
2 **SYMBOLIC EGALITARIANISM AND HOMOGENIZED DISTRIBUTIONS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD AT CARACOL, BELIZE: METHOD, THEORY, AND COMPLEXITY**

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Archaeological data are frequently used to assess past social, political, economic, and religious organizations in human society. Just how complex or simple these past systems are interpreted to be, however, can be influenced by a host of factors that involve the theoretical background of the investigator, the methodology applied to archaeological data, and epistemology and hermeneutics. Homogenized distributions should not be automatically correlated with simplicity; likewise, differentiated distributions may not always be correlated with complexity. Through focusing on archaeological data from Caracol, Belize, this paper seeks to illustrate the complications of making attributions of complexity to an archaeological database. In particular, the concept of symbolic egalitarianism is used to show how homogenized distributions can represent great archaeological complexity.

Regardless of whether the approach is evolutionary, typological, cultural historical, processual, or post-processual, discussions of complexity in the archaeological record tend to focus largely on the development of an increasingly “complex and unequal world” that are both “critical problems in the world today” (Chapman 2003:4, 7). That not all differentiation is hierarchical is evident in literature that focuses on the development of networks and heterarchy (Crumley 1995). Just as there are aspects of complex society that lead to differentiation and inequality, there are also forces and/or mechanisms that may lead to greater homogeneity. One contemporary homogenizing phenomenon is globalization (Chapman 2003:2). In fact, in the modern world a frequent source of discussion is the relationship between local and global identity (Appadurai 2001). Archaeologists have long been aware of similar processes in the ancient past, having focused on homogenizing mechanisms such as acculturation and diffusion early in the theoretical history of the discipline (e.g. Wauchope et al. 1956). However, for a variety of reasons, homogenizing mechanisms have not been well integrated with discussions of archaeological complexity.

In this paper, we seek to explore one possible reason for less clear-cut stratification in the archaeological record, specifically the management strategies related to a phenomenon we have previously described as symbolic egalitarianism (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006; A.

Chase and D. Chase 2005a). Initially defined by Pfeffer (1994) in a completely different frame of reference as one of 13 key people management techniques that can provide competitive advantage for organizations and companies, the term has clear applicability to other social and political situations that can be documented in the archaeological record.

The Archaeological Recognition of Complexity

A major impediment for discussions of the development of complex society is the interpretation of the archaeological record. Even a simple definition of complexity is complicated by general theory, available data, and perception. Following Stewart (2001:324), “complexity is a matter of perspective or framing (which in our case relates to human intention and interests), level of detail (fine or coarse graining), and the result of perceiving through observation.” Thus, while all scholars may have a sense of what constitutes complexity, how it is explored and explained in the archaeological record may differ based on an individual researcher’s background and perceptions.

Several years ago Cowgill (1989) commented on issues surrounding the recognition of diversity in the archaeological record, a necessary building block in any consideration of complexity. Cowgill (1989:135) noted that while archaeological data sets were investigated for diversity and then

related to ancient behaviors, far richer interpretations would result if discussions of diversity included considerations of “richness” (number of categories present), “evenness” (extent to which categories are represented by similar number of objects), “range” (amount of difference between the most different categories), “standardization” (low variation between categories), and “uniformity of standardization” (the extent to which some categories are more standardized than others). Thus, Cowgill’s real focus was the nature and interpretation of artifactual distributions in the archaeological record.

Much of our archaeological understanding of complexity has been framed through analytic approaches that are premised on normative considerations of culture. Archaeologists generally have focused more on similarities than on differences in an attempt to define cultural units; thus, considerations of kinds of diversity are often given short shrift. In our analytic models, uniform similarities in a given archaeological distribution generally are correlated with a lack of complexity, while any variability found in the archaeological record usually is framed in terms of the institutionalization of ancient social inequality. Thus, heterogeneous distributions of archaeological materials are often viewed as a sign of diverse behaviors and corresponding social complexity (or wealth: e.g., Smith 1987), while homogeneous distributions are considered to represent egalitarian behaviors and less complex societies (see also D. Chase and A. Chase 1992:313).

While the presence of stratification is cited as a hallmark of complexity, the determination of clear distinctions among potential or presumed social strata is a difficult, if not impossible, task. In some cases, the lack of distinct divisions or strata may be indicative of less complex “non-state” societies. Potentially muddying the discussion, however, are models of emerging complexity for the Formative era based on preconceived inequalities (Clark and Blake 1994), even when supporting archaeological data suggests a “lack of evidence from artifact distributions for economic differences between high- and low-status households” as in the case of Paso de

Amada (Lesure and Blake 2002:20). This lack of clear-cut distinctions in artifact distributions among different status households is an issue not confined to Formative Period Mesoamerica. Similar gradations also appear throughout the Classic and Postclassic Periods in both the Maya Lowlands and the Mexican Highlands, presumably representing a completely different and more complex situation. In truth, in most of Mesoamerica, a lack of clear-cut artifactual distinctions relating to social class can be found for many time periods (D. Chase and A. Chase 1992:313). Where these occur, archaeologists have focused on developing a variety of analytical techniques to aid in differentiating among material culture remains. For Teotihuacan, George Cowgill (1992) used gradations in archaeological data to segregate the site’s inhabitants into seven levels that he then grouped into three larger social classes. The newer excavations of obviously important burials in the Temple of the Moon at Teotihuacan do little to alleviate difficulties in defining social gradations based on artifacts in other than a ritual realm (Sugiyama and Lopez 2007). Faced with a similar dilemma at Caracol, Belize, we have focused on identifying the mechanisms leading to broader shared social and ritual archaeological material culture during the Late Classic Period, suggesting that these patterns are indicative of a purposeful shared identity (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004).

The Distributional Approach and Symbolic Egalitarianism

Two intertwined factors underlying the homogenizing phenomenon found interspersed throughout Mesoamerican prehistory are of particular significance in this paper: the first is economic, presumably related to the distribution of goods; and, the second is socio-political, likely related to issues of societal management.

Ken Hirth (1998) used a distributional approach to explain why certain imported artifacts were relatively evenly distributed among households of different statuses at Xochicalco, Mexico - providing a usable methodology for identifying markets in the archaeological record. The material culture - obsidian and imported decorated ceramics - had

been acquired through market exchanges which were not bounded by social rank. Hirth carefully positioned his distributional approach in terms of what was known of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican economic patterns to demonstrate that market exchange was in fact taking place, at the same time explaining why homogenized distributions of certain artifactual classes occurred.

At Caracol, Belize, a similar homogenizing trend is in evidence among the site's households. Like Xochicalco, the items include imported obsidian and decorated ceramics, including polychrome vases. But, unlike Xochicalco, the material culture similarities also extend into the ritual realm.

We have used the term symbolic egalitarianism to describe aspects of Late Classic Caracol (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006: 178-179, 180-182, 185; A. Chase and D. Chase 2005a). We believe that this symbolic egalitarianism was an intentional strategy employed by the ruling group or bureaucracy at Caracol during this time. This strategy - identified particularly with shared ritual identity, but also apparent in other material aspects of Caracol - served to integrate Late Classic Caracol far better than following strategies of differentiation. In fact, the switch away from symbolic egalitarianism may be seen as a key underlying factor in the Terminal Classic Maya collapse at this site.

The identification of factors such as symbolic egalitarianism that point to homogenizing versus differentiating mechanisms are important in discussions of complexity precisely because they provide alternative interpretations for similar material cultural patterning and phenomena, thus requiring more detailed multifaceted analysis that combines contextual and frame analysis to discern meaning from the archaeological record.

Frame Analysis and Symbolic Egalitarianism

In a paper focusing on the Maya Collapse (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006), we suggested the utility of viewing the ancient Maya past through frame analysis. Using four well-defined frames (Figure 1) - structural, human resource, political, and economic - we stressed the holistic potential of a multiple frame

analysis in viewing past, as well as contemporary, organizations. Following Bolman and Deal (1997:15), we stressed the fact that "no frame is 'the' frame, rather each constitutes one 'image of reality'" (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006:173). Thus, the structural frame defines the different units of the organization - both lateral (heterarchy) and vertical (hierarchy) (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006:173-175). The human resource frame focuses on the relationships between people and organizations with human resource-focused organizations providing greater individual control and democracy as well as the sharing of rewards for successful efforts (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006:175). The political frame concentrates on the "different interest groups that compete for power and resources" (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006: 175) as well as on the divergences and partnerships among these groups. And, the symbolic frame considers the role of symbols, metaphors, ceremonies, and traditions (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006: 175). We argue here, as well as in the earlier paper, that symbolic egalitarianism was a key aspect of the human resource and symbolic frames of Late Classic Caracol organization, and that only multi-frame analysis places the rise, fall, and regeneration of the Classic Maya into full perspective.

The concept of symbolic egalitarianism is one of a series of management organizational tools proposed as a source of competitive success by Jefferey Pfeffer (1994). The term implies the use of symbols to minimize differences and increase cooperation and collaboration among different people working towards a common purpose. Thus, organizations seeking to decentralize decision-making and elicit "employee commitment and cooperation" achieve their competitive advantage through minimizing symbolic separation of organizational members (Pfeffer 1991:48). These symbols are generally outwardly visible signs such as dress, insignia, or the use of physical space. In the modern corporate world these outwardly visible signs may include consistent dress codes, a common cafeteria, and/or constant office arrangements - all of which may increase cooperation and decrease obvious divisions. In archaeological contexts, the material culture signs of symbolic

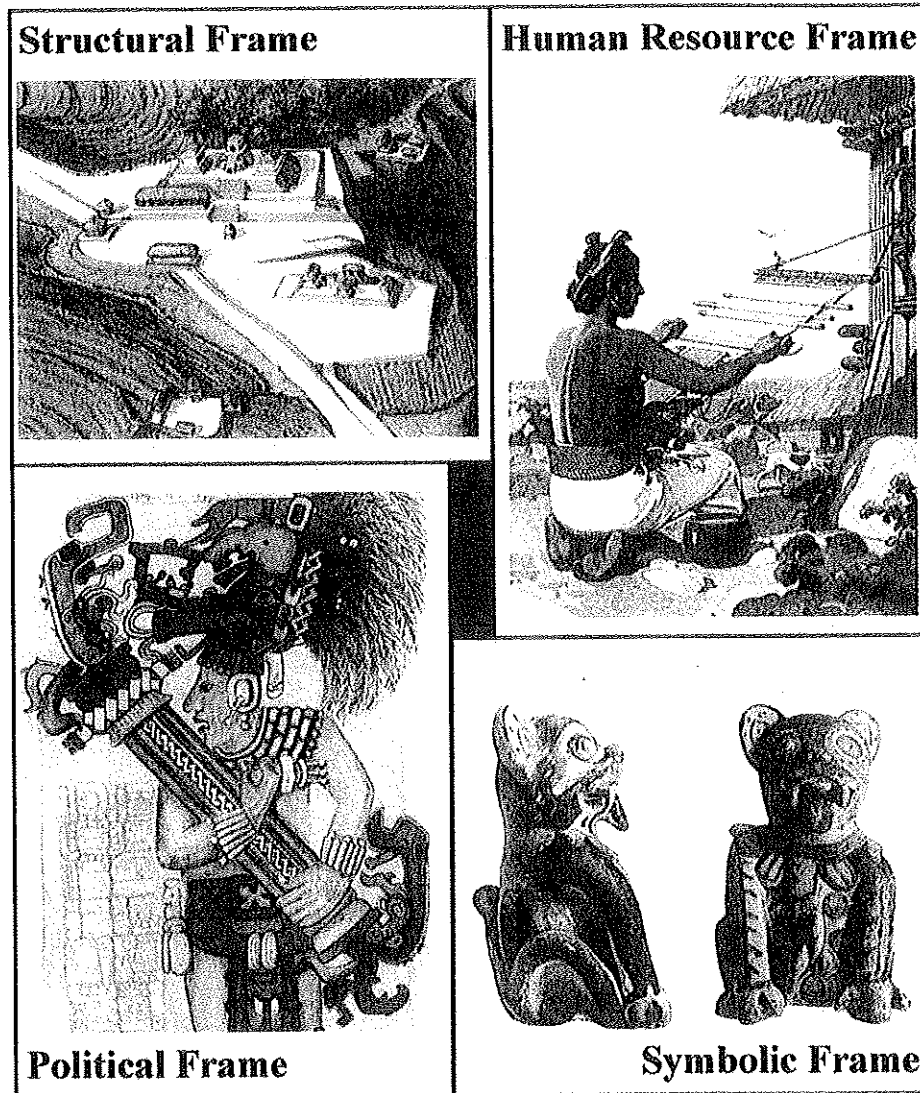


Figure 1. Organizational frames useful for analyzing change within ancient Maya society (after D. Chase and A. Chase 2006:174).

egalitarianism might go well beyond work-place symbolism to include ritual and household identities and commonalities. We believe that it is precisely this sort of symbolic egalitarianism that led to Late Classic Caracol's successes, and, conversely that the retreat from symbolic egalitarianism was directly related to the decline of the subsequent Terminal Classic polity.

Complexity, Symbolic Egalitarianism, and Archaeology at Caracol Belize

The material signs of symbolic egalitarianism are found throughout the archaeological record of the Late Classic Period at Caracol, Belize. They are evident in the fairly

uniform distribution of material remains at the site, a number of which are assumed to be status markers elsewhere in the Maya lowlands. They also are evident in the widely shared ritual containers and features that are found in the majority of Caracol's residential groups. For example, by the Late Classic Period, some 80% of Caracol's residential groups were organized with an east-structure focus (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004); this compares to 15% of Tikal's contemporary residential groups that evince this focus (Becker 2003:261). For Caracol it can be estimated that over 7,000 residential groups had an eastern structure that served a mortuary and

ritual focus, usually housing one or more tombs along with other burials.

The ubiquity of tombs recorded in the residential groups at Caracol resulted in the rejection of the pervasive definition of a Maya tomb as “an elite interment” (Loten and Pendergast 1984:9). Tombs are infrequent in the Tikal settlement area (Becker and Jones 1999) and at many other lowland Maya sites. Almost half of the recovered burials at Caracol, including most residential tombs, contained multiple individuals (D. Chase 1994, 1998; D. Chase and A. Chase 1996, 2003). This focus on multiple individuals does not appear to be as prominent elsewhere in the Maya lowlands (Welsh 1988). At Caracol, the prevalence of multiple bodies in single interments may be related to group definition and corporate land-holding rights. Regardless, the nearly universal mortuary practices at Caracol comprise a significant aspect of symbolic egalitarianism.

Modification of teeth was also fairly common at the site: filing of teeth occurred in 26% of the recovered interments; 22% of the interments (presently some 65 burials) contained teeth inlaid with jadeite or hematite (D. Chase 1994:131). Put another way, 59% of the excavated groups that produced burials contained at least one individual with filed teeth and 45% of such groups contained one or more individuals with inlaid teeth. These percentages are far higher than others reported elsewhere in the Maya lowlands. Of the 214 burials excavated by the original Tikal Project at Tikal, inlaid teeth were rare, occurring only in 6 burials, and filed teeth only occurred in 11 burials (Becker 1973:401). Significantly, simple presence or absence of dental modification at Caracol cannot be correlated with status.

The material items that were placed in the residential interments also indicate a widespread distribution and included polychrome vessels (and cylinder vases). These polychrome vessels occur in residential groups in the same proportion that they are found in group interments in the site epicenter. Other researchers have suggested that cylinder vases served as markers of elite status (Reents-Budet 1994), but their contextual situation at Caracol dictates otherwise. We believe that such ceramic forms may have been readily available

to the full social spectrum in Caracol’s markets (A. Chase and D. Chase 2008). Thus, the relative homogeneity in their distribution was likely due to both sociopolitical and economic factors.

Ritual ceramic containers are also widely distributed at Caracol, occurring both in elite residential units in the site epicenter and throughout the site’s settlement. Specially-made

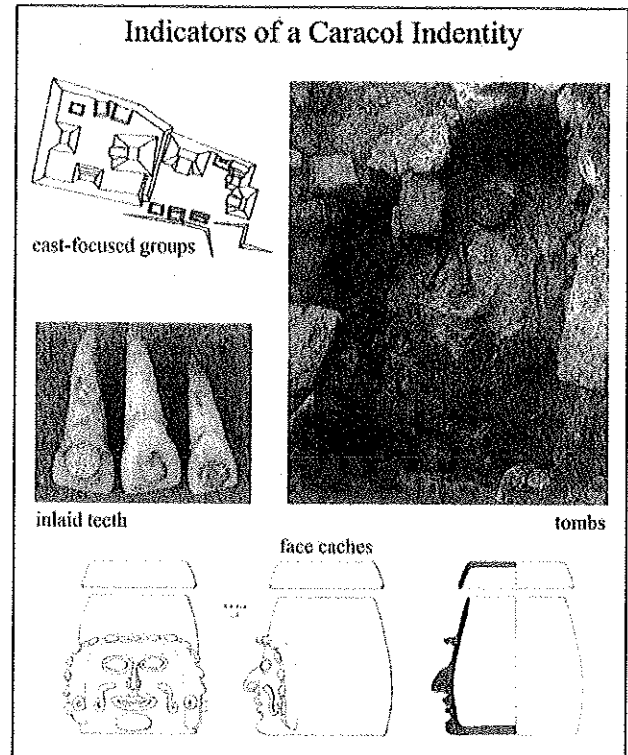


Figure 2. Archaeological indicators of a common social identity at Caracol that forms the basis for the site’s Late Classic symbolic egalitarianism (after D. Chase and A. Chase 2004:140).

cache vessels, that are very standardized in terms of their paste, sizes, and forms, are found in the majority of excavated residential groups. In general, two kinds of caches vessels occur, either small lip-to-lip vessels containing human fingers (if anything) or empty lidded barrels, usually with an exteriorly modeled face, representing a human or bird. These caches were commonly positioned on the axes of the eastern mortuary buildings in residential groups (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Similar caches at other sites are almost non-existent in the archaeological literature. Also present in some

residential groups are modeled incensarios. These occur infrequently in Late Classic tombs and late varieties are found in association with the stairways of eastern buildings. The incensarios do not follow the predicted epicentral correlation suggested by Rice (1999) in her comparative study of Maya incense burners. The widespread use of all of these ritual objects is key to the previously defined Caracol identity and likewise comprises an excellent example of symbolic egalitarianism. Differences between high and low status caches are not outwardly visible, but instead are only apparent when cache contents are revealed.

Thus, a broad spectrum of artifacts and features appear as homogenized archaeological signatures within the site's residential groups during the Late Classic Period. We have previously linked the widespread distribution of these items to the appearance of a social identity (Figure 2) following the successful warfare carried out by Caracol at the beginning of the Late Classic Period (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996). Some of these successful war campaigns were recorded in the site's epigraphic record, beginning with the successful defeat of Tikal, Guatemala in A.D. 562 and then continuing with the calculated incorporation of Naranjo as an outlier of the Caracol polity from A.D. 631 through A.D. 680 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998; D. Chase and A. Chase 2002, 2008).

The archaeological record indicates that the population of Caracol grew rapidly at the end of the sixth century (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989) and that the inner-ring termini plazas were constructed at the very beginning of the seventh century (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001) as a means of providing controlled access to commodities. This growth and, presumably, an influx of population can be correlated with the appearance of the homogenizing tendencies that start to become visible in Caracol's archaeological record at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh century. Thus, we feel that socio-political control of Caracol's burgeoning population was maintained by the elite through conscious fostering of symbolic egalitarianism in the distribution of social and religious items and features that were restricted in their distribution at other Maya polities. The end result of this

purposefully fostered symbolic egalitarianism was Caracol's successful nation-building of an inclusive population that shared in the prosperity achieved through successful warfare for most of the Late Classic Period. Thus, there were two processes or management techniques being employed at the same time – economic control of distribution and symbolic egalitarianism – and the combined impact of these two forces resulted in the relatively homogeneous signature that we see in the archaeological record.

But why is this categorized as symbolic egalitarianism and not simply as egalitarianism? It is "symbolic" because other data indicate that status differences continued to exist and that the elite had access to some – or at least more – items not overtly available to the rest of the Late Classic population. The Late Classic elite may have shared burial and ritual practices with the bulk of the population. They may have even worn similar clothing and shared access with the general population to the vast majority of material items that were available at the site. Yet, there were differences in material remains. The Caracol elite often maintained slightly larger plazuela areas; the interior contents of caches sometimes varied; and, larger numbers of vessels might have been associated with each elite individual in an interment. However, the sharing of symbols across socio-economic levels is unmistakable. That stratification was in fact present is most clearly confirmed by dietary analysis. Stable isotope analysis indicates that the elite had far greater access to maize and meat than did the rest of the population (elsewhere referred to as the "palace diet;" A. Chase et al. 2001). In fact, diet is the one area that can be used to see clear-cut variability within the Late Classic population of Caracol. Individuals living in neighboring groups often had very different diets. And, individuals living closest to the epicenter and termini areas, but not physically within these venues often had the worst diets found in the city. Elsewhere we have correlated the patterning seen in Caracol's diets to well-known urban models, explainable in terms of workforce and economics (A. Chase and D. Chase 2007a).

The use of symbolic egalitarianism by the Late Classic population at Caracol surely eased some of the social tension that normally

would be found in a large metropolitan population. It is evident from the archaeological record that the bulk of Caracol's Late Classic population enjoyed great prosperity. This is seen in the artifactual distributions and is confirmed in the health exhibited in the site's mortuary remains (D. Chase 1994). However, the strategy of emphasizing symbolic egalitarianism also appears to have incorporated a lessened focus on dynastic rulership in the later part of the Late Classic era at Caracol. Between AD 650 and AD 750 Caracol reached and maintained its maximum population; however, the site's monument record is relatively silent during this time. It is suspected that Maya bureaucrats were overseeing the functioning of a system that incorporated over 115,000 people at the site. These leaders oversaw the continued expansion of the site's agricultural terracing and also raised and rebuilt the summit of Caana sometime after AD 680. Thus, the organizational elite of the site surely prospered with the rest of the population. However, the history and physical symbols of dynastic rulership were not flaunted as they were before and after the late Late Classic Period. Any Late Classic stone monuments were constrained to the site's western plaza and relevant texts were recorded only in plaster on the cornices of buildings housed within more private elite complexes.

Managerial strategies and dynastic restraint changed, however, sometime immediately preceding AD 790. Caracol's elite re-established their visible presence at the site with a flourish by placing a host of carved monuments in the B Group. That this was a purposeful strategy, much like symbolic egalitarianism had been two centuries earlier, can be seen through the conscious use of specific iconography that included a full-stela vision serpent set in front of the eastern building and the record of the establishment of the Terminal Classic rulership in monuments set in the B Group ballcourt, a liminal location important for dynastic matters. The impact of this dynastic reassertion was presumably the beginning of the end of symbolic egalitarianism - for a hundred years later the last material items found on the floors of Caracol's epicentral palaces were distinct from those available to the

majority of the population (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004, 2005b, 2007b). Long distance trade items were kept within elite purview. And, in a clear reversal of earlier practices, two different sets of status-linked ceramic subcomplexes were used by the site's latest inhabitants, effectively differentiating the elite from the remainder of the population.

Conclusion

What can be seen in the archaeological record of Caracol are shifting strategies related to differentiation and homogenization. The most elaborate, labor intensive interments from the site are those that date from the Early Classic Period. The elite burials from this time span stress differentiation through both the size of the chambers and the elaborate items included. However, the tenor of elite burials shifted in the early part of the Late Classic Period. Thus, while Late Classic chambers could still be sizeable, the burial goods included within the tombs were more widely available to others and were not as ostentatious as those included in earlier offerings. Such homogenizing practices would have been in keeping with the tenets of symbolic egalitarianism.

Based on the differentiation that is evident in the latest palace materials, the Terminal Classic Period rulers at Caracol broke from Late Classic practices in an attempt to re-establish strong dynastic leadership. We would see the Terminal Classic resurgence of differentiating strategies as comprising a key factor in the ultimate collapse of Caracol. The attempt by Caracol's Terminal Classic elite to establish a more autocratic organization potentially disenfranchised the bulk of the site's population with regard to a long-held expectation of shared wealth and success. This would have effectively destabilized the general population and hastened their unwillingness to combat threats to Caracol's last power elite. More important, however, these changes led to a breakdown in other aspects of what had been a successful socio-politico-economic framework based on sound people management strategies.

What appears at first to be simplicity in the archaeological record can often mask great complexity. Long-standing analytic modeling of the development of complex societies follows

preconceived theoretical notions of how socio-economic and political formations came into being (e.g., Fried 1967 and Service 1975). In western thought, such theory is well developed and resulting consequences were deduced from these general premises (Morgan 1889; Durkheim 1893). Thus, the evolution of social inequality in an ever more complex world was believed to be documentable in the archaeological record. But, sometimes archaeological data reveal patterning that is at odds with preconceived assumptions concerning the development of complex social, political, and economic institutions and these same data reveal issues in commonly held societal units and definitions (e.g., Pauketat 2007 and Yoffee 2005 for "chiefdom" and "state").

Symbolic egalitarianism and homogenizing tendencies are terms that are not generally found in the literature on archaeological complexity. The use of such terminology in describing archaeological data reflects a growing vibrancy in archaeological interpretation relative to the identification of past strategies for both managing and coping with the divisiveness of social inequality. The results of human behavior are evident in the patterning seen in archaeological remains. And, it is in both the recognition of the application and subsequent rejection of such patterning that better interpretations can be derived concerning some of the great diasporas of the past, such as the Maya collapse.

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