

# 19. An Archaeological Assessment of Mesoamerican Elites

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ANY consideration of elites is by definition an examination of an elusive concept. Even in modern nations, arguments abound as to who exactly constitutes an "elite" and how the term should be applied within different situations. It is difficult to identify living elites, let alone long dead ones. Yet that is exactly what we have sought to do within this book—identify past elites based upon a body of extremely incomplete—and "dead"—archaeological data. The task is an important one, however, because elites have direct relevance to social, political, and economic organization and to the degree of stratification in any society. Needless to say, differences of opinion have arisen. But it is precisely in these disagreements that the value of this book lies—for such disputes point to larger questions concerning the makeup of ancient Mesoamerican society as well as the ways in which archaeological interpretations are made.

This volume illustrates the lack of agreement on the identification, number, and significance of elites in Precolumbian society. Some of this discord is due to differing methodological approaches. It is clear from the papers presented, however, that all of Mesoamerica did not have equal numbers or percentages of elites through time. It is also apparent that viewing the variations and patterns in the distribution of elites over time and space is significant in terms of Mesoamerican prehistory and cultural dynamics. Thus, it is inappropriate to suggest or assume that a singular socio-cultural situation existed throughout prehistoric Mesoamerica.

Given the differing theoretical and methodological approaches—as well as the widespread areas considered by the authors of the chapters—it may surprise some that any patterns or agreements emerge from the contributions in the volume. While there is overlap among the various papers by virtue of the simple fact that all consider the topic of elites, in actuality each paper is unique with regard to area, focus, and data base. Different approaches to the archaeological record, analogy, and ethnohistory have also colored the interpretations that are offered. Yet the papers can be grouped into two basic schools of thought concerning the composition of Mesoamerican society.

This chapter is distinct from the preceding discussion by G. Marcus, which focuses on the historical perspective of elites, in that it is specifically archaeological in focus; however, it considers issues that go beyond a mere consideration of elites and Mesoamerica. In order to facilitate discussion, several broad topics are highlighted: archaeological method and theory; the

role of analogy; the segmentary state model;<sup>1</sup> history versus archaeology; continuity, disjunction, and stratification in the archaeological record; and elite dynamics.

#### Archaeological Method and Theory

The very use of the word "elites" implies the existence of societal opposites within a given culture—those who have privilege and power and those who do not. While the term is sometimes used in other ways (cf. U.S. Southwest; Cordell and Gummerman 1989; Upham et al. 1989), it is often assumed to correlate with stratified societies (cf. Fried 1967:184-226). A consideration of elites necessarily gives rise to two distinct interpretative realms: the identification of stratification and the ways in which this information affects the wider political, economic, religious, and social system(s). The recognition of societal levels is a prerequisite to the interpretation of hierarchical political structure. Yet such recognition is not as easy as it sounds, for it must be premised on archaeological data, only partially preserved and only partially recovered. What must be asked is how do we derive our interpretations for the existence of societal levels? Is it from ethnography? Is it from anthropological theory? Is it from ethnohistory? Is it from archaeology?

To get at questions of stratification and political organization archaeologically is a herculean effort. Specifically, how are questions relating to these realms operationalized in the archaeological record? A primary assumption is that elites are a group with unequal access to basic resources as compared to the rest of society (cf. Fried 1967:186) and that they will be identifiable archaeologically in terms of material remains. It is generally assumed that this inequality may be seen in household items, refuse, constructions, and funerary activities, as well as in evidence for better health and diet. But any assessment of the archaeological data is difficult and is often guided by models and paradigms that are derived from other disciplines, data, times, and continents. It is in the framework(s) used for interpreting archaeological remains that differences of opinion are found. Yet the archaeological data themselves can place parameters on the kinds of interpretations that can or cannot be made.

Certain kinds of archaeological research designs and data are better suited than others to answering questions about complexity. Survey will provide some idea as to what kinds of remains are present and whether or not they might be hierarchically organized; in some instances, survey will permit predictions of what will be found beneath the ground surface. Whether survey can directly indicate workshop areas and other data relevant to complexity is dependent on the part of Mesoamerica in which one works. Drier environments in Mesoamerica have sites with a substantial surface visibility of artifactual remains; this fact has permitted greater latitude in higher-level interpretations (Charlton and Nichols; Kowalewski et

al.). Test-pits provide an idea of the range of archaeological materials that may be found in an area, but, because of their small size and limited cultural associations, they do not usually provide data that directly bear on behavioral interpretations (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1990). Intensive excavations often reveal much about complexity because of the detailed chronological and spatial information that may be gained relating to construction events and past activities; but, because of limited resources and the time and effort involved in such horizontal stripping or vertical penetrations, the end result can be a very small sample from what may be a very large site. While some combination of the above techniques is obviously advisable, practical considerations often make it impossible to carry out the ideal research design. The whole situation is compounded further depending on whether or not a site or a region is under study; failure to consider data in a regional (or wider) perspective may lead to inaccurate characterizations.

Ample consideration must be given to the relationships among theory, method, and data (cf. Sabloff 1986:116). Not all research questions can be answered with the same strategy of investigation. Intensive work may be necessary to answer some desired questions; however, once undertaken, investigations might also uncover additional data that suggest controversies where simpler correlations were once possible. Such is the nature of scientific inquiry.

In spite of the multitude of problems in simply approaching the archaeological record, most researchers—regardless of the nature of the data base—seek to address the most difficult considerations. This obviously complicates the situation as well. Still further chasms exist in attempts at archaeological interpretation. We all enter into conceptualizations about archaeological data based on our own experiences and understandings. And a major debate is presently ensuing in archaeology about the very nature of archaeological interpretation and whether or not such interpretations have any validity or merely represent our best efforts at fantasizing about the past (cf. Trigger 1989a:379-382, 386-396).

But, regardless of the approach, archaeology does provide us with answers. Problems occur only when there is insufficient realization of three basic items: (1) that different questions may require different research strategies; (2) that all models must be tested; and/or (3) that there may be no cultural universals.

The archaeologically based papers in this volume show substantial variation in research methodology. All provide some discussion of method and theory. Some researchers (Cowgill; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy; Webster) focus on single sites with large data bases. Others compare two or more sites (D. Chase; Grove and Gillespie; Pendergast; Tourtellot et al.)—trying to gain an insight into variability in the archaeological remains relating to elites over time and space. Yet others (A. Chase; Freidel; Kowalewski et al.) look at multiple sites within a region or even broader area to try to

analyze relationships. Further variation exists in the primary data base that is utilized. Most papers are based on excavation data. Some, however, focus on surface survey (Charlton and Nichols). Some use analogy to other ethnographic societies (Fox et al.; Henderson) or ethnohistory (Charlton and Nichols; D. Chase; J. Marcus; W. Sanders) as alternative sources for models or data. Various classes of archaeological data are used—residences, architecture, burials, skeletal information, artifacts, and iconography. The focus of the papers also varies: while most papers dealt with power and wealth, some authors were alternatively concerned with a historical perspective of elites (G. Marcus), stratification (Sanders; Kowalewski et al.), cosmology (Freidel), religion (D. Chase), trade (Hirth), and warfare (Freidel).

#### The Role of Analogy

It is one matter to collect data through mapping and excavation. It is quite another matter, however, to place these data within the matrix of past behavior and/or social organization. Archaeology, based as it is in material remains, does not often provide explicit evidence of past activity. To look at more than chronological and spatial ordering of material remains requires interpretation; behavior must be inferred. While some levels of interpretation may be relatively straightforward, others are more complex. Thus, while the inference that a group of people are sedentary agriculturalists may be easily made, inferring aspects of social organization can be substantially more complex and less certain.

Archaeologically, we are always seeking to model and explain behavior, but our synchronic models are generally derived from analogies to ethnographically known societies or general social theory. Analogies are drawn from a seemingly limitless variety of contexts; they are used in interpretations of Mesoamerican elites in a number of papers in this volume. But sometimes the models and/or analogies that are applied to a given body of archaeological data are inappropriate (cf. Wobst 1978).

Many models display an inherent theoretical brilliance, especially when viewed in terms of anthropological precepts. On the surface, they appear to provide solutions to puzzling archaeological situations. Yet difficulties often lurk below this surface. A major problem is the way in which analogies are employed to bolster a given model. In spite of substantial literature on the subject, there is little or no agreement on the appropriate criteria for selecting an analogy. Must an analogy be derived from a similar culture area? Should it be from a culture in a similar environment with a similar technological base? Or is there no framework that needs to be followed? In some cases it seems that no criteria are applied and that any analogy may be deemed to suffice for interpretation.

A primary consideration in the use of analogy is the degree to which known contemporary cultures can be assumed to reflect the total extant

variety of past cultures. Alternative varieties of organization presumably existed and have been lost archaeologically. This is probably very true for societies in the New World that were decimated, upended, and regrouped by Europeans at contact. A secondary consideration is the degree to which cultural continuity is important in making an analogy. There is frequently a Western bias in comparative views of world civilizations (J. Marcus 1983c:470; Chang 1989:166). Like others in this volume (Kowalewski et al.), we feel that it is very inappropriate to apply Old World analogies for complex organization in the New World without substantial rationale. The New World and the Old World developed independently and without knowledge of each other for millennia. Surely, major cultural and organizational differences arose within each milieu. A tertiary consideration is the degree to which environment and technological achievements are important in making a comparison. Thus, in our opinion, it is unwise for the Mesoamerican archaeologist to look to very differently based African or Southeast Asian societies for analogies relating to complexity; this procedure will without doubt miscast the New World picture.

One other complicating factor exists. Simply stated, the problem is not solely the lack of standards for employing analogies, but that such analogies are simply applied and assumed to be explanatory, when in point of fact they have never been tested. Archaeological cultures must be viewed in the same culturally relative manner as living cultures. The application of ethnography, ethnohistory, and general analogies and models to archaeological data must be seen for what it is—as equally problematic as other aspects of archaeological interpretation and not as a simple panacea to a complex situation.

#### *The Segmentary State*

The Maya are referred to as a “segmentary state”—or by related terminology such as “regal-ritual”—in a number of the preceding papers (Fox et al.; Tourtellot et al.; Sanders; Webster). In the Maya region, the segmentary state model was pioneered by Robert Carmack (1973, 1981) and then further explored by John Fox (1978b, 1987) to explain not only highland Maya Quiche organization, but also that of other Maya areas. Both researchers premise a strict lineage form of social organization for the Quiche Maya based on Carmack’s readings of the ethnohistoric documents. Fox (1987:4) explicitly states that “this marks the first time that segmentary lineages have been recognized in Mesoamerica.”

Ethnohistoric research by others on the same documents used by Carmack to postulate lineages and feudalism has, however, revealed something quite different. Robert Hill and John Monaghan (1987:158-59), in their study of the organization of the Quiche community of Sacapulas, Guatemala, specifically refer to their disagreements with Carmack’s and Fox’s readings of the Quiche data. They (1987:29-34, 41-42, 159) document the fact that the very word that Carmack uses to infer a lineage structure for all

of Quiche society—*chinamit*—was not an anthropological lineage at all, but rather “a territorial unit and not kin-based”; in fact, they show that this term is akin to the Aztec *calpulli*.

Thus, ethnohistoric and ethnographic work by Hill and Monaghan on boundary maintenance in Sacapulas has been able to demonstrate that the segmentary lineage structure postulated by Carmack and Fox did not exist for the Quiche Maya. Adam Kuper (1983:92) has gone so far as to suggest “that the lineage model, its predecessors and its analogs, have no value for anthropological analysis.” Yet the attribution of such a system to the Quiche group has been picked up by other Mesoamerican archaeologists in search of alternative models and has been applied to a great many sites and regions. Sanders (this volume), in fact, now sees the *calpulli* as being a segmentary lineage (in contrast to Carrasco 1971:364, 368). The related concepts of segmentary state and regal-ritual center have also been applied to interpretations of Mesoamerican urbanism (cf. Sanders and Webster 1988 critiqued by Michael Smith 1989 and D. Chase, A. Chase, and W. Haviland 1990). In fact, many related concepts and models derived from Old World situations (cf. R. Fox 1977) have been introduced into Mesoamerica with questionable substantiation in the relevant archaeological, ethnohistoric, or ethnographic materials.

The concept of the segmentary state was formulated by Aidan Southall (1956, 1988). This unit was created for the Alur of eastern Africa, but Southall (1956:254-60) clearly implies that it has widespread usage elsewhere. For Southall (1956:251), a “segmentary state” is based on lineage or kinship arrangements within a pyramidal social structure in which the “powers exercised . . . are virtually of the same type at the several different levels”; in contrast, a fully developed state exhibits a “hierarchical power structure” because “such powers are delegated from the top of the structure” and “similar powers are not repeated at all levels.” Southall’s (1956:252) analytical distinction between the segmentary state and the more developed unitary state hinges on “Weber’s concept of legitimacy”—“the prestige of being considered binding” rather than based on “motives of tradition or of expediency.” To Southall (1956), a segmentary state exhibits neither a strong central authority nor a bureaucracy and is largely incapable of maintaining control over distant territory in terms of feuding, landholding, or fiscal relations. One key aspect of Southall’s (1988:52) definition also includes the concept of flexible, changing boundaries because of the lack of political control outside of a core area.

Southall’s description of a segmentary state does *not* fit the Late Classic Maya of the Southern, and presumably Northern, lowlands. Rather, the lowland Maya had a form of political organization that could be termed a “unitary state” following Southall’s definitions, although we hesitate to utilize either of his bipolar categories.

While not denying that lineages were important to the Maya or that some segmentation may have occurred, a decentralized kinship-based system does not characterize the Classic and Postclassic Maya political order. Centralized bureaucracies were clearly in evidence at sites like Tikal and Caracol. At Tikal, by the Late Classic era the ruling elite probably acted as the main landholding corporation (D. Chase, A. Chase, and W. Haviland 1990:501), arguing for a centralized power and a nonsegmentary state. The settlement pattern at Caracol with its regularized distribution of plaza groups among and between the extensive terrace systems also indicates that local kin-based groups were not in control of settlement policy, but rather that a centralized bureaucracy was. Similar interpretations may be made for the Postclassic Maya of the Northern lowlands (Farriss 1984:148).

Hieroglyphic interpretations concerning categories of subsidiary lords would also indicate that power could be delegated by a given ruler, thus also contravening the definition of a segmentary state. At Caracol, the relationship between the supreme lord and the minor lord is clearly stated. The power is possessed by the ruler and delegated to the subordinate lord—clearly a form of legitimacy. This can be seen in statements both at Caracol proper (cf. the *sul* title in A. Chase, N. Grube, and D. Chase 1991) and at its outlying dependencies such as La Rejolla. Grube (personal communication, 1990) has noted that “sometimes it happens that a subordinate calls himself a sublord of an already deceased ruler by means of these possessed titles.” Kornelia Kurbjuhn (n.d.) has similarly pointed out that a *sahal*—“a governor or deputy chief of a small, dependent site”—“must refer to a life-long appointment independent of a specific ruler or his lineage.” Thus, legitimacy formed a part of the Classic Maya political order. Following Southall, this would again reinforce the Classic Maya position as a unitary state.

Additional evidence relative to the unitary nature of Maya states can be mustered from the ethnohistoric evidence, at least from the Northern lowlands. Ralph Roys (1943, 1957) has dealt extensively with the social and political organization of the Northern lowlands. He (1943:35-36, 1957:4) acknowledges the widespread existence of lineages among the Maya, but fully admits that there are problems involved in understanding them, even going so far as to say that these groups “contained too many members and were too widely dispersed to be considered lineages in the anthropological meaning of the term.” Reading Roys, one realizes that principles beyond kinship governed the Maya of the Northern lowlands (see also Haviland 1972).

Roys (1957:6) further defines three different kinds of territorial organization as being present in the Northern lowlands at the time of Spanish contact: (1) territories governed under the centralized rule of a single head of state, termed a *halach uinic*; (2) territories governed not by one ruler, but by a convocation of local *batabs* belonging to the same lineage; and (3) territo-

ries governed independently by many autonomous units. While a superficial reading of two of the forms of governance defined by Roys could be classified as segmentary in nature, comments by Nancy Farriss (1984:148) make it abundantly clear that these forms could in no way be construed as constituting a segmentary state, for all of Roys' forms recognized formal boundaries and were hierarchical in organization:

Two points about the geopolitical structure are relevant here. One is that the provinces were, for all the flux of political groupings and the varying degrees of cohesion, more than random collections of towns. They all possessed internal ties of some kind and provincial boundaries, which might be readjusted by war or arbitration but which were nonetheless recognized as boundaries. The other point is that these ties were for the most part hierarchical in nature, with a rank ordering of towns at the subprovincial level regardless of how unified or loosely organized the larger entity might be.

That such a political organization was once even more complicated can be seen in reports of two previous periods of political unification: first, under Chichen Itza and, later, under Mayapan (Roys 1943:58).

Although not always recorded, even earlier, Classic period, attempts at "empires" can be seen in the archaeological and epigraphic records of the Southern lowlands (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989; Schele and Freidel 1990). These same records indicate that the Maya of the Late Classic era had a clear conception of a bounded political and ritual unit. The determination of boundaries and boundary sites was very significant. In fact, Maya warfare often concerned itself with where the boundary of a given political unit was located (cf. Caracol and Naranjo; A. Chase, N. Grube, and D. Chase 1991).

In summary, then, while the segmentary state model may be of heuristic use in developmental considerations of complexity, it is misapplied to the Classic and Postclassic Maya data with which we are familiar. The archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography of the Maya provide evidence that is contrary to the tenets of this model. The nomothetic and unilinear aspects of the model must also be questioned. For these reasons, we believe it is unwise to equate the New World Maya with the Old World-derived model of a segmentary state.

#### History versus Archaeology

Because archaeology provides us with only the remnants of past activities, we often not only rely on analogy with living peoples, but also look toward historic information to augment the archaeological record. Only history and archaeology can provide the temporal perspective for studying change in human society (cf. Trigger 1989a:372ff, 1989b). Both disciplines are concerned with the chronological ordering of events; however, each has a data base with distinctive benefits and limitations. The written documents of history provide information on individuals and specific events that may be very detailed; however, written materials often contain the biases of individ-

ual recorders and can mirror their ethnocentrism. As indicated above, reconstructing behavior from the material record of archaeology is fraught with its own interpretative pitfalls. When used to address the same problem, history and archaeology sometimes yield different answers. In an ideal situation, history and archaeology would be combined in a conjunctive approach where neither discipline nor data base would dominate interpretation; rather, the different kinds of data could be tested against each other to gain a balanced picture. Unfortunately, in practice, this is rarely the case; when both history and archaeology are available, one is generally given precedence over the other.

In prehistoric Mesoamerica, a substantial amount of historic information is available (Nicholson 1975; J. Marcus 1976c). Written materials were created and used by certain Mesoamerican peoples (most notably the Maya; Culbert 1991); there are also European texts that discuss native American culture during the early years of contact. As with all historic material, an overarching question exists with regard to the reliability of these texts regardless of their origin or content. Indigenous hieroglyphic texts, for example, may overemphasize the significance of specific rulers; Spanish texts may ethnocentrically misinterpret native culture. Yet another consideration is whether one can directly correlate historic materials from one region of Mesoamerica with another. The *Popol Vuh* is a case in point (Tedlock 1985); this origin myth is based in the oral history of the highland Quiche Maya; however, it is assumed to be useful for explaining archaeological remains found throughout the Maya area (cf. Schele and Freidel 1990; Freidel, this volume)—regardless of the degree of cultural/temporal contact with the Postclassic/historic Quiche. Thus, historic materials must be evaluated not only for reliability, but also for their applicability to a particular culture or subgroup.

The papers in this volume use history and archaeology in various ways. For some, history is the primary data base (J. Marcus); others use archaeology in a critical comparison with history (D. Chase; Charlton and Nichols). William Sanders uses ethnohistory as a primary source of information on the Aztec; this permits a far more detailed understanding than is possible given the limited archaeological information. But it also means that his interpretations are generally not grounded in archaeology. Thomas Charlton and Deborah Nichols compare what is known ethnohistorically with what can be defined archaeologically for Postclassic central Mexico, attempting to explicitly test their assumptions. Diane Chase uses ethnohistory and Postclassic archaeology for the lowland Maya, noting problems in certain traditional interpretations based solely on the ethnohistoric data; this work also points to a multitude of problems both in assuming that history is correct and in directly applying ethnohistorically based models to much earlier archaeological societies. Joyce Marcus examines both native American and European history for the purpose of deriving interpretations

of Precolumbian society. Despite her critique of Maya epigraphy as being unreliable, Marcus is staunch in her defense of Spanish historic sources as being correct concerning Precolumbian status distinctions. David Freidel alternatively focuses on the validity of the indigenous texts and iconography and their usefulness for the interpretation of the Precolumbian political situation.

The only paper in this volume to focus solely on history and writing is that of Joyce Marcus. She is also the most emphatic about the existence of a two-group or two-class society in Mesoamerica (consisting of a small group of nobles and a larger group of commoners that presumably included slaves), based on these historic materials. Virtually all of the papers dealing with archaeological data point to a difficulty in identifying two strict groups "on the ground." Some suggest that while there may have been two "ideal" groups as described ethnohistorically, the archaeology indicates more divisions within these larger groupings (A. Chase; D. Chase; Cowgill; Tourtellot et al.). Some note the possibility that there may be differences between what is said and what is actually done in a culture (cf. Cowgill; D. Chase; A. Chase and D. Chase). Our position (cf. D. Chase) is that if a simple two-class division does not mirror Late Postclassic Maya society archaeologically, it cannot be assumed to fit the earlier Classic Maya.

Models derived from historic sources, whether written by members of the culture or by those from outside, must be reviewed critically. Joyce Marcus has shown how a critical reading of hieroglyphic texts can cast doubt on their veracity. David Freidel, here and elsewhere (Schele and Freidel 1990), has demonstrated the usefulness of such texts for archaeological interpretation. The European historic documents used by a majority of the authors in this volume, while tantalizing in their detail, often present misleading worldviews of New World societies, for transcribers did not understand the intricacies of the events they were recording and attempted to explain things they did not understand in terms of their own worldview and language. Even carefully derived ethnohistoric interpretations concerning Precolumbian society should not be assumed to fit the archaeological situation. Archaeology can play a key role in assessing the validity of historic accounts; this condition holds whether one is analyzing epigraphy or ethnohistory.

The majority of the archaeological papers in this volume provide no direct support for a two-level division of ancient Mesoamerican society; in fact, some papers indicate archaeological evidence for more than two divisions. We feel that this archaeological information cannot be ignored. Three possibilities exist for resolving the presumed discrepancies between the archaeological and ethnohistoric interpretations: (1) the two-group division may have existed, but the subdivisions within the groups may actually have been more important than the hereditary classes themselves in terms of correlations with wealth; (2) the two-group division may have been the ideal situation in Mesoamerican society, but not in the reality of the

sociopolitical organization; (3) indications in the ethnohistory for a middle group of people may adequately mirror the archaeological situation that sometimes dictates the existence of a relatively large middle group.

#### **Continuity, Disjunction, and Stratification in the Archaeological Record**

General theories of complexity have long attempted to wrest meaning from the archaeological record. Thus, the recognition of hierarchies of both sites in a given region and social groups at any one site was seen as important for arguments pertaining to stratification and social complexity. But how does one identify a social hierarchy archaeologically, especially at a single site? In the past, the primary way was to look at continuous and discontinuous distributions of presumed status indicators in the archaeological record. Discontinuous distributions of archaeological remains were seen as being markers of stratification and distinct status levels while continuous distributions were seen as being something less complex, specifically reflecting a ranked society or chiefdom. Papers in this volume suggest that there may be a problem with such an approach.

There is a difference of opinion with regard to what a lack of clear-cut archaeological status-related divisions means. Those working in the highlands (Sanders), in the southern peripheries (Henderson), and on early time horizons (Grove and Gillespie) tend to see the absence of clear-cut divisions in the archaeological record as implying a nonstate ranked society. John Fox and his coauthors think that the gradations seen in the archaeological record at Utatlan are reflective of an underlying egalitarian structure. Other researchers working both in the highlands (Cowgill; Kowalewski et al.) and the lowlands (A. Chase; D. Chase; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy), who also note a lack of clear-cut divisions in the data, often—but not always—focus on the idea of a state or greater complexity. George Cowgill, in fact, uses the gradations in the archaeological data of Teotihuacan to point to the existence of up to seven levels within three overall groups at that site—obviously a complex hierarchical situation. Thus, it can be inferred that the lack of sharp “class” distinctions in the archaeological data—or, alternatively, the recognition of a general gradation from the top to the bottom of a given society—does not necessarily indicate the level of a given social or political organization; such assemblages are just as likely to reflect great complexity as they are to reflect simpler societies.

There may be distinctive reasons for the existence of similar patterns in the archaeological record. The basic premise underlying the association of continuous distributions with nonstratified societies is that these mirror the individual ranking of people in a society relative to a chief and his lineage. However, a similar gradation in the archaeological data may result from interactions found in politically and economically more complex societies (C. Smith 1976; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:75). Thus, additional information—such as a consideration of scale, integration, and horizontal and/or

vertical differentiation (Blanton et al. 1981:17-22)—assumes significance in determining whether a continuous distribution reflects a ranked or a stratified society.

As has been indicated, the identification of stratification in a society archaeologically is premised in the idea that there will be apparent distinctions in material remains reflective of different status groups. The reality of the archaeological situation suggests that this may not be the case. It is often unclear which variables are critical in making divisions. How one structures one's questions will also have a bearing on the existence of either a disjunction or a continuum. A focus on a single variable will often result in clear-cut distinctions and divisions. A focus on multiple variables often leads to blurring in the categories under investigation, thus leading to the archaeological recognition of a continuum. Equally problematic are some descriptions of group differences that focus on material items, like distinctive dress, that are unlikely to survive in the archaeological record. William Sander's postulated Aztec merchant class may be quite evident from the ethnohistoric materials, but its recognition archaeologically would be problematic, especially given the variability encompassed in his description.

Regardless of the variables being considered, archaeologists encounter a conundrum when they must attempt to decide where to place divisions between groups. Even though there are often clear distinctions between the uppermost and lowermost segments of society, the actual societal divisions are generally less obvious in Mesoamerica. A similar situation exists in ancient Mesopotamia; C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (1989:257) notes that "the Sumerian population consisted of five distinct social classes," but at the same time writes that "lines of separation between the classes were far from clear."

Among all the variables that may be examined (such as artifact distributions, settlement patterns, and structural elaboration), it is the mortuary data base that provides a prominent portion of the information on status distinctions (cf. O'Shea 1984); yet it is also a part of the record that may be affected by nonstatus factors. A lack of distinctions in mortuary remains does not necessarily equate with a lack of status distinctions in society (Ucko 1969; Huntington and Metcalf 1979:122; Pearson 1982). In Mesoamerica, however, status distinctions do seem to be reflected in the archaeological record; skeletal remains can also be analyzed for differences in diet and health (Haviland and Moholy-Nagy; Pendergast).

The presence of intermediate status burials and residential groups archaeologically at several lowland Maya sites has led us to suggest the existence of some sort of middle level in Mesoamerican society. Members of these groups display intermediate aspects of wealth (cf. M. Smith 1987b) and are far more numerous than would generally be expected for any elite grouping. Arlen Chase's data from Caracol, Belize, demonstrate an increase in this middle group over time and the probable association of this

growth with successful warfare. Diane Chase's work suggests that this middle group persisted into the Postclassic/Historic era. William Sanders sees the merchants of Aztec central Mexico becoming such a "middle" class.

If we were to explore over time the distributions of continuous and discontinuous variables archaeologically, as they relate to complexity in Mesoamerica, we predict that we would find the following general pattern in the archaeological remains over time: continuous distribution, discontinuous distribution, continuous distribution. Such a situation does not imply the rise and fall of a complex society. Rather, in our estimation, it reflects a nonstratified society that experiences the onset of stratification and the development of what may be termed an archaic state and then, finally, subsequent elaboration in that complexity as the political entity continues to exist. In this light, it is important to re-emphasize that continuous distributions of archaeological data can be representative of *both* simpler societies and complex ones.

#### Elites and the Dynamics of Mesoamerican Civilization

By definition, some sort of elite must have existed in past Mesoamerican societies. Some individual or group directed different aspects of any society and made decisions that were subsequently implemented. The archaeological data indicate that such individuals existed, minimally inferentially and sometimes directly in the archaeological record—as in the Maya case, where we see rulers portrayed and their histories recorded on monuments, and sometimes find their stupendous interments, like those of Pacal at Palenque and Ah Cacao at Tikal.

At many sites, however, the on-the-ground definition of the elite is extremely problematic, largely because their identification relies on understanding the extant archaeological diversity and assigning meaning to patterns that may be discerned. It is in the assignment of meaning to recognized archaeological patterns that most researchers have difficulty. Often they use analogies or general theoretical conceptualizations of societies and their evolution either to assign such meaning or to gain a framework for structuring their interpretation. Yet this approach to the archaeological data is fraught with problems and it minimizes the archaeological contributions to diversity, complexity, and change.

The papers within this volume provide a series of examples of how archaeological interpretation is accomplished. They also illustrate the problems faced by archaeologists when dealing with obtuse definitional matters. One area on which most authors would agree is that Mesoamerican elites were a "power elite" (cf. Mills 1956; Dahl 1969; Kornhauser 1969)—even though none of them use this terminology directly. The concept of a power elite was derived by C. W. Mills (1956) to discuss power in contemporary American society. This unified power group is composed of "top government executives, military officials, and corporate directors" (Kornhauser

1969:43). A second, middle level of power includes a variety of interest groups. The largest, but least powerful group, is the "mass society." The ruling elite is a controlling group that is a minority of the population and that is not created by democratic process (Dahl 1969:37).

While there is no clear agreement about the size of the elite group and while there may be variation in their numbers temporally and spatially, they were a relatively small portion of the total Mesoamerican population. It is equally apparent that the elite made the political decisions, not the other members of society. What is in question in the Mesoamerican archaeological data is the number of other levels of power. Was there, for example, a middle level above the powerless masses? And did power relationships vary temporally and spatially? Thus, stating that ancient Mesoamerica provides excellent examples of power elites may be correct, but the interesting questions revolve around the composition of the elite relative to the rest of society and any variations in the system.

It is difficult to assess Mesoamerican social dynamics given the distinctive methodologies and perspectives that are used with regard to elites; however, some variation in both contemporary and temporal realms is evident. For example, the data from the Maya site of Caracol, Belize (A. Chase), demonstrate that during the Classic period an increasingly large middle-level group developed that had increased access to elite items over time. It is as yet unclear whether this was movement in a positive direction indicating a more efficient social or political system with more division of labor and administrative activities or, instead, a potential problem leading ultimately to societal breakdown given the greater access to, more knowledge of, and potentially greater degree of questioning of the social and political system. It is possible that the difficulty in defining a small elite group at Sayil (Tourtellot et al.) is representative of a similar transition. Contemporary variation in societal composition and organization is very evident in data from both the central Maya area (A. Chase; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy; Pendergast) and its peripheries (Henderson; Webster). Over time, the Maya data show surprising continuities (D. Chase). Similarly, temporal change and contemporary variation is discernable in highland Mexico (Charlton and Nichols; Cowgill; Grove and Gillespie; Kowalewski et al.; Sanders). This diversity among Mesoamerican sites still needs further exploration and explanation. However, by viewing elites dynamically we can start to view social and political structure. And the variety and change in such structure is the key to understanding Precolumbian Mesoamerican society.

### Notes

1. The discussion relating to segmentary states that appears in this paper is derived from a presentation by A. Chase at the 89th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans in December 1990 in a session titled "Maya Settlement Pattern Studies: New Methods and Interpretations" chaired by S. Jaeger and D. Walker. Robert M. Hill II subsequently provided additional sources on lineage theory. The authors, however, take full responsibility for the content of this statement.