

Mayans Had a Middle Class, Too, Emerging Burial Artifacts Indicate



Shell ornament.

A complex social structure emerges from the ruins.

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

DIGGING deeper, clearing away thickets of misconception and finally deciphering obscure glyphs, archeologists are developing striking new images of the ancient Mayans of Central America as a people with a more richly textured society than previously imagined.

No longer are they idolized as an exceptionally peaceful people; their kings made a habit of bloody wars of conquest. Their agriculture was not so primitive; they practiced intensive farming sufficient to feed large urban populations. Their art and technology were not necessarily derived from the powerful cultures of temperate Central Mexico; on their own the Mayans evolved an innovative, vibrant civilization in the tropical lowlands.

Now evidence is accumulating to support another transformation in thinking. The Mayans, it appears, did not have an invariably simple social structure divided sharply between the rulers and nobles on top and the multitude of poor working peasants. As some kingdoms prospered, new excavations reveal, the gulf between the two disparate groups began to be filled with a growing middle class.

Some of the most persuasive clues for the existence of a Mayan middle class emerged last year from the tombs and ruins of Caracol, which was the capital of one of the major Mayan kingdoms in what is now Belize. Archeologists said similar evidence is being found at sites in Guatemala and the Yucatan of Mexico.

The new findings not only challenge conventional ideas about a rigid, two-tiered Mayan society, but also undercut a widely held belief that the collapse of the classic Mayan civilization, one of archeology's enduring mysteries, was brought about, in part, by a widening gulf between the rulers and the ruled that led to revolt.

In an announcement of the most recent studies of Caracol, Dr. Arlen F. Chase and Dr. Diane Z. Chase, anthropologists at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, said yesterday that an examination of burial practices and nonroyal workshops and living quarters showed the presence of a large, flourishing middle class in the city throughout the late classic period, from A.D. 550 to 900. If anything, they concluded, the elite and the commoners of Caracol were growing closer over this time.

"There was a large middle group who lived very much in the manner of what we thought was reserved for the nobility," Dr. Diane Chase said. "This is something we have absolutely no doubts about."

The Chases, a husband-and-wife team, and other experts cautioned that the Mayan situation should not be equated with the economic and



Burial cache pot with face.

The New York Times; illustration by Patricia J. Wynne

political status of modern middle classes. Nor is there clear evidence for much social mobility in Caracol. Members of the middle group seem to have been civic administrators, overseers, leading warriors, bone-setters and skilled craftsmen.

Dr. Jeremy A. Sabloff, a Mayan specialist at the University of Pittsburgh, described the Caracol discoveries as exciting and important, "part of a whole change in Maya archeology, in which people are seeing that the older, simpler models are just not sufficient to explain what we are finding in excavations."

Dr. David Friedel, a Mayan archeologist at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, said new research elsewhere was producing evidence of "social rankings below the level of kings in all the well-recorded capitals."

One of the current challenges for archeologists and scholars of Mayan hieroglyphics, he said, was to understand the symbols of power used by several different ranks within the elite and to identify those in power and the relation of others to them.

Royal Tombs Found

The Chases suspect that the Caracol middle class arose in the wake of military success, beginning in 562 with the conquest of Tikal, another important Mayan city-state in what is today Guatemala. Victory brought wealth and rapid population growth, which scholars now recognize as a motivation for much Mayan warfare in the classic period, from A.D. 250 to 900. From a detailed survey of a Caracol site, covering 55 square miles, the Chases estimate the city's population may have reached 180,000, making it one of the largest in Mayan history.

About 70 formal tombs have been investigated at Caracol over the last eight years, including two intact royal tombs found last year.

One tomb, determined to be 1,600 years old, contained the remains of a ruler and another individual, along with a large number of ceramic vessels and jewelry. A painted text dated the construction of the second tomb to 686. It held the remains of four members of a royal family, all resting on a plaster floor covered with jade flakes.

"Those two tombs were the clincher for our hypothesis," Dr. Diane Chase said. She and her husband had already outlined their ideas on the growing middle class in a book, "Mesoamerican Elites: An Archeological Assessment," published last summer by the University of Oklahoma Press. Before these discoveries, the researchers said, it was widely believed that Mayans buried their dead rulers and royal families in ways that differed significantly from the rest of the population. Instead, comparison of these tombs with nonelite burials showed a number of shared practices: the interment of more than one person in the same chamber and the use of identical ritual materials.

The Mayans did not bury their dead in secluded places like cemeteries, but in special buildings that were part of their living complexes. "They had the dead 'live' with them," Dr. Arlen Chase explained. "The dead may have even been formal participants in rituals carried out by their living descendants."

The royal tombs at Caracol may have been somewhat larger than those of the middle-class dead, and more elaborately decorated and inscribed with detailed hieroglyphics. But otherwise, the royal dead were treated much like the others.

Workshops Provide Clues

Two things were happening, the Chases concluded. More nonelite people could afford to adopt some of the jewelry and ritual customs of

the elite, and the elite seemed to make no great effort to maintain some of the more conspicuous class distinctions.

In other excavations at Caracol, the Chases identified workshops where craftsmen made jade and shell ornamentation, including rings, necklaces, pendants and earflares, apparently for the growing middle class. The artisans' stone tools were still in some of the shops.

"If these artisans were making things only for elite households, the workshop would be near the elite households," Dr. Diane Chase said. "When we found areas we suspect are workshops, they are not located there, but along the roads leading away from the center. These people were producing things being used by more ordinary people."

Archeologists working with Dr. Arthur Demarest of Vanderbilt University in Nashville have sought to delineate social stratification at Dos Pilas, another large Mayan city-state in Guatemala. They examined patterns of variations in the architecture, masonry, pottery, burials and grave goods at more than 400 households.

Dr. Demarest said the findings supported the middle-class hypothesis, showing "a kind of continuum between rich and the poor, without any sharp breaks in the levels of wealth."

Evidence Against Revolt

Archeologists said the evidence from earlier sites was too sparse to determine if Mayan societies had a

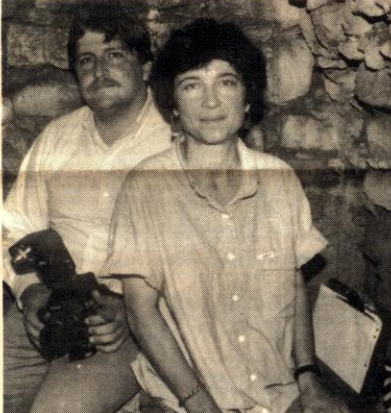
Middle Class Shell
Maya rulers treasured jade, and pyrite mirrors were also left in their tombs. The discovery of more sparsely decorated tombs containing ornaments of humbler conch shell, like the round ornament above, has convinced some archeologists there was a third class of Mayans, neither peasants nor kings. A shell workshop at the site suggests that these "middle class" Mayans may have been shell traders or artisans.

Source: Dr. Diane Z. and Dr. Arlen F. Chase

substantial middle class before the sixth century. Mayan prehistory extends back to 1200 B.C., but it was the classic period from A.D. 250 to 900 that saw the peak of Mayan civilization, symbolized by the magnificent temples, tombs and pyramids. From the end of the classic period to the arrival of Europeans, the Mayan cities went into a steady decline.

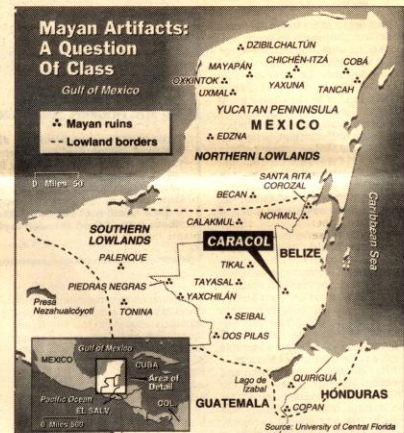
The last recorded date on a monument at Caracol is 859, and the city seemed to be totally abandoned by 1050. From the ruins, archeologists said, it appears that Caracol met a violent end.

But if the Chases are right, Caracol and other Mayan cities were not doomed by a peasant revolt against the elite. Both the peasants and the nobles — as well as a middle class that had known periods of prosperity — were probably victims of the increasingly frequent and widespread warfare that, according to the new thinking, contributed to the collapse of one of the great pre-Columbian civilizations.



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Ornaments for what may have been a middle class, like those found at Caracol in what is now Belize, are turning up at other Mayan sites.