

*The Architectural Context of Caches, Burials, and Other  
Ritual Activities for the Classic Period Maya  
(as Reflected at Caracol, Belize)*

DIANE Z. CHASE and ARLEN F. CHASE  
university of central florida

What goes inside a Maya building is just as significant in determining its function as a building's architectural plan and external appearance. Structures are not alike in their contents. Some hold interments and caches; some contain earlier buildings; others are single or multiple construction efforts with no contents other than fill. Artifacts are found littered on the floors of some buildings, whereas other buildings are found completely clean.

Careful consideration of the overall context of Maya architecture, in terms of both its siting and contents, leads to many questions about the associations of architecture and archaeological materials. For example, is there a correlation of ritual offerings with new construction? Do caches, burials, or "termination" rituals reflect the "dedication" of a new building, the final use of the previous construction, or something else altogether? Are changes in a building's function apparent archaeologically in the final treatment of a given structure? Which buildings contain ritual deposits and which do not? And what other determining factors are there besides structure form and location?

Almost by definition, many architectural forms and contents imply specific functions. Function may be manifest in the physical layout or iconographic decoration of a given building, or it may be revealed by associated ritual activity and deposits. Although the concept of temple as funerary construction is simplistic in that some temples bear multiple interments, and others contain no interments at all, certain buildings did apparently function as ancestral shrines and were used repeatedly for both interments and ritual offerings. In this con-

text, tombs themselves may be seen as sacred spaces conjoining the world of the living and the world of the dead. Buildings that use *wits* icons (Cauac monster masks) at the base of stairs or to frame building doors reflect the concept of pyramids and buildings as portals allowing passage beyond the present world; these pyramids and buildings form not only physical entranceways for tombs but also symbolic entranceways to the underworld.

Although some correlations of architecture and ritual deposits reflect overall Maya cultural practices, others define more regionalized cultural identities or shifts in general ritual patterns over time. Data from Caracol, Belize, can be used as a springboard from which to consider both the pan-Maya and more specialized architectural context of caches ( $n = 133$ ), burials ( $n = 183$ ), and other ritual activities for the Classic period Maya.

#### THE CONTENTS OF MAYA BUILDINGS: DEFINITIONS

The contents of Maya buildings are extremely variable and may include earlier constructions as well as deposits of artifacts. Buried buildings may be relatively easy to define with substantial excavation; however, distinguishing among other activities and deposits may not be quite as simple. Activities of particular concern are deposits such as caches, human burials, and terminal offerings that have presumed ritual overtones. Caches have been defined as “one or more objects found together, but apart from burials, whose grouping and situation point to intentional interment as an offering” (Coe 1959: 77); caches may be distinguished from terminal offerings found on building floors in that, even though the latter may be encased by a new construction, caches are either intentionally intruded into earlier structures or buried within the fill of a building during construction (Fig. 1). Although perhaps the most easily recognizable caches are those found within pottery vessels, cached objects also may exist without specialized containers. The distinction between caches and burials is often clear; however, in certain cases—such as when partial human remains are concealed within a pottery container—there may be uncertainty about the nature of the offering. Instances exist when the only human skeletal remains in a covered deposit consist of a human skull or human finger bones; these are frequently, but not always, classified as caches rather than as interments; in contrast, fragmentary remains encountered in a specially constructed tomb are generally classified as interments.<sup>1</sup> Human remains, however, may be

<sup>1</sup> The reader is referred to various sources for further discussion of the identification and definition of these varied ritual deposits—e.g., Becker (1992, 1993), Chase (1988), Coe (1959), Garber (1983), and Krejci and Culbert 1995: 103.

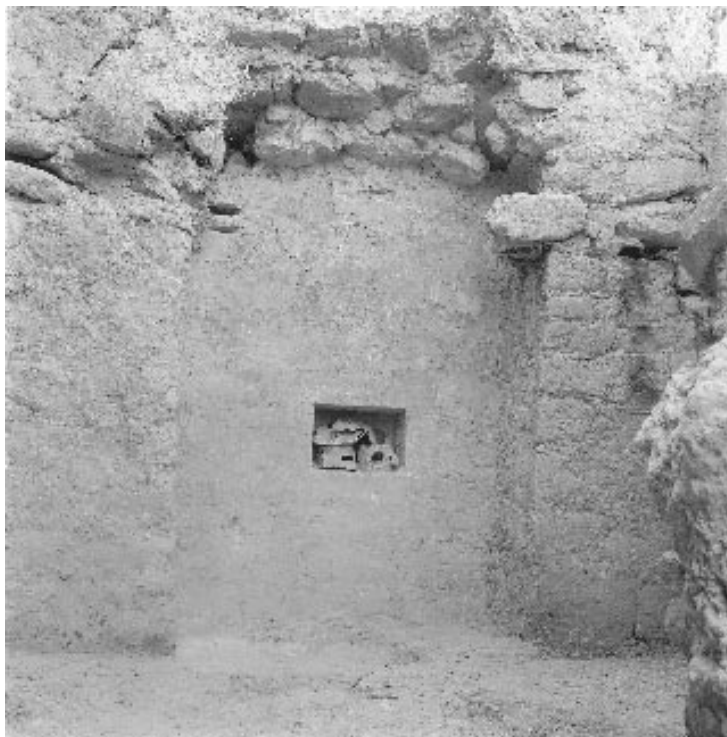


Fig.1 Termination deposit placed within niche in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7-3rd and later sealed in the core of Structure 7-2nd.

interred in a number of distinctive contexts, including: (1) simple burials in fill; (2) cist burial in a simple hole; (3) crypt burial in a carefully lined grave; and (4) burial in a small open-air chamber or tomb. In addition to concealed offerings and interments, excavations sometimes reveal material remains left on floors. These items can be divided into two classes: (1) domestic or ritual materials representing the last use of a building at the time of abandonment; and (2) purposely broken and often burned material sometimes referred to as “termination offerings.” The latter are not only found scattered on building surfaces but also may be associated with building defacement (see Coe 1959; Garber 1983). Later constructions usually conceal them, and the practice could be argued to form a subset of caching, in which the earlier structure served as part of the cached contents and the later structure as the container.

Postconquest descriptions of Maya ritual activities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries indicate that offerings, once made, were usually removed

from everyday use (Tozzer 1941: 161). Items could be consumed, burned, broken, or tossed into a cenote (Tozzer 1941: 104 n. 474, 114, and 181; Edmonson 1984: 94). We presume, perhaps inappropriately, that formally cached items were more profound offerings related to the well-being of a large group of people or the entire community. It is unclear why offerings were sometimes completely destroyed by breakage or burning as opposed to being buried intact. A similar difficulty (and potential perceptual problem) attends the final treatment of buildings. In certain cases, care is taken to cover stucco façades of constructions; in other cases, stairs, walls, and decoration are cut preparatory to constructing a new building. Buildings may often see intense burning. And floors may be clean or littered with broken vessels.

The treatment of caches, burials, and buildings is, in fact, exceedingly similar, in that the contents of all may be found in differing conditions—whole, broken, or burnt. Caches contain varied numbers and kinds of offerings; however, caches also may appear to be completely empty, having once contained only perishable items that have disappeared entirely. Caches have been found intruded into floors, buried directly in a building's or platform's fill, or left in a niche. Like caches and buildings, burials also vary substantially in their content and deposition. Not only are human remains found in differing contexts, ranging from refuse deposits to tombs, but the bones themselves are found in various states, including everything from single articulated individuals to massive deposits of burnt and disarticulated remains (e.g., Caracol Special Deposit [S.D.] C7B-1). These various skeletal combinations are also accompanied by a diverse array of offerings. Similar situations exist with constructions.

Scholarly studies often reduce ritual activities to a simple (or functional) order. A major point of controversy in these works is the degree to which caches and burials may be seen as being “dedicatory” to a specific construction. Michael Coe (1956, 1975a), following Landa (Tozzer 1941), focused on the priority of funerary activities over construction; in his view, buildings frequently were erected as funerary monuments. Thus, burials were not “dedicatory,” rather buildings were “commemorative.” William Coe (1959: 77–79; 1965) engaged in some of the first in-depth discussions of this topic with regard to caches. Coe (1990: 920, 930), along with other archaeologists (Becker 1982, 1992: 188–189; 1993; D. Chase 1982: 555–556; 1985a, 1985b, 1988; Haviland et al. 1985: 150–152; Pendergast 1979: 198), grappled with the difficulty of differentiating the potential functions of these ritual deposits and has pointed toward the problematic polarity in seemingly simple assignments of “dedicatory” or “commemorative” ritual deposits. Schele and Freidel (1990; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993) have added to this predominantly archaeological discussion by using hi-

eroglyphic materials to focus on caches as parts of complex, episodic dedication rituals.

We believe ritual offerings are more complex than current discussion recognizes. Effective typologies of burials and caches (Becker 1992) elude Mayanists, as do meaningful distinctions between dedicatory and commemorative deposits. The term dedicatory, in particular, may be an overused Western conception of ancient Maya activities (see Coe 1975b: 195; Davies 1984: 214). It is apparent from historic, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic information that the Maya of the sixteenth century and later practiced a variety of sacrifices and made many different kinds of offerings depending on the specific ritual activity taking place (Tozzer 1941: 139–145, 315–321; Edmonson 1984: 94). Some offerings may have been dedicatory in function; some were calendric (D. Chase 1985b, 1988); and others defined sacred boundaries of the community (M. Coe 1965; Garcia-Zambrano 1994: 219). William Coe (1990: 930) has suggested the “probability of multiple objectives to the act per se.” Attributions of specific functions to ritual offerings is made difficult by the fact that these activities are not static but change over time. The regularities and abnormalities in distribution, chronology, numbers, and kinds of offerings may provide important clues to their ancient functions. Consideration of this variation affects interpretations not only of Maya architecture but also of the dynamic nature of Maya civilization. We believe that viewing structures within two distinct contexts—first as individual containers or repositories and second as part of a broader formal site structure—provides substantial insight into the function of both constructions and ritual deposits.

#### RITUAL DEPOSITS, WORLDVIEW, AND ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Just as the placement of structures requires careful planning in terms of Maya cosmology (Ashmore 1991: 200),<sup>2</sup> caches and interments may provide physical representations of the Maya worldview. A number of the Caracol caches evince an ordered layout that appears to reflect the Maya view of the cosmos. Lower layers of mercury, jadeite, malachite, coral, or shells distinctly reflect the watery underworld. Distributions of groupings of four versions of the same kinds of artifacts around a central unit (usually a single jadeite ear ornament) may indicate the sacred landscape of the present world. Fragmentary beehives and depictions of a winged Itzamna located in the uppermost layers of a cache may illustrate the above world. The placement of both caches and interments within a structural location further defines them. They can be viewed as portals or

<sup>2</sup> See also Sugiyama (1993) for an analogous argument for Teotihuacan.

transitory points to the underworld (see Houston, this volume; Schele and Freidel 1990: 216). In fact, the hieroglyph for cache is basically a crescent of skeletal jaws, enfolding upward; the defleshed condition of the jaws indicates the underground position of such a deposit (Stephen Houston, personal communication, 1994). Building iconography can also place the interior of a given building in an underworld context; offerings placed within a construction may also indicate an underworld context. Entranceways to Caracol tombs may be seen as connecting the underworld tomb with the exterior world outside the “sacred mountain” or construction; horizontal red-painted lines on tomb walls likely delimit underworld space as do the layers of broken jadeite that may underlay a corpse. Thus, the contents and contexts of ritual offerings all combine to provide meaning.

*Ritual Deposits and the Definition of Architectural Function: Tombs*

The use of ritual deposits is especially critical in defining architectural space at Caana, Caracol’s largest construction, and specifically in interpreting Structures B19 and B20 as an expanded version of an eastern ritual pattern prevalent elsewhere at the site. Located on the eastern side of the summit of Caana, Caracol Structure B20 provides perhaps the best example of a building that can be defined by viewing its contents (Fig. 2). It is one of the clearest examples of a funerary structure at Caracol. However, investigations here also demonstrate the difficulty in assuming that a single construction or building phase is associated with a single tomb or burial. One construction phase incorporates the creation of three chambers, but some contain no new tomb constructions. Structure B20 had a series of major modifications, the majority of which occurred within an approximately 100-year time span during the sixth and seventh centuries. Tombs with entranceways were built into two versions of Structure B20 (4th and 2nd), but not in its intermediate (3rd) or its latest (1st) version.

Structure B20-4th was built either over or in front of an earlier construction that had been placed on a different axis (Structure B20-Sub). Tomb 4 (S.D. C1H-2) was included in the core of Structure B20-4th. The entranceway to this chamber was situated within a stylized mask set into the frontal stair of the pyramid. The tomb was used before construction of Structure B20-3rd. A wall text dates the use of this chamber to a.d. 537. At this time, a single individual was interred in an extended position with the head to the north. Fifteen ceramic vessels, 1 perishable vessel and 14 stone spindle whorls, 1 jaguar paw, the bones of a bird and a reptile, and a half dozen obsidian lancets were arranged about the individual. An elaborate shell bracelet was on the left wrist; two jadeite earflares, one jadeite bead, one tubular shell bead, and one stingray spine

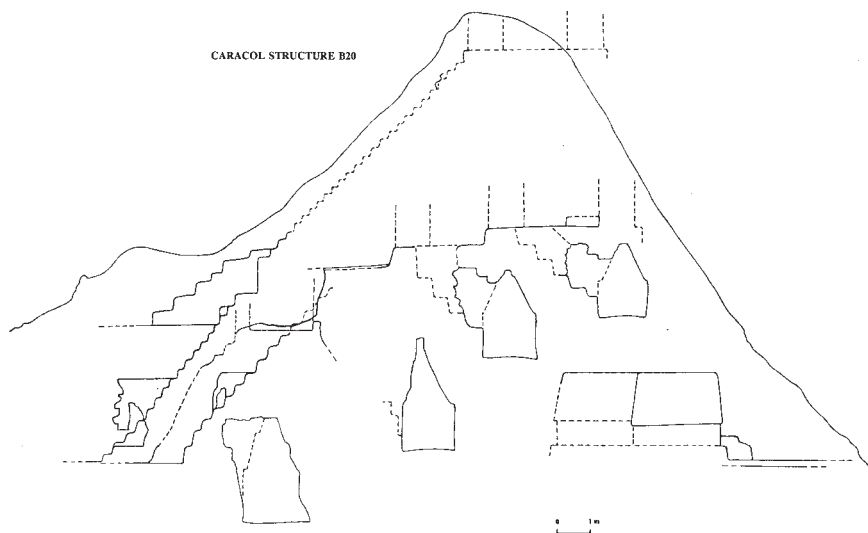


Fig. 2 Schematic section of Caracol Structure B20.

were in the vicinity of the head; three jadeite/albite balls were also associated with the body, as were two Spondylus shells, one of which covered the pelvis.

Structure B20-3rd was built over the intact lower stairs concealing Tomb 4. This construction contained no new tombs, caches, or interments but did lead to the creation of a shrine room within the central stair and directly above the preexisting Tomb 4 (S.D. C1H-2). An extensive carbon deposit covered the low “altar” in this room. Included within this carbon lens and resting directly on the room’s floor was a shattered *incensario*. The preservation of this material is fortuitous, because most of Structure B20-3rd (or at least its axial part) was almost entirely dismantled to create Structure B20-2nd. Probably this portion of Structure B20-3rd was purposely left undisturbed to avoid destruction of the preexisting tomb below.

Structure B20-2nd was constructed with three formal chambers (or tombs) being built within its core. Each tomb had an entranceway for either symbolic or actual reentry. Corpses and offerings were placed inside these tombs at different times. Tomb 3 was the earliest tomb to be used. The hurried manner in which both the interior of this chamber was plastered and the text was placed on its rear wall (Houston 1987: 95) indicates that the formal finishing of the interiors of these tombs took place only upon the death of the individual se-



lected to occupy the chamber. Although it is uncertain whether the deeply buried Tomb 3 was constructed and then reentered to place the body or whether the body was placed in this chamber during construction of Structure B20-2nd, the placement of the body apparently took place in a.d. 576 (Chase and Chase 1987a: 20). Logic and stratigraphy dictate that Tomb 1 was next used and then, finally, Tomb 2. An unplastered cut through the flooring that covers the entranceway stairs for Tomb 2 indicates that this previously constructed chamber was reentered and used before construction of Structure B20-1st; Tomb 2 thus represents the latest interment in the core of Structure B20-2nd. The area above the Tomb 2 entranceway also was heavily burned and marked by obsidian pieces. Given the intact tombs concealed within it, it is also probably significant that the building walls (interior and exterior) of Structure B20-2nd were entirely black. No terminal offerings or use-related materials were found on the floors of Structure B20-2nd; however, graffiti representing an individual being carried in a litter was found on one inner wall (Chase and Chase 1987b).

At some point after deposition of Tomb 2 in Structure B20-2nd, the Maya built Structure B20-1st-B. No additional tombs or caches were placed within its core. A critical architectural component of this version of Structure B20, however, was a large *wits* mask, forming a small room (or niche) centered in the base of the pyramid's stairway (Fig. 3). This lower mask appears to have symbolically swallowed the dead already interred within the construction (and is analogous to the earlier central mask that was on the stair of Structure B20-4th that formed the entranceway for Tomb 4). This mask was sealed in an intact condition when the plaza floor at the summit of Caana was raised about 4 m sometime after a.d. 700; at the time of its encasement, parts of a human body were placed within the room formed by the mouth of the mask. Structure B20-1st-A had extensive modifications made to the western side of its pyramid, necessitated because of the engulfment of 4 m of the original pyramid base by the new summit plaza. Two masks were placed to the lateral sides of the newly modified stairway. Initially, this modified stair contained an inset balk that mirrored the one also found on the adjacent Structure B19. In the final modification of Structure B20, however, a projecting frontal stairway encased the inset balk. Set within this final stair was a crude, stone-lined burial of several individuals with no grave offerings.

The funerary activities of Structure B20 suggest that it may have served as a prototype for the Late Classic period eastern "ancestral shrine" constructions that appear with great frequency in residential groups throughout Caracol (Chase and Chase 1994).<sup>3</sup> However, the eastern buildings in these residential groups

<sup>3</sup> See also Becker (1971) for Tikal.



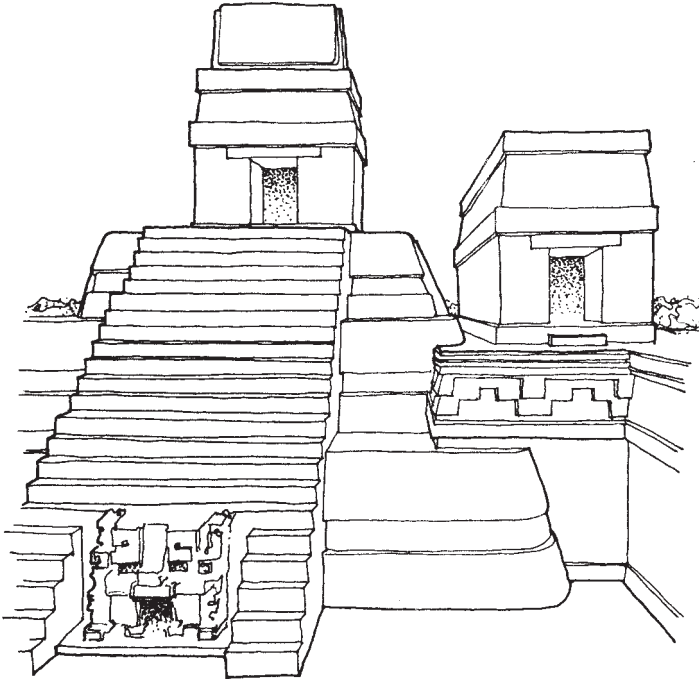


Fig. 3 Illustration of Caracol Structure B20-1st-B. Drawing by J. Ballay.

combine activities and features (specifically caches and burials) that are split between Structure B20 and B19 on the summit of Caana.

Structure B19 is the northern building at the summit of Caana. It also saw a number of rebuilding efforts and appears to have served as a locus for several caches but only one tomb. No caches or interments have been encountered in excavation of the earliest construction encountered—Structure B19-3rd. However, substantial indications exist for extensive ritual activity associated with the use of Structure B19-2nd. A major tomb was created as a modification to Structure B19-2nd. The entranceway to this chamber was concealed in a back wall of a basal niche that was centered on the lower frontal stair (Fig. 4). Similar to Structure B20-3rd, a formal building room was placed directly above this chamber, again centered in the lower pyramid stairway. This tomb was better plastered than those in Structure B20. Instead of a ritual text on its painted capstone, a black-line skull was portrayed. We doubt that the chamber was immediately occupied. Its final use was, however, almost 100 years before the impressive base of Structure B19-2nd was encased in the final raised plaza level of Caana and

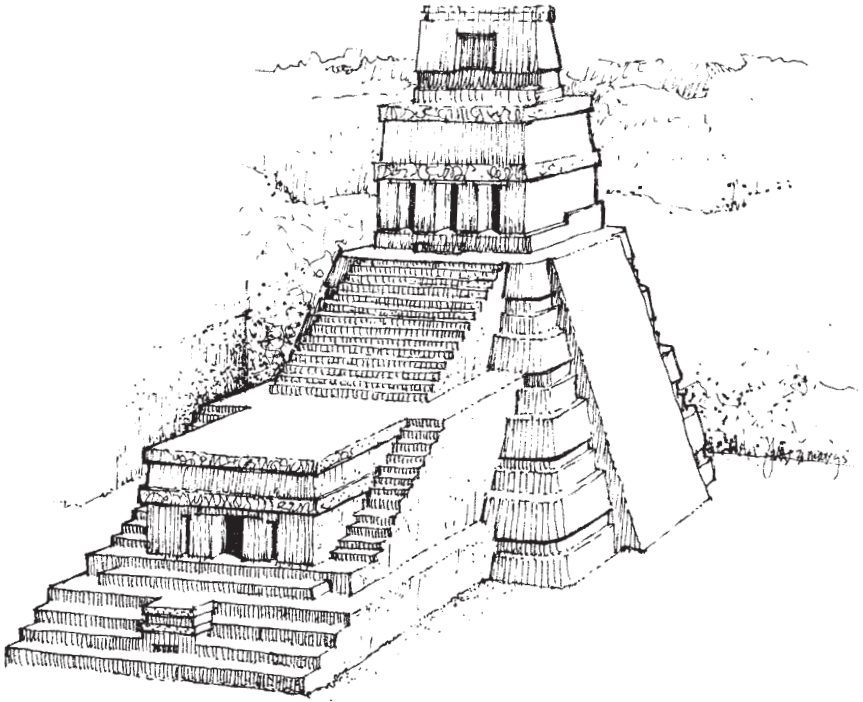


Fig. 4 Illustration of Caracol Structure B19-2nd. Drawing by J. Ballay.

ultimately covered by Structure B19-1st. A text on the back wall of the tomb dates to a.d. 634 (Chase and Chase 1987a: 30). A single bundled individual was buried within the Structure B19-2nd chamber, the largest tomb yet identified at Caracol of the 80 so far investigated as of the 1994 field season. The interred individual was female and her teeth were extensively inlaid with jadeite. She also had a set of jadeite earflares and a few jadeite beads. Her only nonperishable offerings were eight ceramic vessels.

A host of ritual deposits (or caches) placed at the summit of Structure B19-2nd likely both predate and postdate reentry of the tomb. Episodic deposition is evident. All offerings were either placed on or intruded into preexisting floors and sealed by the latest floor that can be assigned to Structure B19-2nd. The latest deposit consisted of a burial of a subadult accompanied by a lidded *incensario*, which in turn was set above a lip-to-lip ceramic vessel set containing human fingers (Fig. 5). Another deposit consisted of a cache of obsidian eccentrics and stingray spines set amid a bed of jadeite chips directly on an earlier floor. Nu-



Fig. 5 Photograph of in situ finger bowl cache from Caracol Structure B19.

merous other deposits within the core of Structure B19-2nd penetrated earlier floors and consisted solely of “finger bowl” caches or single burnt jadeite beads. Before the 1993 penetration of Structure B19, caches containing human fingers in them had been associated only with eastern structures in residential group structures (Chase and Chase 1994). In this context, finger caches were primarily found in front of the eastern buildings, but they also occasionally occurred as part of tomb assemblages.

No tombs were incorporated into Structure B19-1st, the new north building created when the entire Caana summit plaza was raised over 4 m. However, a final cache was placed in the fill of Structure B19-1st directly over the northern limit of the preexisting Structure B19-2nd tomb. This cache contained paired *Spondylus* shells, nine eccentric obsidians, one jadeite bead, one *Spondylus* bead, and many small chips of jadeite, *Spondylus*, and pyrite. At an even later



Fig. 6 Photograph of a face cache and varieties of finger caches from Caracol.



Fig. 7 Photograph of a face cache from Caracol Structure B34 dating to the early Late Classic period.

date, an *ahau* altar was placed in a specially prepared inset stair balk directly above the buried tomb at the base of the Structure B19-1st stairs. Beneath this altar was an offering consisting of two broken incense burners, two partial ceramic vessels, a host of chert drills, and human cranial fragments; these artifacts date to or after a.d. 800. Thus, the altar correlates with the Katun 7 Ahau dating to a.d. 830. Although the locus of the altar suggests a commemoration of the death of the woman entombed far below it, we feel that this altar was meant in the sense of cyclical revitalization, invoking the earlier Katun 7 Ahau when Caracol defeated Tikal.

The predominance of caches and interments encountered in the excavations of Structures B19 and B20 are replicated in east structure excavations in residential groups throughout Caracol during the Late Classic period. This east structure pattern reflects activity related to the veneration of the dead (see Becker 1971, 1982); it has been suggested that the eastern structures of many, if not most, of the outlying residential compounds served as charnel houses (Chase and Chase 1994). At Caracol, an eastern building focus is evident in most residential groups based primarily on the ritual content of these constructions. Materials included within these eastern buildings consist of single- and multiple-individual tombs, all other classes of burials, stalagmites, finger bowl caches, and “face” caches (urns with modeled human faces; Figs. 6 and 7) that are often found in association with obsidian eccentrics and chips. Although this “veneration” pattern is found in most of the outlying residential groups at Caracol, it exists in buildings of various sizes, shapes, and plans and cannot be assumed to be present on the basis of architectural type and eastern location alone. A similar burial concentration in eastern buildings has been long noted for Tikal (Becker 1971, 1982: 120) but in a much smaller percentage of the outlying residential groups (14% recognized with ease at Tikal as opposed to more than 60% recognized with ease at Caracol) and minus both the tomb reentryway and cache components that are so important at Caracol. This eastern structure pattern is but one example of the use of ritual activity to define architectural function.

At Caracol, then, the Maya fashioned tombs in buildings long before they placed bone in them. Other data from the site demonstrate a similar pattern of chamber construction—some never received human remains—as well as multiple interments and tomb reentry over an extended time. A common practice at Caracol, in both tomb (Fig. 8) and non-tomb (Fig. 9) contexts, was the combination of primary and secondary burials as a single interment event; in these cases, the remains of several individuals were usually deposited a substantial time after death, usually in conjunction with a single primary individual



Fig. 8 Photograph of a tomb containing multiple individuals from Caracol Structure A7.



Fig. 9 Photograph of a non-tomb burial at Caracol clearly showing articulated and nonarticulated remains.



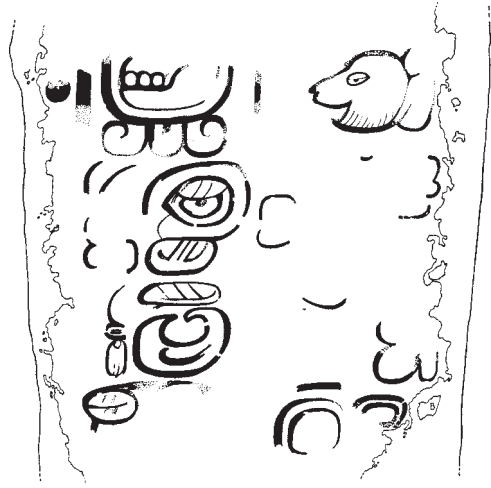


Fig. 10 Text from the Caracol Structure A34 lower tomb capstone. Drawing by N. Grube.

who had just expired. For instance, investigations into Caracol Structure A34 (Chase and Chase 1996) led to the discovery of two tombs—one located at the summit of the construction and the other located beneath the base of the frontal stair. The upper tomb illustrates the Maya practice of reentering a tomb to remove bone. Only one long bone fragment remained inside the excavated chamber; a lip-to-lip cache was left in the entrance to the chamber, presumably at the time that the original interment(s) and offerings were removed. The lower chamber shows the significance of the tomb in and of itself as well as the continued use of the tomb for more than 100 years. The lower tomb was completed and consecrated in either a.d. 577 or a.d. 582. One individual may have been interred in the chamber at this time. The closing or capping of the chamber was considered to be an event significant enough to have been witnessed by the ruler of Caracol and recorded in a hieroglyphic text that was placed in the vault of the tomb (Grube 1994; Fig. 10). The osteological and artifactual evidence indicates that the tomb was subsequently reentered on at least one occasion to place human remains and offerings. The osteological material inside the chamber represents at least four individuals (D. Chase 1994). Offerings included 13 whole and 7 partial ceramic vessels (A. Chase 1994), as well as artifacts of jadeite and shell. In addition to demonstrating the long span of time in which a tomb might be used and the significance of the tomb itself, the Structure A34 investigations indicate further problems in assuming either dedicatory functions for burials or commemorative functions for constructions. These investigations also demonstrate the difficulty in assuming a structure's



function or contents without excavation, as the Structure A34 building plan and elevation are replicated in other buildings at Caracol (specifically Structure B5) that do not appear to have housed tombs.

*Variation in Ritual Deposits: Caches*

Caches provide an excellent view of both chronological and spatial variation in ritual deposits that can also prove to be critical in functional interpretations. It is possible to identify the existence of at least two major kinds of caches in the archaeological record of the Maya: one set helped to define a sacred domain for a broader community; the second set is more diverse and likely included a series of possible activities ranging from veneration of the dead to commemoration of historical or calendric events. Those delineating sacred space are perhaps more easily identified and are almost always associated with public architecture, but even these were likely to result from a series of different rituals.

For Late Pre-Classic to Early Classic Caracol, caches have been found predominantly in the monumental architecture of the epicenter and in nodes of monumental architecture some distance from the actual Late Classic site center. These early caches appear in only a few locations in the site and seldom in residential groups. Early caches from monumental architecture are among the most elaborate encountered at the site. Although their precise contents and layouts vary substantially, one subset of early Caracol caches is easily distinguished from the others; these have contents that are layered and/or ordered in such a way as to suggest an intentional plan or design reflecting both directional order and placement. Items within these caches are generally similar, whole, and unburnt. It is suspected that variations in numbers of artifacts—as with the “Charlie Chaplin” (Moholy-Nagy 1985: 154) or other figures—among the caches may reflect intentional differences, probably relating these offerings to specific rituals (see D. Chase 1988: 86; Landa in Tozzer 1941: 138–149; Pendergast 1979: 85).

Two excellent examples of this kind of cache were found in Caracol Structure A6 (Chase and Chase 1995).<sup>4</sup> Both followed the construction and use of Structure A6-2nd. Both were buried in open-air intrusive pits with capstones. The first of this kind of cache to be placed in this locus consisted of a stone box and lid. Inside this hollow geode were a series of offerings that had been wrapped together in cloth (some of the threads were still in place). The contents of the

<sup>4</sup> See also Thompson (1931) for other examples of this kind of cache from the Mountain Cow area.

box appeared to be intentionally organized (Fig. 11). At the bottom of the stone receptacle was a pool of liquid mercury. Uppermost in the cache was a complete jadeite earflare assemblage. A multitude of malachite pebbles overlay two lip-to-lip Spondylus shells, which held other items. Encased within the two halves of the large Spondylus shells was a solid jadeite mask covered with red hematite. A jadeite claw pendant was set at its throat and two beads (one jadeite and one shell) were set to its sides as if to form earflares.



Fig. 11 Exploded view of Caracol Structure A6 cache dating to ca. a.d. 70. Drawing by J. Ballay.



Fig. 12 Plan of interior layout of second Caracol Structure A6 cache.

Sometime shortly after the stone box was deposited, another cache was intruded on the same axial line. The container for this cache was a large urn with a lid. The urn itself rested on a series of unworked shells. The contents of the urn were layered. Uppermost inside the urn were the remains of a beehive; placed inside the base of the urn were a layer of malachite pebbles. The central area of the cache contained a series of items all located around a jadeite earflare (Fig. 12). Most noticeable were four sets of marine bivalves oriented toward the four directions and two opposing hematite mirror backs. Other artifacts included small Charlie Chaplin figures of *Spondylus* shell as well as items of carved shell and jadeite. Also included were bloodletting implements (stingray spines) and items most likely intended to convey underworld, and underwater



Fig. 13 Upper and lower figures from interior of cache vessel, Caracol Structure 8F8. Identifications by S. Houston, drawings by S. Houston and A. Chase.



(Hellmuth 1987), associations such as coral, sharks' teeth, fish vertebrae, and small natural shells. Pumpkin seeds and pine needles were also present.

Three other caches are similar to the one described above and can be placed within the same basic category. Two were located elsewhere in the A Group. A large urn and lid were found with much of their associated contents spilled into a pit in the core of Structure A2. Although the complete, original ordering of the objects within this cache can only be surmised, the materials associated with this deposit mimic those previously described for Structure A6. Objects from within and outside the vessel included a series of bivalve shells, coral,

stingray spines, animal bone, shell Charlie Chaplin figures, a jadeite earflare, and a jadeite pendant. A similar deposit encased in a smaller urn and lid were recovered from a pit in the core of Structure A8. Among the items within this cache were bivalve shells, coral, other unworked shells, Charlie Chaplin figures of jadeite and shell, assorted shell beads, mosaic pieces, and a shell pendant. The third deposit that is within this genre was encountered in the reclearing of looter's excavations at Tulakatuhebe Structure 8F8 when an urn and its associated lid (but no remaining contents) were found. On the base of the vessel was painted a dead Maize God; on the lid of the vessel was painted a winged Itzamna or *muán* bird (Principal Bird Diety) (Fig. 13). Thus, although no interior offerings were left by the looters, the interior of the vessel itself clearly conveys the opposition (and layering) of the "heavenly" and the "underworld."

Other caches of similar date are far less simple to categorize—see also Pendergast (1979: 198) for a similar situation at Altun Ha. Not only are there no clearly defined directional layouts to these caches, but there also appear to be no prescribed universal contents. Offerings may be whole or broken, burnt or unburnt. Not all of these caches are contained within vessels; some consist solely of concentrations of objects. Examples of this kind of cache are found in epicentral Caracol and in limited occurrences elsewhere. Depositionally, these may precede layered and ordered caches in the same structure. Even though these caches do not evince the same degree of design noted for the previous group of caches, they may contain some of the same objects—such as shells, coral, animal bone, stingray spines, malachite, jadeite, or even hematite mirrors.

Examples of this second class of caches include two additional deposits placed into Structure A6-2nd during its use life. S.D. C8B-5 consisted of items placed inside a lidded vessel. In contrast to the previously described caches that had been filled with items, the offerings within this cache barely covered the base of the vessel; they included one large bivalve, one jadeite bead, one shell bead, several small pieces of cut and unworked shell, small pieces of hematite mosaics (possibly from an eroded mirror), animal bone, and stingray spines; the entire contents of the vessel appear to have been burned. A second cache into Caracol Structure A6-2nd was unusual in both its restraint and opulence. The pit for S.D. C8B-4 was bedded with hundreds of broken jadeite and greenstone beads. Above the multitude of beads, however, was an unslipped lip-to-lip vessel pair containing only one jadeite bead and one shell bead. These two earlier, use-related deposits contrast sharply with the later two set into Structure A6.

A distinctive kind of cache characterized by obsidian cores and eccentrics appears throughout Caracol—and independent of monuments—at the end of the Early Classic Period. Those in the epicenter differ from those in the core of

Caracol. Three epicentral caches in public architecture are known to contain obsidian; all are the latest special deposits in their respective structures. Two are associated with paired Spondylus shells and one is associated with large jadeite/albite balls. S.D. C70B-2 in Caracol Structure A8 consisted of a Spondylus shell pair with one large malachite ball inside it and obsidian cores, chips, and eccentrics surrounding it. The other examples of epicentral caches with obsidian have been found in Caracol Structures B19 and A2. The Structure B19 example was clearly tossed into the structure fill (Fig. 14). It consisted of nine eccentric obsidians as well as a paired set of Spondylus shells, a single jadeite bead, a single shell bead, and small flat pieces of shell, pyrite, and jadeite. The Structure A2 cache was similarly tossed into the structural fill, but consisted of only one obsidian lancet, ten obsidian eccentrics, and four jadeite/albite balls. Eccentric obsidians (Fig. 15) are also distributed with Late Classic pottery caches throughout the residential groups in the core of Caracol. Within the core area, however, the deposits usually are found in plazas at the front of structures and only rarely in the building fills.

Most common for Caracol during the Late Classic are caches identifiable by both their pottery containers and their contents; these are colloquially referred to as “face caches” and “finger bowls.” Both kinds of vessels are extremely poorly fired and likely were created solely for deposition as caches. Face caches consist of pottery urns of various sizes with modeled and appliquéd faces on them; some of the individuals portrayed may be deceased, as they have their eyes closed and lips sewn. The vessels themselves are usually devoid of identifiable offerings. Finger bowls consist of small bowls and lids of various forms; if their contents are still preserved, these caches contain only the bones of human fingers. These occur in residential areas throughout the site—predominantly in or in front of eastern constructions that also house human interments. It is believed that these caches have a distinctive function as offerings to the ancestors buried in the same area. These caches are far more common and standardized than any other kind of cache at Caracol; however, caches found in presumed high-status residential groups in the Caracol epicenter are somewhat more elaborate than those found in the Caracol core area. This focus on caches in residential locations is very different from the Early Classic pattern at Caracol and is significant in that it suggests that a shift to dispersed ritual activity likely occurred during the onset of the Late Classic period rather than at the onset of the Post-Classic period.

At Santa Rita Corozal the two basic classes of caches noted for Caracol are found conjoined at the end of the Early Classic period in a single deposit placed into monumental architecture and associated with the interment of a



Fig. 14 Photograph of final cache sealed in core of Caracol Structure B19-1st.

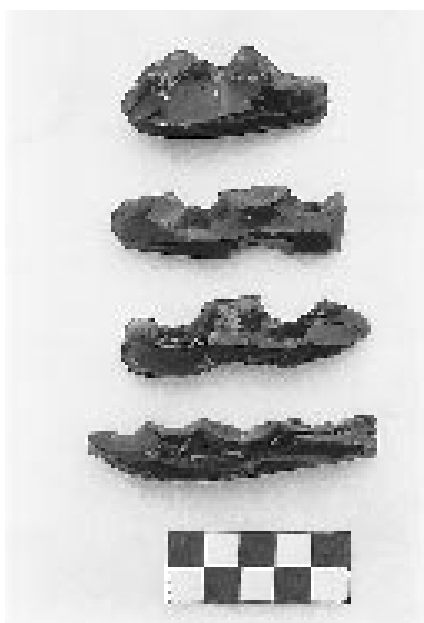


Fig. 15 Photograph of eccentric obsidians from Caracol.





Fig. 16 Hieroglyphs on outer cache vessels from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7.



Fig. 17 Santa Rita Corozal deity heads from within Structure 7 cache vessels.

ruler of that site (A. Chase 1992: 34–36). The pairing of tombs and caches as part of the same event is recorded as early as the Late Pre-Classic period at Tikal (Coe 1990: 237–242). At Altun Ha, caches were deposited beneath the floors of tombs and also in tomb walls (Pendergast 1979, 1982, 1990: 23–42). Occasionally, pottery cache containers—e.g., Tayasal (A. Chase 1983: 405–406)—and eccentric flints—e.g., Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979: 74–78; 1982: 122; 1990: 28)—were included within the tomb itself, but more often caches and materials suitable for caches were set within the fill covering the tomb or chamber, as in the Santa Rita example. In the Santa Rita example, the contents serve to indicate both a ritual associated with the deceased—as indicated in the hieroglyphs painted on each of the three vessel sets (Fig. 16) and in the burnt stingray spines included in each of the three vessels—as well as broader cosmological or “sacred space” overtones—as indicated by the inclusion of painted deity heads on shell and jadeite (Fig. 17) and by the extensive use of shells, coral, and seaweed. This Structure 7 cache serves both to “center” Early Classic



Fig. 18 Photograph of reconstructed figurines (correctly positioned without urn) constituting Post-Classic cache within Santa Rita Corozal Structure 213.

Santa Rita and to place the dead king within a broader cosmological picture. It also presages the ritual pattern found for honored dead throughout Late Classic Caracol (although at Caracol the burial and caching activities are usually separate events in the actual archaeological record).

Post-Classic caches are not common from the Caracol area but are extensively known from Santa Rita Corozal in northern Belize. As is the case in Late Classic period Caracol, Late Post-Classic Santa Rita Corozal caches are found in residential groups throughout the site and not solely in central or monumental architecture. Although the trend is toward a continuation of residential area caching, there is an elaboration and patterning of Late Post-Classic caches that is in many ways similar to the Late Pre-Classic/Early Classic epicentral caches at Caracol. In particular, many of the Late Post-Classic caches at Santa Rita Corozal exhibit the intentional layout noted for Early Classic caches related to the concepts of settlement foundation, centering, sacred space, and a cosmological map.

Examples of this kind of cache may be seen in the offerings found in Santa Rita Corozal Structures 213 and 183. Within the core of Structure 213 was found a cache consisting of 25 figurines distributed in and around a ceramic urn with lid (Fig. 18) (Chase and Chase 1988: 48–52). Within the central en-



Fig. 19 Plan of Post-Classic cache within Santa Rita Corozal Structure 183.

cased unit, a single central human figure depicted blowing on a conch shell was seated on a stool located directly above a piece of jadeite and four small shells. All the other figurines were found in sets of four. This included four deities practicing self-mutilation while standing on the backs of giant sea turtles; these figures are interpreted to be the four *bacabs* holding up the four corners of the world (Chase and Chase 1986). A cache located within Structure 183 contained 28 figurines inside of a large lidded urn (Fig. 19) (Chase and Chase 1988: 56–59). There were four each of seven kinds of animal, human, and deity figurines, each oriented around a central vacant space defined by four warriors with shields. These and other Late Post-Classic caches have been interpreted as related to the *uayeb* rites as defined for the sixteenth-century Maya by Bishop Landa (Tozzer 1941: 139–145; Chase and Chase 1988: 72–75; D. Chase 1985b, 1988). Interesting because of the ideological similarities between the Late Pre-Classic and Late Post-Classic caches is the fact that an important aspect of the *uayeb* rites is the unification of sacred space correlated with the four symbolic entrances to town and the ceremonies of each of four different *uayeb* years.

INTERPRETATIONS

Maya architecture serves to define spaces, and, although ritual offerings do sanctify that space, a study of the contents of structures is clearly important in determining their functions. The construction and use sequences of tombs at Caracol indicate that both simple dedicatory functions for offerings and commemorative functions for structures are difficult to identify archaeologically. Caracol tombs are often constructed inside buildings with entranceways for reentry at a later date. Several tombs may be placed within the same building and even building phase; several bodies may be contemporaneously or successively placed within the same tomb. And the same construction also may be rebuilt several times with varying funerary and nonfunerary functions. In addition to these considerations, the tomb chamber itself must be viewed as a sacred space. Hieroglyphic texts on tomb indicate that the creation or consecration of a given tomb chamber is an event as significant as the actual later placement of an individual within that chamber. Thus, there are occasions when neither strictly dedicatory nor commemorative functions may be assigned.

Burning of floors, buildings, and the contents of caches and burials is also a key factor in viewing ritual activities, especially as offerings and buildings are often burnt as a final act of destruction (Coe 1990: 938) or, alternatively, “activation” (Stuart, this volume). This physical act of burning, regardless of scale, has been interpreted as an important aspect of the death and rebirth cycle, as are the “earth offerings” themselves (Becker 1993).

Perhaps the most interesting consideration of ritual deposits, however, correlates them with the definition of sacred “layered” space. Caches that may play a critical role in the delineation of sacred landscape are most apparent in the Late Pre-Classic to Early Classic era and again in the Late Post-Classic period. It is important to note, however, that the architectural context of these “sacred space” or “cosmological map” caches—defined by their ordered contents—differs between these two eras. Before and in the initial part of the Maya Classic period, the elaborate caches that help to define sacred areas are found exclusively intruded into the cores of public, epicentral architecture. In their Post-Classic architectural context, these caches are found within nonepicentral residential compounds.

It has been suggested (D. Chase 1985b, 1988, 1991; Chase and Chase 1988) that a number of the Late Post-Classic caches at Santa Rita Corozal conform with the descriptions of *uayeb* (New Year’s) rites detailed by Landa (Tozzer 1941: 138–149). These caches contain modeled ceramic figures that correlate with the offerings and activities described for the various *uayeb* years. As would

be expected in this kind of ceremony, individual caches contain either one or four of each kind of figure; figures include humans, animals, underworld creatures, and gods. Activities within the *uayeb* rites call for integration of the four symbolic parts of the town through processions and the physical movement of items such as idols from the outskirts of the town toward the center. The ritual movements in the *uayeb* ceremonies described by Landa are very similar to the procession to town limits to define territorial space noted for foundation rituals described for sixteenth-century Mesoamerica (Garcia-Zambrano 1994: 225–229). And caches from Santa Rita Corozal Structures 183 and 213 physically depict the Maya concept of “centering” their universe (see Vogt 1976: 58; Schele and Freidel 1990: 125–131) through the orientation of groups of four figurines around a central figurine, object, or space.

Garcia-Zambrano (1994: 219) has suggested that clay *ollas* interred within pyramids may have symbolically represented sacred caves inside mountains when natural caves and mountains could not be found to center the sacred landscape of a given town—see also Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993: 125–131). Caches in structures adjacent to the major plaza areas and causeway termini at Caracol may reflect such definitions of sacred space. Creation of Caracol’s Late Pre-Classic/Early Classic epicentral precinct is associated with deposition of a series of caches. These caches (see above) contain symbolic layering (cf. Freidel et al. 1991) and numbers of units not found in other structural caches at Caracol. Most contain a central jadeite element suggestive of the centrality of the cache locus. One actually contains a layer of mercury that could be seen as corresponding to a mirror representing a map of the Caracol sacred space (cf. Garcia-Zambrano 1994: 224).

Different levels of ritual centering can be found at various sites throughout the southern lowlands. At Altun Ha, although the tombs are centered relative to constructions, the chambers themselves are both layered and centered (Pendergast 1979, 1982, 1990). Most Altun Ha tombs have one or three subfloor caches beneath the floor of the associated chamber; other deposits are sometimes found in the walls of the chamber or in the fill above the chamber. However, although the deposits may be spatially arranged according to a specific chamber (cf. Pendergast 1982: fig. 57) or building (cf. Pendergast 1990: fig. 6), no broader spatial patterns are in evidence at Altun Ha. Similar tombs, burials, caches, and ceramics were found in diverse parts of the site and “custom-built quality” homes “extended outward into the most peripheral areas” (Pendergast 1990: 243). No central focus can be clearly identified. “The heterogeneity of caches . . . is characteristic of Altun Ha, and is clearly not simply the product of different deity associations or times of construction” (Pendergast 1979: 198).

A different sort of ritual centering is found at Tikal, where an entire building complex, specifically the North Acropolis of that site, is clearly the focal point for the entire site during the Early Classic and part of the Late Classic periods. In particular, the caches placed about the northernmost plaza of Tikal's North Acropolis indicate a desire to symbolically "center" this space relative to the rest of the city. This is seen not only in the large number of caches placed within this architectural complex but also specifically in the recovered caches on the southern (Cache 120, Structure 5D-26), western (Cache 140, Structure 5D-22), and northern (Cache 86, Structure 5D-23) sides of the summit plaza. All three of these "centered" deposits included articulated crocodiles, an element central to the basic Mesoamerican worldview (see Reilly 1994; Taube 1989). It is important to note that the eastern side of this plaza was not intensively excavated; such an excavation may well have resulted in a fourth crocodile cache of Early Classic date—e.g., Muul offertory assemblage (Coe 1990: 324, 368, 427)—that would have defined the fourth side of this summit plaza. The centrality of this space is further emphasized in the inclusion of a crocodile in Burial 10 at the southwestern corner of this area and indirectly by the inclusion of numerous turtles in Burial 195 in the southeastern corner of the same space. Thus, although Tikal's North Acropolis architecturally forms the center of the site, the associated deposits and their placement confirm the importance of this public architecture in terms of a broader cosmological plan.

Offerings are not merely activities undertaken secondarily to define physical constructions. Not only do ritual offerings help to define architectural space, but they may form critical components in the definition of territorywide sacred space and may be incorporated into buildings by design and before construction. Variations in the distribution, contents, and treatment of ritual offerings relative to their architectural context are the key to interpretation of some of the most dynamic aspects of ancient Maya civilization.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Research at Caracol has provided a rich context for framing Maya architectural form. In particular, archaeological data illustrate that the Maya used their architecture to reflect their cosmos and active articulation of both the living and the dead. The pervasive nature of this relationship is seen not only in epical architecture but also in the layout and contents of residential buildings. Changing Maya views of architecture are also apparent in the archaeological record. Importantly, the architectural context of caches, burials, and other ritual activities is instructive for inferring how Maya society was both integrated and transformed during the Classic period.

There are changes in the nature of offerings at most Maya sites through time—especially during the Late Classic and Post-Classic eras. Changes occur in the caching (and burial) patterns at Caracol. Ordered epicentral Late Pre-Classic/Early Classic caches are believed to have functioned in the sanctification of ritual space related to the territorial whole. This class of caches is associated only with public architecture through the Early Classic era. Late Classic offerings were both more varied and more decentralized; these Caracol caches were also placed throughout the site in a pattern that is very different from that reported for other Late Classic Maya sites, such as Tikal, where the centering of caches in monumental architecture appears to have continued with only minor change. The shift in cache emphasis from monumental architecture to domestic architecture seen at Caracol (and possibly at Altun Ha), however, is reflective of a continuity in caching practice documented for the Post-Classic period. Whereas Late Classic caching practices placed a premium on venerating honored dead (or sanctifying personal ritual space) in many different domestic loci, by the Late Post-Classic the domestic areas were being used for sanctification of ritual space related to the larger community. This deemphasis on epicentral ritual space is also seen in a corresponding deemphasis on Post-Classic monumental architecture. Thus, the location and nature of ritual deposits serves as a mirror of societal change and organization. The shift in placement of the most important ritual deposits of the Maya ultimately from epicentral monumental architecture to domestically linked architecture located throughout the community is clearly reflective of very different, but effective, strategies for dealing with a changing Maya world.

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*Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase*

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