological record argues strongly against any forcible impact from Teotihuacan (Demarest and Foias 1993; Iglesias 2003; Laporte 2003; White et al. 2000, 2001). The more recent Tikal excavations by Juan Pedro Laporte (2003; Laporte and Fialko 1995) and his colleagues have better defined the Early Classic Period at that site and substantially filled in ceramic gaps relevant to Tikal's earlier phases. These investigations suggest a Maya, rather than Teotihuacan, temporal priority for key ceramic types and architectural styles.

While Early Classic materials could be defined in most excavations at the various sites that were excavated in the 1950s and 1960s, the analysts usually commented that the full spectrum of what should have been there was absent. For Barton Ramie (Willey et al. 1965), Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971), and Altun Ha (Pendergast 2003:244), this meant that few of the hallmark cylinder tripods were found, although other materials could be assigned to this temporal era. At Seibal, however,

there were problems finding and defining any Early Classic occupation. Secure Early Classic occupation could only be assigned to the site epicenter and a "temple" 2 kilometers distant. Based on these data, Sabloff (1975:233) argued that Seibal "was virtually abandoned for several hundred years" between the Late Preclassic and the Late Classic Period. This idea of an Early Classic population depression or abandonment was subsequently popularized (Willey et al. 1975:41; Willey 1977:395-396) and adopted by later researchers (e.g., Sidrys 1983:397-399) who also had difficulty locating the Early Classic remains within their archaeological samples. Based on his archaeological data and in accord with this viewpoint, Freidel (1978, Freidel et al. 1982) argued that Cerros was almost completely abandoned at the end of the Late Preclassic Period (although subsequent re-analysis did in fact identify Early Classic remains within the Cerros structures [Walker 1998]). The accumulated publications led to a widespread belief that there was little or no Early Classic Period occupation in large portions of the Southern lowlands, presumably because of some sort of larger societal decline. Lincoln (1985) provided an alternative solution to the dilemma of the "missing" Early Classic by postulating that Preclassic ceramics continued to be used by the bulk of "Early Classic" populations at many sites and were thus not easily distinguishable by the ceramic analyst. While initially not widely accepted, Lincoln's (1985) work in fact provided part of the resolution to the Early Classic problem.

The above being said, we should note that we have frequently looked in bewilderment at those who postulated Early Classic abandonment or had difficulty in finding Early Classic archaeological remains –for the Early Classic Period has been well represented at each of the major sites at which we have worked. Both Tayasal and Cenote in the central Peten of Guatemala produced burials and tombs dating to the Early Classic. And, the conjunction of E Groups, the advent of stela, and Protoclassic ceramics were all in evidence at Cenote (A. Chase 1985). Thus, ceramically, a clear transition was manifested in intertwined ceramic modes that spanned the Late Preclassic into the Early Classic; another transition was seen in ceramic modes conjoining the Early and Late Classic eras (A. Chase and D. Chase 1983). However, exactly when these transitions occurred was somewhat hazy. In fact, it was in examining the Tayasal data that we started to understand some of the analytical problems involved in the Early Classic, for if one used the standard temporal frame for the Early Classic –then current– of A.D. 250 to A.D. 600, it would appear as if there was a population decline in the archaeological record. But, if one reduced the upper end of this phase from A.D. 600 to A.D. 550, as archaeological sequencing and cross-dating dictated (see A. Chase 1990), then the population curve reversed itself and the Early Classic demonstrated a population upswing. Thus, a 50-year shift in timeframe drastically restructured analytic perceptions of the same data (A. Chase 1990:158). Methodologically, the Tayasal data further demonstrated that Early Classic remains were not often encountered in random settlement test-pits, but were rather more likely to appear deeply buried in larger architecture. Thus, sampling was clearly a key issue in the recovery of Early Classic Period remains.

Santa Rita Corozal also produced a sizeable amount of Early Classic material including tombs, burials, caches, and on-floor refuse (see D. Chase and A. Chase, this volume). Analytically, these data again demonstrated ceramic continuity between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic, but

also suggested an Early Classic exuberance that far exceeds the central Peten materials. Unlike the central Peten, the continuities in certain forms in northern Belize between the Early and Late Classic eras sometime made an ascription to the Late Classic difficult (e.g. Pring 1976). These same data showed a highly stratified society and demonstrated that a few people could accomplish great architectural feats (D. Chase 1990:207), something later expounded upon in terms of ergonomics by Abrams (1994) for Copan.

Like the Tayasal-Paxcaman Zone and Santa Rita Corozal, Caracol also has blessed us with plentiful Early Classic remains. Analytically, we have several deposits that permit us to examine both the Late Preclassic and Early Classic articulation and the Early Classic to Late Classic transition. Methodologically, Caracol has also allowed us to note that our traditional excavation techniques –i.e., axial trenches on mounded architecture– may be fine for identifying remains from the late Early Classic onwards, but that they are not well-suited for finding earlier Early Classic remains. Many Early Classic primary deposits tend to be inside elevated plazas and not on structural axes. Thus, part of our inability to find Early Classic remains can be ascribed to an excavation methodology that is conditioned to find Late Classic deposits.

The Early Classic Period at Caracol

To understand the Early Classic Period at Caracol, one needs to first define the known Preclassic remains at the site. Preclassic Caracol was quite precocious. Caracol's Preclassic ceramics may go back as far as 600 B.C. based on form and decorative seriation. However, most Preclassic occupation at Caracol is deeply buried and difficult to access. In the epicenter, Preclassic architecture has been investigated in three loci. Caana, Caracol's main epicentral complex, had been built to a height of over 38 meters by the end of the Late Preclassic era. In the A6 locus was a Late Preclassic version of Caracol's E Group (or commemorative architectural complex; see A. Chase and D. Chase 1995). Finally, two Preclassic building platforms have been partially excavated deep beneath the elevated plaza in front of Structure B34. Preclassic caches also are known from both the Caracol epicenter and from some of the outlying sites that were engulfed by Caracol's Late Classic settlement. J. Eric S. Thompson (1931) recovered Preclassic caches from both Hatzcap Ceel and Cahal Pichik. The Caracol Archaeological Project also encountered looted cache vessels of probably Late Preclassic date at Cahal Pichik. In the Caracol epicenter, two Late Preclassic caches were found in the core of Structure A6-2nd. Both consist of pottery containers with only a few contents; however, one was bedded on hundreds of broken greenstone beads.

The transition between the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic –to some extent representing the earlier end of the Early Classic– is exceedingly well represented at Caracol in terms of ceramics contained in burials, caches, and refuse deposits. These data substantially augment Brady et al.'s (1998) discussion and faceting of ceramic typologies for the "Protoclassic". Brady and his colleagues argue that Protoclassic ceramics can subdivided into two temporal facets, one that is essentially Late Preclassic and represented by Usulutan material and tetrapod nubbin supports and a second that is essentially Early Classic and is characterized by orange-gloss polychrome mammiform tetrapods and pot-stands; the earlier facet is dated from 75 $\pm$ 25 B.C. to A.D. 150 and the later facet is dated from A.D. 150 to ca. A.D. 400. Unlike much of the data examined by Brady et al. (1998), the Caracol archaeological data on this

transition comes mostly from primary deposits.

Part of the problem in dealing with this transitional era is perceptions about what Preclassic ceramics as opposed to Early Classic ceramics look like. Simply put, Preclassic ceramic materials were viewed as being monochrome red, black, or cream, were often portrayed as being fairly thick and heavy, and were perceived as having waxy finishes; Early Classic ceramics were considered as being more finely made, as having forms that included basal flanges, z-angles, lids, and cylinder tripods, and as being decorated with polychrome or with gouging and incising on blackwares. In the past, many of our contexts for these early materials came from fill, and the ceramic analyst had little choice but to sort materials into what were perceived as being Preclassic as opposed to Early Classic types. Assumptions were made as to what went with what, and it was believed that waxy wares and glossy wares were temporally sequent. In the absence of good radiocarbon dates, dating was based on comparisons to other sites (where other analysts had supposedly already resolved these issues). What this meant is that our understanding of the Late Preclassic and Early Classic transition, an era difficult to find archaeologically, was reified in terms of analytic preconceptions.

After 20 years of research at Caracol, we are only now starting to break out of this analytic straightjacket. At this point we have a number of deposits that can be dated to the "Preclassic" end of this transition. Two burials have been recovered from Caracol that combines Preclassic and Protoclassic forms and a third is known from Tzimin Kax (Thompson 1931: 286-287). The first Caracol transitional burial came from a *chultun* in the settlement area and contained six vessels (see A. Chase 1994:165) combining Preclassic and Protoclassic modes (3 Laguna Verde Incised bowls [1 with faint Usulutan decoration], 1 Sierra Red labial flange bowl, 1 groove-hooked rim nubbin-footed Sacluc Black-on-Orange bowl, and 1 incised deep incurved orange bowl with missing mammiform supports). The second Caracol transitional interment is from a very rich cist placed to the front of Structure B34 (Figure 1); here a woman was buried with an elaborate mantle composed of some 7,000 shell and jadeite beads fringed with dog-teeth as well as with minimally 32 vessels combining Preclassic, Protoclassic, and Early Classic modes (see Figure 1). The combination of modes and decorations found on the ceramics within these contexts makes it clear that these two interments date to the cusp of the transition to the Early Classic. But, there are also indications that vessels placed within burials during this era were more conservative and traditional in their contents than ceramics contemporaneously used in other social realms. Thus, it was only in viewing the total assemblage that dating could be ascribed.

During our 2003 field season, a collapsed *chultun* was excavated in the southern portion of the South Acropolis. At the bottom of this *chultun* was a single lens of refuse that contained some twenty-five reconstructable ceramic vessels (Figure 2). Finewares from the deposit exhibited an admixture of Late Preclassic and Protoclassic forms and surface treatments. But, unlike the recovered burials noted above, these finewares were in association with other utilitarian and ceremonial ceramics that included large slipped water-jars, large unslipped *ollas* with handles, and various kinds of censerware. Both glossy orange-wares of various forms (including large mammiform supports [not illustrated here]) and large waxy red-ware dishes were present in the reconstructable ceramics, as well as a mammiform blackware plate, a

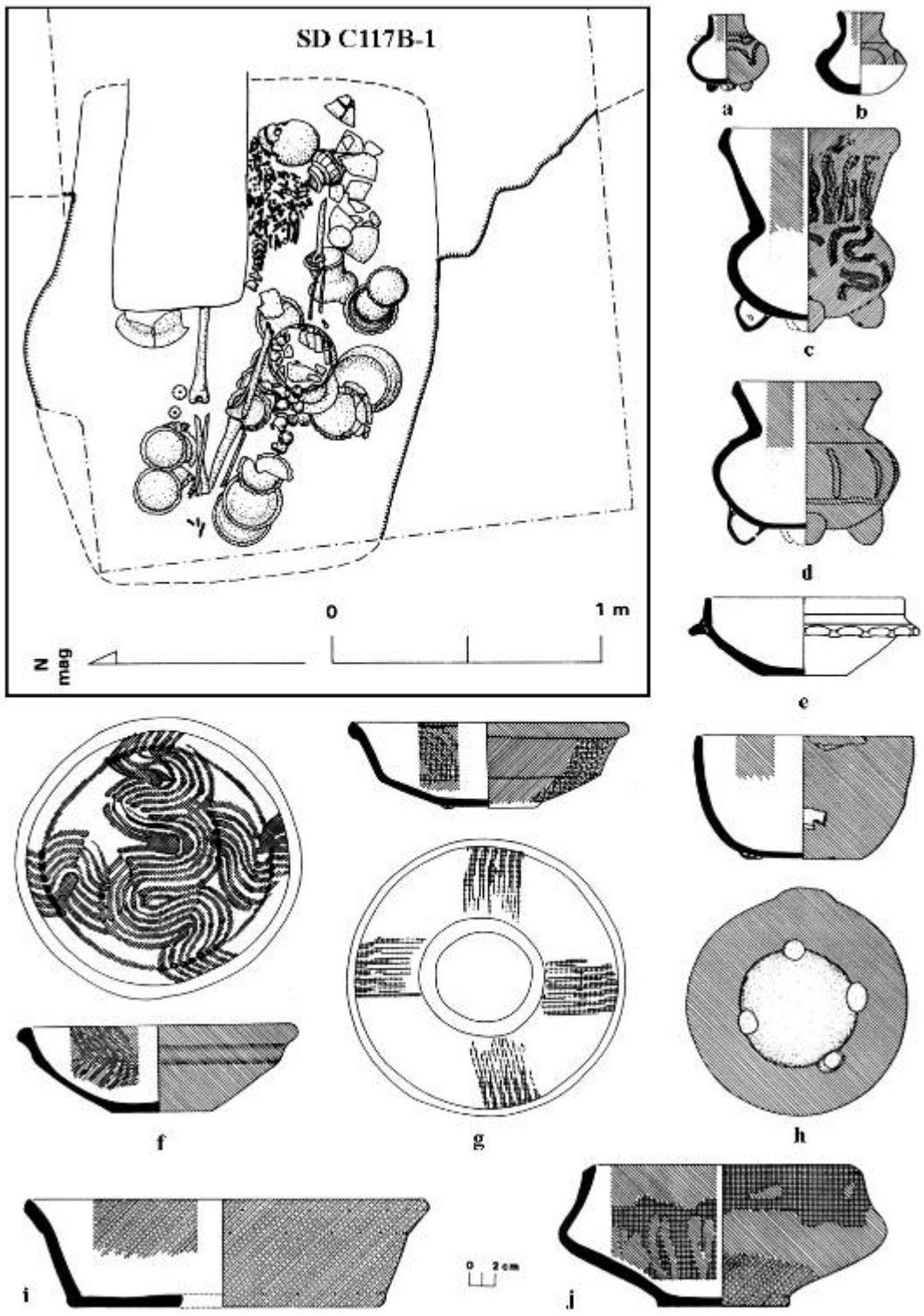

Figure 1. Burial plan of a woman at Caracol Structure B34 ca. A.D. 150. She was accompanied by 32 vessels, 10 of which are shown here: (a, b) Laguna Verde Incised; (c) Sacluc Black-on-Orange; (d) Alta Mira Fluted; (e) Flor Cream; (f, g) Mojara Orange Polychrome; (h) Sierra Red; (i) Accordian Incised; (j) Mut Red-on-Brown.

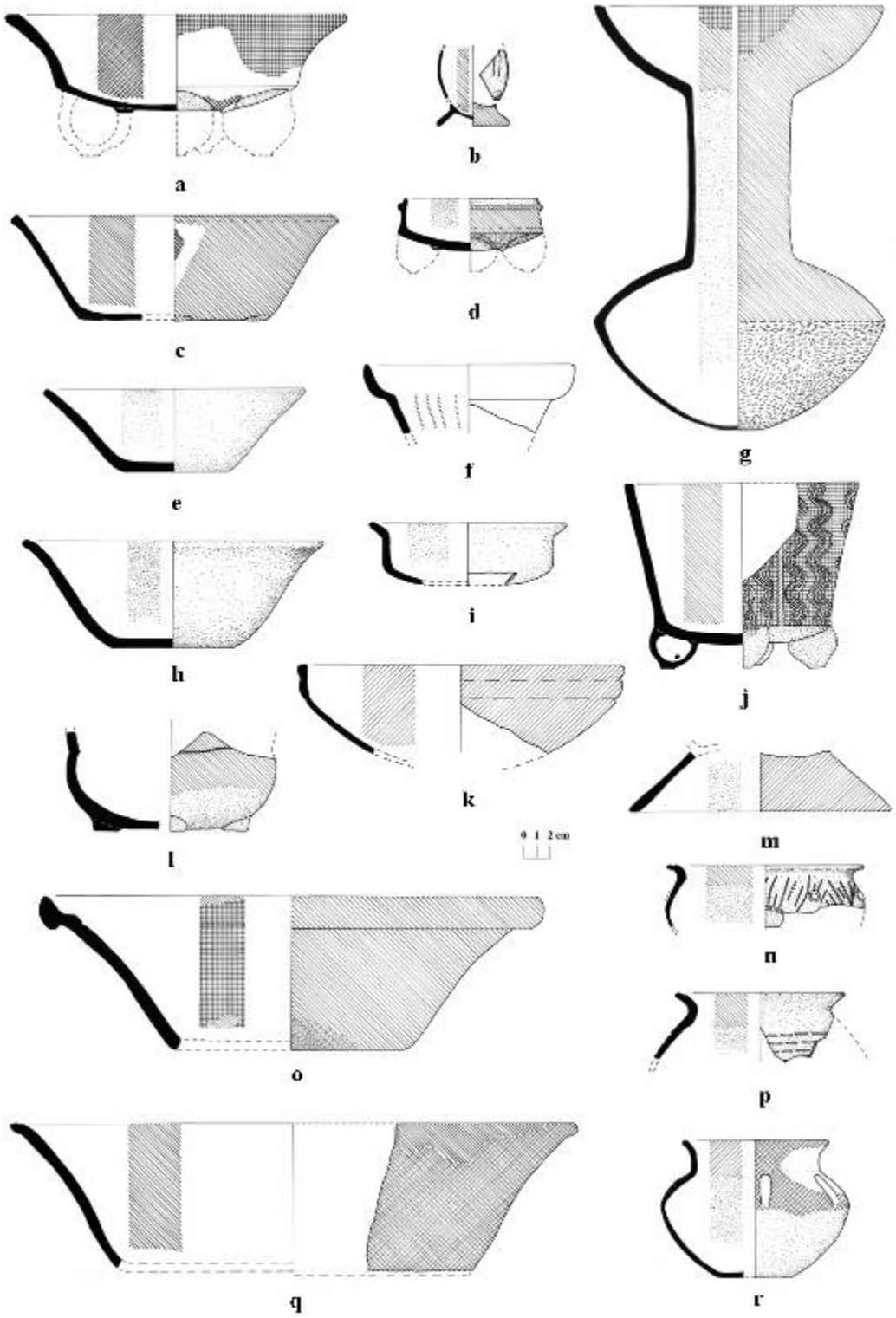

Figure 2. a: Vessels from a refuse deposit at the bottom of a collapsed *chultun* in the South Acropolis (excv. C164D), representing transitional ceramic material at the beginning of the Early Classic era (ca. A.D. 200).

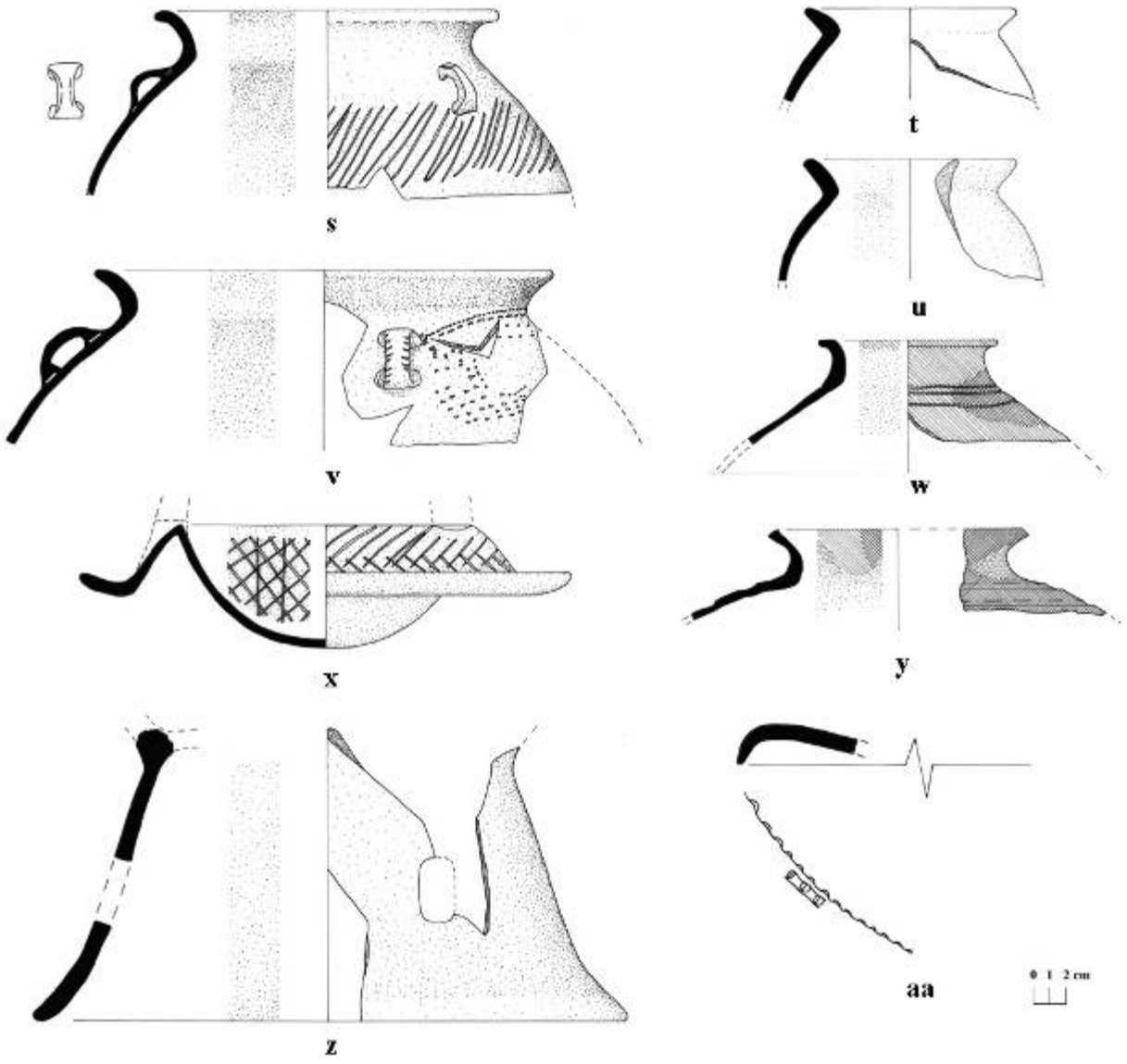

Figure 2. b: Vessels from a refuse deposit at the bottom of a collapsed *chultun* in the South Acropolis (excv. C164D), representing transitional ceramic material at the beginning of the Early Classic era (ca. A.D. 200).

Lagartos Punctated mushroom pot, and 2 Sacluc Black-on-Orange bowls (1 with mammiform supports and the other with a groove-hook lip). This admixture was much richer than that which occurred in the interments, conjoining forms that would normally be dated only to the Late Preclassic with forms that are clearly knocking on the A.D. 150-facet transition in the Brady et al. (1998) dating scheme.

The overlap between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic ceramics and the problems in burial ceramics and sampling became even clearer during our 2004 field season. Excavations in the platform north of Structure B36 produced three burials that are quite early in the Early Classic sequence. Two of these interments were placed directly within the fill of the platform and approximately half a meter

below the modern ground surface. Each burial was associated with two vessels (Figure 3). One was accompanied by a basal-flange polychrome bowl and a polychrome pot-stand; the other was accompanied by a miniature handled olla and a small collared bowl with lug-handles. The stratigraphy indicates that both interments had to have been deposited within a very short time span relative to each other. However, traditional ceramic analysis would make one interment "Preclassic" and the other "Early Classic," thus to some extent mirroring the admixture seen in the earlier deposits discussed above. The third interment recovered immediately east of the other two was a re-entered tomb (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2004a) containing six vessels (including two basal-flanged bowls) and an incised blackware lid, all dating this interment to the Early Classic Period. Thus, these excavations also confirm the difficulty in dating isolated ceramics outside of contextual assemblages and stratigraphic relationships.

Besides the above deposits, 15 other Caracol interments can be assigned to the Early Classic Period. Eight Early Classic tombs are known from Caracol: five come from the site epicenter (Figure 4), one comes from the Retiro termini, and two were recovered in the settlement area (Figure 5). Two other Early Classic interments come from *chultuns* excavated within the settlement area (Figure 6). Two more Early Classic interments were recovered in settlement test excavations and at least three other Early Classic interments are cursorily known from settlement looting. Most of the Caracol Early Classic interments have basal-flange bowls. Interestingly, however, cylinder tripods only come from three tombs in the site epicenter. Five Early Classic interments have hourglass *incensarios* in them: one tomb has an effigy-face censer; a *chultun* burial has a spiked censer with its base removed (see Figure 6a); three other tombs have plainer forms (1 in the site epicenter and 2 in residential settlements). The Early Classic burials with these *incensarios* date from the later part of the Early Classic, and the hour-glass *incensario* can be considered to be a transitional form as it continued to be placed in other burials dating to the early part of the Late Classic Period.

At minimum, four excavated caches fall within the transitional Late Preclassic to Early Classic era at Caracol. This includes materials from both within and outside the site epicenter. Primary among these are two caches that were deposited during the construction of Structure A6-1st. One cache was in a barrel-shaped vessel; it contained color-coded directional shells set about a central earflare assemblage on a bed of malachite; also included in the urn were carved shell and jadeite figures (including human "Charlie Chaplins" [Moholy-Nagy 1985]), pine needles, pumpkin seeds, a beehive, and sharks teeth. Carbon within this urn yielded a date of 1980 $\pm$ 80 (B.C. 190 [A.D.15] A.D. 210; Beta 18060). A second cache in the core of Structure A6-1st was located in a stone geode. It too contained a central jadeite earflare above a pair of *Spondylus* shell that held a jadeite mask; the whole had been enclosed in a cloth that contained malachite pebbles and had been set above 664.7 grams of liquid mercury. Extensive burning on structure floors that sealed these two caches were dated and yielded a series of three dates that confirmed the "transitional" placement of these caches, presumably as early as A.D. 60 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995:96-97). The early placement of this cache pattern at Caracol anticipates similar patterns found at Tikal almost 250 years later (see Coe 1990:926-930) and again emphasizes the importance of sampling and the difficulties in cross-dating. The other two transitional

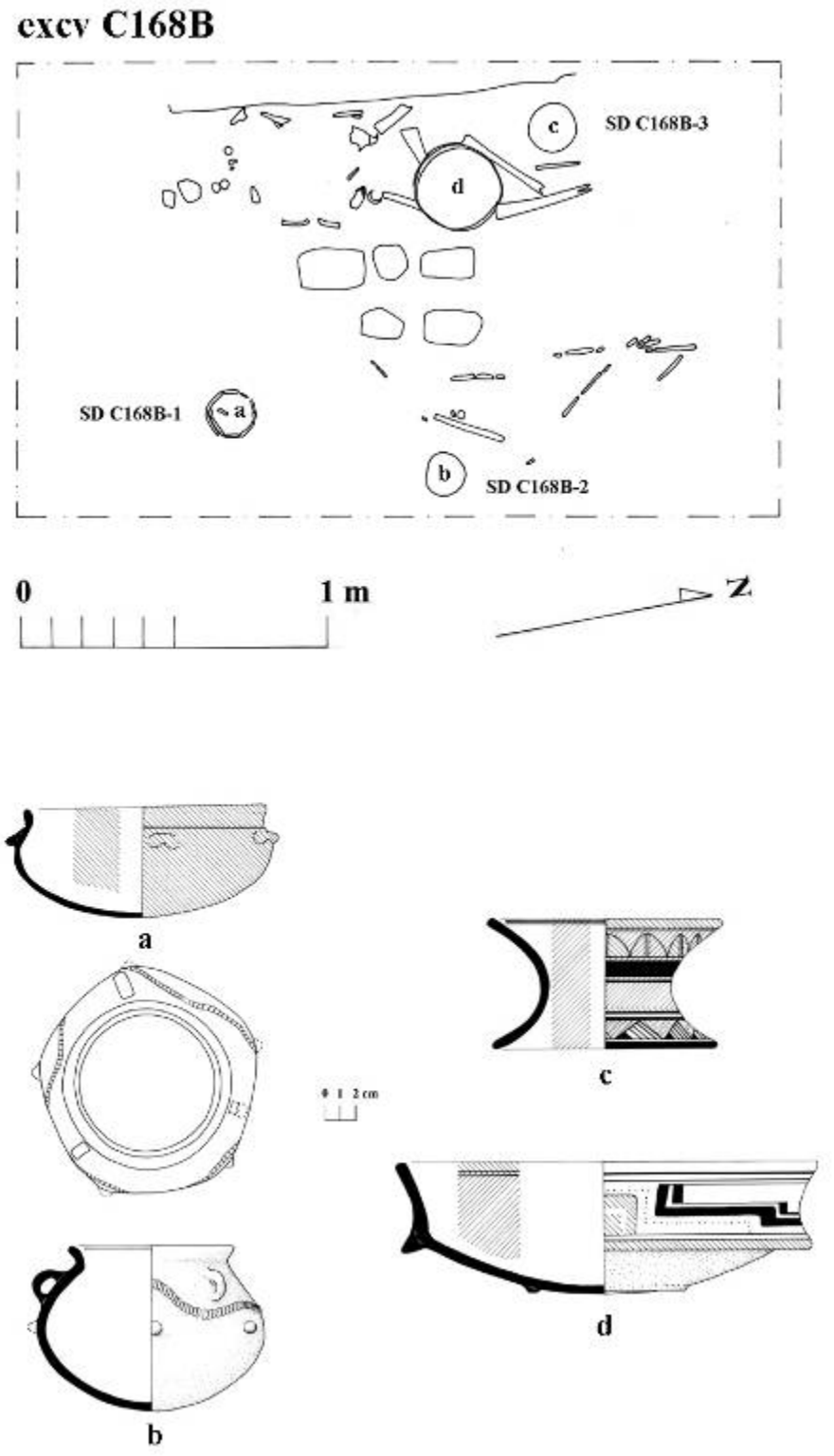

Figure 3. Interment plans and vessels from two roughly coeval burials deposited within the Structure B36 platform (excv. C168H).

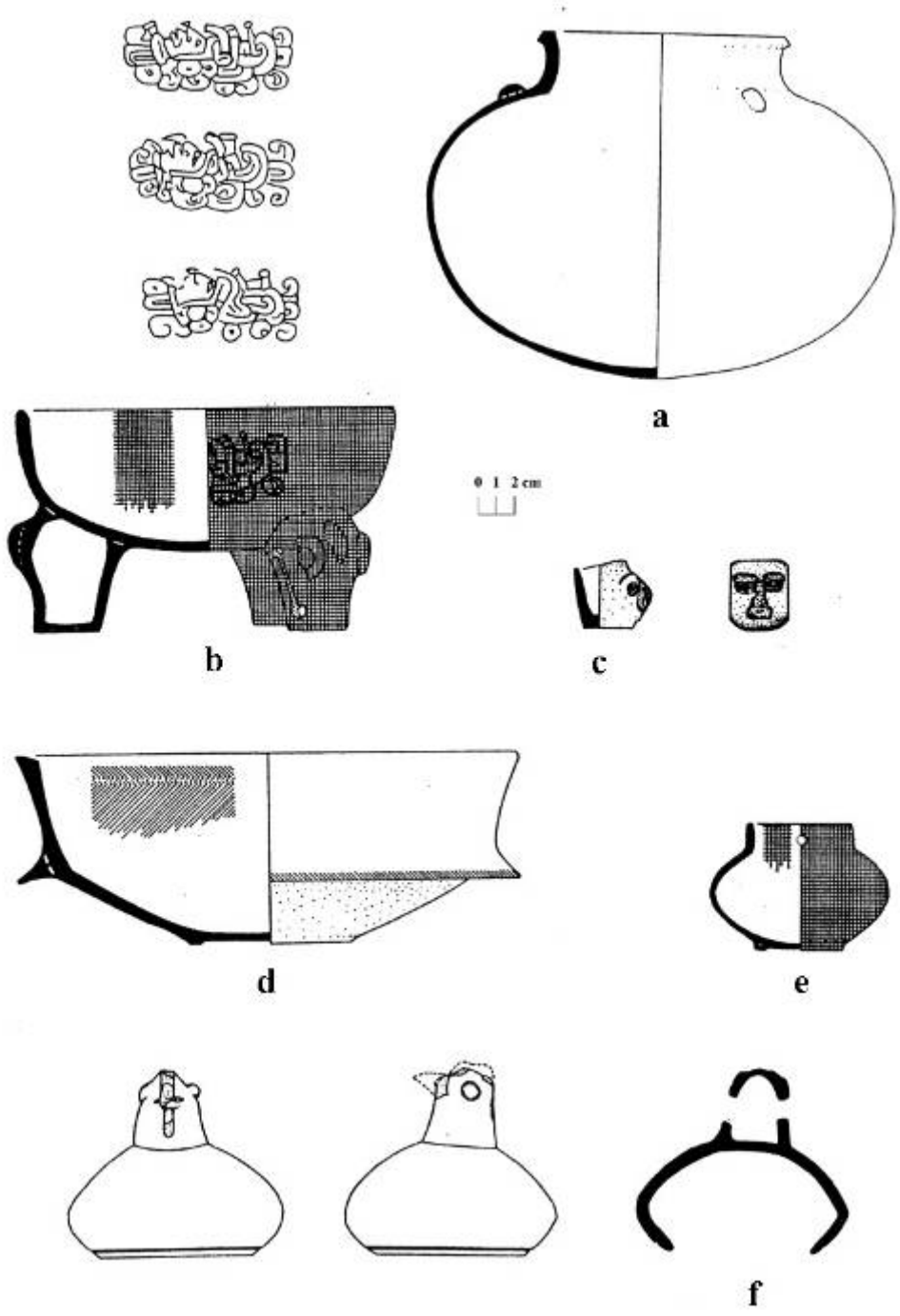

Figure 4. Early Classic vessels from a tomb in a residential (excv. C95B).

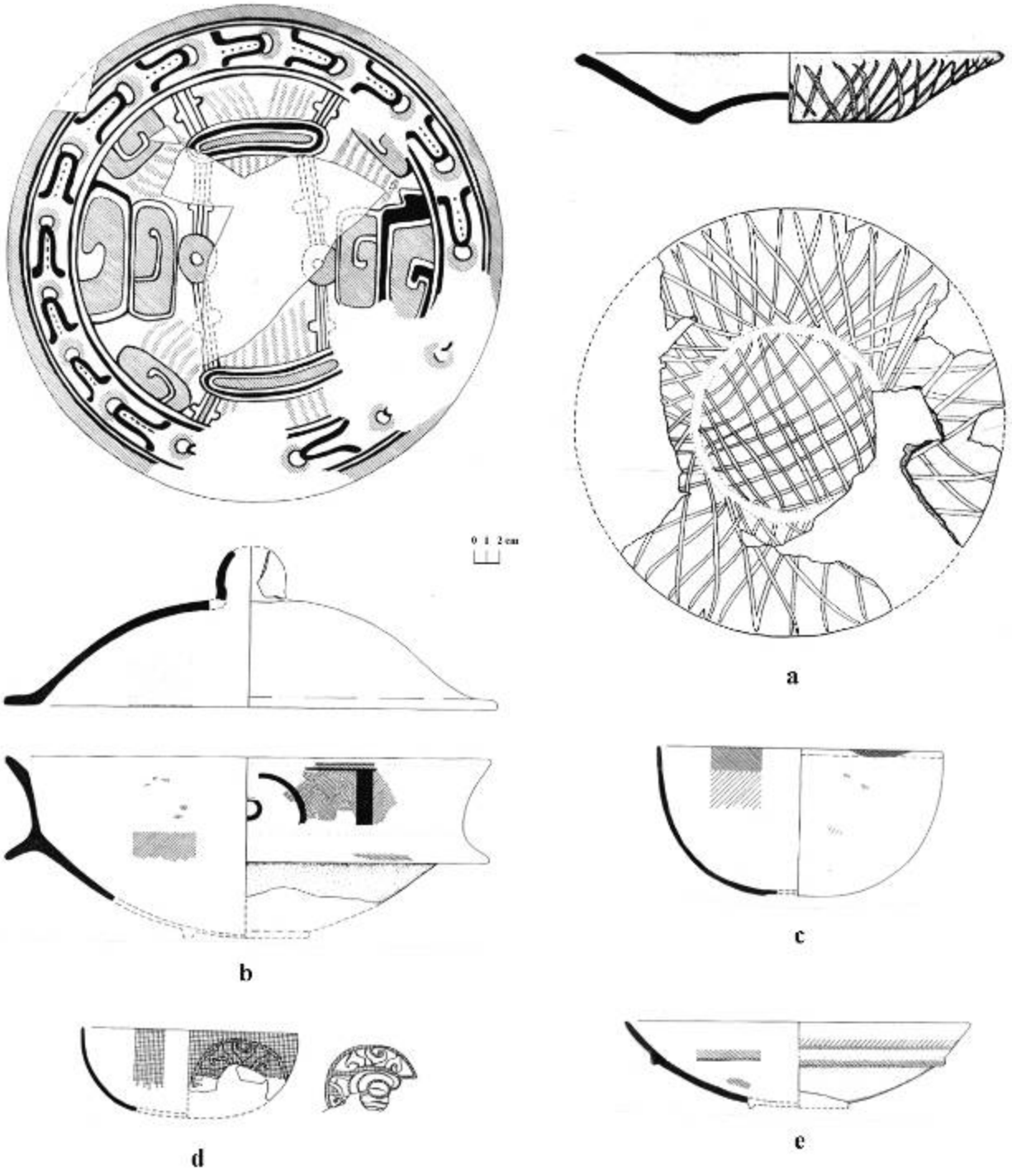

Figure 5. Early Classic vessels from tomb at Caracol settlement area (excv. C116D).

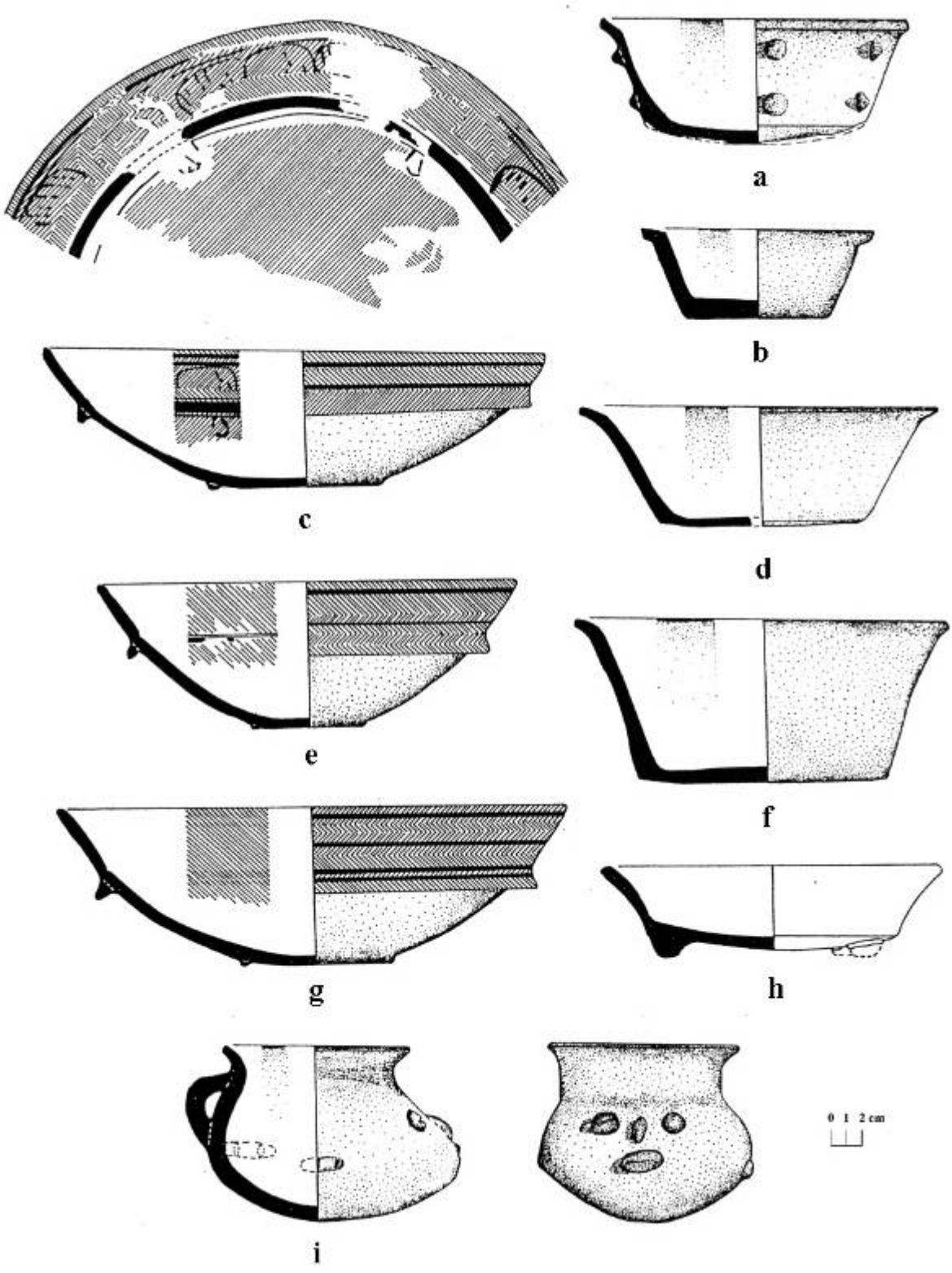

Figure 6. Vessels associated with a burial inside a *chultun* in the Caracol settlement area (excv. C67A).

caches at Caracol come from an outlying housemound group (an urn with shells and an obsidian 'Charlie Chaplin') and from within the Structure B34 plaza (lip-to-lip bowls containing *Pomacea* shells and a miniature carved mica stingray spine).

Besides the above transitional caches, fourteen additional caches in enclosed ceramic containers may be assigned an Early Classic date, six from the settlement area and eight from the epicenter (see Figure 7). All are on presumed structural axes, although half of the settlement caches are non-structural and were recovered from within plazas. While there are differences among the contents of these caches, 'Charlie Chaplins' shells, and carved jade are especially noticeable. Face caches first appear at the transition between the Early and Late Classic in the middle of the sixth century, but finger caches would appear to have a longer history, perhaps spanning the entire Early Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Because the ceramic form of small-unslipped dishes does not vary all that much over time, it is difficult to date isolated finger caches without good stratigraphic control.

Apart from ritual deposits, it is also possible to briefly comment on architecture and settlement patterns. Most Early Classic remains are deeply buried within Caracol's extensive Late Classic constructions. However, the majority of Caracol's A Plaza was constructed by the end of the Early Classic Period. Not only was the Late Preclassic commemorative complex further extended and elaborated on the western and eastern sides of this plaza during the Early Classic Period, but the platform mass of the temples known as Structures A1 and A3 were also built during this era. As previously mentioned, Caana's Structure B19 reached a height of at least 38 meters prior to the Early Classic Period, and evidence exists for a buried Early Classic version of Structure B20 that was on a more northerly axis during this era. Apart from these scant data, little has actually been recovered on Caana proper relative to the true Early Classic. Outside of epicentral construction, what can be noted is that the Early Classic landscape about Caracol was quite different than the Late Classic one. Residential groups were sparser, although agricultural terracing was probably being constructed (Healy et al. 1983). Sizeable architectural complexes (such as Talking Trees, Tulaktuhebe, and Saraguate) –some elaborations of earlier Preclassic constructions– were regularly spaced over the terrain at distances of approximately 2 kilometers from each other. Most of these groups were later engulfed by the more dense Late Classic population (e.g. D. Chase and A. Chase 2002). However, the amount of Early Classic construction activity visible throughout Caracol, when combined with evidence from burials and caches, bespeaks an active and presumably prosperous site one that was well positioned for growth and development in the Late Classic.

A note needs to be made concerning Caracol's hieroglyphic record and the Early Classic Period. Ballcourt Marker 3, dating to A.D. 798, makes reference to Caracol's founding ruler, Te' K'ab' Chaak, and his probable accession to the throne in 8.14.13.10.4 or A.D. 331. Clearly identifiable events related to Caracol's early history are, however, few and far between in the texts. A badly broken Stela 23, set beneath a later altar at the summit of Structure A2, records a late 8 Baktun ISIG (Grube 1994:91-92) somewhere between A.D. 361 and A.D. 429. The Caracol Tourism Development Project recovered the upper half of Stela 20 under a side stairway for the A Plaza's eastern platform (Figure 8). The full date on this monument can now be read as 8.18.4.4.12 or A.D. 400, but again little else can be garnered historically,

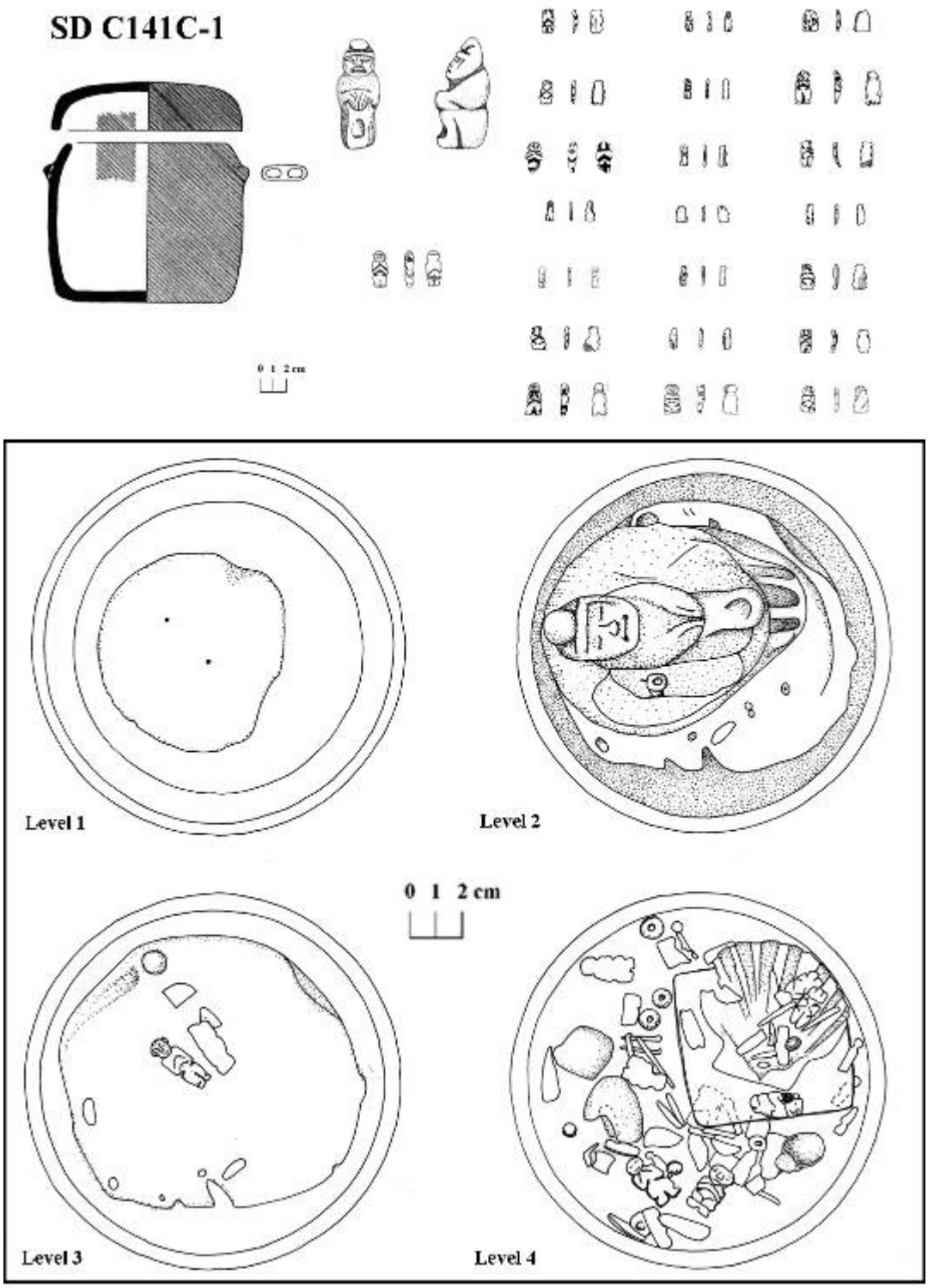

Figure 7. Part of Special Deposit C141C-1, which was placed in a small structure appended to the rear of Caracol Structure A1 (excv. C141C). Positioning of associated artifacts within the cache vessel is shown in four levels. Also illustrated is the central jadeite figurine and 22 "Charlie Chaplins" from within the urn (far left one is jadeite; the other 21 are of shell).

although both the A Plaza and the South Acropolis are loci of activity at this time. Two tombs from the South Acropolis may be dated from before (Structure D7) and after (Structure D16; e.g. A. Chase 1994) this monument. The double-decker tomb recorded by Satterthwaite (1954) in front of Structure A6 also was placed subsequent to Stela 20. While many early 9th cycle monuments exist at Caracol (e.g. Stelae 2, 4, 13, 14, 15, and 16 as well as in Giant Ahau Altars 2, 3, and 4), these texts are largely eroded and, thus, only the briefest parts of Caracol's Early Classic history have been decoded. Apart from the founder, the next Caracol ruler, Yajaw Te' K'inich I, is noted as acceding to the throne in A.D. 484 (9.2.9.0.16; Martin and Grube 2000:86). His father was named K'ak' Ujol K'inich I and his son, K'an I, acceded to power in A.D. 531 (9.4.16.13. 3) near the transition to the Late Classic Period; in turn, K'an I's son, Yajaw Te' K'inich II, acceded in A.D. 554 (9.5.19.1.2) under the auspices of a Tikal lord (Martin and Grube 2000:89). Caracol's independence from any relationship with Tikal resulted from the A.D. 562 "star war" recorded on Altar 21 (A. Chase 1991). Although no rulers' interments have been unequivocally documented, monuments and dated chambers help anchor the Caracol sequence.

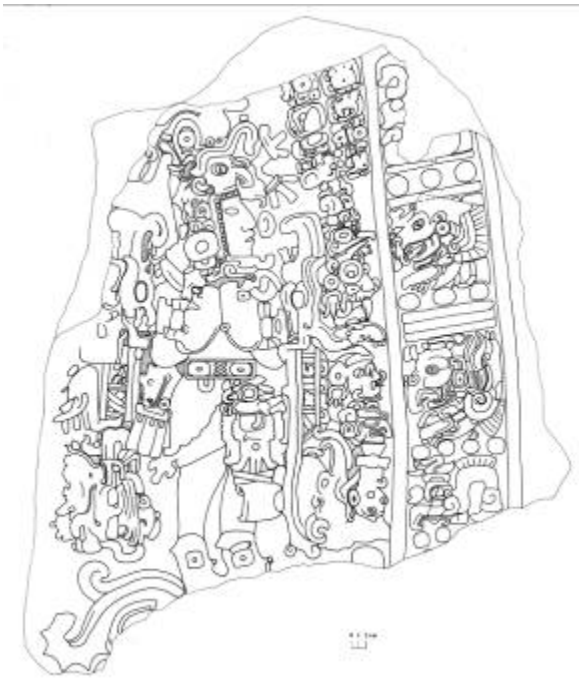

Figure 8. Upper section of Caracol Stela 20 dating to 8.18.4.4.12. (drawing by A. and D. Chase).

Caracol's ample archaeological record helps us to interpret the later transition to the Late Classic Period. While the population of early 6th century Caracol was nowhere near Late Classic size, displays of opulence in Caracol's Early Classic burials and caches suggest that the site must have been relatively well established prior to the war with Tikal. That this was, in fact, the case can be seen in the earliest tomb from Structure B20. Dated to A.D. 537 (9.5.3.1.3) by a text painted on the east wall of the tomb, this chamber is large and impressive (D. Chase 1994:fig. 10.3), measuring 3.62 m in length, by 1.95 m in width, by 3.2 m in height. It housed the remains of a single individual accompanied by 15 pottery vessels (A. Chase 1994:fig. 13.1), 2 *Spondylus* shells, a carved jadeite pendent, jadeite earflares, and 14 limestone spindle whorls (among other items). The contents, size, and location of this chamber suggest that members of Caracol's ruling dynasty prospered prior to the war with Tikal. The impact of the successful warfare with Tikal also can be seen in the substantial construction undertaken in the Structure B20 locus between the use of this chamber in A.D. 537 and the use of the sequent chamber in A.D. 577 (9.7.3.12.15). The A.D. 537 tomb was sited behind an earlier stairway mask. Some time later this first mask and its associated stair was covered by a new set of steps and a small "shrine" room or building that was elevated directly above the tomb chamber. After extensive use, this second stair was disassembled and the rear of the shrine was cut away to place the tomb used

in A.D. 577 as well as two additional chambers that were encased in Structure B20-2nd (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). A similar intensification in residential construction is also visible throughout the site at the transition from the Early to Late Classic Period following the A.D. 562 war (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989; D. Chase and A. Chase 2003).

Conclusion

Transitions are far more intriguing than stable blocks of time. Yet, transitions are also notoriously difficult to identify in the archaeological record because of their fluid (and fleeting) nature. We archaeologists tend to define blocks of time and to look for horizons that can be identified through specific modes and markers. In spite of a widespread dearth of appropriate contexts and deposits for analysis, modes and markers have tended to be used in Maya archaeology to make temporal subdivisions, thus actually reifying and obfuscating a very fluid situation.

Most Maya archaeologists "know" what basic Early Classic ceramics look like and can identify them and sort them out of mixed fill collections. At least for the later part of the Early Classic Period, we have used these markers to assess connections to and interaction with central Mexico and elsewhere (e.g. Braswell 2003). However, it has only been with Laporte's (2003) successful recovery of numerous primary deposits from the Mundo Perdido area of Tikal that we have begun to get a handle on what transpired in the earlier part of the Early Classic Period and how this era articulated with "Protoclassic" modes and markers. Yet, even with Laporte's extensive work, the articulation of the Late Preclassic and Early Classic at Tikal was and is still not fully resolved. Thus, the Caracol materials are important to understanding this early transition and, as at Tikal, reveal that the vagaries of sampling can very much condition interpretations.

Much of our understanding of the past itself results from historical events and activities. Thus, the Uaxactun and Tikal excavations have come to condition our view not only of the earlier transition, but also of the later transition from the Early Classic to the Late Classic. The extensive archaeological excavations at Tikal did not recover voluminous materials that related to this later ceramic transition from the Early Classic to the Late Classic Period. The lack of identifiable material for this later transition at Tikal may quite possibly have been a result of the historically noted A.D. 562-war event involving Caracol that disrupted the Tikal elite order for 130 years. Tikal entered into a monument hiatus between A.D. 562 and A.D. 692; elite burials from this transitional era were both difficult to find and to date (e.g. Culbert 1993). An inverse situation occurs at Caracol during this same time; there was an inscriptional apogee accompanied by plentiful archaeological deposits and remains. Again, the Caracol sequence is able to define this transition with well-dated ceramic assemblages and with the onset of new site-wide ritual practices (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004b) that continued throughout the rest of the Late Classic Period.

Even though research at Caracol has focused predominantly on its Late Classic occupation, during the 20 years of the Caracol Archaeological Project, there has been an increase in discoveries relevant to the site's early history. Exactly why Caracol initially developed where it did is probably never knowable, although Caracol's emergence as a city can be seen in the archaeological record (A. Chase et al. 2001). In spite of a lack of water, a series of areas in the Caracol region were occupied by at least 600 B.C. By A.D. 100 all of Caracol's

major epicenter groups were the loci of massive constructions; Caana rose 38 meters above the jungle floor. The presence of several E Groups within the site boundaries and the many elaborate ritual offerings dating to the 1st century A.D. and later suggest that Caracol was well established before the formal advent of the Classic Period. It would appear that Early Classic Caracol continued to grow and to embellish the already established Preclassic patterns. During the 6th and 7th centuries Caracol expanded to become larger and more centralized; it became a giant site with a substantial population and massive public works projects. Giant sites often have humble beginnings; however, the archaeological data indicate that prepubescent Caracol was always substantial, even in the Preclassic era. Just as the Late Classic architecture covers earlier construction, so has Late Classic Caracol obscured what is now being revealed as a formidable earlier history. The combined work of various researchers has made the Early Classic far more understandable, but at the same time we now know the impact that sampling, cross-dating, type and mode markers, and preconceived notions can have on interpretations of the past.

Acknowledgements: Parts of this paper were adapted from an earlier article prepared for the stillborn *Journal of Belizean Archaeology* entitled "The Prepubescent Giant: Caracol before the Late Classic Period." However, the new Caracol data gathered since the original piece was formulated in 1996 have proved particularly informative with regard to the early transition into the Early Classic Period. Funding for the majority of the more recent research has come from the Ahau Foundation, the Stans Foundation, and the University of Central Florida Colbourn Endowment.

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