

3 **BEFORE THE BOOM: CARACOL'S PRECLASSIC ERA**

Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase

A number of Preclassic constructions and deposits have been recovered during the course of 21 field seasons at Caracol. These materials indicate that isolated house groups existed in Caracol's extensive settlement area from as early as 600 B.C. The earliest materials recovered from the site epicenter thus far date no earlier than 300 B.C. Preclassic caches recovered in Caracol's A Group, associated with an early version of an "E Group" astronomical complex, indicates that the Preclassic site was "centered" in the A Group. Towards the end of the Preclassic, this focus may have shifted to the B Group at Caana, whose height by A.D. 150 was over 34 meters. Contextual review of the Caracol's A Group remains suggest that its major construction was associated with the initiation of Baktun 8 in the Maya calendar.

Introduction

The Preclassic Period is one of the most difficult to define and understand in the Maya lowlands. This is due to several factors. Preclassic materials are usually deeply buried under later occupation. Thus, often substantial earth must be removed to approach these remains, and many Preclassic remains have been disturbed and used for fill in later constructions. Of greater concern is the fact that Preclassic materials frequently do not follow patterns that can be identified for the succeeding Classic Period – specifically the practice of placing ritual items on a central structural axis. Using recognizable Classic Period patterns to guide excavations generally only serendipitously results in the recovery of Preclassic remains – and, in fact, may contribute to and under representation of Preclassic materials in archaeologically recovered samples. Preclassic remains, burials included, are often spread over a large spatial area, meaning that areal excavation is usually necessary to recover a meaningful sample. And, recovery is made all the more difficult by deeply buried remains. The dispersed spatial distribution also makes stratigraphic chronology building difficult, especially when many

Preclassic burials are accompanied by no more than a single ceramic vessels and little carbon is present to permit radiocarbon dating. Nevertheless, each Maya site that is excavated adds new pieces of knowledge to our overall understanding of this early time.

Preclassic remains at Caracol are spotty in their distribution. Those that have been recovered indicate that the time depth for the period is relatively shallow in the site epicenter, going back probably only into the second century B.C. However, one excavation in the settlement area recovered Preclassic remains dating several centuries earlier, indicating that people occupied the Vaca Plateau during the Middle Preclassic Period. While the earliest Maya may not be well represented in the Caracol investigations, the recovered materials are significant in demonstrating both the existence of early occupation in the Maya Mountains, away from permanent natural sources of water, and the timing and degree of Preclassic ceremonialism, especially as related to Baktun ceremonies.

Settlement Pattern Investigations: Special Deposit C119D-1

As a part of a National Science Foundation-sponsored northeast Caracol settlement

survey undertaken from 1994 through 1996 in an area ranging from 1 to 5 km distant from the site epicenter, approximately 40 residential groups were tested by a series of limited excavations and 2 residential groups had more extensive excavation. In both of the intensively excavated groups, Preclassic Period remains were recovered. The residential group nicknamed "Veracruz," located 4.5 km distant from the epicenter, witnessed the axial penetration of 5 of its 7 structures. The single western building in Veracruz was excavated with a 1.5 m by 3.3 m trench that was dug to bedrock (Figure 1). The western building was found to consist of a very decomposed building substructure set atop a larger platform, which itself had been raised in the past. At the base of the platform fill, two capstones were encountered set above a depression in the bedrock. Beneath the stones was a single flexed adult individual. Two ceramic vessels (1 whole and 1 partial) were set above the individual's head on an adjacent limestone ledge and a large flint axe was set under the knees; also recovered with the burial was a pyrite-inlaid shell and a jadeite bead. The recovery of this burial was fortuitous, as it is not directly related to the upper constructions. The pottery that accompanied this burial as well as the sherds included in the matrix that covered the body are the earliest yet recovered from Caracol. Stylistically, these materials may be dated to the Middle Preclassic era.

Settlement Pattern Investigations: Special Deposits C118F-7 and C118F-8

The second residential group intensively investigated under the NSF-sponsored northeast Caracol settlement research was nicknamed "Monterey" and was located approximately 250 m northeast of Veracruz (and nearly 5 km distant from the epicenter). Five buildings were investigated within the Monterey residential

group during the 1995 field season. An axial trench, measuring 8.4 m by 1.5 m, penetrated the eastern building and the plaza in front of it; this excavation succeeded in finding 7 caches and 4 burials (Figure 2). Four caches located within the core of the building may be related stratigraphically to each other and to eight sequent floors. The first two caches placed within the building are of interest here. The earliest cache (S.D. C118F-8) may be dated to the Late Preclassic Period based both on stratigraphy and on the style of the ceramic container found in the cache. A stratigraphically later deposit, S.D. C118F-7, is viewed as being transitional, dating to somewhere between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic. Special Deposit C118F-8 was placed within a specially constructed cavity sealed beneath the lowest floor (Floor 8) in the building. Three separate "finger bowl" vessels, associated with human finger bones, were set to one side of a larger urn. The urn itself was sealed with a lid and contained 6 shell beads and 3 small pieces of raw jadeite as well as a large limestone rock. Sometime after this deposit was made, the building was elevated 20 cm and a new plaster floor (Floor 7) was laid down. Before the next construction raised the building a further 35 cm, a hole was cut into Floor 7 and a lidded urn was placed into this hole, covered with a capstone, and then sealed within the fill for the new construction that was capped, in turn, by Floor 6. The contents of Special Deposit C118F-7 were more elaborate than those within the earlier urn. Like the materials in the earlier urn, however, limestone rocks ($n=7$) were layered above the objects placed in the bottom of the vessel. Objects in the urn included: 3 "Charlie Chaplin's" (e.g. Moholy-Nagy 1985:154), one each of obsidian, stone, and shell; 3 beads, one each of jadeite, quartzite, and shell; 2 flamingo-tongue drilled shells; 2 small drilled clam shells; and 2 other shell

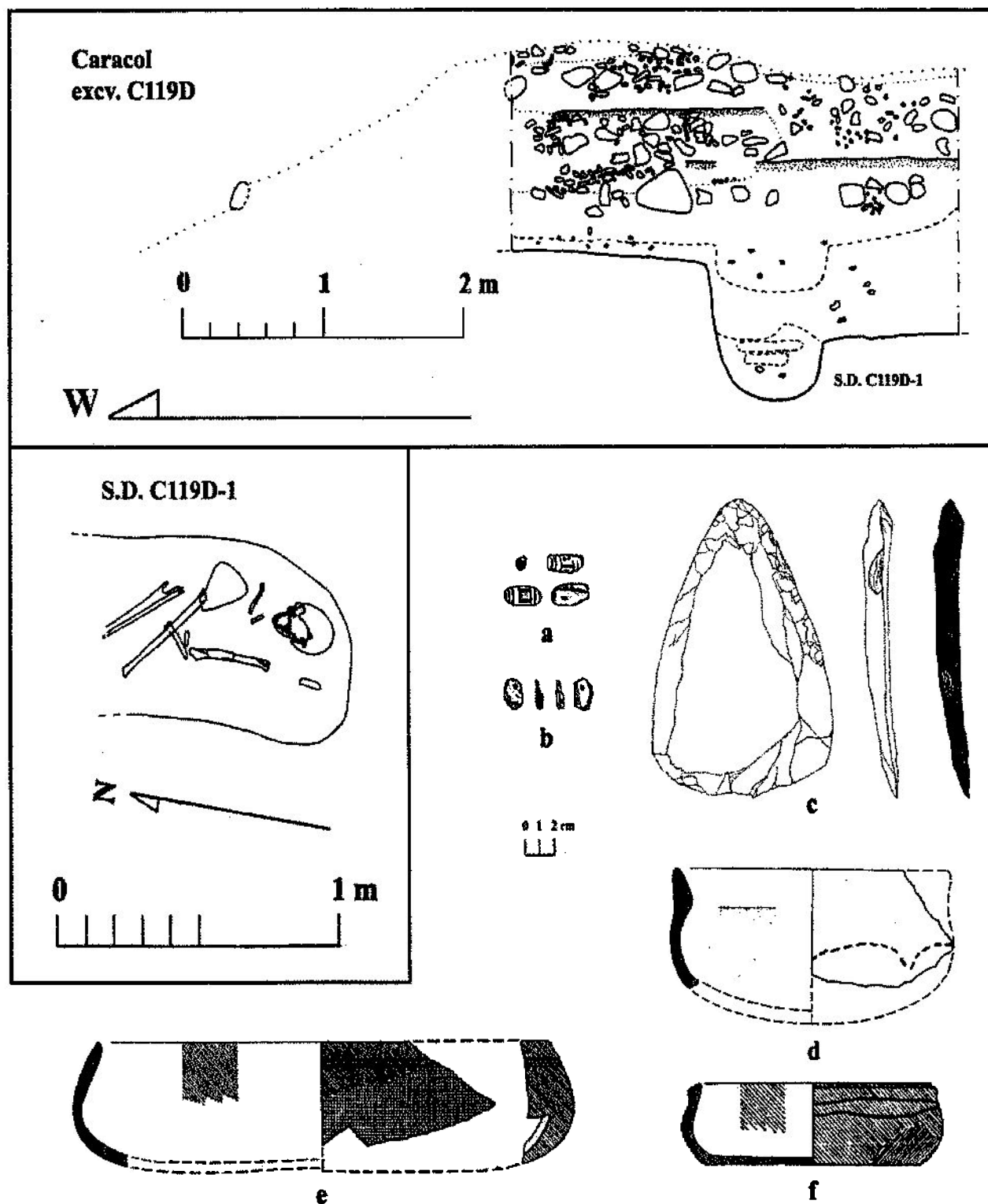


Figure 1. Caracol excavation C119D and associated burial, S.D. C119-1: a. olivella shell with hematite inlay; b. jadeite bead; c. flint axe; d.-f. pottery vessels (no types designated).

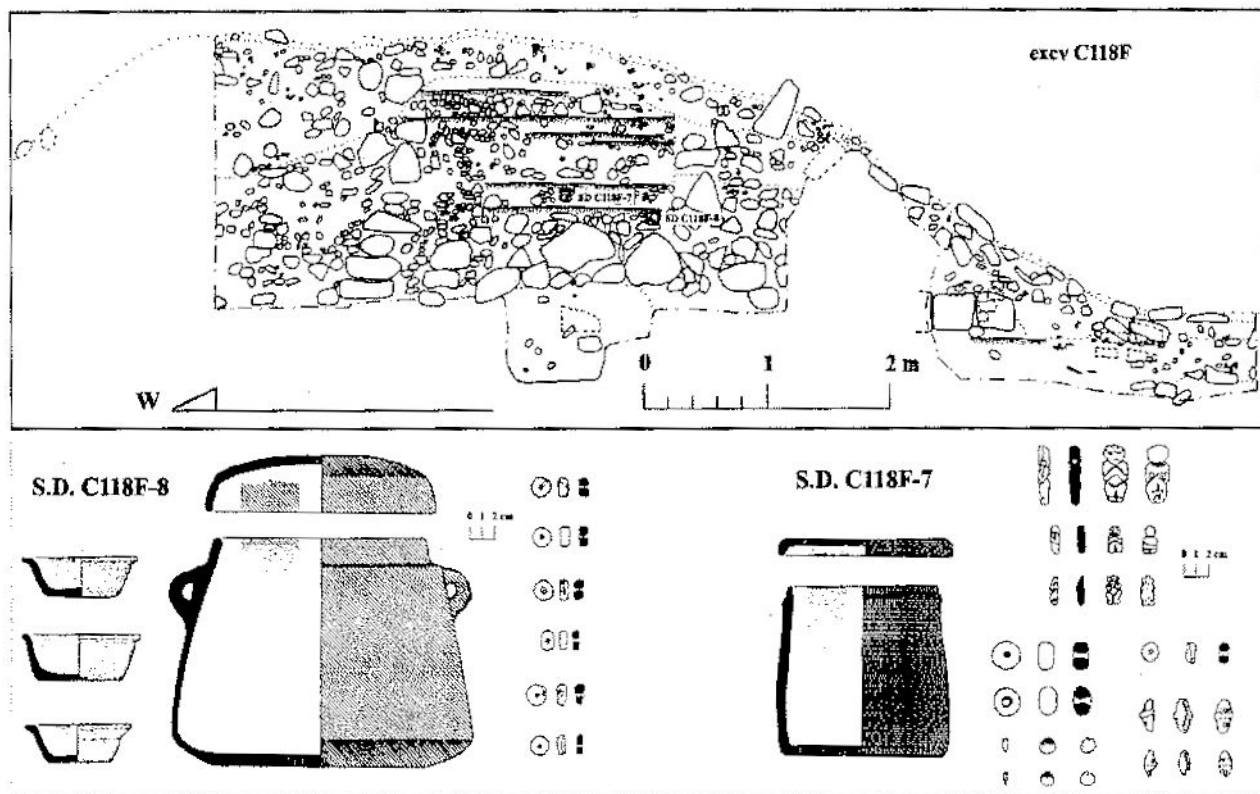


Figure 2. Caracol excavation C118F and early caches, S.D. C118F-8 and C118F-7; contents of two caches both illustrated.

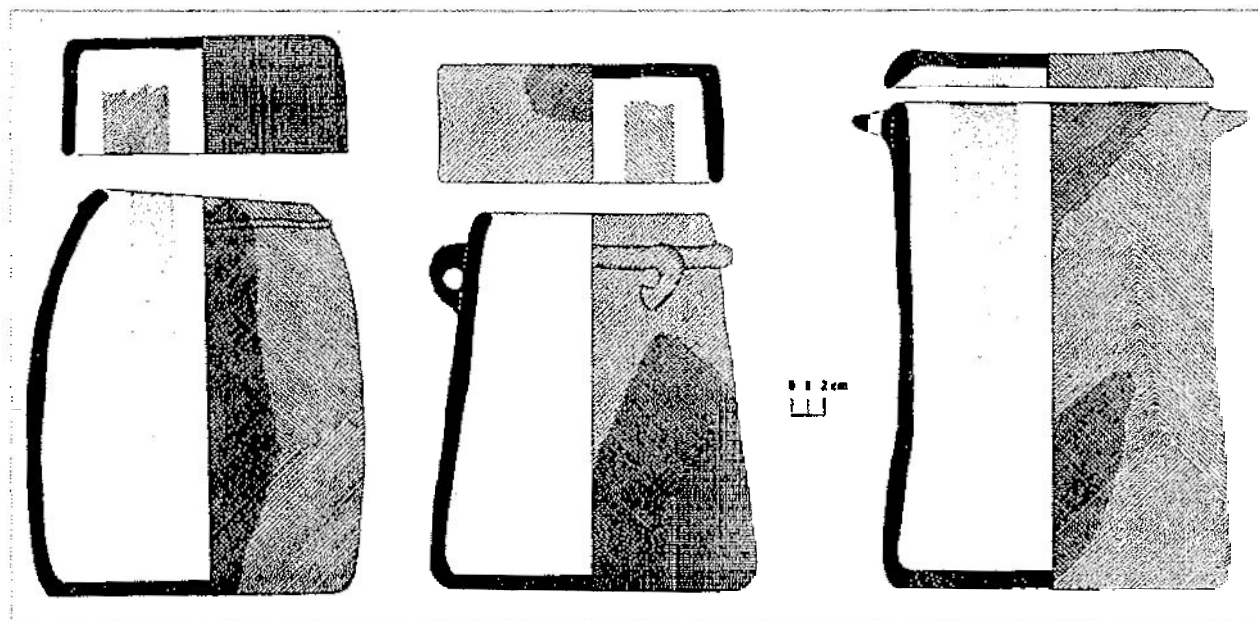


Figure 3. Cache vessels associated with Cahal Pichik Structure B (no types designated).

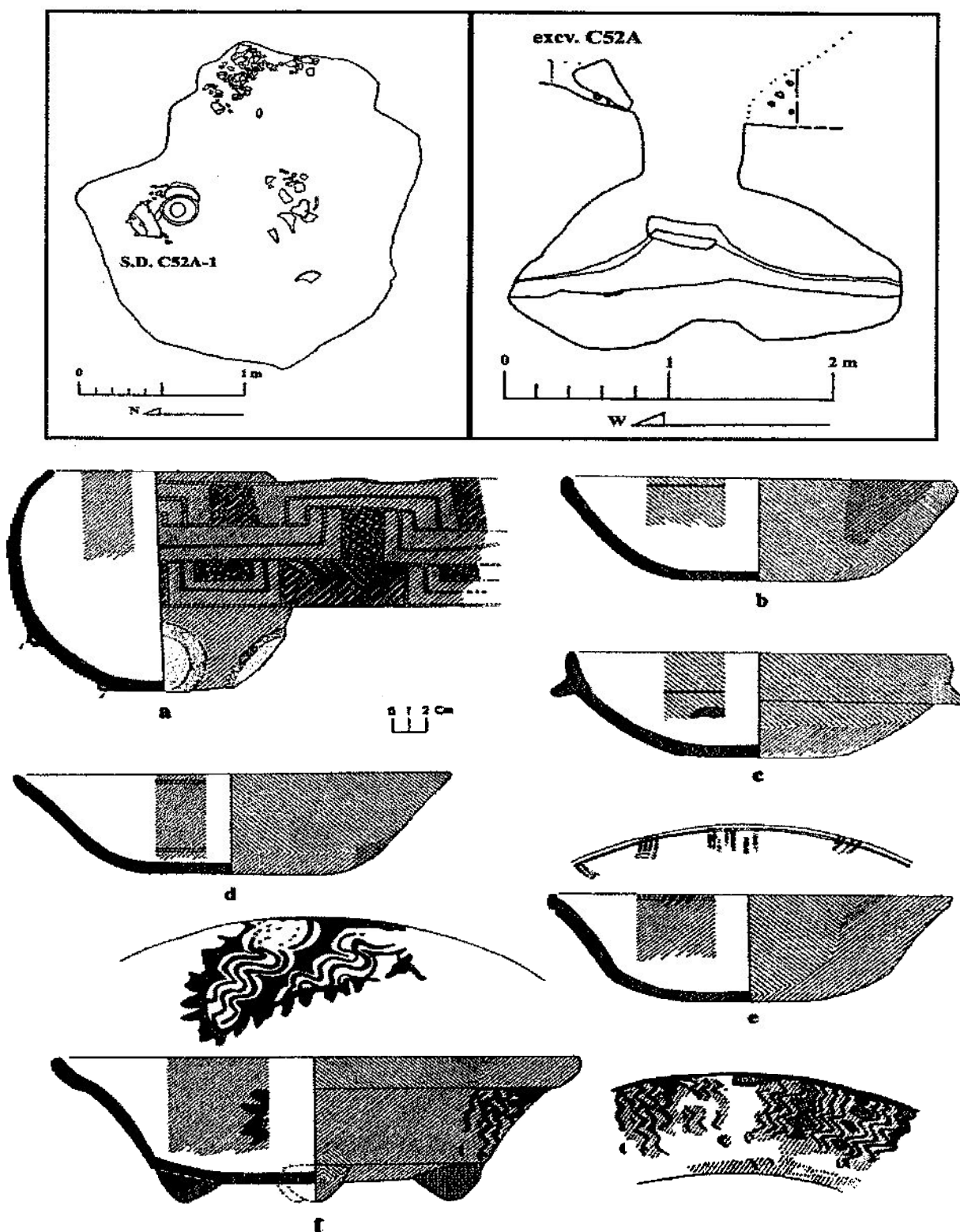


Figure 4. Special Deposit C52A-1 from within a chultun in excavation C52A: a. possibly Cay Incised; b.-e. Laguna Verde Incised; f. Sacluc Black-on-Orange

fragments. The subsequent cache within this stratigraphic sequence (S.D. C118F-6) was located two floors higher on top of Floor 4, was dated to the Early Classic, and included 2 soapstone and 2 shell Charlie Chaplin's as well as a Lion's Paw fan-shell.

Settlement Pattern Investigations: Cahal Pichik

In 1989 a causeway was followed from the Caracol epicenter to the terminus "site" of Cahal Pichik (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001), some 7.9 km distant. At this time a brief reconnaissance was undertaken of the site by the project. Cahal Pichik had originally been worked on by J. Eric S. Thompson (1931); more recently, John Morris (2004) has built on and better contextualized this earlier work. Thompson excavated several sites in the Mountain Cow region and illustrated Preclassic sherd materials from this area. One of the structures investigated by Thompson was Structure B at Cahal Pichik. Here, Thompson (1931:Plate 36) found a lip-to-lip cache located beneath a bench or altar set at the rear of a room atop the 13 m high substructure; the form of the containers indicates that this deposit can date no later than the Early Classic Period. By 1989 looters had made additional penetrations into the summit of Structure B and the Caracol Archaeological Project recovered several vessels from near the summit of this building. These vessels came from more deeply buried levels than those probed by Thompson. The vessels are clearly cache containers, most likely of Late Preclassic date (Figure 3).

Settlement Pattern Investigations: Special Deposit C52A-1

One of the hallmarks of chultuns at Caracol is that they often contain burials (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994, 2005; Hunter 1994).

Although the material within these chambers often dates to the Early Classic, occasionally Preclassic deposits are found. This is the case for one chultun excavated within a residential group (nicknamed "Blanca") some 3 km southeast of the site epicenter (Figure 4). Excavation here recovered three discrete clusters of bone within the base of the chultun. One of these clusters was the burial of 3 individuals (ages 5, 35, and undetermined) associated with 5 pottery vessels dating to the Late Preclassic Period. A sixth vessel with its tetrapod supports removed was found broken on the chultun floor as well as on bedrock at the entry point to the chamber.

Caracol Epicenter Investigations: Northeast Acropolis

The Structure B34 locus was intensively investigated during 1995 and 1996, resulting in the recovery of 9 burials and 6 caches. One of the burials recovered in 1995, a woman placed in front of Structure B34, traditionally would be placed in the Terminal Preclassic Period; however, the combined pottery suggests the possibility of Protoclassic dating. Special Deposit C117B-5 contained minimally 32 vessels, 2 ceramic figurines, 2 bone spindle whorls, 1 drilled river cobble, and 1 stingray spine (see A. Chase and D. Chase 2005:figure 1). In death she was also adorned with the trappings of the Maya moon goddess Ixchel, complete with dog teeth anklets and an elaborate mantle made up of over 7,000 shell and jadeite beads as well as a dog teeth fringe (see Rich 2003). The ceramics in this interment suggest a possible date of approximately A.D. 150 for the deposit.

Stratigraphically linked to this burial through sequent floors is a cache excavated in 2002 in front of the adjacent Structure B33. Special Deposit C117D-1 was sealed beneath the same floor that was penetrated

to place S.D. C117B-5; thus, it must be dated to an earlier time frame than the burial. The cache consisted of 2 unslipped bowls set lip-to-lip. Resting on the bottom bowl were 9 pomacia shells, 1 jadeite bead, 1 carved miniature stingray spine in mica, and 1 carved miniature stingray spine in conch shell.

Deeper excavation both in front of Structure B34 and in front of Structure B33 yielded deeply buried Preclassic constructions. While only the corner of a northern building was found in the 2002 probe, the 1996 excavation tunneled around and into the eastern Preclassic building to gain some semblance of its plan and time depth. In plan, the eastern Preclassic building in the Caracol Northeast Acropolis resembles the earliest structures recovered in Tikal's North Acropolis, specifically Tikal Structure 5D-Sub 11, which Coe (1990:242) dates to approximately B.C. 50. A layer of trash was found on the bedrock beneath the eastern Preclassic building and several partial vessels of Late Preclassic date were reconstructed from this material that would accord well with this dating.

Caracol Epicenter Investigations: Caana and South Acropolis

There was also substantial Preclassic activity in the vicinities of the South Acropolis and Caana. During the 2003 field season, a chultun was excavated in the South Acropolis that contained a single unit refuse deposit at its base from which approximately two dozen ceramic vessels could be reconstructed. These materials may be dated as transitional between the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic eras (see A. Chase and D. Chase 2005: figure 2). Excavations within Caana also attempted to find earlier remains. In most cases, deep penetration was halted by substantial quantities of dry core fill. However, it did prove possible to trench and tunnel into the Structure B19 substructure. An unsealed

Terminal Classic cache was found in the summit floor of Structure B19-1st (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004: figure 16.2). Based on a Special Deposit containing the body of a child, a finger cache, and a complete lidded incense burner, the summit fill for Structure B19-1st was placed at the beginning of the Late Classic Period. Penetration into Structure B19-2nd revealed several Early Classic cache deposits placed into the surface of B19-3rd. Deep tunneling in B19-3rd during the 1995 field season revealed only Preclassic ceramics in the core of this construction, suggesting that Structure B19-3rd and Caana had reached a height of 38 m (out of a preserved 43.5 m) by the end of the Late Preclassic Period.

Epicenter Investigations: A Group

The buildings in the Caracol A Group have long been known to form a Commemorative Astronomical Assemblage or "E Group" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995). Based on the archaeological work in Group E at Uaxactun, Guatemala (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Rupert 1940), this building arrangement was originally dated to the Early Classic Period. Further archaeological work, however, has demonstrated that some of these complexes date into the Middle Preclassic era (A. Chase 1983; Hansen 1992; Laporte and Fialko 1990), but that their heaviest use may be dated to the transition between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic Periods (A. Chase 1985; A. Chase and D. Chase 1995). The complex is generally agreed to represent some of the earliest public architecture at any given Maya site and to have been focal for that site's initial development as an urban center. As we (1995:100-101) have previously noted, an E Group "served as an architecturally standardized focal assemblage for integrating Late Preclassic and subsequently Early Classic Maya."

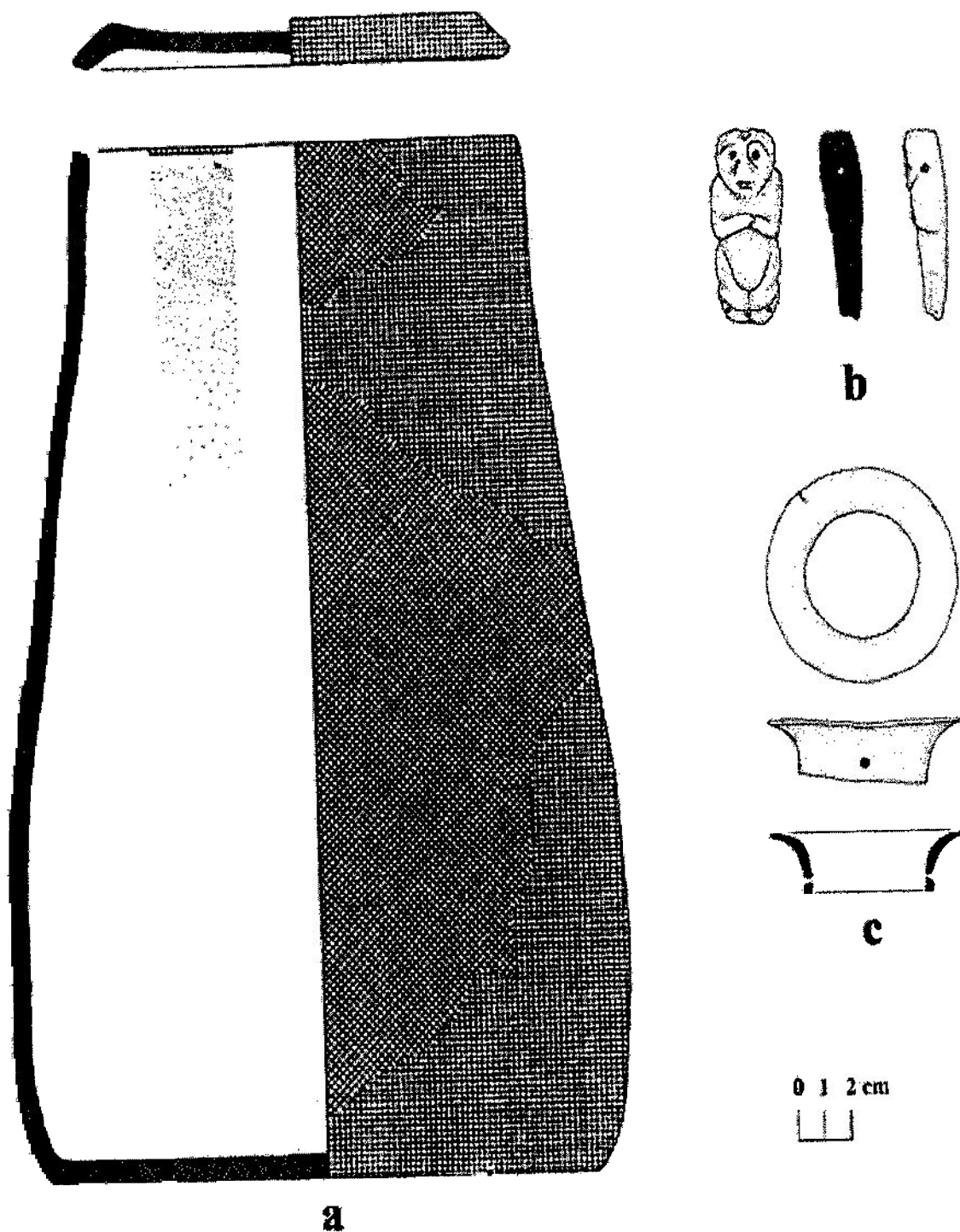


Figure 5. Cache vessel and two associated pieces of jadeite from within Caracol Structure A2.

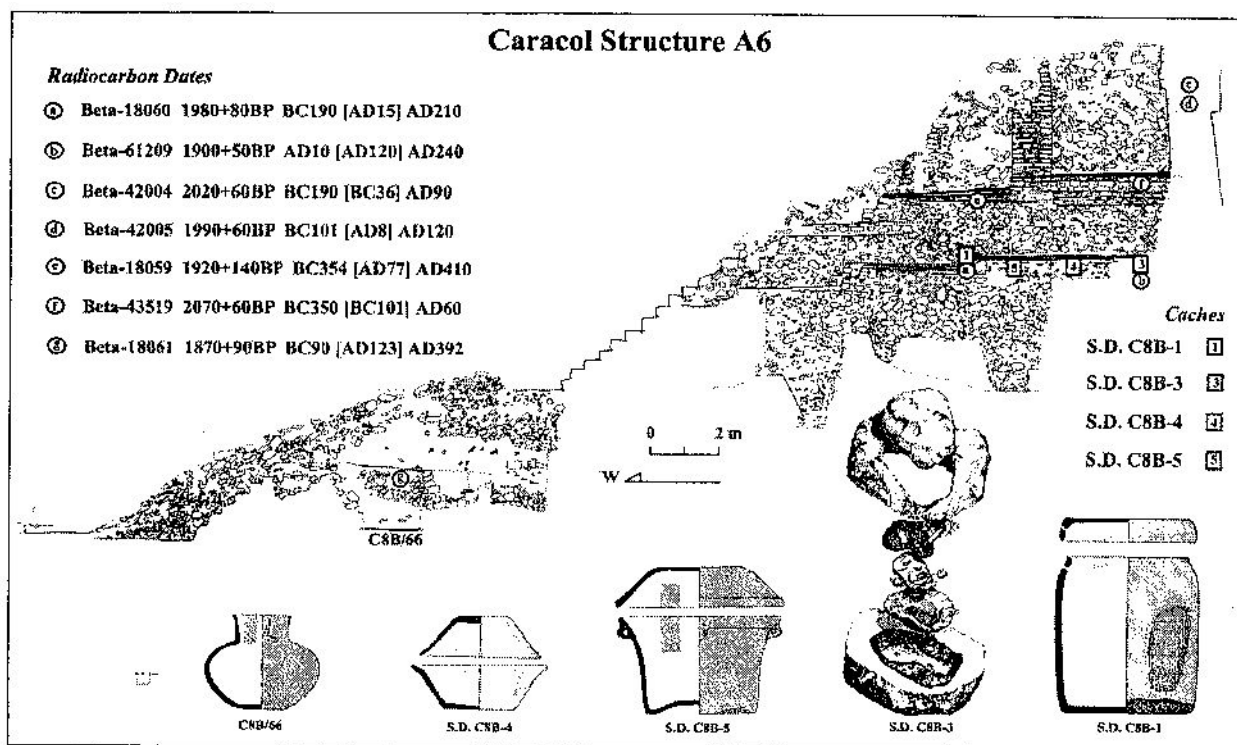


Figure 6. Section through Caracol Structure A6 illustrating placement of Preclassic vessels and caches as well as the location of associated radiocarbon dates.

populations, first ritually and then dynastically.”

The Caracol E Group is arranged around the site's A Plaza and is primarily defined by two constructions: the 25 m high Structure A2 on the western side of this plaza and the 85 m long raised platform on the eastern side of this plaza. The eastern platform underwent a series of building phases to reach its present state (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1995: figure 60). Initially constructed in the Late Preclassic Period, the eastern platform consisted of a long linear platform. Immediately east of this linear platform, Structure A6-2nd was constructed atop fills that may hide even earlier constructions. Two small structures were also added to the northern and southern extremes of the linear platform. With the construction of Structure A6-1st, the entire platform was raised in height and engulfed the smaller end constructions. Two structures (A5 and A7) located on the

northern and southern sides of Structure A6-1st were added in the Early Classic Period. Two other structures (A4 and A8) were added to the northern and southern ends of the platform in the Late Classic Period. A final structure was sandwiched in between Structures A5 and A6 at an even later date. Structure A6 continued to be used into the 10th century; the interior floors of the building were covered with ash, faunal material, small artifacts, and reconstructible ceramics (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000).

Structure A2 dominates the western side of the Caracol A Plaza. Its summit was excavated in 1990 and the base was penetrated in 1999. The basal penetration in 1999 recovered only Preclassic sherd materials in the construction core of Structure A2 and, apart from a single earlier basal step, could find no evidence for any other earlier construction. The excavation of Structure A2 undertaken in 1990

penetrated its summit to a depth of approximately 5 meters. In the course of these summit excavations, Caracol Stelae 22 and 23 were discovered (Grube 1994: figures 9.3 and 9.5); Caracol Stela 23 is an 8th cycle monument.

Also uncovered on the summit during the 1990 field season were four caches and one burial. The burial appeared to have been of Terminal Classic date, as was one of the caches placed beneath Altar 17. Two of the caches within the summit construction core were tentatively placed as being Early Classic in date; one cache consisted of 10 obsidian eccentrics, 1 obsidian lancet, and 4 jadeite spheres placed directly in fill; the second cache consisted of two large lip-to-lip bowls containing 6 pieces of coral and 4 shell fragments.

The third summit cache was located deep within the core of the structure in an open-air cist covered with capstones. A pyrite bead, a shell ring, and an unworked marine shell were found on top of the capstones. Once the capstones were removed, a large amount of material was recovered both outside of and within the tall ceramic urn (Figure 5) that occupied the airspace beneath the capstones. The urn was filled with a dirt matrix; excavation of this matrix revealed a host of artifacts in no particular order; these included: 11 unmodified sea shells, 1 shell tine, 9 shell fragments, 1 jadeite bead, 3 jadeite chips, 1 stingray spine, 4 shell Charlie Chaplins, 1 spondylus shell bead, 1 pearl bead, 2 drilled shells, 6 shell beads, 2 circular shell inlays, a large number of seed shells, a large amount of faunal material, and a red substance that was probably hematite. Material recovered in the cist outside the urn included: 1 jadeite figurine, 1 jadeite earflare, 2 pieces of coral, 7 whole marine shells, 2 drilled shells, 1 shell Charlie Chaplin's, 2 stingray spine fragments, faunal material, and 1 rounded sherd. The peculiar distribution of this

material in and outside of the urn and even on top of the capstones raises the issue as to whether or not this deposit was re-entered and disturbed in antiquity (see D. Chase and A. Chase 2003 for a description of kinds of tomb re-entries). The contents of this cache are broadly similar to the Structure A6 barrel cache described below. An earflare like the one found in this cache was also recovered in a residential cache, S.D. C147B-2, of unknown date north of the epicenter; as in the Structure A2 cache, this earflare was associated with a single jadeite figurine. The Structure A2 cache is dated as transitional between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic Period; it is probably not as early as the caches found in Structure A6.

Structure A6 dominates the eastern side of the Caracol A Plaza. Excavations were undertaken in Structure A6 in 1985, 1986, 1990, and 1991. These resulted in the recovery of a detailed stratigraphy related to two versions of Structure A6 as well as 5 caches and an early refuse deposit (Figure 6). Four of the caches and the early refuse deposit all date to the Late Preclassic Period. Most impressive are the four recovered caches, which may be dated by a series of radiocarbon dates as being no later than A.D. 10 to A.D. 60. The front refuse deposit yielded a date of 1870±90 BP (BC 90 [AD 123] AD 392).

The two earliest caches were both sealed within the core of Structure A6-2nd. Once the upper floor of Structure A6-2nd had been removed, a second lower floor was encountered. Cut through this floor was a circular pit that had been filled with marl; at the base of this pit S.D. C8B-4 had been placed. Special Deposit C8B-4 consisted of a pair of lip-to-lip bowls bedded on 1,165 grams of crushed and broken greenstone beads (estimated at over 200 beads). One shell bead and one jadeite bead comprised the entire contents of the lip-to-lip vessels. Following the excavation of this cache, the

second floor was removed to reveal a third floor for Structure A6-2nd. This floor, too, was penetrated by a single pit (2 m west of the upper deposit). A lidded urn, S.D. C8B-5, was recovered from within this pit. The contents of this urn included 1 spondylus shell pendent, 1 worked flamingo-tongue shell, 2 stingray spines, 1 shell bead, 1 jadeite bead, 1 pyrite mirror fragment, and the bones of 2 burnt quail. Both of these caches and their associated materials were sealed within Structure A6-2nd and certainly date well before the caches associated with Structure A6-1st.

Immediately prior to the construction of Structure A6-1st, a pit was dug into the uppermost floor of -2nd at its juncture with what had been its rear wall. A natural stone geode, containing an entry hole that had been sealed with red mud set around an artificially made stone lid, was set in the bottom of this pit. The open-air cache was then capped with stones and sealed under a layer of marl, which in turn was directly encased by the fill for Structure A6-1st. Inside the geode (S.D. C8B-3) was a layered set of artifacts, which had once been wrapped within a cloth, pieces of which were still preserved (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1995: figure 58). Set above paired spondylus shells was a single jadeite earflare with its central jadeite cylindrical spire still attached with stucco to the flare and with the remnants of a string still within this hollow bead – to which had surely been tied a pearl bead that was also recovered. Set around and in the spondylus shells were 913 pieces of malachite (167.8 grams) as well as 6.45 grams of jadeite chips. Four pumpkin seeds and one unidentified seed were also recovered from above the upper spondylus shell. Set in the lower of the two spondylus shells was a jadeite mask arranged in a bed of hematite with a jadeite jaguar claw pendant at its throat and 1 spondylus and 1 jadeite

bead to either side of the head, functioning as earrings. In the base of the stone geode, 684 grams of liquid mercury was recovered. Carbon associated with this cache yielded a date of 1900±50 BP (AD 10 [AD 120] AD 240).

Following the placement of S.D. C8B-3, Structure A6-1st was constructed. Over 2 meters of vertical fill were carefully laid as the foundation for this building platform. During a pause in the fill placement and prior to any formal building construction, a pit was dug back into Structure A6-2nd at the western extreme of what was to become the A6-1st rear room. A lidded barrel (S.D. C8B-1) was set in the bottom of this pit on top of approximately two dozen small land and sea shells. The contents of the urn were layered (see D. Chase 1988). The bottom of the urn was filled with 345 malachite pieces, upon which 2 mirrors had once been placed, indicated by the recovery of 279 pyrite/hematite inlay pieces and their decomposed backings. The upper part of the barrel was filled in with a beehive or honeycomb that was still intact. Immediately below this honeycomb were preserved pine needles, 27 pumpkin seeds, and 4 other unidentified seeds. Beneath these terrestrial items, but above the lower malachite and mirrors, were a host of other items (see Figure 7 for some of these): 41 stingray vertebrae, 4 whole stingray spines, 5 fragmentary stingray spines, 4 shark's teeth, seaweed, faunal material, cinnabar, burnt wood (?), 1 jadeite pendant, 1 jadeite turtle, 1 jadeite "whale," 1 jadeite flower earflare with central tubular bead, 9 jadeite beads, 1 large pearl, 1 small pearl, 1 shell fire serpent, 4 shell Charlie Chaplin's, 2 shell turtles, 3 shell "spines," 1 shell point, 2 pointed shells, 4 circular shell markers with inlays, 1 piece of coral, 1 shell with leather (?) attached to it, 15 natural shells, 1 large

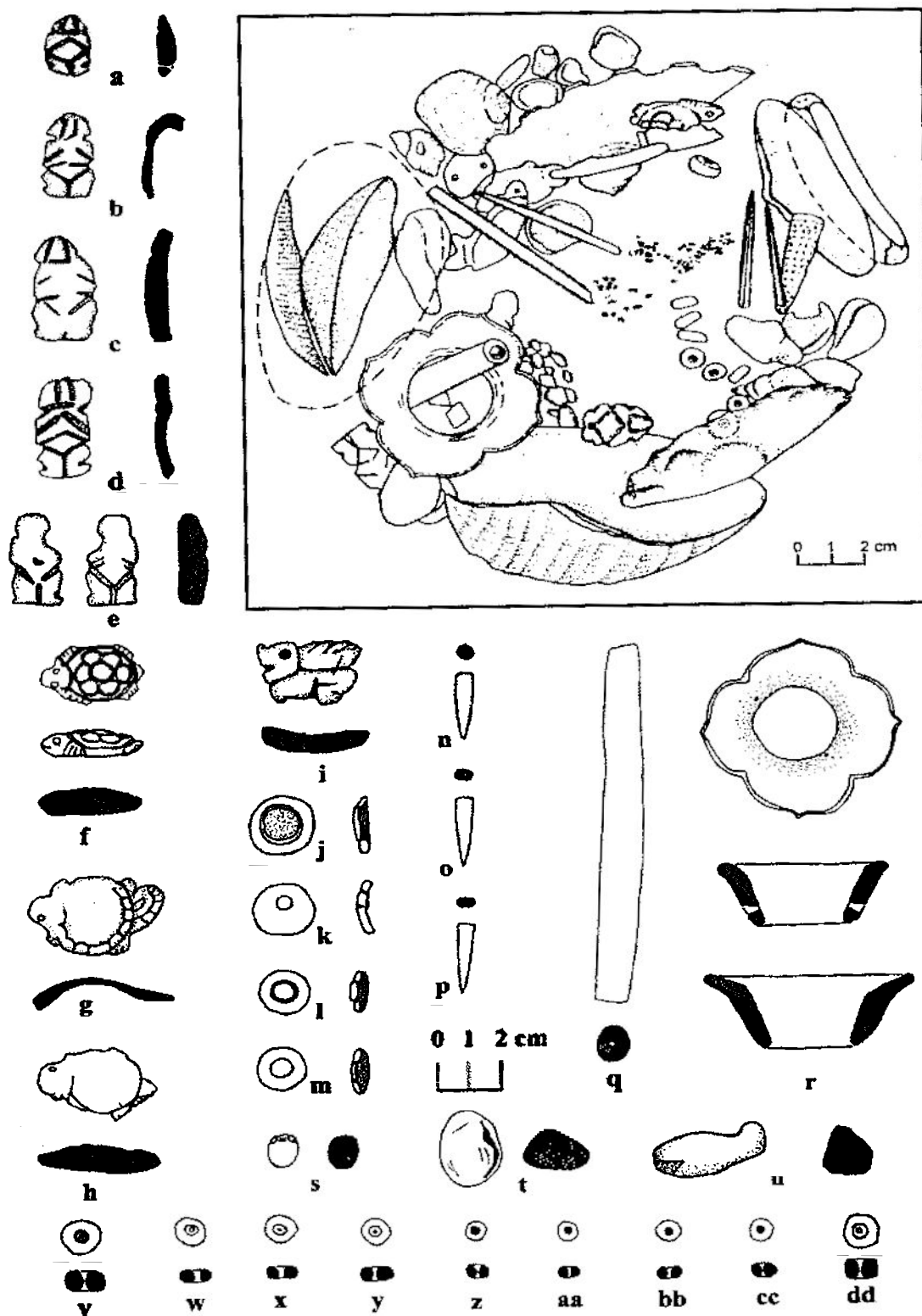


Figure 7. Partial contents of Caracol Special Deposit P8B-1 showing jadeite (a, f, q, r, t, u, v-dd), shell (b-e, g-p), and pearl (s) artifacts.

spondylus shell, 2 large scallop shells, 1 large clam shell, and 1 large fan shell. The large shells were placed in the urn oriented to cardinal directions, perhaps color-coded (D. Chase 1988; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Carbon from within the urn yielded a date of 1980±80 BP (BC 190 [AD 15] AD 210). Both of the caches associated with Structure A6-1st appear to have acted as cosmograms to center the building and, by extension, the site of Caracol.

Following the placement of this second cache, the formal construction of Structure A6-1st was finished. It may be that a wall cache was included above the decomposed beams in the southern interior doorway for a set of large jadeite earflares and a conch shell trumpet were recovered within the building collapse – well above the floor – in the interior of the edifice in the vicinity of this inner doorway. Structure A6-1st is called the “Temple of the Wooden Lintel” because of preserved wooden beams in its interior northern door. Portions of two of these beams, with bark attached, were radiocarbon dated to 2020±60 BP (BC 190 [BC 36] AD 90) and 1990±60 BP (BC 101 [AD 8] AD 120). Additional carbon samples were gathered from in situ burning on the sealed floors of Structure A6-1st. Two of these samples were submitted for dating because each was sealed and were directly above one of the two caches for Structure A6-1st. The first sample came from carbon on the 3rd lower floor in the rear room directly above S.D. C8B-3; it dated to 2070±60 BP (BC 350 [BC 101] AD 60). The second sample came from burning on the 4th lower floor in the front room directly above S.D. C8B-1; it dated to 1920±140 BP (BC 354 [AD 77] AD 410). Taken together, these four dates in combination with the two from S.D.s C8B-1 and C8B-3 indicate that the construction of Structure A6-1st was accomplished between A.D. 10 and A.D. 60.

Discussion

Krejci and Culbert (1995:111) surveyed Preclassic caching practices in the Maya lowlands [$n=84$] and commented on the overall poverty of items included within them, noting “they contain few objects and exhibit little variety. They are, in a word, very dull.” Most Preclassic caches consisted of no more than 1 or 2 jadeite beads or shell fragments with possibly flint or obsidian blades within a single pottery vessel; alternatively, a human skull and/or bones were included between two vessels. “The poverty of Preclassic caches is reflected across all the zones in our sample and is true even at sites where major architecture of Preclassic date was excavated” (Krejci and Culbert 1995:111). They (1995:113) further noted a dearth of caches at Tikal between A.D. 1 and A.D. 200 and commented that only after A.D. 325 did caches contain a great wealth of items. According to their study (Krejci and Culbert 1995:109), jadeite earflares, taken as a sign of status differentiation in wider Maya society, did not appear in caches until the Early Classic Period.

Excavations in the vicinity of Caracol’s A Group have recovered 19 caches. Of these 19 caches, 5 may be assigned a Preclassic date: 1 cache from Structure A2 and 4 caches from Structure A6. The 4 caches from Structure A6 are bounded by a series of radiocarbon dates and may be dated to no later than A.D. 10–60; a similar or slightly later date is probable for the Structure A2 cache as well. Based on the recovery of certain artifacts in the collapse of Structure A6, it is also suspected that a wall cache of Preclassic date was located above the beams of an inner door of the building’s rear room.

Caracol caching practices in the Preclassic Period appear to be precocious; especially when they are compared with the

dismal picture conjured up by Krejci and Culbert (1995) for the rest of the Preclassic Maya area. Most of the caches that can be assigned a dating to the Preclassic Period at Caracol provide evidence of significant ritual and "wealth" up to 300 years earlier than is found in the central Peten. The richness and diversity of the Caracol caches contrasts greatly with caches of similar date from Tikal and Uaxactun and also provides precedence for the caching patterns found at those two sites much later in the Early Classic Period. The opulence of the Caracol caches, their physical association with an early E Group (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995; or Commemorative Astronomical Complex, e.g. Laporte 1996), and their dating to between A.D. 10 and A.D. 60 further suggests that an argument can be made, following Rice (2004), that Caracol was a Preclassic *may ku* – or major center that hosted important cyclical ceremonies for a large portion of the Southern lowlands.

The dating of the Caracol caches in Structure A6 and, indeed, the dating suggested for Structure A6-1st – and, by extension, for the Caracol Commemorative Astronomical Complex – may be used to suggest that the physical construction and dedication of this group was undertaken in conjunction with – and, perhaps to specifically celebrate – both the arrival of Baktun 8 (8.0.0.0.0 Katun 9 Ahau) in A.D. 41 and the start of the *u kahlay katunob* or 256-year cyclical short count 20 years earlier in the Katun 11 Ahau ending in 7.19.0.0.0 or A.D. 21. The start of 8.0.0.0.0 or the Baktun 8 cycle was certainly of importance to the Maya – as was the Katun 11 Ahau start of a 256-year cycle (see Puleston 1979 and A. Chase 1991). The conjunction of the two cycles within a 20-year time span was also surely noticed by the ancient Maya. This 20-year span was as close as the Preclassic or Classic Period Maya would come to a temporal conjunction

of these two cycles – with the exception of the actual conjunction of Katun 11 Ahau and Baktun 6 in B.C. 747. Thus, the ritual caches associated with Caracol Structure A6 and, by extension, Caracol Structure A2 – the two major components of the site's Commemorative Astronomical Complex – may be linked temporally to activities that were undertaken to cosmologically center the site at the inception of Cycle 8.

Conclusion

Given the difficulties usually associated with recovering Preclassic Period remains, each site with reportable materials adds to our general interpretations of this time era. Preclassic deposits from Caracol, Belize, are not notable for their temporal priority. Given the extensive Late Classic built environment at Caracol, investigation of strictly Preclassic remains is particularly difficult; only one *excavated* locale clearly contained Middle Preclassic Period materials. However, the Caracol data are significant for their ability to define Late Preclassic ceremonialism to an extent not yet found elsewhere.

In contrast to current thought (Krejci and Culbert 1995), Late Preclassic caching practices at Caracol are prominent, impressive, and precocious. Five Late Preclassic caches investigated in the A Group vicinity presage defined Early Classic caching practices elsewhere in the Maya Lowlands by almost 300 years. Typical Late Preclassic Caracol caches contain multiple and varied items. Jadeite, shell, and other materials placed within stone and pottery containers appear to purposefully portray a now vanished cosmology. The cache items are often located around a central artifact – frequently a jadeite earflare or mask – and items were also layered and directionally oriented to reflect Maya worldview and probably myth. Stratigraphic associations and radiocarbon dates from the

caches themselves, from burnt floors above the caches, and from structural beams suggest that these elaborate ritual practices may have been correlated with significant calendrical cycles. Caches were placed and the final construction of the Structure A6 core was completed between AD 10 and AD 60. These dates correlate remarkably well with the arrival of Baktun 8 in AD 41 and the start of a 256 year *u kahlay katunob* in AD 21. Identification of the Caracol E Group with these important calendrical cycles also may be used to potentially date and explain the expansion of other E Groups throughout the Southern Maya lowlands and especially the southeastern Peten adjacent to Caracol, where Laporte (1996) has demonstrated a profusion of similar complexes. However, the extraordinary content of the Caracol caches suggests a prominent role for this site in these calendrical rituals and further suggests that even at this early date Caracol was at the acme of a wider political sphere.

While Preclassic investigations at Caracol have proved significant, these data still pose new questions. How large was the accompanying Late Preclassic occupation? Were Preclassic ritual seats of power primarily associated with calendrical time, following Rice's (2004) model? And, if so, how many of these Late Preclassic primary centers were there? Of even more interest, how does Caracol's prominence in the Late Preclassic relate to hieroglyphic texts indicating the start of its dynasty hundreds of years later (A. Chase et al. 1991)? Perhaps another katun of archaeological research will provide the answers.

Acknowledgments Excavation at Caracol, Belize has been funded from a variety of sources, including grants from the Ahau Foundation, the Stans Foundation, the Dart Foundation, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Science

Foundation (BNS-8619996, SBR-9311773, SBR-9709637, and DBI-0115837). Substantial monetary contribution also has been provided by the United States Agency for International Development, the Government of Belize, and the University of Central Florida. The work reported on here is indebted to the individuals who comprised Belize's Department of Archaeology and now form Belize's Institute of Archaeology; without their long-term aid and support, none of the research reported on here would have taken place. Part of this article is based on an earlier paper (*The Prepubescent Giant: Caracol before the Late Classic Period*) prepared in 1996 for the stillborn *Journal of Belizean Archaeology*; however, in the decade of research since this original presentation, our understanding of early Caracol has been greatly enhanced.

References Cited

- Chase, Arlen F.
1983 A Contextual Consideration of the Tayasal-Paxcaman Zone, El Peten, Guatemala, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (University Microfilms International No. 8406652).
- 1985 "Archaeology in the Maya Heartland: The Tayasal - Paxcaman Zone, Lake Peten, Guatemala," *Archaeology* 38(1):32-39. 1991 "Cycles of Time: Caracol in the Maya Realm," in M.G. Robertson, Ed., *Sixth Palenque Round Table, 1986, Vol. VII*, pp. 32-42, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Chase, Arlen F. and Diane Z. Chase
1994 "Details in the Archaeology of Caracol, Belize: An Introduction," in D.Z. Chase and A.F. Chase, Eds., *Studies in the Archaeology of Caracol, Belize*, pp. 1-11, Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute Monograph 7, San Francisco.
- 1995 "External Impetus, Internal Synthesis, and Standardization: E Group Assemblages and the Crystallization of Classic Maya

- Society in the Southern Lowlands," *Acta Mesoamericana* 8:87-101 (special issue edited by N. Grube entitled *The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization: The Transition from the Preclassic to Early Classic*) Markt Schwaben Verlag A. Surwein, Mockmuhl, Germany.
- 2001 "Ancient Maya Causeways and Site Organization at Caracol, Belize," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 12(2):273-281.
- 2004 "Terminal Classic Status-Linked Ceramics and the Maya "Collapse:" DeFacto Refuse at Caracol, Belize," in A. Demarest, P. Rice, D. Rice, Eds., *The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Transformation*, pp. 342-366, University of Colorado Press, Boulder.
- 2005 "The Early Classic Period at Caracol, Belize: Transitions, Complexity, and Methodological Issues in Maya Archaeology," In *Archaeological Investigations in the Eastern Maya Lowlands: Papers of the 2004 Belize Archaeology Symposium. Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology*, Volume 2: 17-38, Institute of Archaeology, National Institute of Culture and History, Belmopan, Belize.
- Chase, Arlen F., Nikolai Grube, and Diane Z. Chase
1991 "Three Terminal Classic Monuments from Caracol, Belize," *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing*, Number 36, Center for Maya Research, Washington, D.C.
- Chase, Diane Z.
1988 "Caches and Censerwares: Meaning from Maya Pottery," in L. Lackey and C. Kolb, Eds., *A Pot for All Reasons: Ceramic Ecology Revisited*, pp.81-104, Laboratory of Anthropology, Temple University, Philadelphia.
- Chase, Diane Z. and Arlen F. Chase
1998 "The Architectural Context of Caches, Burials, and Other Ritual Activities for the Classic Period Maya (as Reflected at Caracol, Belize)," in Stephen D. Houston, *Architecture*, pp. 299-332, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
- 2000 "Inferences about Abandonment: Maya Household Archaeology and Caracol, Belize" *Mayab* 13:67-77.
- 2003 "Secular, Sagrado, y Revisitado: La Profanacion, alteracion, y reconsagracion de los Antiguos Entierros Mayas," in A. Ciudad Ruiz, M.H. Ruz Sosa, and M.J.Iglesias Ponce de Leon, Eds., *Antropología de la Eternidad: La Muerte en la Cultura Maya*, pp. 255-277, Publicación 7, Sociedad de los Estudios Mayas, Madrid.
- Coe, William R.
1990 *Excavations in the Great Plaza, North Terrace, and North Acropolis of Tikal*, Tikal Report 14 (6 volumes), University Museum Publications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Grube, Nikolai
1994 "Epigraphic Research at Caracol, Belize," in D.Z. Chase and A. Chase, Eds., *Studies in the Archaeology of Caracol, Belize*, pp. 83-122, Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute Monograph 7, San Francisco.
- Hansen, Richard D.
1992 "The Archaeology of Ideology: A Study of Maya Preclassic Architectural Sculpture at Nakbe, Peten, Guatemala, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Hunter-Tate, Clarrisa C.
1994 "The Chultuns of Caracol," in D.Z. Chase and A. Chase, Eds., *Studies in the Archaeology of Caracol, Belize*, pp. 64-75, Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute Monograph 7, San Francisco.
- Krejci, Estella and T. Patrick Culbert
1995 "Preclassic and Early Classic Burials and Caches in the Maya Lowlands," *Acta Mesoamericana* 8:103-116 (special issue edited by N. Grube entitled *The Emergence of Lowland Maya Civilization: The Transition from the Preclassic to Early Classic*) Markt Schwaben Verlag A. Surwein, Mockmuhl, Germany.
- Laporte, Juan Pedro
1996 *Organizacion territorial y politica prehispánica en el sureste de Peten*, Atlas

Arqueologico de Guatemala No. 4, Instituto de Antropología y Historia, Guatemala City.

301, Anthropological Series, Vol. 17, No. 3, Chicago.

Laporte, Juan Pedro and Vilma Fialko C.

- 1990 "New Perspectives on Old Problems: Dynastic References for Early Classic Tikal," in F.S. Clancy and P.D. Harrison, Eds., *Vision and Revision in Maya Studies*, pp. 33-66, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Moholy-Nagy, Hattula

- 1985 "Social and Ceremonial Uses of Marine Mollusks at Tikal," in M. Pohl, Ed., *Prehistoric Lowland Maya Environment and Subsistence Economy*, pp. 145-158, Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Volume 77, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Morris, John

- 2004 "Mountain Cow: Survey, Excavations, and Interpretations," In *Archaeological Investigations in the Eastern Maya Lowlands: Papers of the 2004 Belize Archaeology Symposium. Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology*, Volume 1: 129-153, Institute of Archaeology, National Institute of Culture and History, Belmopan, Belize.

Puleston, Dennis E.

- 1979 "An Epistemology Pathology and the Collapse, or Why the Maya Kept the Short Count," in N. Hammond and G.R. Willey, Eds., *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, pp. 63-71, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Rice, Prudence M.

- 2004 *Maya Political Science: Time, Astronomy, and the Cosmos*, University of Texas Press, Austin.

Rich, Shayna

- 2003 An Analysis of Female Protoclassic Costume from the Site of Caracol, Belize, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Maya Studies/Liberal Studies, University of Central Florida, Orlando.

Thompson, J. Eric S.

- 1931 *Archaeological Investigations in the Southern Cayo District, British Honduras*, Field Museum of Natural History Publication