

8. Postclassic Maya Elites: Ethnohistory and Archaeology

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OUR views of prehistoric Maya society are colored largely by ethnohistoric descriptions of activities witnessed during the century following European contact in Central America. Spanish accounts, especially published materials (*Relaciones de Yucatán 1898-1900*; Tozzer 1941) and compilations of historic works (Roys 1943), are used to fill in gaps in Maya archaeology and to offer an interpretation of ancient culture and day-to-day life. This is true not only for the epoch immediately preceding the conquest—the Postclassic—but also for the even earlier Classic period. Ethnohistoric information is used for a variety of interpretations, ranging from the identification of structure function (Wauchope 1934; D. Chase 1982:573-78; Freidel and Sabloff 1984) to the organization of sites and polities (Roys 1957; Folan et al. 1983; D. Chase 1986).

While there is no doubt that ethnohistoric resources are an invaluable source of information about the Maya, the use of these written materials without critical evaluation can lead to misleading or inappropriate interpretations. There are numerous reasons why this might be the case. The early chroniclers were unfamiliar with the ways of the native inhabitants of the New World and, thus, frequently did not understand what they were witnessing—making misinterpretation of native culture quite possible. Often, European-based models—specifically those pertaining to a society such as existed in medieval Europe of the time—were applied to New World societies and indigenous forms of organization were ignored or contorted to fit a Western mindframe. Some recorders may have been more thorough or reliable—less ethnocentric—than others, but even the best of these historical resources have flaws and all require critical evaluation (cf. Nicholson 1975:490). This is true of both the Spanish and the later native Maya chroniclers. Bishop Diego de Landa, perhaps the premier source of data for the contact period Maya, was noted as a plagiarist (Genet 1934), and native chroniclers such as Gaspar Antonio Chi were sometimes more likely to “sway” history in favor of their own family’s importance (Tozzer 1941:44-45, note 219). Ethnohistoric accounts are also generally transcribed, translated, and published before they are accessible to archaeological researchers; these activities can sometimes lead to nearly imperceptible changes—such as in wording—that nevertheless can greatly alter documentary interpretation. Beyond these factors, the Maya society described in Spanish documents was not the same as had existed in precontact times; it was altered due both to Spanish influence and to depopulation caused by disease. On a further

note, the descriptions of the lowland Maya in the early European documents tended to refer to the Yucatec Maya, and it is not always evident to what degree they were representative of the various other parts of the Maya realm. Finally, as is always the case in recounted information, the degree to which historic accounts have embodied ideal as opposed to real distinctions in the social order can be questioned.

The truly unanswered issue, however, is the amount of change in Maya culture that took place somewhat earlier following the Classic Maya collapse (ca. A.D. 900). Even should ethnohistory be reliable with regard to the Late Postclassic Maya, it does not provide us with any consensus on the relationships between the Classic and Postclassic periods, much less on whether or not historic events in the Northern Maya lowlands have any direct bearing on Classic period events in the Southern Maya lowlands. Most scholars describe the Classic Maya collapse as having had dire effects on the population of the Southern lowlands (Willey and Shimkin 1973; Sharer 1977); Postclassic peoples have been described as decadent in contrast to their ancestors (cf. Proskouriakoff 1955). I have disagreed with these ethnocentric statements about Postclassic Maya culture (D. Chase 1981, 1982, 1985b, 1986; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, n.d.), nevertheless, I wish to restate here that direct transfer of ethnohistoric statements to describe and interpret a civilization that existed over 600 years earlier is clearly problematic.

This presentation reviews some of the more commonly used ethnohistoric descriptions of Maya society with respect to the Maya elite and their spatial organization within sites. These descriptions are examined with regard to information gleaned from Maya archaeology. The primary data used here are investigations at the archaeological sites of Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase 1982; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986b, 1988) and Mayapan (Pollock et al. 1962; R. Smith 1971). Both of these are well-documented Late Postclassic sites that flourished after A.D. 1350. Santa Rita Corozal, located in northern Belize, was probably the capital of the province of Chetumal and, as such, was abandoned in A.D. 1531; it has already been demonstrated that analogy to the Yucatec Maya is appropriate for this site (D. Chase 1982, 1986:349). Mayapan, situated in northern Yucatan, was the capital of a much larger confederacy, the "league of Mayapan," and is believed to have been largely depopulated following A.D. 1450; it is particularly appropriate to compare the archaeology of this site with ethnohistoric statements because it is specifically described by early chroniclers. After comparing the data from these late Maya sites to interpretations that have been and can be made based on ethnohistory, the discussion moves back in time to analyze the Classic period. The results of such combined study suggest that a number of frequent assumptions concerning Maya elites are not applicable to the Postclassic period, much less to earlier eras. A more critical use of ethnohistorical data—in conjunction with archaeological

data—also suggests that a more varied social and political organization existed than has often been proffered.

Maya Elites: Ethnohistory

Maya society at the time of first European contact is generally described as either a two- or three-group system composed of nobles and commoners with the addition of slaves (Tozzer 1941:26, 62; Roys 1965). Elites have been previously defined as "those who run society's institutions" (Chase and Chase, introduction, in this volume). Such a definition would appear to accord well with ethnohistoric descriptions of Maya nobles as administrators, adjudicators, and ritual leaders (Tozzer 1941:87, 98; Roys 1943:33, 59-64). Nobles or *al mehenob* had a status determined by descent through both the male and female lines (Roys 1943:33). Descent alone, however, may have been insufficient for positioning in certain political offices, and individuals were also questioned as to their esoteric knowledge so as to preclude inappropriate pretenders to power. This is indicated in the interrogation of the "chiefs" in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Roys 1933:192). Offices held by nobles are defined to a certain degree in entries and passages found in the Motul dictionary (Martínez Hernández 1929) and the *Relaciones de Yucatán* (1898-1900), including Landa (see also Tozzer 1941). These offices are summarized by Roys (1943:59-64) and included the *halach uinic* or territorial ruler, the *batab* or town ruler and hereditary war captain, the *ah cuch cab* or leader of a particular segment of town, the *ah kulel* who assisted the *batab*, and the *holpop*, who may have either been the governor of a smaller town or possibly the head of an important lineage. Priests were also members of the elite, and the *ah kin* was perhaps the most important religious leader within a community (Tozzer 1941:27). There were two very different personages who bore the title *nacom*—one often served as the officiator for human sacrifice, and the other was elected to serve for three years as a war chief. Of the two, Landa (Tozzer 1941:112-13) notes that the war chief was accorded high status, while the *nacom* who undertook the role of executioner in human sacrifices was not. This latter point, however, has been questioned, based on some of the better-known individuals documented to have served as *nacoms* in Yucatan (Roys 1943:79).

According to the ethnohistory, Maya of different social statuses lived in distinct locales at any given site and were also accorded varying degrees of material wealth. The ethnohistoric model called for nobles to have lived at the center of towns, often in elaborately painted and permanently constructed residences (Tozzer 1941:26, 62). At least certain of these elite also bedecked themselves with necklaces of shell or jade beads (Tozzer 1941:95-96). At death, those of the highest status were reported to have been cremated and their ashes placed in idols (Tozzer 1941:130-31), although certain of the elite—such as priests—may well have been buried without cremation below their houses (Tozzer 1941:129-30). Following an interment

in a house, the structure was supposedly abandoned and, in certain cases, temples were erected over the former house site (Tozzer 1941:130).

But what of the rest of Maya society? What ethnohistoric data relate to the nonelite segment of Maya society shortly following contact? The commoners were reportedly the largest segment of Maya society. In the most frequently used ethnohistoric model, these people lived at the outskirts of town and provided subsistence items for the elite, as well as service required for such things as house repairs (Tozzer 1941:26, 62, 86, 87). They lived in buildings that resembled those of the nobles but were entirely constructed of perishable materials (Tozzer 1941:85, 86)—reinforcing the idea that noble houses were made of stone. We are told that commoners were buried below or to the rear of their houses; maize or valuable stones were placed in their mouths to provide for them in death (Tozzer 1941:129-30). Lower in status than the commoners were slaves captured in war and used either as sacrificial victims or as servants (Tozzer 1941:54, 123).

Indications exist in the ethnohistory, however, that stratification of individuals in Maya society was not quite as simple as the "noble-commoner" and, sometimes "slave" terminology might indicate. While this basic dualistic or tripartite division *may* have been the *ideal* social situation described to the Spaniards, it is unclear how inviolate these categories were in reality or whether they always related directly to material well-being. The *holcans*, for example, were mercenaries of unclear status who were paid only in times of war (Tozzer 1941:123). Merchants might derive from either the nobles or the commoners (Roys 1943:33, 34, 51). Both nobles and commoners could own slaves (Roys 1943:34). There was also a term for a group of individuals who by their designation as *azmen uinic*—"middle" or "medium men"—were neither commoners nor nobles, but had "middling status" (Roys 1943:34; see also Martinez Hernandez 1929:69; Barrera Vasquez et al. 1980:18). These individuals may well have been those of "high esteem," described by Landa (Tozzer 1941:62, 130-31) as living closest to the houses of the nobles and priests and as sharing similar burial patterns with these two groups. Thus, while the general description of Maya social organization used widely by ethnohistorians and archaeologists traditionally consists solely of nobles, commoners, and slaves, there is evidence even within the early historic materials that there were at least certain "in-between" individuals, who in many ways must have mimicked the nobles. Given statements about the burial rites of these individuals being similar to those of the nobles, one might also expect that they could be particularly difficult to define in the archaeological record.

Ethnohistoric description of the plans of Maya towns are largely based on what the Spaniards were told about the then already abandoned Mayapan; such accounts are fairly rigid in their descriptions: "Their dwelling place was as follows: —in the middle of the town were their temples with beautiful plazas, and all around the temples stood the houses of the lords and the

priests, and then (those of) the most important people. Thus came the houses of the richest and of those who were held in the highest estimation nearest to these, and at the outskirts of the town were the houses of the lower class" (Tozzer 1941:62). Because of this ethnohistoric depiction, Maya communities were believed to have been concentrically organized. This concentric view of Maya site organization has been often uncritically applied to archaeological settlements of both the Classic and Postclassic periods (Haviland 1982; Folan et al., 1983; but see also Arnold and Ford 1980; Ashmore 1981b:461-62, 1988:160-61; Ford and Arnold 1982; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:58).

Elites and Archaeology

An archaeological testing of the generalized ethnohistoric statements concerning Maya social, political, and spatial organization requires the identification of particular material remains, or combinations of remains, as likely to be elite associated. Notwithstanding the problems in distinguishing status archaeologically (see Chase and Chase, introduction, in this volume), certain kinds of data have been useful in this regard. Architectural mass, building techniques, and structural elaboration have all been used to derive differences in status, based on the assumption that increased effort expenditure in architectural remains was/is an indicator of increased status. Such assumptions are bolstered by historic documentation, as indicated previously. However, consideration must be given to the possibility that a greater number of rooms or an enlarged overall area might also represent either a larger number of activities and/or more residents, rather than simply the increased status of the occupants. Thus, information on architecture must be cross-checked with other material classes.

Refuse and primary activity areas have obvious utility in assessing the function of specific areas. Maya elites were reported to have been involved in administration, ritual, and—to some extent—warfare (Tozzer 1941:87, 98, 122; Roys 1943:33, 59-64). While warfare and ritual may provide indicators in the material realm, administrative activities are more difficult to assess. Maya interments also vary greatly in the effort expended in the creation of a final resting place, the treatment of the body, and the manufacture or accumulation of objects placed with the individual; presumably these factors are reflective of differential status. In addition, written materials or symbols of power and authority may sometimes accompany an individual in death. Trade items, while not always limited to the elite, may sometimes provide an indication of status—especially when encountered in primary context in residences or in burials. Rarity and/or distance from the point of origin of a trade object may prove particularly useful in status assessments.

By assessing the relationships among these variables, it is theoretically possible to define the basic status groups present at a site. These definitions can then be used to assess spatial organization. Strict conformity to

the concentric model of site or town organization calls for the location of all elite houses in the central area of a site surrounding the central ceremonial constructions. Residences of other individuals would be located at greater distances from the site center in direct proportion to their decreased social status. Commoners would be located in the furthest extremes of any given town. Therefore, concentricity, or lack thereof, may be assessed by viewing the occurrence and variability of the above-mentioned material indicators in conjunction with specific building types and groups in comparison to their distance from a given site center.

Archaeology and Elites: Santa Rita Corozal

Research undertaken by the Corozal Postclassic Project (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988) from 1979 through 1985 focused on a large number of structures dating to the fifteenth century just prior to Spanish contact (A.D. 1300-1530). In all, intensive excavations were carried out in forty-three structures, of which thirty-five produced construction or significant occupation dating to the Late Postclassic period (cf. D. Chase 1990). These investigations can be further amplified by using the earlier work of Thomas Gann (1900, 1918).

If one views the distribution of presumed elite-associated items and activities at Santa Rita Corozal, some surprising information surfaces about the nature of status distinctions and site organization as well as about the excavations necessary to answer these questions. Santa Rita Corozal serves as an excellent reminder of the problems in making interpretations in archaeological sites based solely on surface remains. Both elaborate residences and constructions in which elaborate burials have been encountered were often not visible based on surface inspection or survey. The most impressive Postclassic burial encountered at Santa Rita Corozal came from a building that was not perceptible without extensive excavation. Such findings have clear negative implications for the *a priori* association of presumed nonelaborate dwellings with commoners. Attempts to assess status at the site have led to the definition of three categories of residential groups (fig. 8.1). The most easily identified were the areas in which the highest-status individuals are presumed to have resided. These locales tended to contain at least one elaborate residence, consisting of a multiple-room construction, generally with an enclosed shrine. Residential groups in this category also were distinctive in their artifactual associations. Nearly the entire archaeological spectrum of Postclassic artifactual categories may be found in association with these high-status architectural groupings. Even more significantly, all high-status groups also have ritual associations in the form of either effigy caches (fig. 8.2) or paired incense burners (fig. 8.3). There is also a strong correlation between high-status residence and items associated with warfare—chert and obsidian arrowpoints occur with great frequency in these structures. Interestingly, evidence of weapons in the form of chert and obsidian arrowpoints is more common at Santa Rita Corozal than at

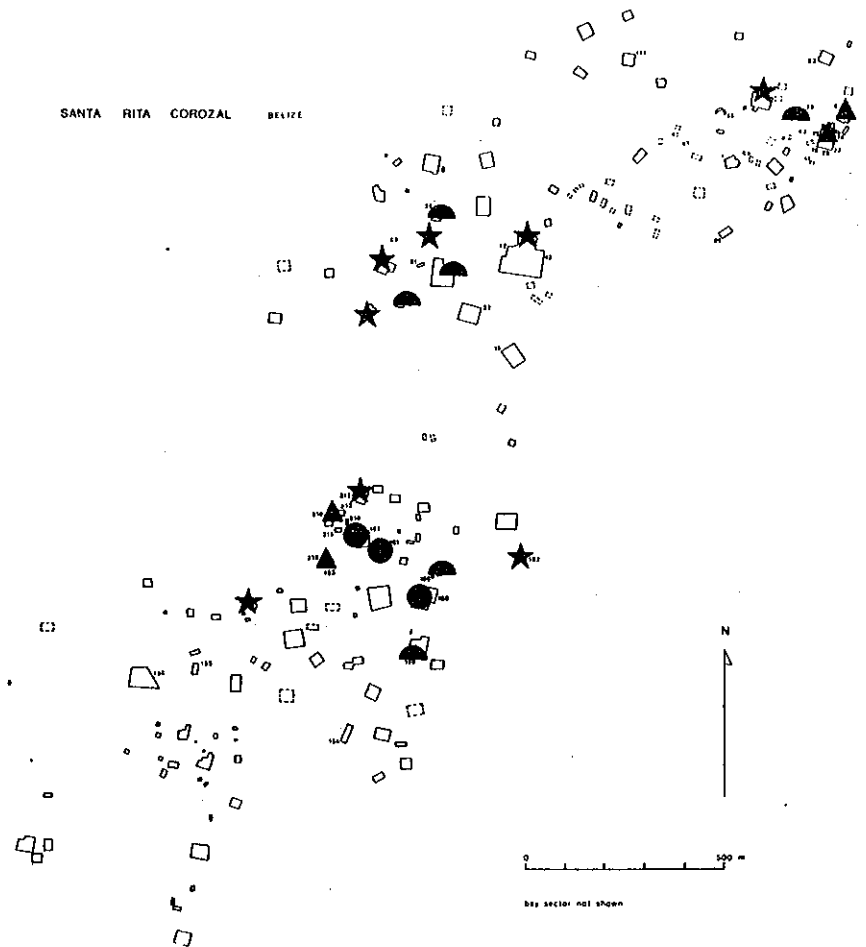


Fig. 8.1. Distribution of Postclassic buildings and/or groups excavated by the Corozal Postclassic Project at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize: triangle = high status residence; circle = middle status residence; semi-circle = low status residence; star = ritual and non-residential.

Mayapan—eight times so for chert points and two times so for obsidian points. Perhaps this can be seen as affirming the notion of increased internal warfare within the lowlands following the deterioration of the league of Mayapan in the fifteenth century. Significantly, the presumed highest-status groups were not limited to the central portion of the site; there was generally more than one of these groups in each of the defined sectors of the site (cf. D. Chase 1982).

The lowest category of residential occupation uncovered at Santa Rita Corozal includes several locales, one of which has no definable base walls.

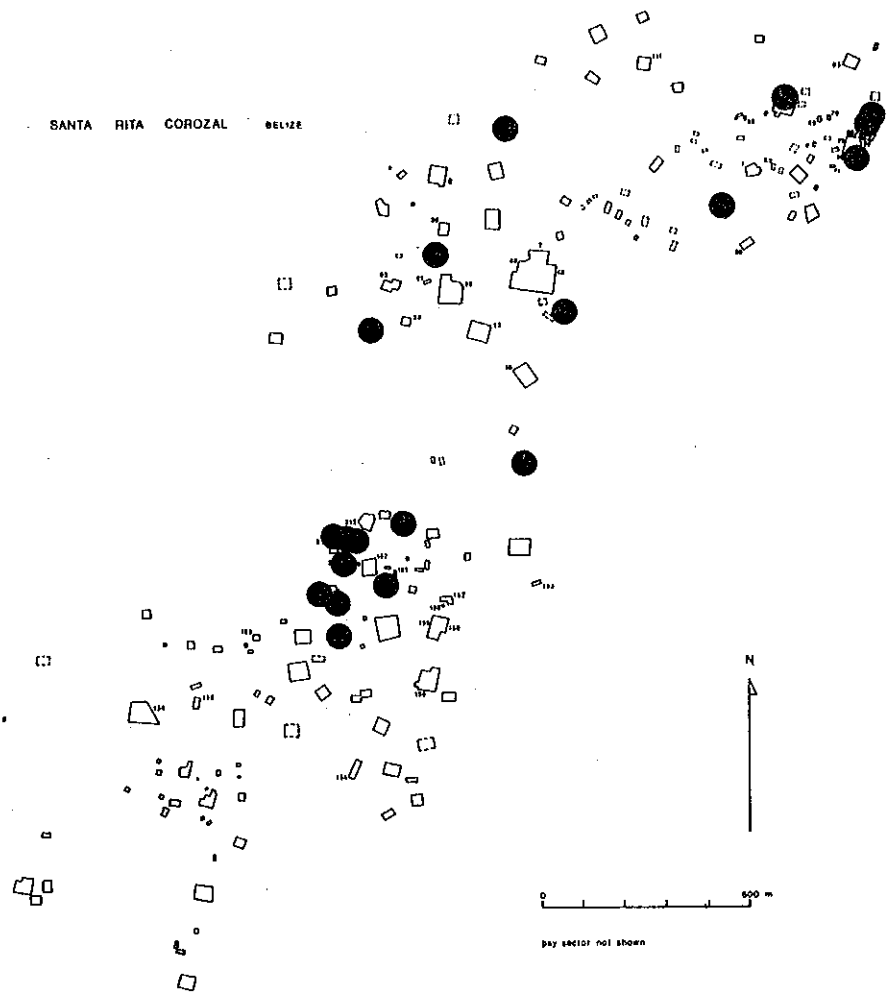


Fig. 8.2. Distribution of Postclassic caches at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize.

No group termed "low-status" contains elaborate multiple-room constructions. None of these constructions are built upon a contemporary platform. When any of these constructions rests on a raised platform, the platform was invariably constructed at a much earlier date and only subsequently reused for Postclassic residence. Interestingly, none of the low-status constructions contains ritual items in the form of caches or paired incense burners. Additionally, these groups lack not only the greater number of other artifactual associations found in the high or middle categories, but also complete categories of artifacts such as obsidian arrowpoints or potlids. Presumed lower-status housing is distributed throughout the site and

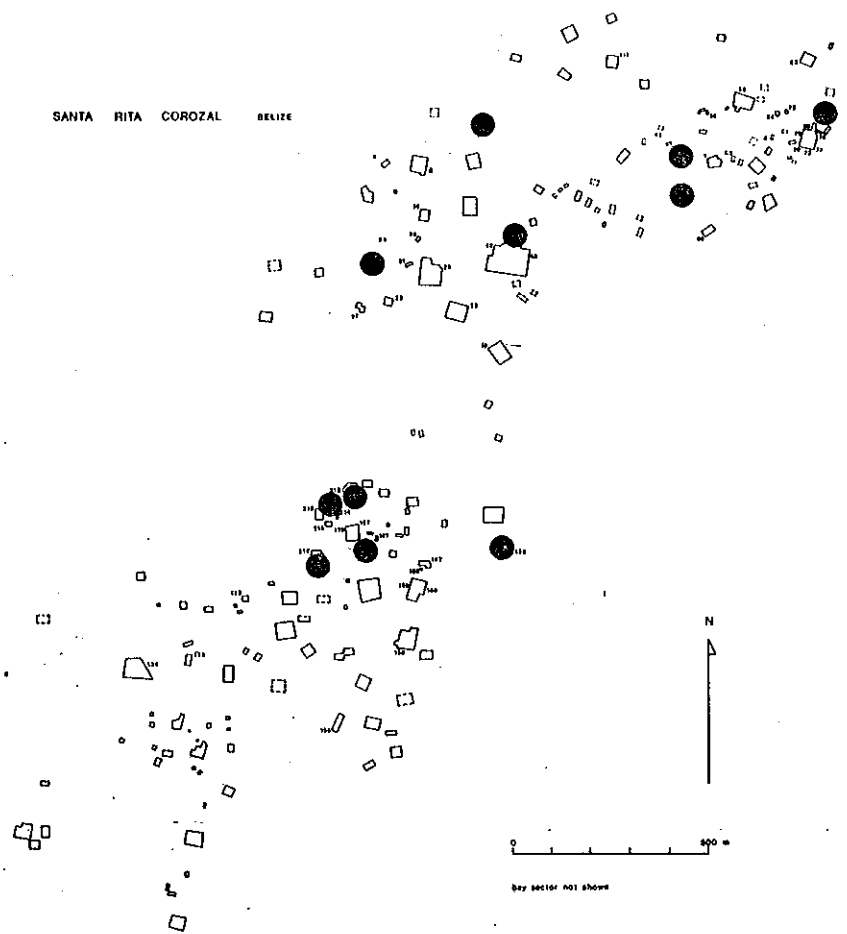


Fig. 8.3. Distribution of paired and reconstructible censers at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize.

not solely at its edges; it often exists directly adjacent to what are inferred to have been nonresidential ritual structures.

Even though either extreme in housing is archaeologically evident, the dividing line between the high- and low-status residential areas is sometimes quite hazy. Middle-range residential areas have been tentatively identified based on the distribution of artifacts and/or the labor investment in architecture. Middle-status groups at Santa Rita Corozal did not have the association with ritual materials seen in the highest-status residences. Importantly, however, middle-status residence groups did share certain artifactual types—such as obsidian points, pot-lids, and large numbers of ceramic beads—with high-status groups. However, burials and architecture tended

to be less elaborate than those found in high-status groups, but more elaborate than in low-status groups. Presently, middle-status groups have been identified from one portion of the site only, in an area surrounded by both higher- and lower-status residence categories.

Elaborate Postclassic burials at Santa Rita Corozal were limited in their occurrences, but were found throughout the site. Contrary to statements by Landa (Tozzer 1941:130-31), there is no indication that elites were cremated. At Santa Rita Corozal, important individuals were generally buried in a flexed, seated-upright position. In partial confirmation of Landa's other suggestions, however, certain of these individuals had their grave sites marked by small stone shrines. High-status burials have been identified primarily on the basis of location, grave type, and associated items. An interesting consideration, however, is the fact that variation occurs in burial practices even within a single construction or group; if one can assume that contemporary burials from these contexts were likely to be of individuals related along kin lines, then this reinforces the concept that there can be no simple correlation of burial items with ascribed status. Imported objects, such as jadeite and metal, were also found in burials in different sectors of the site, often at some distance from the presumed epicenter of Santa Rita Corozal. The distribution of metal objects in particular may be significant, given their explicit association with the elite in their area of origin (Noguera 1971:260, 267; Pollard 1987:744). Presumed ritual symbols of power, such as stingray spines (cf. D. Chase 1991), were extremely limited in their distribution, but were found only in association with apparently high-status residences or nonresidential ritual structures. They were not found in any proximity to the presumed central area of the Postclassic occupation as defined by the muraled Structure 1 (Gann 1900).

The remains of Postclassic ritual activity are distributed throughout Santa Rita Corozal, albeit in a patterned way. Censers were deposited within structures in paired sets and may have played a part in katun ceremonies (D. Chase 1985c). Ceramic figure caches in particular have numbers and kinds of items that appear to be associated with specific areas of the site. I have previously suggested that these deposits are patterned in such a way as to indicate their function as integrative units within the site with regard to ceremonies pertaining to the completion of the ceremonial round during the unlucky five days of the Uayeb (D. Chase 1985b, 1988). The effigy caches and paired censers were found in both high-status residential groups and nonresidential ritual and/or administrative buildings. Based on such a distribution, it is evident that the high-status individuals at Santa Rita Corozal were intimately involved in both the religious and secular realms.

The archaeological investigations at Santa Rita Corozal have provided a body of interesting data with regard to Postclassic elites. While it is possible to identify either end of the social spectrum in terms of their living areas

and burials, archaeological evidence does not provide the clear-cut divisions into groups that would be expected following the traditional two-group social model of nobles and commoners. Instead, the archaeology indicates the existence of gradations in status; certain residential groups at the site are intermediate in terms of architecture, artifacts, and burials. These may represent the ethnohistorically recorded "medium men," the *azmen uinic* mentioned by R. L. Roys (1943:34) and found in the Motul dictionary (Martínez Hernández 1929:69) or possibly those of "highest esteem" described by Landa (Tozzer 1941:62, 130-31).

Other common assumptions that have been made about the Postclassic Maya do not hold for Santa Rita Corozal. Ritual activity is not associated with all households; paired censers and caches occur only with the elite residential areas or in separate nonresidential ritual structures. These buildings and areas are distributed more or less evenly at the site, although there are spatial variations in the kinds of effigy figures included in caches. Thus, investigations support the idea of elite associations with religion (cf. Freidel and Sabloff 1984:184), but not the common assumption that ritual activity had become completely individualized (cf. Proskouriakoff 1962:428; Thompson 1970:187-91; Rathje 1975:427-30). Finally, distributions of residences and burials at Santa Rita Corozal do not support the existence of any form of concentric model of site organization. The presumed elite households and interments are located at the limits of the Late Postclassic occupation, and differing status households are instead spatially mixed.

Archaeology and Elites: Mayapan

The archaeological site of Mayapan provides further information on the Maya elite and their spatial distribution. Archaeological investigations at Mayapan have been taken directly to support ethnohistoric statements of Maya society (Pollock et al. 1962; Folan et al. 1983). However, a brief review of the documentation for Mayapan (Pollock et al. 1962; R. Smith 1971) suggests that alternative interpretations are both possible and appropriate. Specifically, even though the concentric model was described as characterizing Mayapan in the ethnohistory, the archaeology at Mayapan suggests a nonfit with such a model of site organization based on a number of criteria.

Robert E. Smith (1971:vol. 2, table 13) has defined a series of excavated structures as being "elaborate residences," most of which had multiple rooms and benches and a good number of which had beam and masonry construction. One assumption might be that these structures, by virtue of the extra effort that went into their construction, were elite residences. If one plots the distribution of Smith's elaborate residences on a map of Mayapan (fig. 8.4), it becomes quite evident that they were not located in any proximity to the central area. The majority were located midway between the central precinct and the outlying wall. Importantly, it must be noted that the Carnegie Institution focused its investigations predominantly on

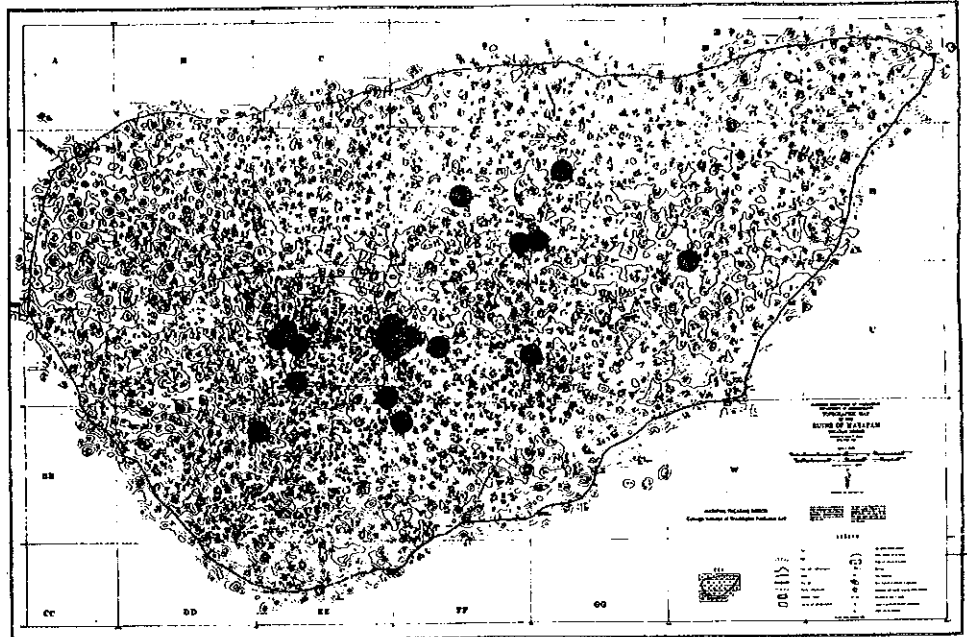


Fig. 8.4. Distribution of elaborate residences at Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico.

the central area of the site; thus, while an increased number of elaborate residences would undoubtedly be defined with more excavation, any further archaeological work at Mayapan is unlikely to decrease the associations of these elaborate residences with noncentral locations. Even if one were to argue that the centrally located colonnaded halls were residences—a stance that could be difficult to sustain—Smith's elaborate residences would minimally represent living areas occupied by those of "high esteem," if not "noble," status and would *not* be located in a concentric fashion around Mayapan's central area.

Likewise, burial chambers and contents suggest other interesting facts. Crypts and burial vaults (empty crypts or tombs), both presumably indicative of relatively high status based upon the increased effort required to create them, were not limited to the site center or even to the area in immediate proximity to it, but were generally located at some distance away (fig. 8.5). High-status interments also occurred in outlying buildings and groups that were not associated with Smith's "elaborate residences." Luxury items within Mayapan's interments—specifically jadeite and metal—were limited neither to burials in the central area nor even to burials within the limits of Mayapan's wall. Metal objects that must have in some way been within the purview of the elite were, in fact, primarily found in areas away from the site center.

Ceremonial buildings and special activities that involved caching practices did appear to aggregate in the center of Mayapan. Even here, however, there is no exact correspondence. Although the majority of ceremo-

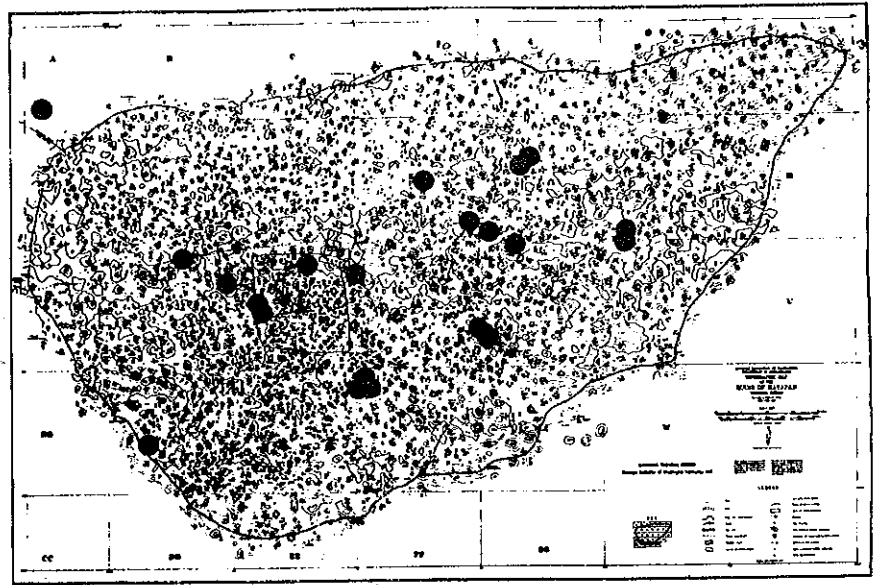


Fig. 8.5. Distribution of burial vaults and crypts at Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico.

nial architecture at Mayapan was located within or relatively close to the central precinct, there were notable exceptions. Groups within the overall walled area with ritual constructions that were not centrally located specifically include the group containing Str. H13. Unlike the situation at Santa Rita Corozal—and contrary to assertions by W. L. Rathje (1975:429) about the nonconcentrated nature of Mayapan's Postclassic caches—caches at Mayapan were found clustered in proximity to the central area of the site (fig. 8.6). This distribution reinforces the idea of Mayapan's central area having been an administrative and ceremonial precinct. However, this distribution does not in any way prove the concentric model, for such a model is more correctly assessed based on the locations of residential areas of differing status—and, at Mayapan, these do *not* accord well with Landa's model.

Thus, the archaeological picture at Mayapan does not support a strict concentric model of spatial layout. Those that would argue concentricity by suggesting that the entire population within the site wall was elite are also clearly incorrect—for a number of reasons. The limited work undertaken outside the wall surrounding Mayapan shows indications of elaborate architecture and imported artifacts of the same kind found within the wall. Additionally, if one accepts Landa's depiction of Mayapan, the elite would have had to have been located in a smaller walled area encompassing one-eighth of a league (Tozzer 1941:24) rather than having been dispersed throughout the larger walled area of the site (cf. *Relaciones de Yucatán 1898-1900*:vol. 1, 254; Tozzer 1941:note 131). The distribution of constructions at Mayapan suggests that the heads of the various political units re-

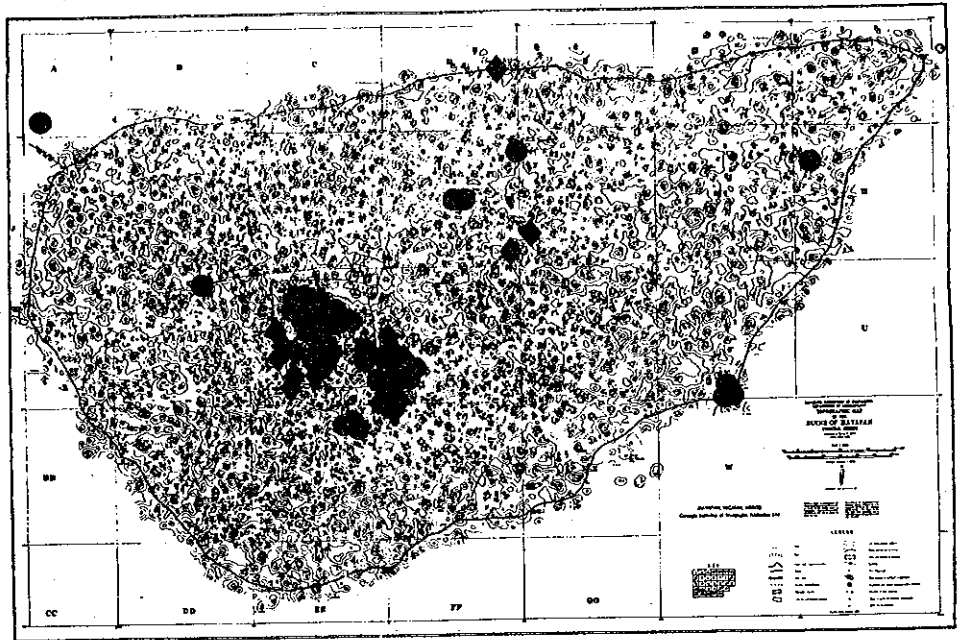


Fig. 8.6. Distribution of Postclassic caches at Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico: diamond = effigy cache; circle = non-effigy cache.

ported to have lived at Mayapan as part of the *mul tepal* or joint government would have had residences well integrated within the overall population (while colonnaded halls may have served as their titular administrative/ritual buildings).

Maya Elites: Back to the Classic

A strict interpretation of the concentric model does not fit the Postclassic sites of Santa Rita Corozal or Mayapan. This does not mean that certain elite might not be located in central areas or that an administrative-ceremonial precinct might not have existed. It does, however, imply that residences and statuses are mixed beyond the central precinct. Should the discrepancy between ethnohistory and archaeology be surprising? Yes and no. There is a description of Mayapan in these historic materials, but it was made when the site was no longer occupied. The concentric description applied to this abandoned site also may have originated outside of the Maya area (D. Chase 1986:363). There is other ethnohistoric information, often overlooked, that would support an alternative to the concentric model, for Roys (1943:63, 1957:7; see also Tozzer 1941:note 292) noted the existence of site sectors or barrios—something inconsistent with the strict concentric model. These divisions of the town or *cuchteel* had a leader or *ah cuch cab*, and residence in each of these wards was not limited to a single lineage. While the sector or ward model is not as well described as Landa's concentric

model, it clearly suggests a more mixed residential arrangement. It also accords well with models of site organization used in other areas of Mesoamerica (Calnek 1972, 1976; Michels 1977). What is surprising in all of this is not really that differences exist between archaeology and ethnohistory, but rather the general and uncritical archaeological acceptance of a single untested model for Maya spatial organization.

While this conclusion may be interpreted as contradictory to certain ethnohistoric information, it should not be surprising given the era and circumstances in which the information was recorded. Such a concentric town plan may have formed an ideal form of site layout, but it is not congruent with the complexity generally found in the archaeology of the ancient Maya. If the generally held views of Maya society that have been derived from ethnohistory do not fit the Postclassic period archaeological data, there is no reason to assume that these same models should apply to the earlier Classic period.

It has generally been assumed that the historically documented terms for specific individuals and different offices hold for the Postclassic. There is no internal mechanism for testing them, so it is the most elaborate burials or residences that are usually correlated with *halach uinics* or *batabs*. Although we know many of the terms used for specific individuals and their offices during the contact era (see above), only limited attempts have been made to correlate these with titles found in hieroglyphic texts. There has as yet been little overlap noted between historic and Classic period texts with the exception of the word *ahau* or lord; most readings are composites from languages other than the most appropriate lowland choices—Yucatec or Chol (for example, Lounsbury 1973, who uses Quiche). The degree of continuity present in titles has clear implications for the nature of any change in sociopolitical organization and should form a basis for future work. At present, however, there is a recognized general lack of agreement between the contact era ethnohistory and the Classic period epigraphy, suggesting both that these historic sources should not be directly applied to earlier eras and that there may have been titular changes in Maya society between the Classic and Postclassic periods.

Interestingly, as shown above, the Postclassic archaeological distribution of ritual containers (incense burners and cache figures/figurines) demonstrates that they were controlled by the individuals of highest status at Santa Rita Corozal and presumably at Mayapan as well. Individuals of middle and lower status did not have access to cache vessels and incense burners in residential contexts in Postclassic society. The data, in fact, contradict ethnohistorically based assertions that all contact period Maya practiced idol worship in the privacy of their homes (cf. Thompson 1970:188).

These same data also shed some light on changes between Classic and Postclassic religion. For Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal, all ritual containers were restricted to high-status contexts and form a single analytic subas-

semblage. For Classic era Caracol, two distinct subassemblages of containers coexist and are generally found in two very different contexts (A. Chase and D. Chase in press a). One kind of cache vessel and one kind of incense burner are found in the epicentral administrative/ritual buildings of the site, while a different subassemblage is found in the residential settlement outside of the epicenter. While elements of the epicentral ritual container subassemblage may occasionally occur in the outlying area—presumably in elite contexts—the nonepicentral ritual container subassemblage generally does not occur in the site center during the Classic period. Thus, in contrast to the Postclassic era, it would appear that middle- and low-status groups at Classic Caracol had access to a ritual container subassemblage of their own. A further difference exists between Classic and Postclassic ritual items; the symbolic system used in Postclassic caches is far less abstract than that of Classic caches and would be more easily recognizable to the population at large (D. Chase 1988).

Looking at the archaeological differences between the Classic and Postclassic, it would appear that there was high-status or elite control of religion and religious ceremonies during the Postclassic era, but that religion was far more popularized than in the preceding Classic period (D. Chase 1988, 1991). Therefore, it would appear that the "Classic Maya collapse" marked a religious transformation of Maya society. During the Late Classic era, certain religious ceremonies were carried out in the hearts of Maya centers, but were presumably restricted to high-status or elite participation and were independent of the remainder of the population; members of the local nonelite populace carried out their own ceremonies with their own special containers in their own residential groups. During the Postclassic era, the nonelite apparently did not carry out similar personal ceremonies. Rather, they appear to have been integrated into a single religious complex characterized by more public ceremonies controlled and carried out by the Postclassic elite.

Concluding Statements

Ethnohistory is useful, but it must be critically compared and contrasted with other data—particularly archaeological—when dealing with such difficult topics as social or site organization. Archaeological evidence from Santa Rita Corozal and Mayapan indicates that the concentric model for site organization derived from Landa cannot be strictly applied to either of these Postclassic sites. Historic period information about the structure of Maya society also hits snags in archaeological verification. There are undoubtedly multiple problems at work here—particularly the difficulty of associating status with material remains and the possibility that the ideal social categories did not correlate with actual practice and real divisions. Regardless of what is ethnohistorically recorded, it is evident from the archae-

ological data that material associations do *not* reflect clear-cut divisions into two or three social groups—nobles, commoners, and slaves.

These findings have two concrete repercussions for earlier reconstructions of Maya society. First, given this much-changed perspective on the previously misunderstood Postclassic Maya, it is evident that elite distributions at Classic period sites must be reevaluated—as must the nature of the changes associated with the “Classic Maya collapse.” Second, archaeology and ethnohistory must be critically conjoined to portray Maya society anew. Any attempt blindly to impose ethnohistoric categories on the archaeological data ignores the complexity seen in these data and reflects a naiveté about the use of contact era sources.

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