

### 13. A Contextual Approach to the Ceramics of Caracol, Belize

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Ten seasons of fieldwork at the site of Caracol have produced a tremendous body of ceramic data. The recovered ceramics span the time from the Late Preclassic through the Terminal Classic Periods, a period of approximately 1400 years. The varying excavation techniques used by the Caracol Archaeological Project have led to the discovery of numerous whole or reconstructible vessels from burials, caches, and final occupation remains (in many cases left intact on building floors). Over 1500 whole or reconstructible vessels have been excavated during the course of the project; these vessels have been concentrated in close to 500 controlled contexts. The sample is most complete during the Late Classic era, and it is during this time that tomb assemblages correlated with dated hieroglyphic texts can be used to produce a fine-tuned seriation of these ceramics (to less than 50 year periods) not possible at other Maya sites.

Because the ceramics of Caracol are characterized by large numbers of whole or reconstructible vessels found in associated units, ceramic analysis at the site has relied heavily on the use of these reconstructible or whole vessels in an explicitly contextual approach. Ceramic analysis is still underway; however, certain benefits of this approach are already apparent. On a very basic descriptive culture-historical level, analysis of the Caracol material has led to more precise dating and modal seriation of previously defined ceramic types (such as Benque Viejo Polychrome and Mountain Pine Red in relation to Belize Red). On a more complex behavioral level, analysis of the ceramics at Caracol has permitted the delineation of the basic components of Late Classic burial subcomplexes and the reconstruction of the events taking place within a single tomb. This contextual approach does, however, have the "disadvantage" of making certain of the problems inherent in the commonly used type-variety-mode analysis (cf. Dunnell 1971; Hammond 1972; Smith 1979) appear more explicit. This paper, therefore, addresses not only the ceramics of Caracol, but also the benefits, possibilities, and difficulties encountered in conjoining both a contextual and type-variety-mode approach to ceramic analysis.

#### **The Ceramics of Caracol: Contextual Approach and Type-Variety-Mode Analysis**

By the end of the first season of excavation at Caracol in 1985 it became evident that the ceramics of Caracol did not "fit" well with any previously established sequence. While overlap was found to exist with pottery from both the Central Peten (Smith 1955; Sabloff 1975; Chase and Chase 1983a) and the Belize Valley (Gifford 1976), to a very large extent the Caracol material was distinctive. This meant that a completely internal sequence needed to be established at the site. While creation of an internal sequence is considered to be the ideal situation at any Maya site (Willey et al. 1967), it sometimes proves difficult to accomplish (cf. the Kaminaljuyu sequence; Wetherington 1976) and often relies on intersite comparisons (Pendergast 1979:33) as well as the consideration of a given site's stratigraphy

(Sabloff 1975:8). The basic ceramic quandary is how to best define a ceramic sequence at a given site that is appropriate both for internal dating and comparative purposes but at the same time is capable of analyzing the ceramics so that they might prove useful in providing a cultural or behavioral interpretation of what happened in the past. Because numerous whole vessels occurred in contextually well-controlled assemblages at Caracol, it was decided that these units would form a primary focus for study. This approach implied a greater emphasis on non-"type class" groupings of ceramics and, thus, an emphasis on changing form (modes) as much as on surface treatment (useful in sherd analysis and a mainstay of type-variety). As mentioned previously, this has very substantial benefits in terms of chronologically fine-tuned seriation and in terms of spatial variability in intra-site behavioral reconstructions. However, this analysis led further away from the traditional tenets of type-variety-mode each year.

As the most abundant artifact class found at any Maya site, broken ceramic sherds must be processed and the type-variety-mode method of analysis (cf. Gifford 1976) provides a ready way of dealing with this mass of material in spite of a number of critiques to the contrary. Some of these critiques have suggested that the type-variety-mode method "may in fact widen the gulf that separates us from the people whose culture we are studying" (Pendergast 1979:33). Most center around the fact that type-variety-mode analysis alone is not sufficient to answer the many questions archaeologists now hope to answer (Dunnell 1971; Hammond 1972; Smith 1979). However, archaeologists discontent with the type-variety-mode system have not provided an alternative form of analysis or data presentation for general communication. Type-Variety-Mode analysis is characterized by its practitioners as "easy to work with" and as serving to make "quick and easy comparisons of pottery from a number of sites" or regions (Sabloff 1975:1, 3). The use of the system is viewed by Maya ceramicists as being a service to other archaeologists in that it provides a common "language" for communication through which to look at basic similarities and differences (Ball 1979:830).

James Gifford (1976:21, 26-29) designed the type-variety-mode method to work apart from Maya "structural stratigraphy" because of the potential problems of mixed older and younger materials in building fills; he focused instead on ceramic middens. At the time that Gifford defined the tenets of type-variety-mode analysis he believed that archaeological change in these middens proceeded at a regular pace "with a constant accretion through time;" ceramic change was similarly normative; therefore, careful classification would document and record such change (cf. Gifford 1976:21). Assuming that excavation units were of equal composition (i.e. 10 or 20 centimeter units), then ceramic change would be apparent to the analyst once the sherds from a given stratigraphic column were laid out on the classification table. Because of the assumed temporal regularity in change and because the majority of the recovered ceramics were found broken into pieces, surface finish was focused on by Gifford as a potentially moldable temporal indicator with possible social consequences (cf. Beudry-Corbett et al. 1993:4). While Gifford (1976:6) indicated that "whole vessels and culturally meaningful segments of vessels" formed the basis of the type-variety-mode conceptual scheme, they were never actually integrated into his conceptual scheme in other than a descriptive way. Instead of whole vessels and contexts, Gifford (1976:6) focused on pieces of pottery; "we are obliged to

cope with large quantities of sherds and adapt the type:variety-mode approach to the limitation of sherd collections."

The focus on broken, secondarily deposited, sherds meant that most primary contexts were never fully considered (on other than a descriptive level) in Gifford's original formulation, a problem on which Gifford (1976:21) himself commented. Gifford (1976:21) specifically noted that had burial mounds have been located at Barton Ramie, even though they derived from structural stratigraphy and "formal tomb placement is simply a special kind of structural situation and deposition," "this would have had a direct bearing on analytical procedures applicable to them." Unfortunately the burial lots at Barton Ramie appear to have been conjoined with his type-variety-analysis only after his untimely death (Gifford 1976:fig. 213) and these contextual units were never utilized to their full ceramic advantage. Instead, the analytical procedures of type-variety-mode treated everything as equal and ordered everything hierarchically (Gifford 1976:21, 34-35). Small sherds formed varieties which formed types which were placed into groups which eventually coalesced to form complexes which could then be placed into temporal frames and ceramic spheres.

Because of the way Gifford established a focus on sherd material, any contextual units were difficult, if not impossible, to integrate with the type-variety-mode methodology as they cross-cut analytically devised groups, type-classes, and complexes (see, for example, Adams 1971). The closest match for such contextual materials could be found only in the hazily defined higher order "integrative level" of the subcomplex (cf. Ball 1977:3, 142-150; Chase and Chase 1987b:48). Any contextual derivation of subcomplexes, however, realistically ran counter to the hierarchically based tenets of type-variety-mode and was, in effect, independent of such analysis. Yet, it is precisely these contextually recovered units that are best suited for any consideration of chronology and ancient behavior. While most analysts may have paid lip-service to Gifford's hierarchical approach to ceramics, reality dictated something different.

Contextual situations were found in the archaeology which naturally placed certain whole ceramic vessels either in association with each other or in stratigraphic relationships. Often such vessels were not represented in the carefully gathered sherd collections. Here the expertise of the analyst was brought into play and these vessels were seriated into ceramic complexes that had already been analytically established (cf. Ball 1977). But, in contrast to the formal sherd-based chronological methodology of the type-variety-mode analysis, any time large numbers of contextually recovered whole vessels were present at a given site, they became the hinge points for a given ceramic sequence (cf. Smith 1955, 1971; Pendergast 1979; and Culbert 1993). Directly addressing problems in type-variety-mode ceramic analysis, David Pendergast (1979:28, 33) recognized the inherent contradiction of such a ceramic classification and opted for a contextual approach; ". . . it is my belief that the best method of reporting involves cultural units which were significant to the ancient Maya," . . . "on analysis and comparison of the many and varied multi-vessel assemblages recovered in excavation."

Thus, although promoted for both its chronological and comparative aspects and widely utilized simply for its naming or labeling function, type-variety-mode analysis was often superseded in the field and laboratory by contextually associated and culturally meaningful ceramic units (explicitly by Pendergast and implicitly by

many other ceramic analysts)—in effect by the "structural stratigraphy" which Gifford avoided.

As contextual units have been used to delineate Caracol's ceramic sequence, it is not strictly dependent on typological analyses. Similar contextual units of variable ceramic groupings are found at all Maya sites. Therefore, such units make inter-site comparison very possible (cf. Chase and Chase 1987b). And, because these comparisons are grounded in actual past behaviors of the Maya, such a contextual analysis also permits a well-grounded consideration of "process" or "the workings of Maya civilization" (Sabloff 1975:1, 4).

It is not that there is another single kind of ceramic analysis best suited to replace the type-variety-mode system, but rather, following the oft-cited admonitions of Brew (1946), that additional analyses are appropriate and useful. While a number of researchers have focused on analysis using contextual units (see above), others have attempted additional modal analyses (Smith 1971; Sharer 1978a) or have focused on technological studies (Rice 1976). At Caracol the contextual analysis and the presentation of such data is considered to be the first and primary ceramic study to be undertaken given the goals of the archaeological project; it will be followed at a later date by type-variety-mode analysis as a service to colleagues looking for a "quick and easy reference."

### Chronological Control of the Caracol Ceramic Sequence

While aspired to at all excavated Maya sites (cf. Uaxactun—Smith 1955:I:105-108), the Caracol chronology is internally derived and contextually controlled. Unlike most other Maya ceramic chronologies, however, the Caracol materials are sequenced using burial materials recovered in association with contextually associated Maya dates. Caracol is unique in the Maya area in having a series of painted tomb texts that date from the Late Classic era; the dates that can be derived from these texts either refer to the consecration of the formal chamber (usually capstone texts using a calendar round date) or the death of the primary individual in a given chamber (usually wall texts using a long-count date). Given the prevalence of dated contexts at Caracol associated with ceramic mortuary vessels, a viable site sequence has been established by seriating other contextually controlled vessel groupings into a temporal frame established on the basis of these dated chambers. Collaborative radiocarbon dating of various contexts also augments the chronological sequence.

Two other points need to be made relative to the Caracol sequence. First, because of the internal contextual Maya dating, it has not proved necessary to cross-date the Caracol sequence to other established ceramic sequences as is so often done (cf. Tikal to Uaxactun and Altun Ha to Tikal and Uaxactun), a process which may sometimes result in the perpetuation of questionable chronological assumptions. Second, after a decade of research formal ceramic complexes have still not been established at Caracol so as to permit fluidity in the interpretational system. Complexes have sometimes been established in the Maya area at the start of a research program when the small amount of information or analysis may lead to a situation where preconceptions may obscure a given ceramic picture rather than clarifying it.

The internally dated ceramic units which provide the basis for the Caracol sequence are as follows:

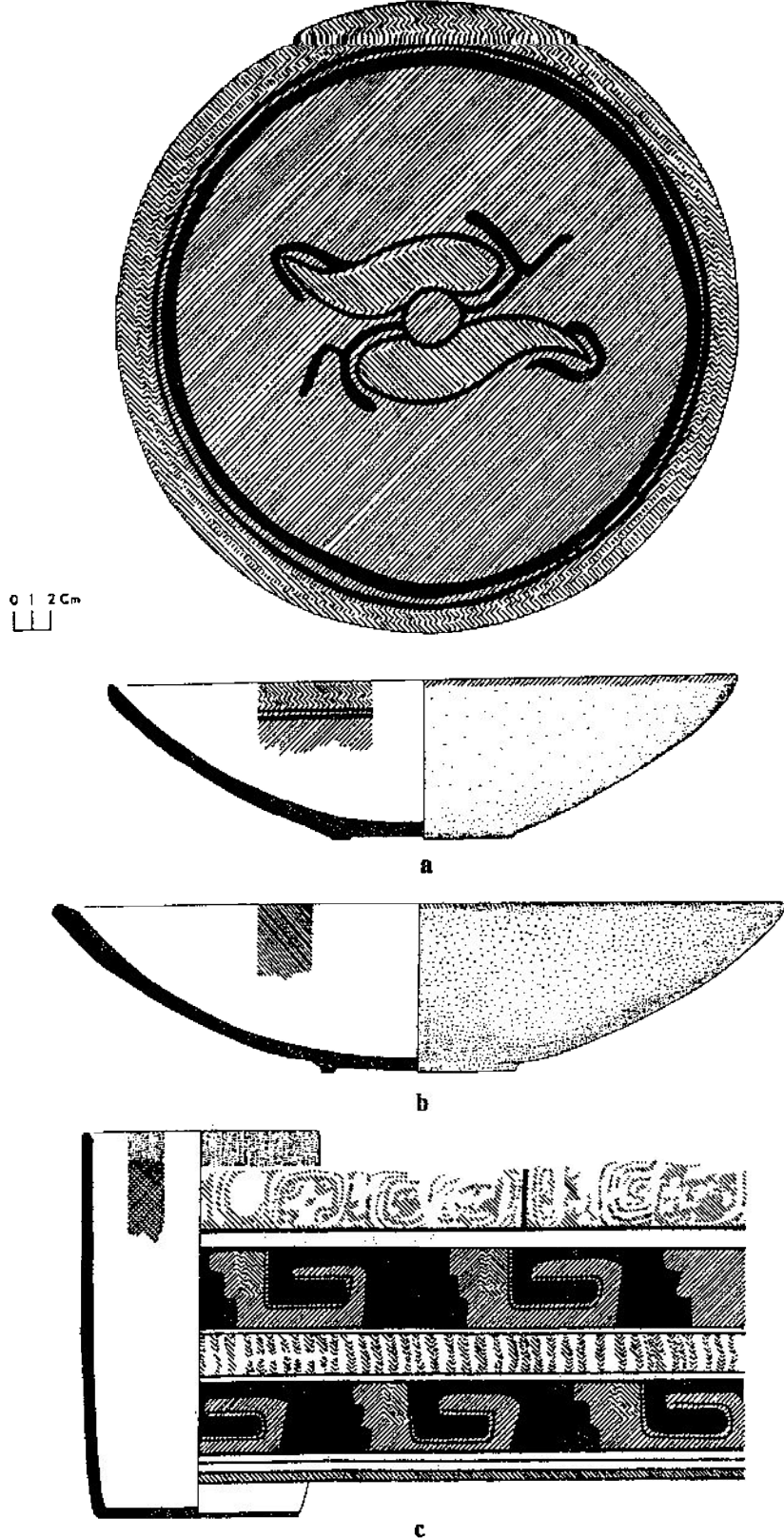


Figure 13.1. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in Structure B20-3rd (Operation CIH): a) related to Pajaro Orange-Polychrome; b) related to Dos Hermanos Red; c) possibly Yaloche Cream-Polychrome with stuccoed blue rim.

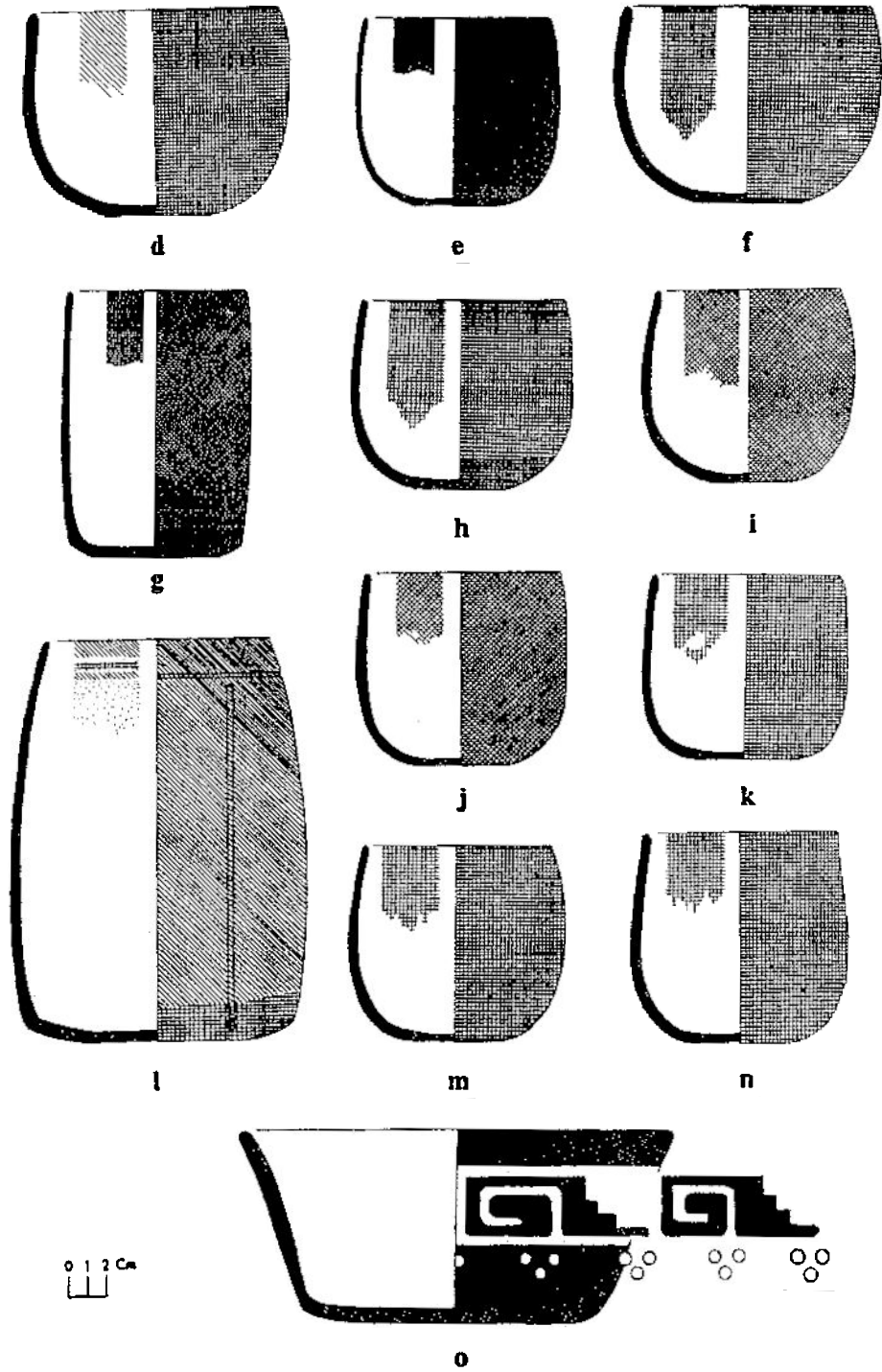


Figure 13.1. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in Structure B20-3rd (Operation C1H): d-k related to Molino Black; l) unnamed red; m,n) related to Molino Black; o) possibly Japon Resist.

(1) The Structure B20-3rd tomb recovered in 1993 with a rear-wall date of 9.5.3.1.3 or A.D. 537 associated with 1 wooden and 15 ceramic vessels (Figure 13.1);

(2) The stratigraphically later Structure B20-2nd tomb with a rear wall text read as 9.7.3.12.15 or A.D. 577 and associated with 1 stone and 17 ceramic vessels (illustrated in Chase and Chase 1987a:21-22);

(3) The Structure L3 tomb with a capstone text of 9.9.0.16.17 or A.D. 613 associated with 4 vessels (illustrated in Chase and Chase 1987a:42);

(4) The Structure B19-2nd tomb with a rear wall text of 9.10.1.12.11 or A.D. 634 associated with 8 vessels (illustrated in Chases and Chase 1987a:28-29);

(5) The Structure A3 tomb with a capstone date of 9.13.3.15.16 or A.D. 696 and 8 vessels (illustrated in Chase and Chase 1987a:16-17);

(6) The Structure A34 lower tomb with a capstone date tentatively read as A.D. 582 or 9.7.8.12.12 and believed to be associated with the partial vessels broken and scattered beneath a later burial episode (Figure 13.2).

The above dated contexts form the building blocks for the Caracol sequence. These "building blocks" are also augmented by Maya dates in stucco recovered from Caracol buildings in stratigraphically controlled contexts and by radiocarbon dates that are also stratigraphically controlled. Based on these dating assessments, other contextually associated ceramic units can be seriated into a chronological series that provides tight dating control, especially when each ceramic unit of more than a single vessel is stylistically analyzed. The contexts used to establish the overall Caracol sequence primarily derive from burials, but also include caches and, importantly, on-floor refuse which is commonly recovered in and around buildings at Caracol. By using the structural stratigraphy at Caracol, refuse recovered in association with various structures serves to flesh out both earlier and later aspects of the broader ceramic assemblages.

### **The Caracol Ceramic Sequence**

The ceramic sequence at Caracol does not begin before the Late Preclassic Period. It is likely that the Caracol region was largely unoccupied until some point shortly before the beginning of the Christian era. It is likely that this relatively late occupation was a function of an inhospitable waterless environment; the initial inhabitants of the Caracol region must have had a developed technology with regard to reservoir construction. What ceramic materials can be ascribed to this era have been recovered primarily from fills in epicentral buildings as well as from a few isolated areas widely distributed throughout the core of the site. Portions of a refuse deposit dating to the Late Preclassic were recovered in association with the earliest known construction beneath the Structure A6 locus (cf. Chase and Chase 1994a). These ceramics may be related to the Sierra Red, Polvero Black, and Iguana Creek White Groups known from the central Belize Valley and the central Peten region (cf. Chase and Chase 1983a). Several caches have also been recovered that date to the Late Preclassic (cf. Thompson 1931; Chase and Chase 1994a). And a single chultun burial may be placed on this horizon (Figure 13.3).

Hard dates have not yet been placed on the Late Preclassic to Early Classic ceramic shift because of a paucity of contextually controlled data. Although some bowl forms from the earlier part of the Early Classic reflect the flaring-walled

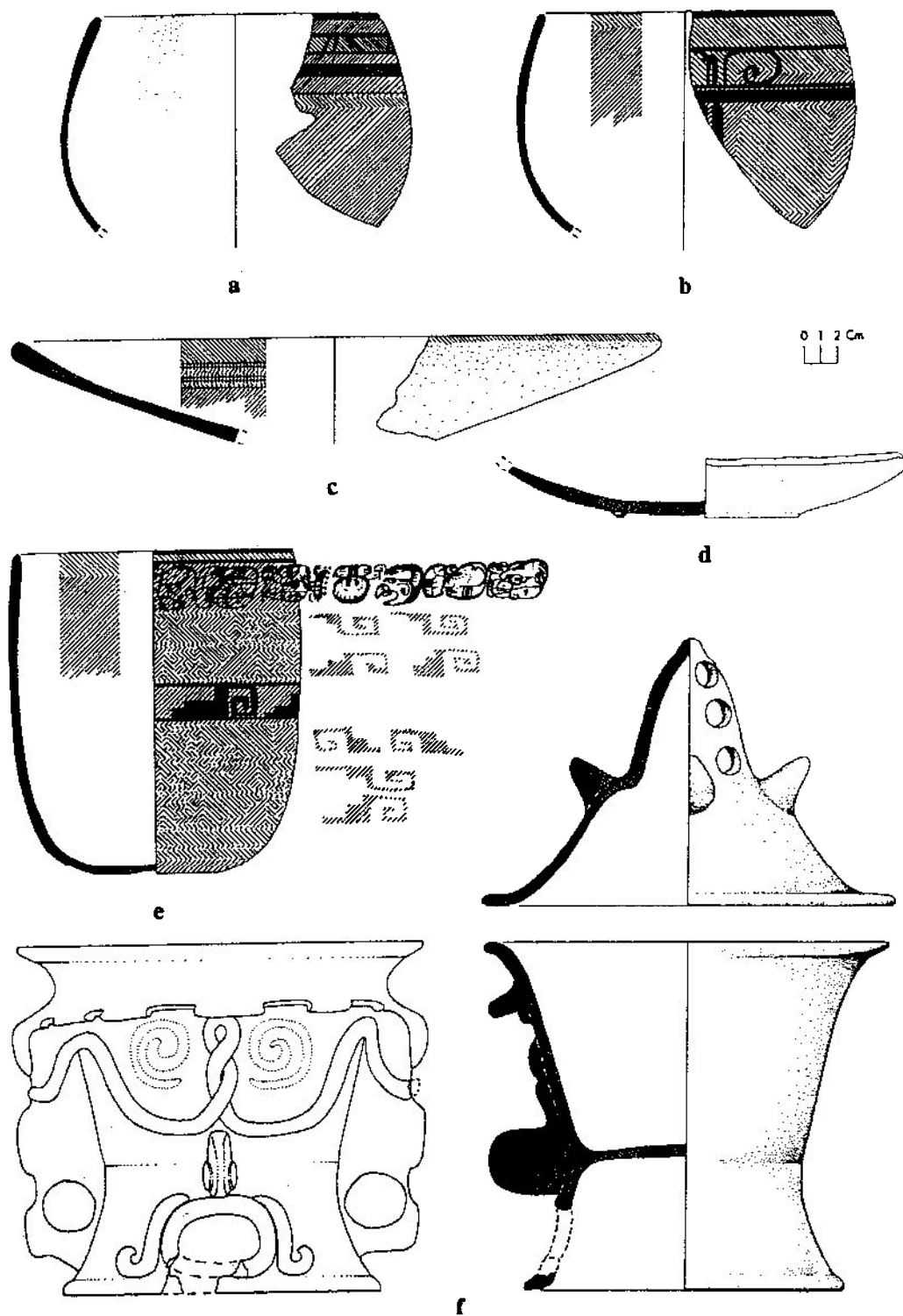


Figure 13.2. Intentionally broken and partial ceramic vessels from the lower tomb in Structure A34 (Operation 87E): a,b) Saxche Orange-Polychrome; c) Pajarito Orange-Polychrome; d) Valentin Unslipped; e) Saxche Orange-Polychrome; f) Candelario Applied; one large jar body sherd not shown.



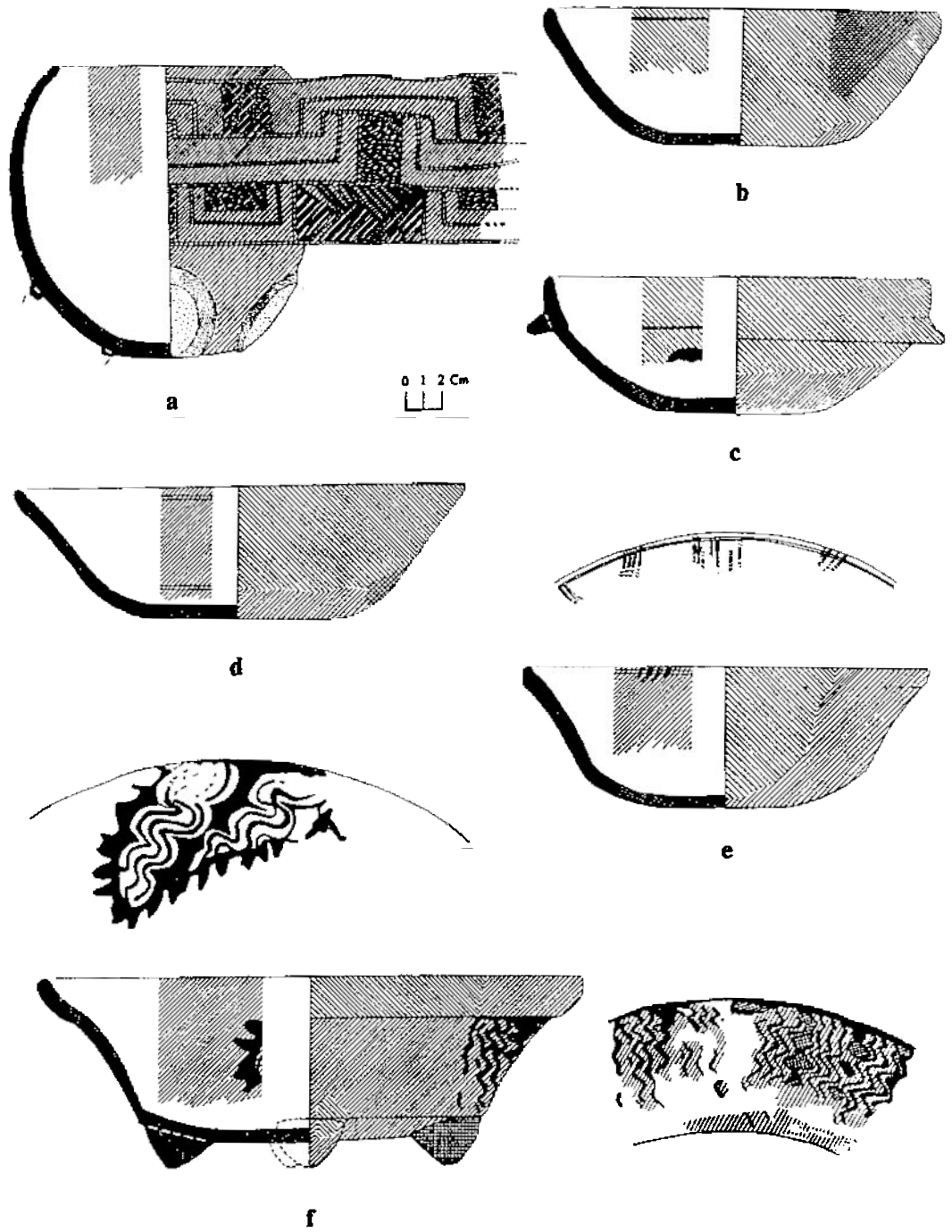


Figure 13.3. Ceramic vessels from a chultun burial in the Blanca Group (Operation 52A): a) possibly Cay Incised; b-e) Laguna Verde Incised; f) Sactuc Black-on-Orange.

rounded-base bowls found in the Late Preclassic, modal changes in form between the two eras are evident. The labial flange of the Late Preclassic (Figure 13.3c; Thompson 1931:fig. 17a-d) becomes the basal and medial flange of the succeeding Early Classic era. As a rule of thumb, the position of the flange is a useful temporal indicator: the earlier the vessel in the Early Classic, the lower the flange. At Caracol, the true basal flange bowl (Figure 13.4a) is sometimes found in the same contexts as the "Teotihuacanoid" tripod cylinder (Figure 13.4g-k), similar to the earliest "Manik 3" Burials 10 and 22 at Tikal (Culbert 1993). Late in the Early Classic, the basal-flanged bowl becomes transformed into a "dish" or "plate" with the flange moving progressively higher until it ultimately becomes an exterior ridge on a flaring-walled dish or plate that may be found in early Late Classic contexts (Chase and Chase 1987a: fig. 15h). Utilitarian jars dating to the Early Classic are also distinctive as they are wider-mouthed than their Late Classic counterparts, have shortened more exfoliated rims, and are characterized by exterior designs made through simple punctation (Figure 13.5).

A profound change occurs in the Caracol ceramics during the shift from the Early Classic to the Late Classic. The basic Late Classic assemblage is apparently in place at Caracol prior to A.D. 537 (based on the contents of the Structure B20-3rd tomb; Figure 13.1) and becomes more elaborated following this date. The forms most characteristic of the Early Classic to Late Classic shift are round-sided bowls. Variants on this standard round-sided bowl form have sometimes been classified as "barrels" or as "cylinders rounding to base" (Culbert 1993:fig. 41b), more realistically a "deep round-sided bowl." Often these bowls are a monochrome red or black in color, sometimes with large resist or stuccoed circles on their sides. A second form that becomes prominent in the early part of the Late Classic is the ring-based dish, usually with a polychrome interior and unslipped exterior. Just as some early versions of this form have an exterior medial or labial ridge, earlier versions of the ring-based dish form also will sometimes have exterior bands of slip either on paste or on slip about the rim.

The Late Classic part of the Caracol sequence is fairly well defined in terms of its metamorphosis. One ceramic type, an hour-glass censer with an effigy face representing the night sun (Figures 13.2f and 13.6e), occurs in both late Early Classic tombs and early Late Classic chambers. This form is widely dispersed at Caracol and also occurs as a simple faceless hour-glass censer in some contexts. Over time the hour-glass form is transformed into a pedestalled-based barrel such as the two censers found in the B19-2nd tomb (Chase and Chase 1987a:fig. 22d,f). During the later part of the Late Classic, this form becomes an elongated effigy cylinder (with lateral flanges) that retains its slight pedestalled-base (Chase and Chase 1987a:figs. 9a and 19; Thompson 1931:plate 27).

One other class of ceramic vessels is quite prevalent in the Caracol archaeological record: cache vessels. Cache vessels, usually unslipped, become especially pronounced in the Late Classic era when they are found in almost all plaza groups at the site, occurring in either of two forms. The first general form consists of a pair of small lip-to-lip everted rim bowls or cups (Figure 13.7b-d,f,g). This form is apparently found at Caracol from the onset to the end of the Late Classic era. If anything is ever found within such paired vessels, it is one or more articulated human fingers, thus leading to the designation of this cache type as "finger bowls." The second Late Classic Caracol cache type is called a "face cache" because of the rudimentary

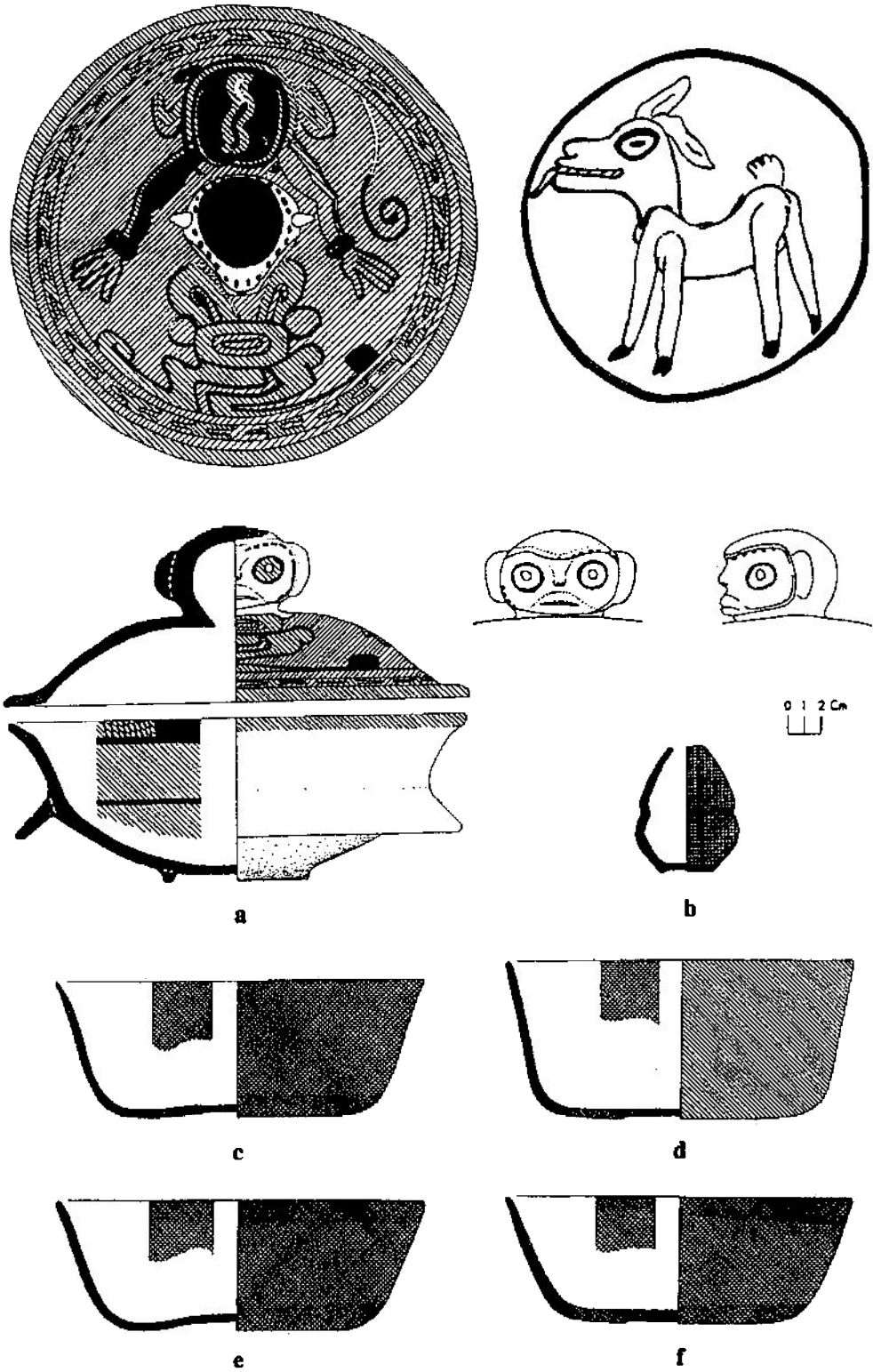


Figure 13.4. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in Structure D16 (Operation C88C): a) Dos Arroyos Orange-Polychrome; b) Pucte Brown; c-f) Balanza Black

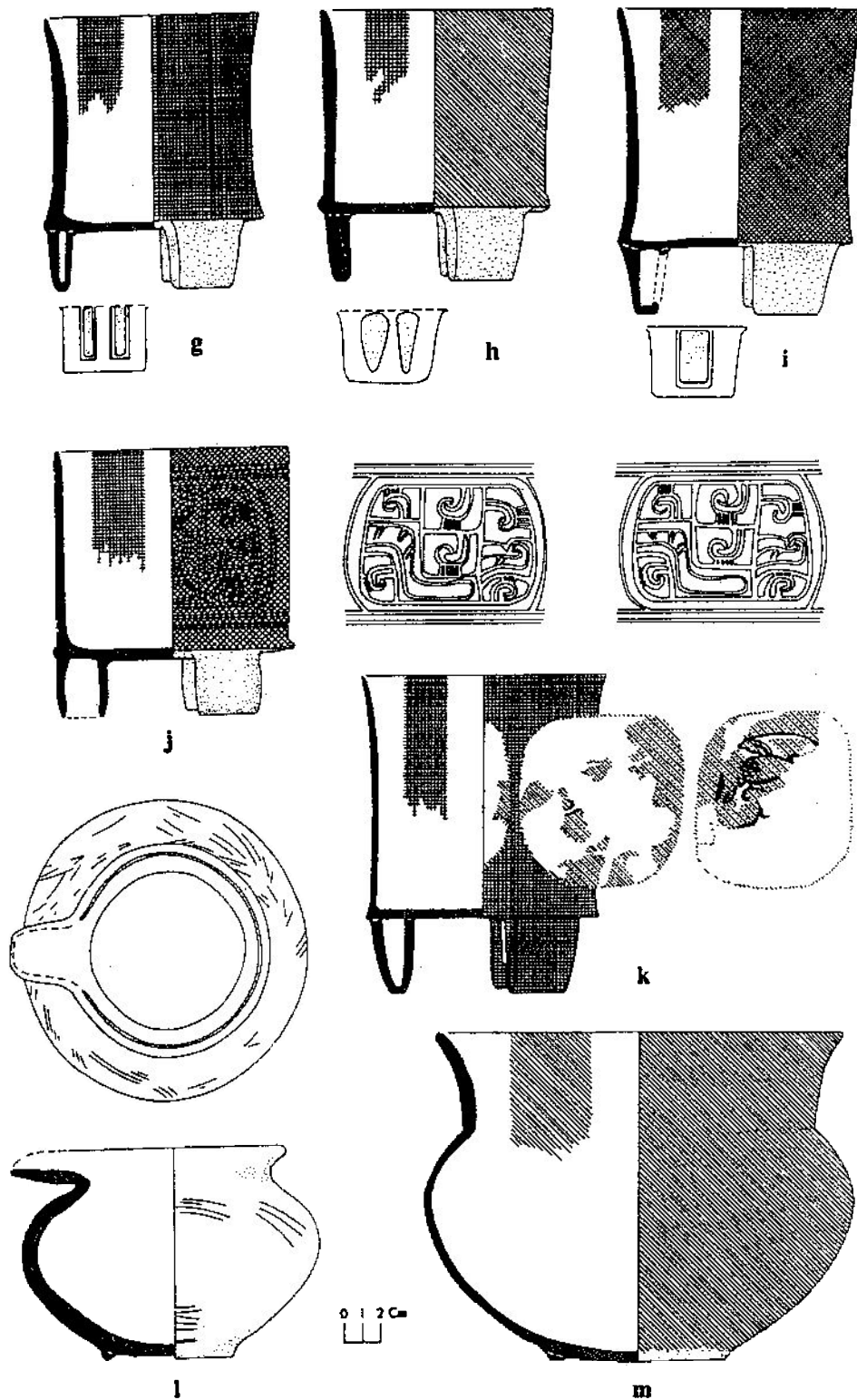


Figure 13.4. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in Structure D16 (Operation C88C): g,h) Pucte Brown; i) Balanza Black; j) Urita Gouged-Incised; k) Pucte Brown with Stuccoed Panels; l) unnamed unslipped; m) Aguila Orange.

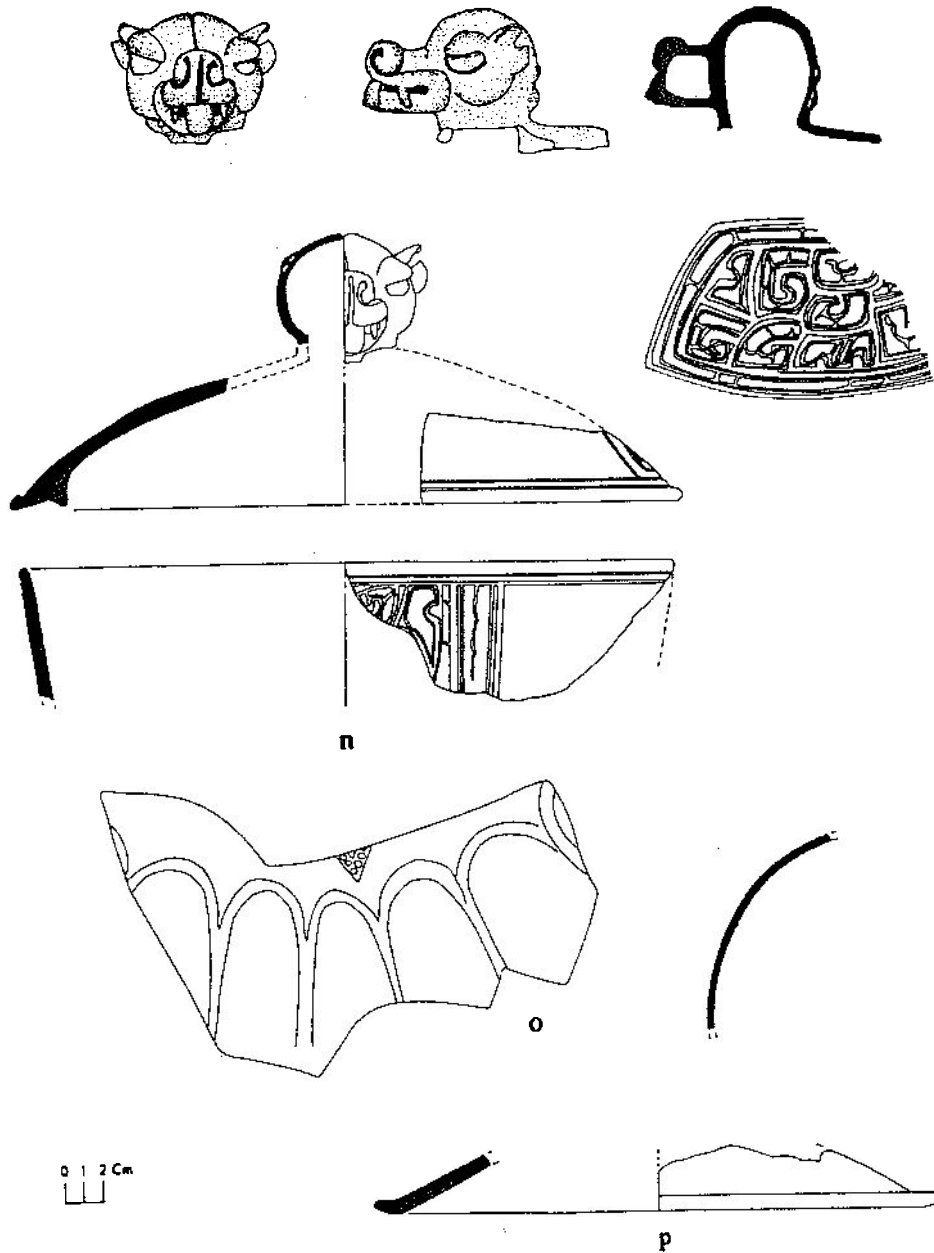


Figure 13.4. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in Structure D16 (Operation C88C), all partial and intentionally broken: n) Positas Modeled and Urita Gouged-Incised; o) possibly Tintal Incised; p) eroded Dos Arroyos Orange-Polychrome.

human face (a bird in one case) modeled on the side of the often lidded urn or barrel (Figure 13.7a,e). These "face caches" are fairly standardized except in terms of container size, which may vary substantially. Although unfaced urns may continue later in the sequence, face caches appear to correlate only with the early part of the Caracol Late Classic era and are, thus, a useful horizon indicator.

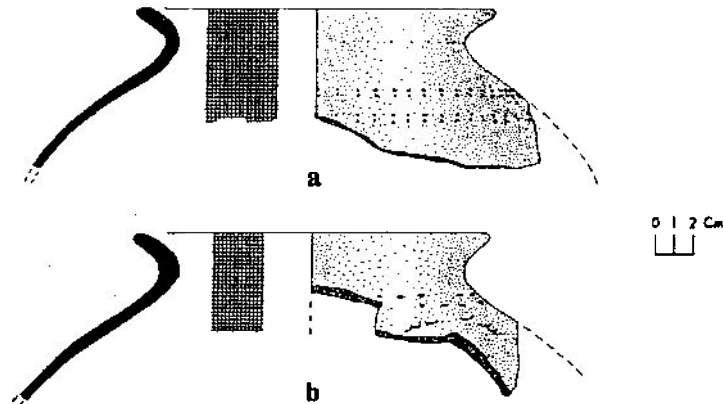


Figure 13.5. Ceramic vessels from secondary refuse in the fill of Structure D17-2nd (Operation C37C): a, b) related to Hoya Punctated.

Three shifts are evident in the mortuary ceramics of Late Classic Caracol. As noted previously, the earliest subcomplex is characterized by the monochrome round-sided bowl/barrel usually in association with one or more ring-based polychrome dishes/plates (Figure 13.6; Chase and Chase 1987a:figs. 15 and 36). The second Late Classic subcomplex sees only the infrequent appearance of the round-sided bowl; when such a form does occur, the rim is either more incurving than in earlier examples or a sharp basal break is in evidence. Two new forms get widespread use in the second subcomplex: cylinders or "cylindrical vases" and a variety of forms of tripod dishes and plates (Chase and Chase 1987a:fig. 22). While the ring-base dish is often still present in this second burial assemblage (sometimes in great numbers), more emphasis is clearly placed on a footed version of the ring-based dish and on a solid slab-footed "Belize Red"-related tripod dish or plate (Figure 13.8). Over time, the Belize Red-related plates become more important in the Caracol burial subcomplexes and their form changes; the more slab-footed dish-like forms (Figure 13.8) become true tripod plates with oven-shaped feet (Figure 13.9), a form that is characteristic of Caracol's third Late Classic burial subcomplex. Another stylistic reference, Holmul-like red-and-orange-on-cream polychrome, makes its appearance at Caracol during the juncture between the second and third subcomplexes. Caracol's third and last Late Classic burial subcomplex is characterized by: both Belize Red and Peten-style polychrome tripod plates with oven-shaped feet; diagonally fluted and incised monochrome and sometimes footed cylinders; incurving polychrome round-sided bowls; large Belize Red dishes without feet and with punctate exterior designs; and occasionally by flaring-walled, direct-rim bowls (cf. Figure 13.10). The tripod plates of this third subcomplex are often extremely tall due to elongated oven-shaped feet (cf. Figure 13.10). Modeled-carving occurs in pseudo-glyph bands found on some monochrome cylinders in this third subcomplex (Chase and Chase 1989:fig. 10).

The final Terminal Classic ceramic materials known from Caracol exhibit a diversity of forms and decoration. Most have been recovered from the floors of the site's buildings or in association with the final use of a given plaza. The most diagnostic form for Caracol's Terminal Classic is an inverted-rim red or orange (brown or grey if burned) tripod bowl (Figure 13.11f); this form is found in most late contexts that have seen areal exposure at Caracol; some of these bowls are also decorated with a crude face (coffee bean eyes plus rudimentary nose). Tripod plates

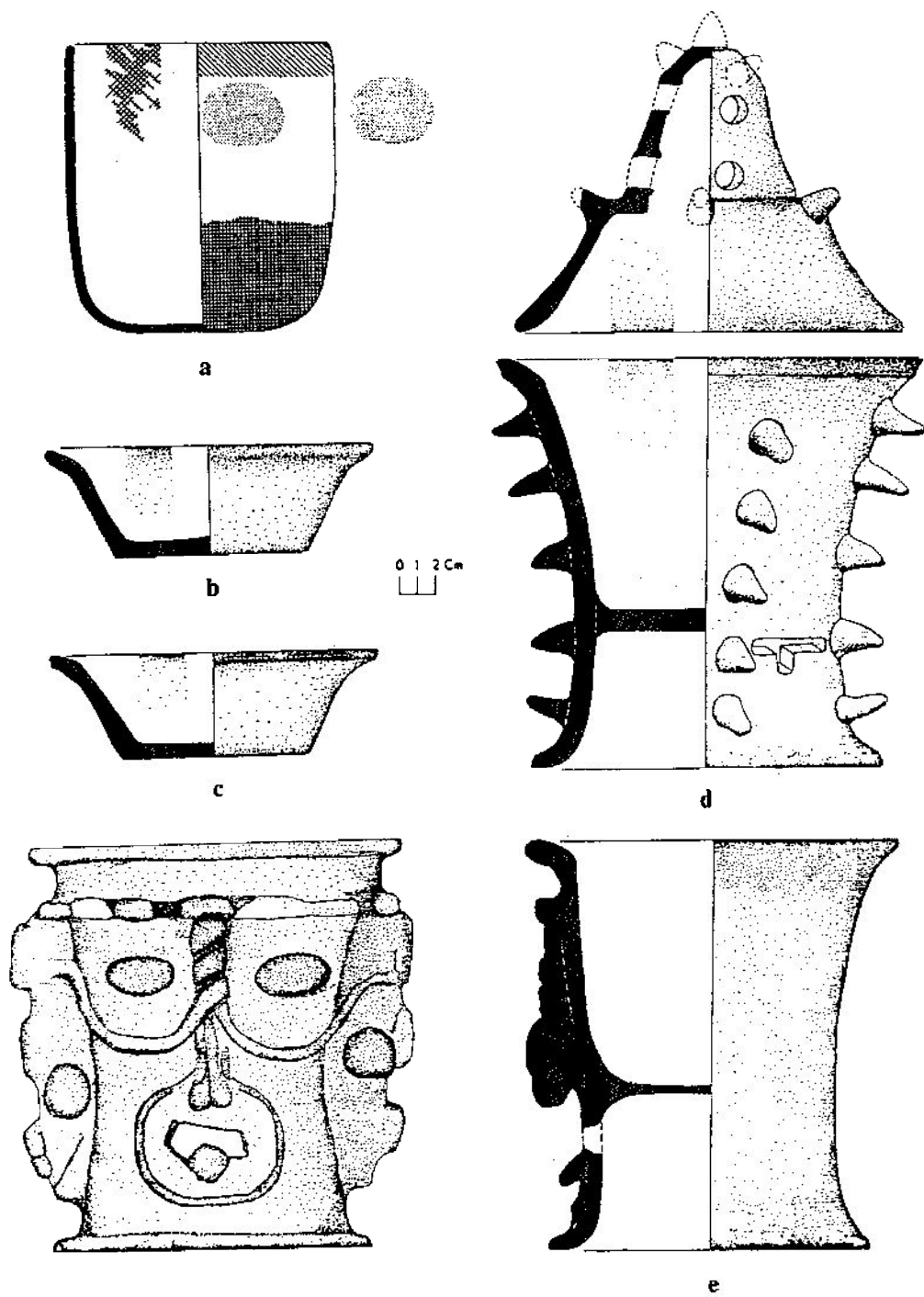


Figure 13.6. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in the Toucan Group (Operation CS4A): a) Molino Black with intact upper stuccoed colors; b, c) Ceiba Unslipped; d) Miseria Appliqued; e) Candelario Appliqued.

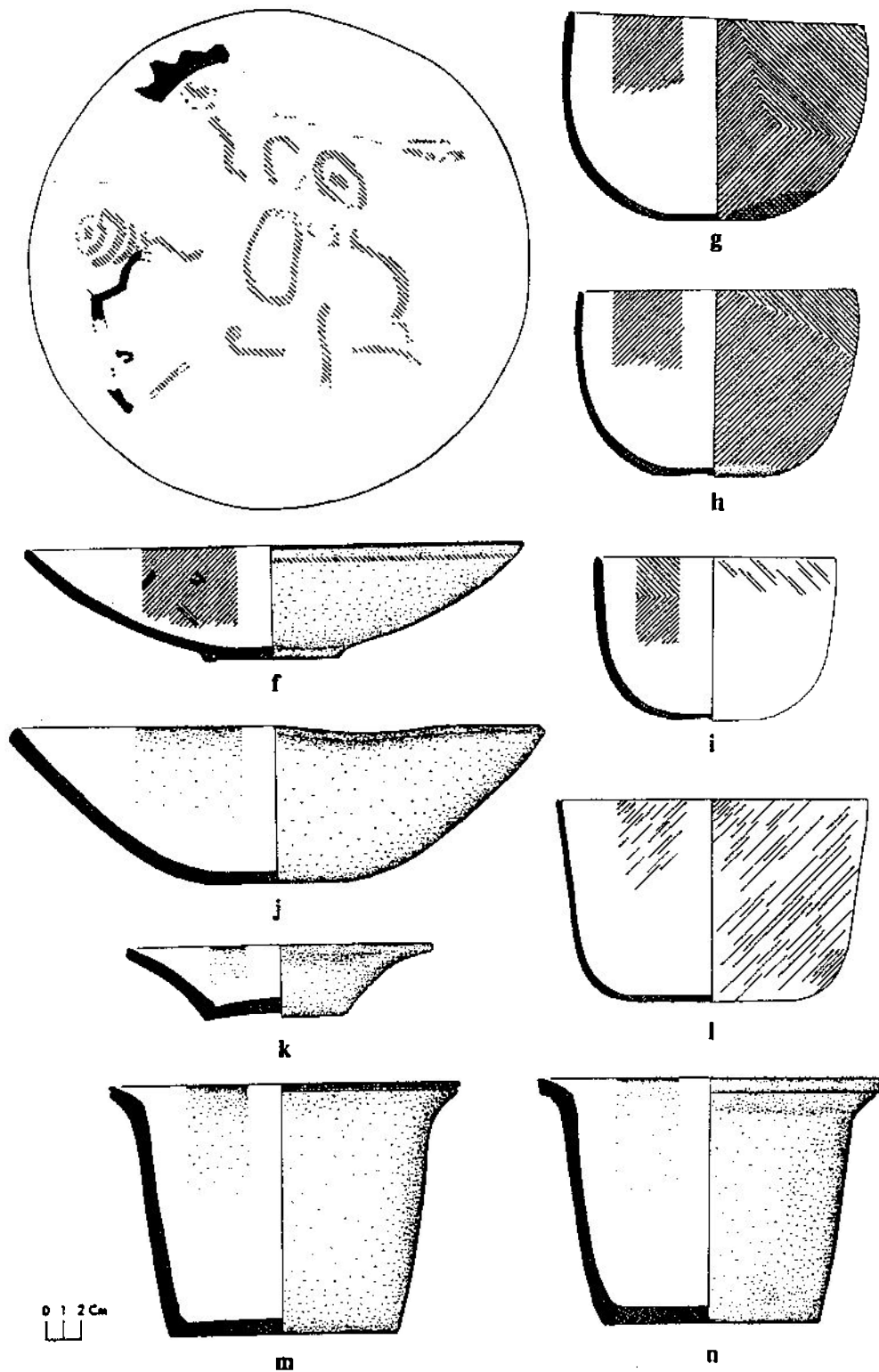


Figure 13.6. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in the Toucan Group (Operation C54A): f) Pajarito Orange-Polychrome; g,h) Veracal Orange; i) Saxche Orange-Polychrome; j) Valentin Unslipped; k) Ceiba Unslipped; l) Veracal Orange; m,n) Valentin Unslipped.



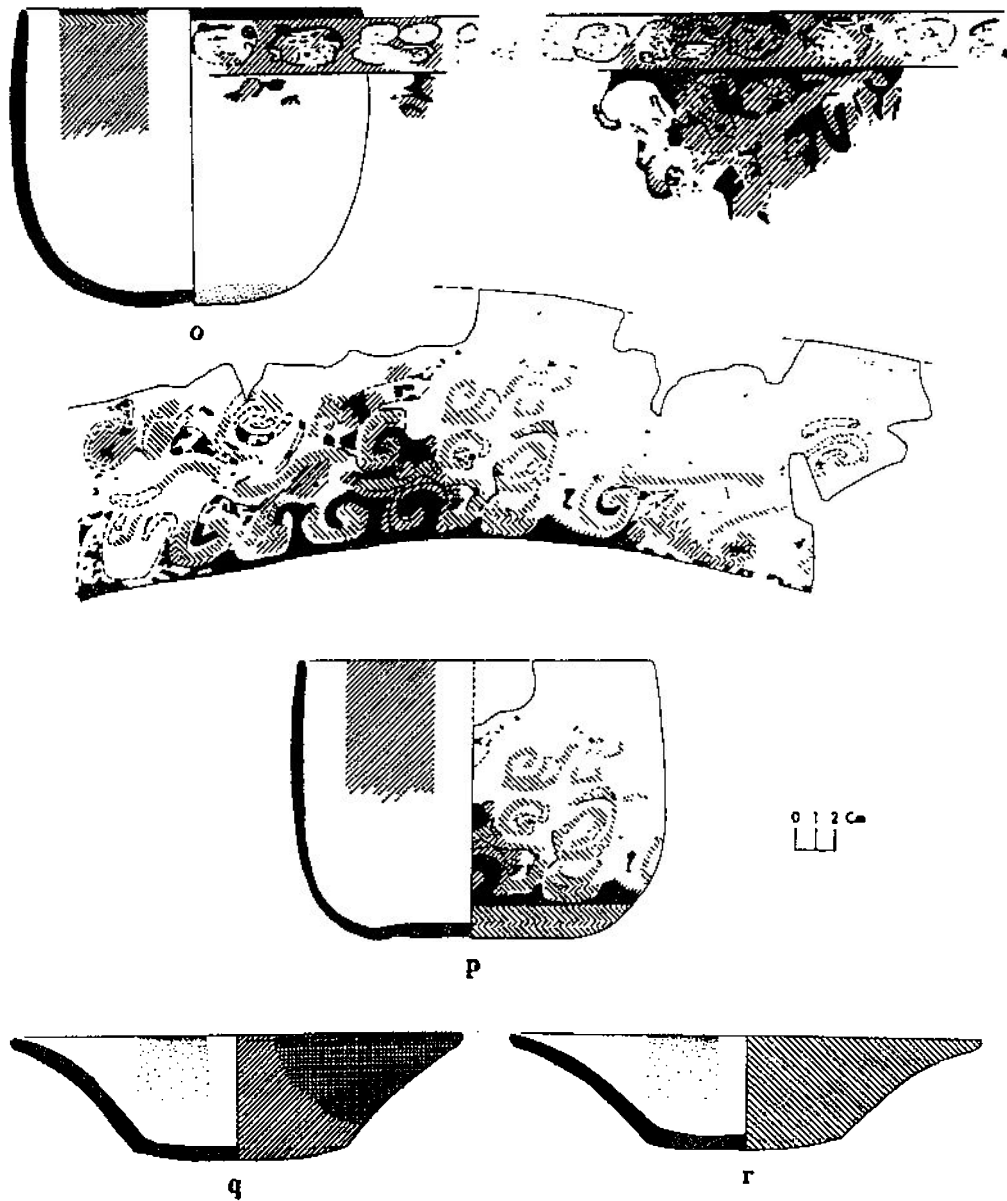


Figure 13.6. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in the Toucan Group (Operation C54A):  
*o,p*) *Saxche Orange-Polychrome*; *q,r*) related to *Aguila Orange*.

occur, but the form has become standardized and is characterized by stubby oven-shaped feet; this form comes either in a grey-black (Figure 13.11b,c) or in a Belize Red form often with basal notching (Figure 13.11e). Cylinders do occur and are generally footed with upper and lower incision framing diagonal fluting. A large grey-black barrel shape with upper and lower molded frames also occurs (Figure 13.11h). Modeled-carving is found both in Fine Orange and non-Fine Orange ceramics; shapes represented are: everted direct-rim bowl, pedestalled barrel, and tripod cylinders. The design on several modeled-carved tripod cylinders known from Caracol is always the same—a prisoner presentation scene (Figure 13.11m); this

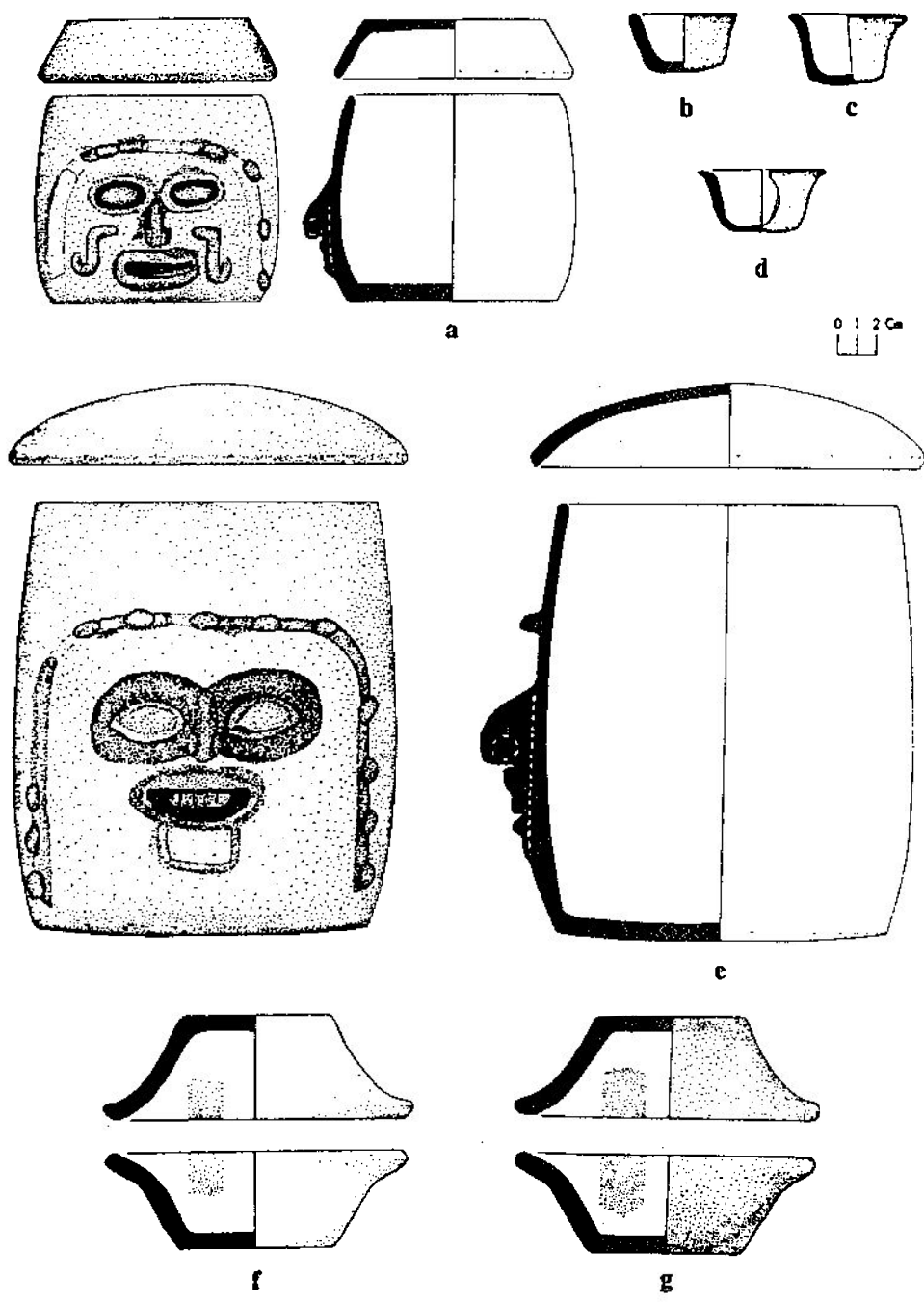


Figure 13.7. Typical pottery cache vessels from Caracol: a-e) from in front of Structure A37 (Operation 3C3); f,g) from within the core of Structure B19 (Operation C4E); a,e) Hebe Modeled; b-d,f,g) Ceiba Unslipped.

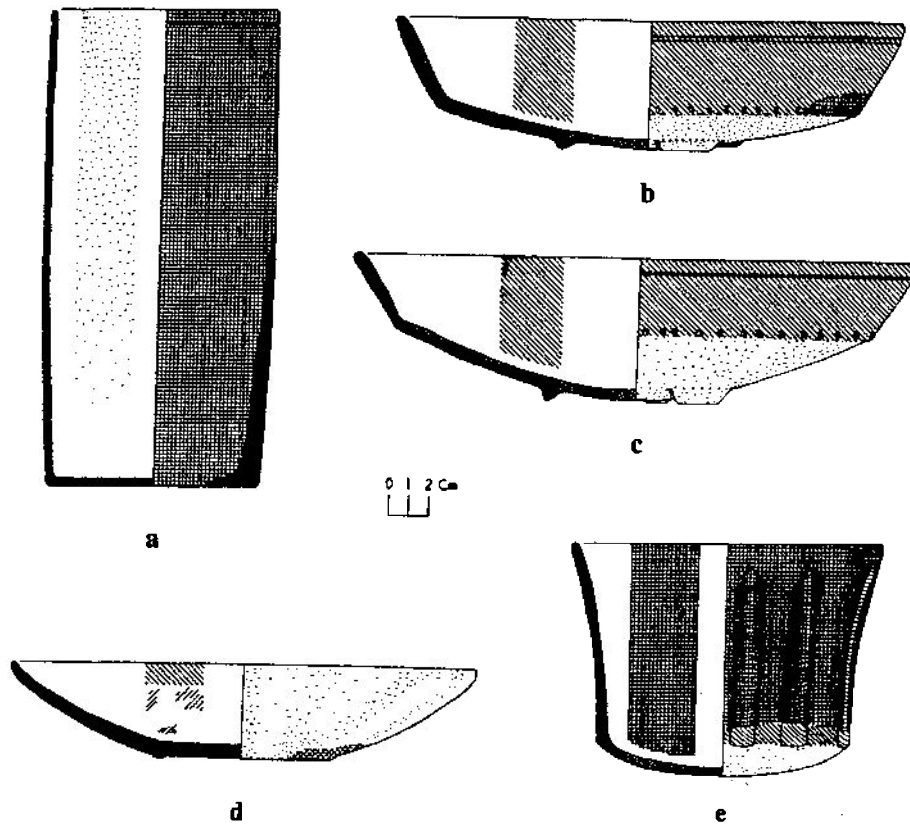
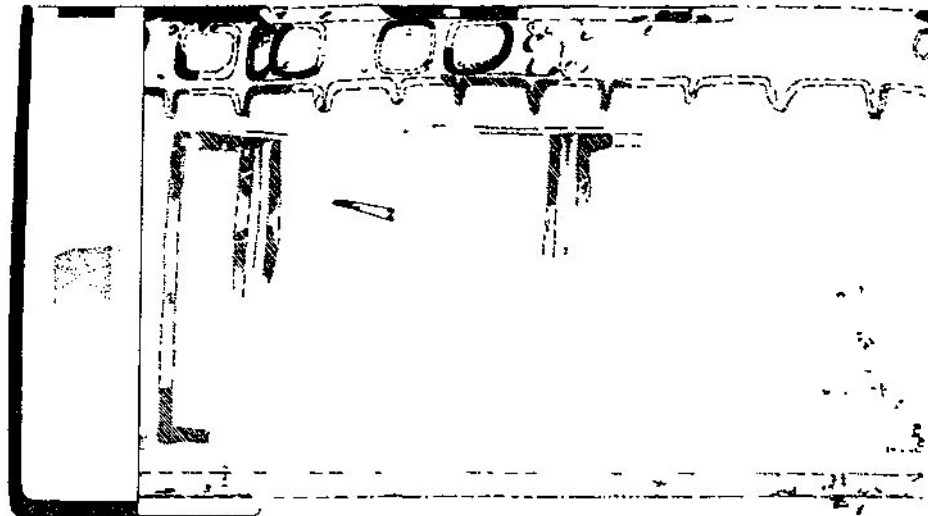


Figure 13.8. Ceramic vessels from a looted tomb in Structure A63 (Operation C5B): a) possibly *Canoa Incised*; b,c) *San Pedro Impressed*; d) *Machete Orange-Polychrome*; e) possibly *Tenaja Fluted*.

same scene is found throughout Belize (Graham 1987:79, fig. 3a-c). Fine Orange occurs at Caracol in several forms as well: a collared bowl (Figure 13.11g); pedestalled and non-pedestalled vases or barrels; a tripod grater bowl; a bichrome tripod bowl or jar, and a water jar. Outcurved direct-rim slipped jars sometimes exhibit exterior stamping on the jar shoulder below the neck (Figure 13.11j), related to more elaborate designs found on Late Classic "Patano Impressed" jars in many Caracol contexts. Terminal Classic unslipped wares from Caracol mimic Terminal Classic shapes known from the central Peten (Figure 13.11k) as well as Postclassic collared-rim bowl forms. Censerware from Terminal Classic contexts include: flat-based, modeled and flanged cylinders depicting the night-jaguar-sun (a Caracol tradition) and an owl; spiked dishes; large pedestalled bowls (Chase and Chase 1987a:fig. 9b); large broad inverted barrels or cylinders capped with three prongs; tall and narrow cylinders with modeled figures on the exterior; small perforated cups; and scored/incised pie-tin shaped censers (lids?) that sometimes occur with loop handles (cf. Awe 1985:311-315).

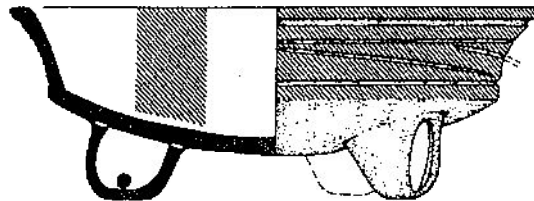
Most of the vessel forms noted for the Caracol burial subcomplexes occur as regular fill materials found in the site's buildings and platforms, thus permitting broad stratigraphic dating assessments of secondary materials. Some unslipped utilitarian forms—usually large incurved, exteriorly-smoothed bowls (reminiscent of



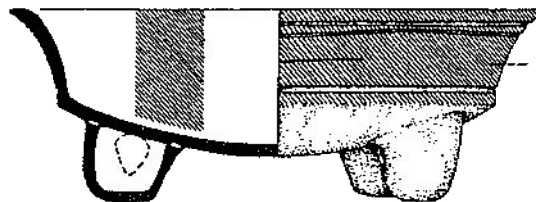
a



c



b

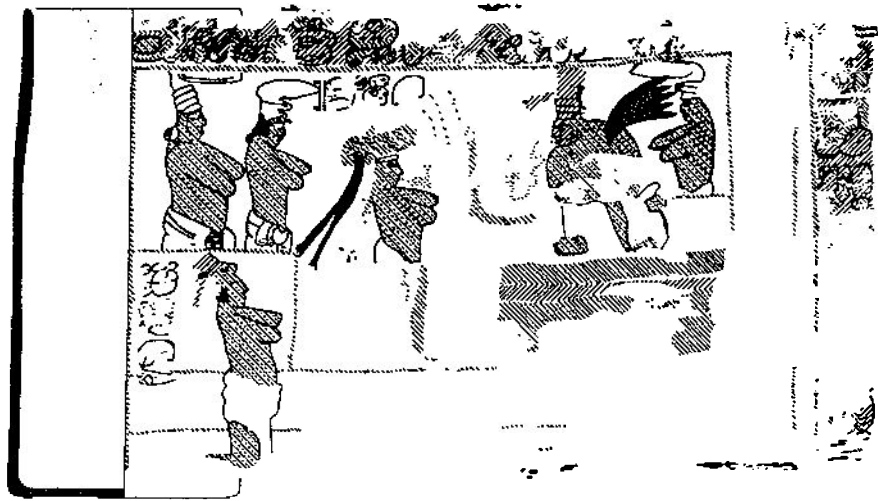


d

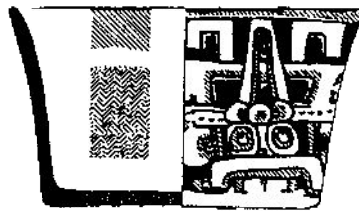
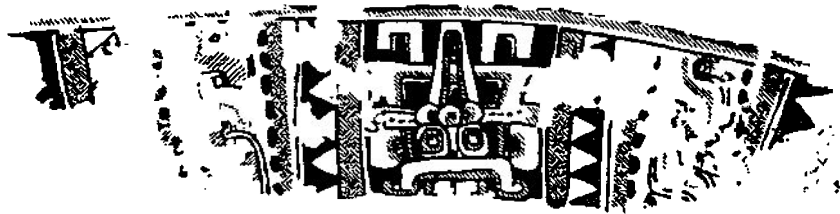


Figure 13.9. Ceramic vessels from a tomb in the plaza of the Muertos Group (Operation C33A): a) Zacatel Cream-Polychrome; b,d) Belize Red; c) probably Tialipa Fluted-and-Incised.

Figure 13.11) but also occasionally large pieces of exteriorly-smoothed jars, non-striation being a characteristic of Late Classic unslipped pottery from Caracol—also occur in the burial subcomplexes, thus also allowing broader temporal assessments of the site's utilitarian ceramics. When all of the contextual units are seriated in regard to the dated contexts described earlier, changes in ceramic forms and in the combination of ceramic forms in various controlled contexts serves as a ready guide for precisely ordering the Caracol ceramic sequence.

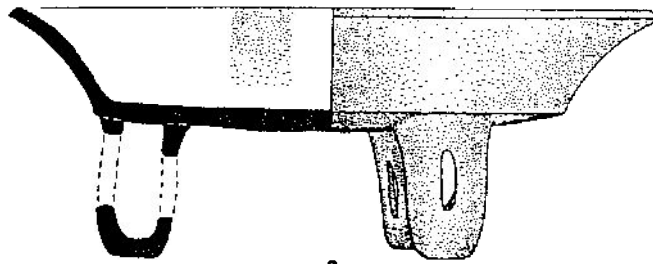


a



0 1 2 Cm

b



c

Figure 13.10. Ceramic vessels from a crypt in Structure B5 (Operation C18U): a) Joyac Cream-Polychrome; b) Zacatel Cream-Polychrome; c) eroded Infierno Black.

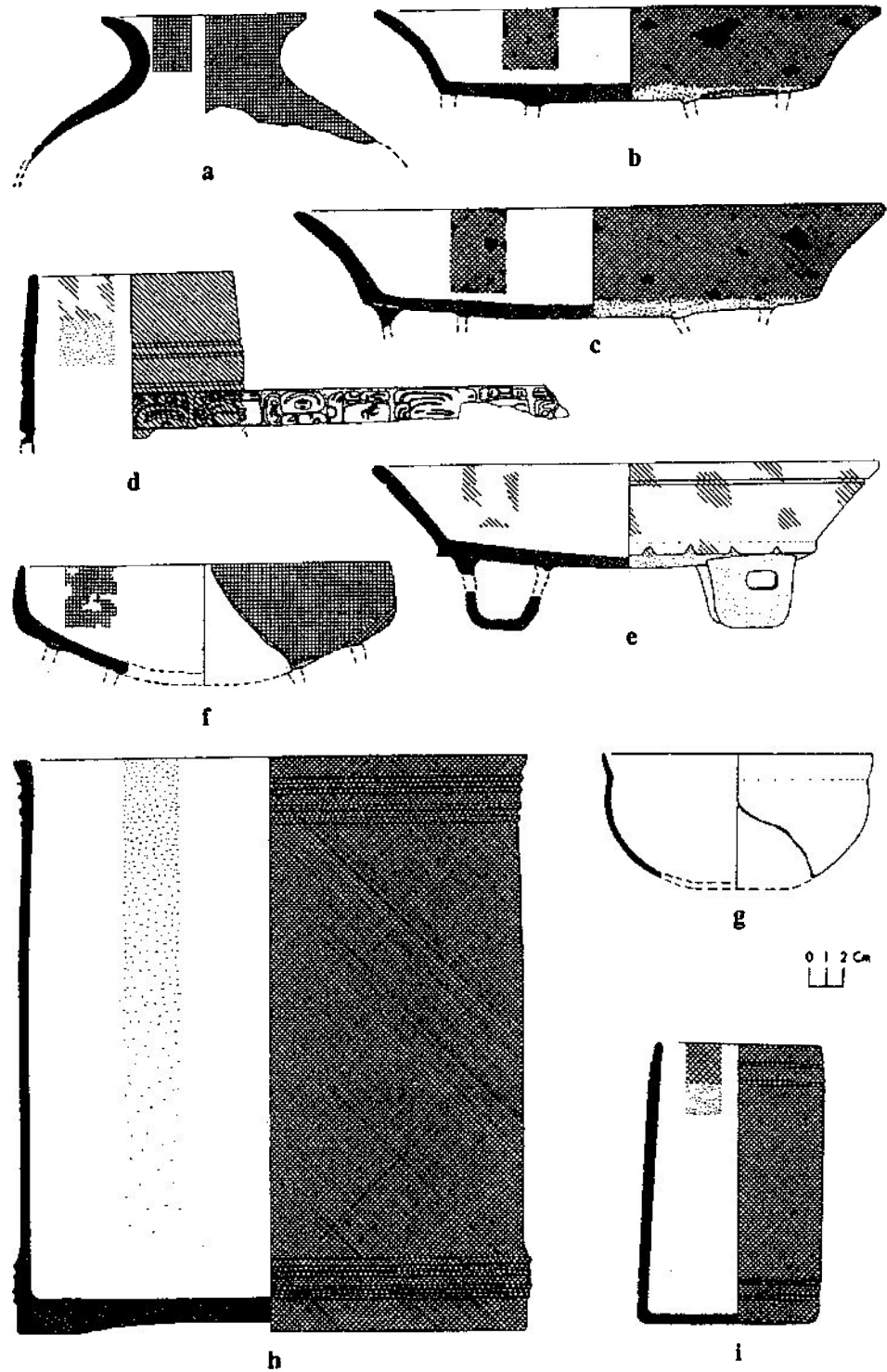


Figure 13.11. Whole and partial vessels from the front of Caana. Plaza floor (Operation 17D): a,f) burnt Tinaja Red, d) related to Sacaba Modeled-Carved, e) McRae Impressed. Plaza floor (Operation C17C): g) related to Altar Orange. Mid-range palace floors: b) Infierno Black (Operation C17I), c) Infierno Black (Operation C17Q), h) "Infierno Black Modeled" (Operation C17Q), i) Carmelita Incised (Operation C17G).

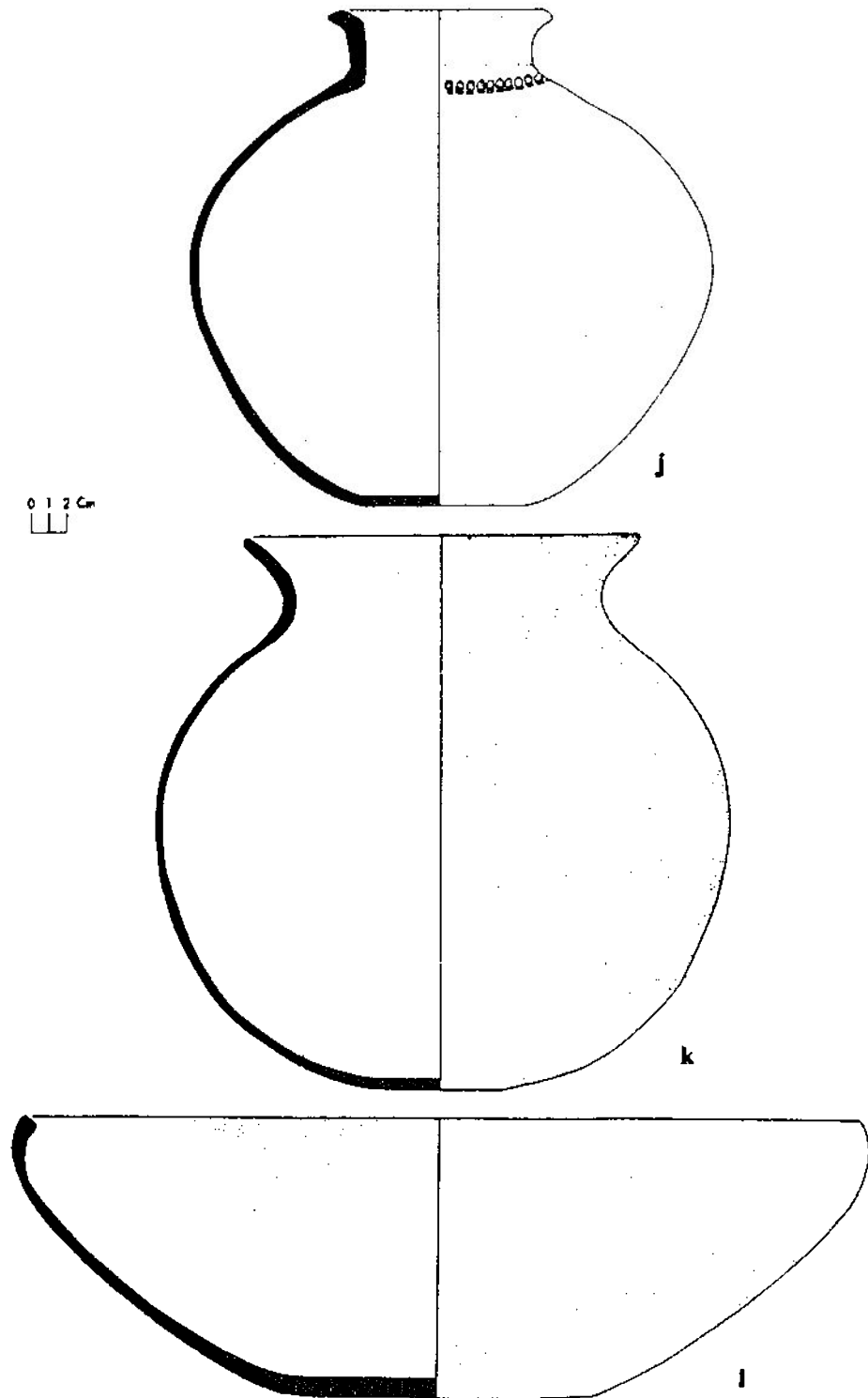


Figure 13.11. Whole and partial vessels from the front of Caana. Mid-range palace floors (Operation C55C): j) possibly Patano Impressed; k,l) possibly Valentin Unslipped.

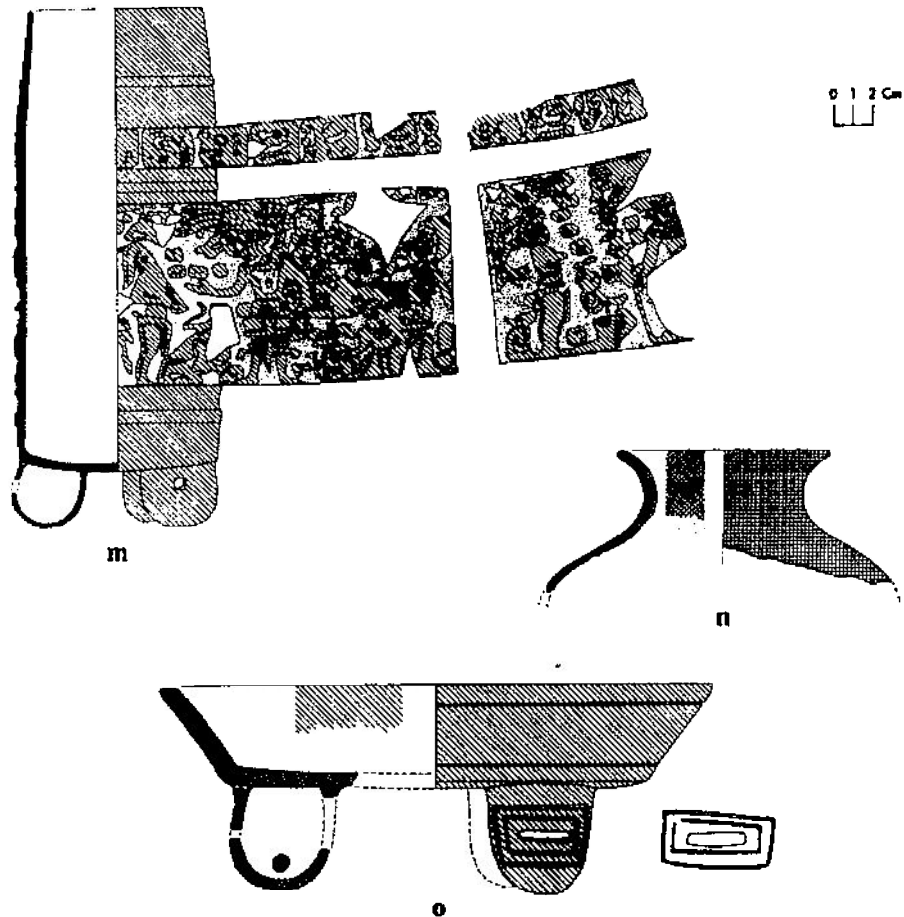


Figure 13.11. Whole and partial vessels from the front of Caana. Plaza floor (Operation C17D): m) related to Sacaba Modeled-Carved; n) burnt Tinaja Red. Mid-range palace floors (Operation C55M): o) possibly Martin's Incised.

### Conclusion

The ceramic sequence that has been briefly outlined above is important for a number of reasons. Caracol was one of the more populous sites in the Maya lowlands at the core of an important regional state; as such its stylistic modes and cultural norms would have presumably had more impact on outlying regions and other polities than would those of a smaller site. Much like the ceramics of Tikal (Culbert 1993), an understanding of Caracol's pottery is important not only in terms of the site itself but also as a yardstick for comparative studies elsewhere in the Maya lowlands. The contextual dating and archaeological control of the Caracol sequence is also unusual and, when combined with other data such as the site's extensive epigraphic record (Grube, this volume), permits an insight into ceramics and cultural change that can rarely be approached at other Maya sites.

With few exceptions (Coggins 1975; Pendergast 1979; Laporte et al. 1992; Culbert 1993), ceramic reports in the Maya area have not been well integrated with the



archaeological reporting of excavations. Until recently ceramic contextual units were often not illustrated together and many vessels in such units went largely unrecorded, described only by a type name. Censerware, even though pottery, was frequently not treated in ceramic reports (cf. Gifford 1976), but instead delegated to yet another analyst (cf. Ferree 1967). Thus, it can prove difficult for an outside researcher to figure out what was found with what, let alone attempt to define where something was found and how something related to other material; one example of this problem may be found in attempts to understand the relationship of ceramics and context at Holmul and Nohmul in relation to the "Protoclassic" (cf. Pring 1977 and Hammond 1984).

Associated ceramics are frequently recovered in the many primary deposits found in the archaeological record. Burials, caches, and refuse comprise these "special deposits" at Caracol; these contextually defined units provide the ceramicist with groupings of vessels that had meaning to the ancient Maya. But how should such deposits be interpreted? And what can be gained from studying these units? The Maya used various combinations of ceramics daily and for thousands of years. They clearly recognized functional groupings of vessels and often purposefully placed or accidentally left such groupings in the archaeological record. What comprises such groupings? How do such groupings change over time? And what can these units tell us about the Maya? These are the ultimate questions facing the archaeologist or analyst.

To attempt to describe, let alone understand the significance of contextual ceramic units requires an adequate sample. The Caracol sample of almost 500 defined special deposits containing ceramics, although large by most standards, is both tantalizing and taunting: tantalizing because of the insights to Classic Maya society that are alluded to, but taunting because it always seems as if just one more unit or context might clarify a nagging query.

At present it is possible to place many aspects of Caracol ceramics into the broader archaeological picture at the site. Face caches (Figure 13.7a,e) are not only typical of the Caracol region, but are also associated with Maya residential units in a consistent and predictive way, frequently occurring in connection with an eastern mortuary construction (Chase and Chase 1994b). There is a typical Late Classic Caracol burial subcomplex after A.D. 650 consisting of a single cylinder and a single tripod plate; even in multiple-person burials, these individual-specific offerings can be identified. Sometimes a bowl or another vessel is added to the subcomplex, mirroring a similar pattern defined for standard Late Classic burials at Tikal (Haviland et al. 1985:149). Even tombs are but an elaboration of this basic scheme. Viewing whole versus broken and incomplete ceramics is also significant. Partial vessels and skeletal remains of antiquated date are sometimes purposefully included in an interment (cf. Figures 13.2 and 13.4n-o). They are clearly intentional parts of the burial ritual, perhaps representing both the bones and possessions of an ancestral figure who helps the deceased with passage through the other world (D. Chase, this volume). Analysis of material found smashed on building floors has also proved productive. Terminal Classic refuse varies in composition and helps in defining how a given architectural complex was both used and viewed by the Maya; some architectural complexes and rooms yield ceramics reflective of expected domestic functions while others produce vessels related to specific ritual realms. For instance, tripod plates—assumed to represent utilitarian "serving ware" (cf. Fry

1979; Haviland et al. 1985:149) and so important to the Late Classic burial subcomplexes—are rarely found in trash deposits on building floors at Caracol, even when they are very extensive; complete tripod plates have only been recovered on the room and plaza floors from Caana (Figure 13.11b,c,e,o) and in mortuary subcomplexes (cf. Figure 13.10c), indicating that these plates had a function other than daily comestible use. Similarly, analysis of the Caracol incensarios suggests an uneven distribution at the site; it is as yet unclear whether this reflects minute temporal changes or coeval variation in ritual activities within different areas of the site.

The use of contextual units for comparisons fulfills type-variety-mode's goal of enabling an "archaeologist working at another site to recognize, without too much difficulty, whether or not the described types are present or absent at his site" (Sabloff 1975:3). The illustrations alone of any contextual ceramic analysis meet this stated goal (cf. Pendergast 1979 and Culbert 1993), but because the illustrated ceramics form meaningful associations, such a recognition is only the starting point for other potential research. Work at Caracol is already showing the utility of contextual analysis. It is expected that continued analysis of what and how vessels co-occur in conjunction with other archaeological data will eventually yield insights into the Maya economic system, social structure, and ritual patterns and proscriptions that once operated at Caracol.