
2 "THIS IS THE END:" ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRANSITIONS AND THE TERMINAL CLASSIC PERIOD AT CARACOL, BELIZE

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Ongoing excavations at Caracol, Belize have yielded a significant amount of data pertinent to the Terminal Classic Period. These data are especially relevant to interpretations of the Southern lowland Maya collapse. Caracol has produced meaningful temporal and spatial data that help to expose conceptual problems in the identification, interpretation, and dating of Terminal Classic contexts. Of particular interest have been the on-floor ceramics in many of Caracol's central buildings that have been systematically collected, assembled, and illustrated over more than two decades. These materials not only provide information relative to sub-assemblages of vessels that were physically used together, but also allow latest building (and, in some cases, room) function to be inferred. These ceramic sub-assemblages also contain trade items that permit insight into the social and economic relationships that were maintained by Caracol's latest inhabitants. Ceramics that was used in the site's extensive settlement system can be compared with ceramics used at the site epicenter, which reveals the use of two distinct ceramic sub-complexes, by Caracol's inhabitants during the Terminal Classic era. When combined with other data classes, the archaeology from Caracol permits a detailed understanding of what transpired at the site before its final abandonment.

Introduction

There are a series of times in Maya "prehistory" when there appears to be rapid change, providing challenges to archaeological interpretation. When such transitions are accompanied by alterations in material culture that affect only one segment of any given society, archaeological analysis may be hampered, particularly if sampling design and preconceived models do not readily lead to the identification of contemporary variation. This is especially true for the transition between the Preclassic and Classic Periods in the Maya area - sometimes called the "Protoclassic" - and is also the case for the transition between the Classic and Postclassic eras - usually called the "Terminal Classic Period." At Caracol, Belize, the Terminal Classic Period elite material culture changed, but the material culture used by the bulk of the population remained relatively constant. The recognition of this fact has clear repercussions for reconstructions of the

Terminal Classic Period and the Classic Maya collapse.

The Terminal Classic

The Terminal Classic era, dating from approximately A.D. 780 through A.D. 900, is key to interpretations of the ancient Maya because it precedes or is conjoined with the abandonment of many of the larger cities. The Terminal Classic has proven particularly enigmatic, especially as hieroglyphic texts do not generally exist to guide the archaeologist - and material culture was in the process of changing - as were traditional interment patterns and other aspects of the archaeological record (e.g. D. Chase and A. Chase 2006).

While broadly recognized as being the latest temporal era before the Classic Maya collapse, traditionally the Terminal Classic was identified only in terms of recognized ceramic type fossils. As originally defined for Uaxactun, Guatemala (and subsequently elsewhere), Terminal Classic ceramics were the detritus left over when recognized "Late Classic" types were

removed from analyzed samples (Smith 1955). Unfortunately, while various scholars have noted problems in the identification of Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic materials (e.g. Pendergast 1986, 1990), a full contextual revision of Terminal Classic ceramics and other artifactual materials has not yet taken place. Type fossils continue to be used to define the transition between the Late Classic and Postclassic Periods.

Several factors led to this over-dependence on specific ceramic subsets to recognize the Terminal Classic time period (see also A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a: 344). Grounded in an older model of Maya sites as vacant ceremonial centers, there was a widespread, but mistaken, belief that palace buildings were not lived in, being only sporadically used. If they were not true residences, there would be no contemporary garbage associated with building floors. Thus, there was no intentional searching for *in situ* remains, it was a foregone conclusion that none existed. The end result was a self-fulfilling prophecy in which previously identified type-fossil ceramic types took on a meaning of their own and became the only way to recognize the Terminal Classic Period.

Because many of the last remains at any site were never sealed in construction, archaeologists have had methodological problems interpreting these data. Material found during the excavation of buildings often appeared to be extremely broken and fragmentary; the assumption was that these artifacts were remnants of later re-occupation. The material in the humus and overlying plazas and latest constructions was viewed as being unusable analytically (e.g. Adams 1971). The type fossil approach to the Terminal Classic, in conjunction with the cessation of dated monument erection, led to views of rapid depopulation at sites like Tikal, Guatemala;

in fact, the type fossils were ascribed to subsequent squatters living in collapsing buildings (Culbert 1973). Yet, the archaeological reality is likely something very different, if the conclusions derived from Caracol can be extended to other sites.

The earlier assumptions that Classic Maya buildings did not have use-related material associated with their floors have been laid to rest by archaeological work at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a, 2005; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000) and at other sites like Aguateca (Innomata 1997; Innomata and Triadan 2000) and, even further such as Xochicalco (Webb and Hirth 2003) that emphatically demonstrate that *de facto* refuse may indeed be found. However, these various projects also have shown that any consideration of the Terminal Classic requires a critical and careful use of data that interdigitates laboratory analysis with field methodology.

Areal clearing of building rooms and platforms at Caracol has revealed that many are associated with abandonment materials. Some of the materials are pottery and artifacts left where they were in the process of being used. Others constitute "sheet refuse" (Schiffer 1987), items thrown or placed in a certain area for later trash disposal. Refuse not only includes pottery but also burnt animal bone and the remains of craft production activities. However, in all of these instances, the debris is composed of **reconstructable** vessels and broken artifacts that were clearly used at that locus. In a few rare cases, Terminal Classic trash was compacted into units of fill that were meant to form a building block for a larger, but never completed, construction.

These kinds of contexts shift the focus of archaeological study to a close collaboration between the analyst and the excavator (e.g., Berggren and Hodder 2003). Rather than simply counting and typing sherds, the analyst can reconstruct whole

vessels, deduce minimum vessel counts, and hopefully see what the entire assemblage or sub-assemblage looked like in specific contexts. Ceramic vessel forms can be combined with other remains, such as faunal materials, to more fully delineate ancient activities. This approach better permits an interpretation of specific contexts. The archaeological focus becomes the functional study and analysis of deposits as well as the delineation of assemblages, sub-assemblages, and subcomplexes – and the identification of single-point-in-time abandonment materials; this allows for better intra-site dating and inter-site cross dating. Thus, not only does a consideration of abandonment materials lead to interpretations of function, but they also lead to refined dating of materials not usually possible in traditional analyses in other than burial or cache contexts.

When archaeological materials are considered in this holistic way, different paradigms and interpretations may evolve. This can be seen in the research that has been undertaken at El Ceren, El Salvador, by Payson Sheets (1998) and his colleagues (Sheets et al. 1990) where ancient community structure is being postulated and commonly held assumptions about the dating and distribution of archaeological materials have been challenged. Similarly, there are other excavated contexts in the Southern lowlands that have served as “Rosetta stones” for the Terminal Classic Period. In particular, we wish to talk about contexts that we have excavated at Nohmul, Belize in the late 1970s and, more recently, at Caracol. Contexts at both of these sites were and are important to resolving lingering questions of cross dating in the Maya lowlands and elsewhere in Mesoamerica. They also have an impact on interpretations of the Classic Maya collapse.

Nohmul, Belize

In order to investigate the transition between the Postclassic and Classic Periods, Structure 20 at Nohmul, Belize was selected for excavation by analyzing mapped settlement. The construction seemed oddly out of place in the eastern plaza of the Nohmul epicenter, as it blocked access to two other range structures. Its low square form also seemed out of place in the repertoire of Classic Period architecture. With these facts in mind, we excavated Nohmul Structure 20 in 1978 with the aid of Norman Hammond’s Corozal Project, which was excavating at Cuello at the time. In 1979 we returned to excavate an anomalously placed Nohmul Structure 9 (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982; D. Chase 1982a, 1982b).

The two structures excavated at Nohmul both proved to be single-phase constructions built directly on the latest plaza floor in the eastern plaza at that site. Besides being stratigraphically late, both buildings were also of unusual form. Subsequently defined as a patio-quad, Structure 20 proved to be almost identical in size to others only known from the site of Chichen Itza; Structure 9 proved to be a round platform and building, almost identical in size to an earlier version of Chichen Itza’s famous Caracol (not to be confused with the site of that name in central Belize). Thus, architecturally, both buildings appeared out of place in northern Belize and had some obvious bearing on the occupation at Nohmul just prior to its abandonment.

Even more surprising than the architecture were the ceramic materials. Within the fill of Structure 9 and abutting the rear of Structure 20 were the same kinds of pottery. The materials associated with Structure 20, however, included both *in situ* de facto debris and sheet refuse, indicating coeval use of diverse ceramic types that

could be largely reconstructed. Based on cross-fits between small sherds in the interior patio area of Structure 20 and the more complete shattered vessels in the alley behind the building, we were able to show that the materials behind the building had once been used within the edifice. The Structure 20 vessels consisted of a series of finewares and cooking vessels that included local and imported slatewares, local blackwares and redwares, red and cream tricklewares, as well as a grater bowl, a drum, and a San Jose V serving platter (Figure 1). Functionally, the building minimally had been used to feed and presumably entertain a group of high status individuals. Temporally, this excavated pottery proved to be a ceramic stone for aligning Terminal Classic ceramic sequences between the Northern and Southern lowlands (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982).

At the time of our Nohmul excavations, Chichen Itza was widely viewed as a Postclassic site (some books still incorrectly place Chichen Itza in this time horizon; e.g. M. Coe 2005). Archaeologists now recognize that the bulk of Chichen Itza's architecture and occupation date to the Terminal Classic Period (Cobos 1999, 2004; Ringle et al. 1998). Much of the older temporal argument that placed Chichen Itza in the Postclassic Period derived from Tozzer's (1957) ethnohistoric interpretation of Chichen Itza and the ceramic alignment of the Sotuta, Hocaba, and Cehpech ceramic complexes (Brainerd 1958; Smith 1971; A. Chase and D. Chase 1985). What the data from Nohmul showed were problems in the then accepted sequential ceramic dating of Northern lowland pottery by demonstrating that several diagnostic types found in the Cehpech and the Sotuta ceramic complexes had to be coeval with other materials

designated as being Terminal Classic in the Southern lowlands (San Jose V and local northern Belize wares). Thus, a single functional context (Structure 20) from an outlier site (Nohmul, Belize), probably only peripherally related to more main-stream interactions, provided a ceramic Rosetta stone for cross-dating and re-evaluating commonly held temporal suppositions and paradigms regarding the Terminal Classic Period.

Santa Rita Corozal, Belize

Our Nohmul experience with use-related materials replayed itself at Santa Rita Corozal between 1979 and 1985, but only in Postclassic contexts. At Santa Rita Corozal we were able to find abundant Late Postclassic abandonment materials in association with architectural remains and to make functional interpretations of sub-assemblages and ritual patterns (D. Chase 1982a, 1985a, 1985b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2000). However, *in situ* earlier Terminal Classic Period deposits remained elusive. While abundant and having many of the same local types as were found at Nohmul, most of the Terminal Classic ceramics at Santa Rita Corozal occurred in building fill. Nowhere was sheet refuse of a Terminal Classic date located and the stratigraphic sequence indicated a disjunction between the Terminal Classic and Postclassic Periods.

Caracol, Belize

Given our success with recovering abandonment materials at both Nohmul and Santa Rita Corozal, the recovery of these kinds of deposits was one of our initial goals when we started excavations at Caracol in 1985. By our second season at Caracol, we had already identified *in situ* on floor remains associated with both Structures A3 and B19. By our fourth field season in 1988, we were excavating abandonment

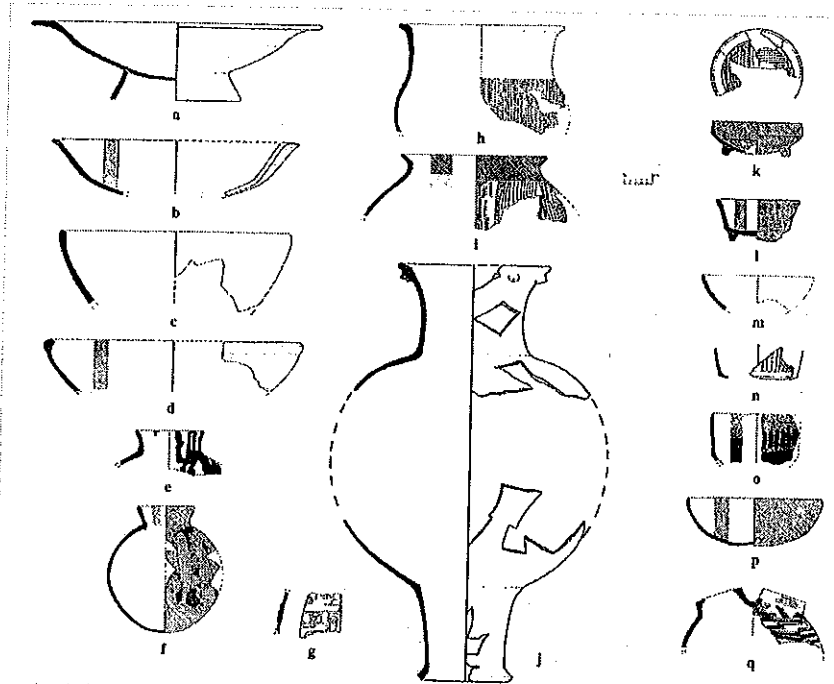


Figure 1. Terminal Classic pottery associated with Nohmul Structures 9 and 20: a. Kik Red; b. Taak Orange-Red; c. Ohel Red; d. Campbells Red; e. Sansomal Black-on-Cream; f. Chacil Red-on-Black; g. Tzibana Gouged-Incised; h. Chambel Striated; i. Red Neck Mother Striated; j. Chembeku Modeled; k. Xixilic Incised; l. Metzabok Slate; m. Savinal Cream; n. Usukum Gouged-Incised; o. Achiote Black; p. Kik Red; o. Buyuk Striated.

materials associated with palace buildings on Caana. The recognition that these materials were associated with palaces meant that an inordinate amount of time was spent on articulation between the fieldwork and the laboratory work so that both could inform each other in a feedback relationship. And, if palaces were to be cleared, there was also a need for stabilization. With this in mind and in consort with the then Belize Department of Archaeology, we approached the United States Agency for International Development in 1988 for funds for tourism development. When these were awarded, we were able to begin to excavate palaces and range structures in earnest and, in the process, recovered abundant *in situ* artifactual materials that could be used for functional and temporal information. Later, with the assistance of the Tourism Development Project directed by Dr. Jaime Awe, we were able to continue the areal

clearing of Caracol's palaces. Even more recently, we have recovered abandonment materials in a non-palace context that serves as a second Rosetta stone for cross-dating Terminal Classic ceramics with wider portions of Belize and Mesoamerica.

However, the recognition of Caracol's Terminal Classic Period material expression was a long-term negotiation with the archaeological record. In spite of extensive excavation in more than 107 residential groups at the site, the recovery of easily recognizable Terminal Classic remains proved somewhat problematic. When refuse was found in the outlying settlement, it was usually comprised of utilitarian vessels that could not be tightly dated as to type (e.g. A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a: 354). Burial units that contained ceramics in the settlement area tended to contain ceramic vessels that could be labeled as generically "Late Classic." Only in a few

cases could Terminal Classic contexts be easily identified – and, even in these contexts, some of the vessels could just as easily have been labeled “Late Classic.” Nevertheless, the widespread occurrence of Terminal Classic pottery in isolated contexts in the settlement area indicated that Caracol was occupied during this time period and that population numbers were likely significant; minimally 25% of residential groups, and probably at least double this figure, may be assigned a Terminal Classic Period dating (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005:85). However, the bulk of the ceramics that were used in these clearly late residential groups are difficult to sort as to time; many are more comfortable with simply a “Late Classic” designation.

This is not the case in the site epicenter. In contrast with the more temporally amorphous materials found in Caracol’s outlying settlement, the large numbers of ceramics that have been recovered from the floors of Caracol’s epicentral buildings are quite consistent among the different palaces and contain pieces that would be at home in Terminal Classic assemblages elsewhere in the Southern Maya lowlands. However, isolated and recognizable finewares and domestic Terminal Classic pottery sufficiently occurs in the core settlement to demonstrate temporal overlap with the palace remains.

The Caracol research has shown that minimally two distinct sub-assemblages were in use during the Terminal Classic Period at the site. One sub-assemblage, found in Caracol’s residential groups, continued to use local utilitarian and fineware ceramics with only the occasional inclusion of pieces easily defined as Terminal Classic from the second sub-assemblage. The second sub-assemblage, associated with Caracol’s epicentral palaces,

used distinctive fineware ceramics that in some cases are tradewares and in other cases are local imitations of forms and decoration found elsewhere in the Maya lowlands; utilitarian wares in the epicenter are a combination of local and non-local styles. Because the one ceramic sub-assemblage is almost always associated with palaces and the other occurs more frequently in non-elite contexts, we (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a, 2005) have referred to these different sub-assemblages as “class-linked ceramics.”

The epicentral Terminal Classic palace ceramics are quite plentiful and each recovered sub-assemblage contains materials that correlate it to other epicentral sub-assemblages. In contrast, however, the site’s epicentral burial ceramics that may be dated to the Terminal Classic (Figure 2a-c,e) mirror ceramics found in Late Classic contexts from throughout the site. While the late burials can be sorted out stratigraphically, ceramically, they are difficult to clearly distinguish from more generic Late Classic Period interments. Epicentral caching practices demonstrate that polychrome ceramics, presumably imported to Caracol, also continued to be used in the Terminal Classic Period (Figure 2d).

Interestingly, among the first Terminal Classic associations uncovered was the pairing of incensarios in Caracol’s temples, a pattern also found in the later Postclassic Period at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase 1988). Paired Terminal Classic incensarios have been found in association with three Caracol temples - Structures A3, A6, and B19. A double pair of incensarios also occurs with Structure A31. The incensario forms are both local and exotic. The pairings and their locations are highly symbolic. However, non-paired incensarios are associated with two palace rooms on the

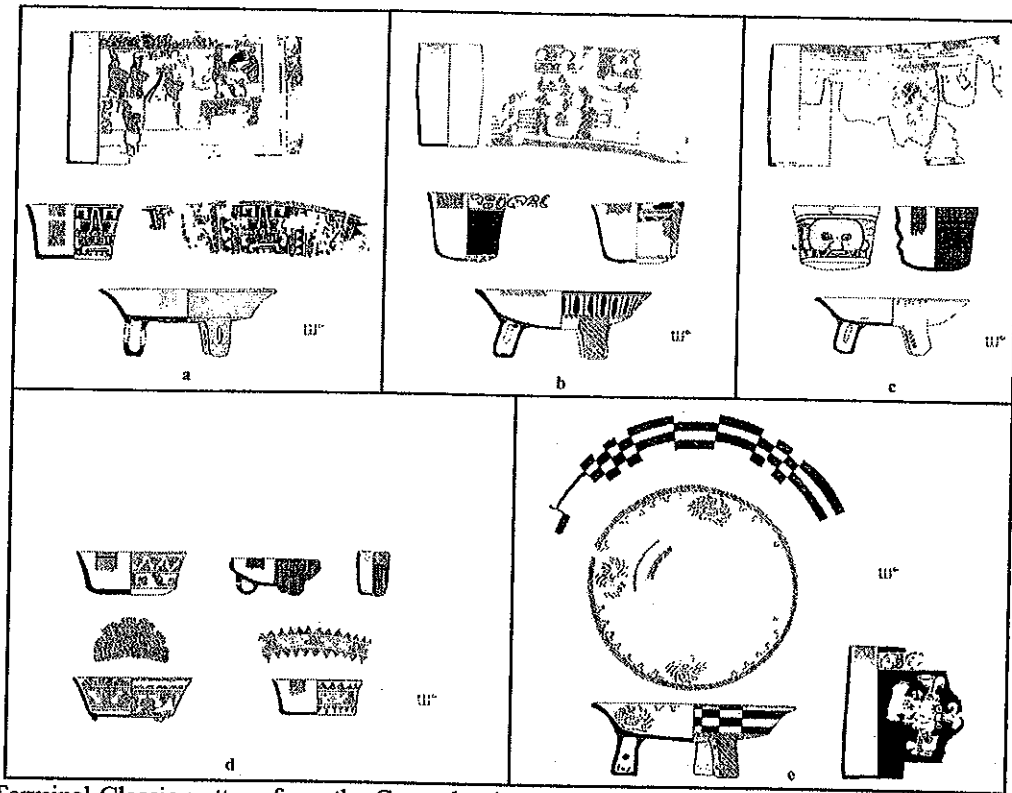


Figure 2. Terminal Classic pottery from the Caracol epicenter associated with burials and caches: a. S.D. C18U-2 in Structure B5 (Joyac Cream Polychrome; Zacatel Cream Polychrome; eroded Infierno Black); b. S.D. C C172C-3 in Structure I20 (Zacatel Cream Polychrome [2]; Batcab Red Polychrome [2]); c. S.D. C117C-4 from Structure B34 (Joyac Cream polychrome; possibly Carro Modeled; Zacatel Cream Polychrome); d. S.D. C4B-1 from Structure B19 (burned Tinaja Red [2]; Danta Orange-Polychrome [3]); S.D. C75B-2 from Structure B66 (Zacatel Polychrome[2]).

summit of Caana, along with serving wares, storage vessels, and a free-standing burner (or portable stove); the presence of incensarios in this location suggests that Caracol's highest elite carried out both private and public ritual with these items.

Most palace contexts include a combination of serving and storage vessels. A sealed room suite on the side of Structure B19 contained 1 large storage jar, 13 blackware tripod plates, and 4 large cups or vases (Figure 3). Specialized storing and serving vessels are associated with the Caana mid-range range structure. Serving and storing vessels, including a *mocaljete*, were also recovered across the B Plaza from Caana in Structure B4 and B6. Structure A39 in the Central Acropolis similarly

contained serving and storage vessels, as well as a burner. Vessels associated with the C Group palace included serving vessels and 2 lid-like incensarios (see Awe 1985 for Caledonia comparisons). Besides incensarios, the Structure A6 sub-assembly contains a wide range of serving vessels ranging from platters to plates to drinking cups as well as minimally three cooking pots. The vessels associated with the Barrio floors and fill blocks also contain a host of serving vessels, a large number of which were non-local, as well as cooking vessels, miniature vessels, and the lower half of a gigantic drum (Figure 4). Other locales within the epicentral limits have produced similar pieces from this same ceramic sub-assembly that focuses on both local and

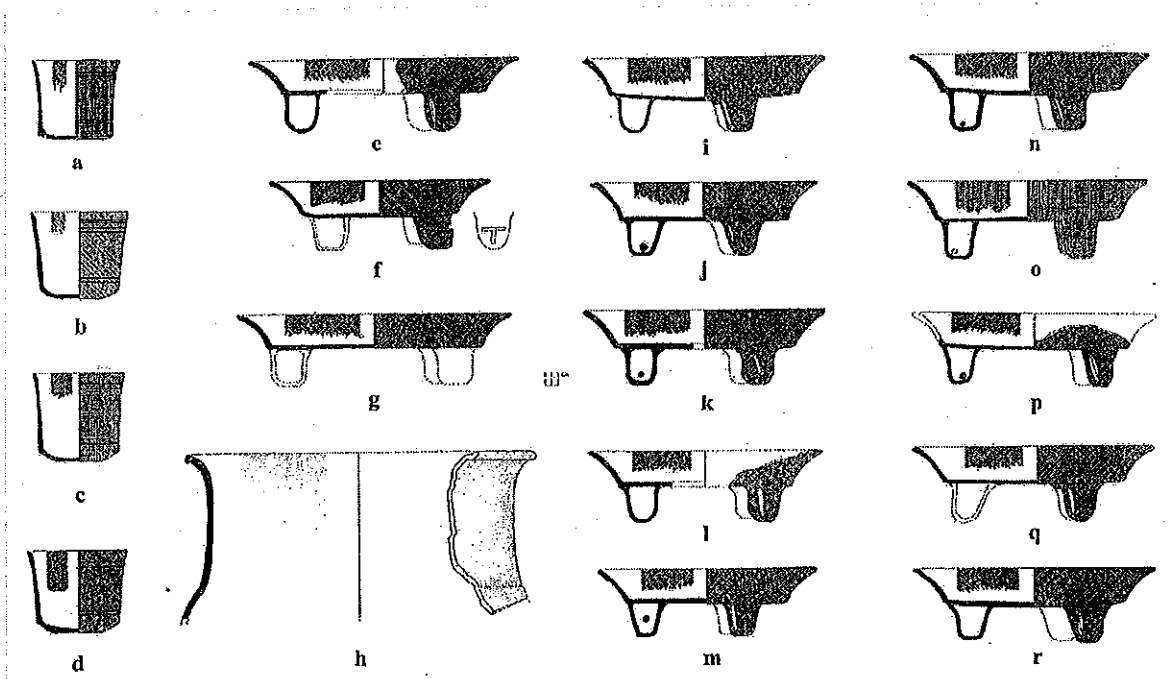


Figure 3. Terminal Classic pottery on room floor beneath fill in sealed room immediately east of Structure B19: a-g and i-r Infierno Black; h. Valentin Unslipped

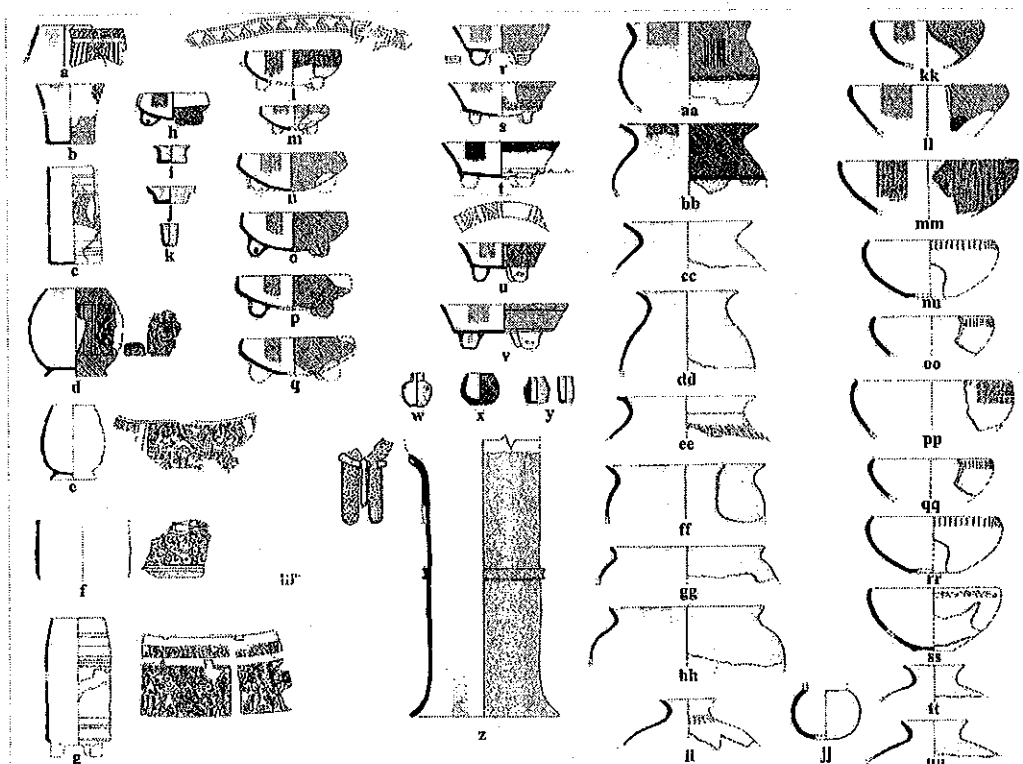


Figure 4. Terminal Classic pottery associated with the Barrio complex: a. Torro Gouged-Incised; b, m, u. Cameron Incised; c. Azucar Impressed; d-e: Pabellon Modeled-Carved; f-g. Sahcaba Modeled-Carved; h, n-q, t, x, kk-mm, ww, yy. Tinaja Red; i-k, Ceiba Unslipped; l. San Julio Modeled; s. Platon Punctated; r, v. Martin's Incised; w, y, cc, dd, ff-hh, jj. Valentin Unslipped; z. Apop Modeled; aa-bb: Sombrero Appliquéd; ff. Encanto Striated; ii., nn-ss. Pantano Impressed.

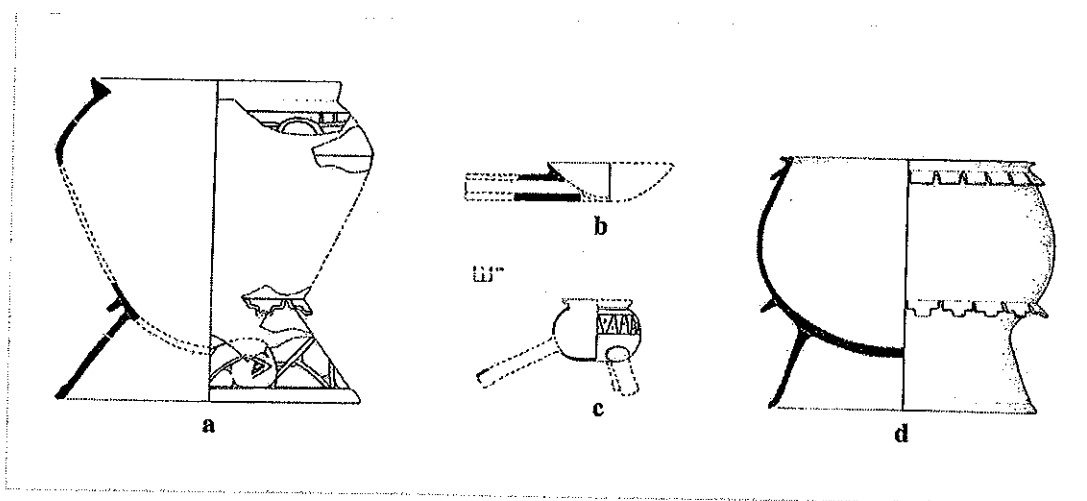


Figure 5. Censers associated with the front of Structure A31: a. related to Lamanai Orange-Redware; b. probably Miseria Appliqué; c. possibly Kilikan Composite; d. undesignated type.

exotic pottery. During the 2006 field season, excavation of Structure A31, a non-palace epicentral construction west of the A Group ballcourt, yielded a sub-assembly of 21 vessels; while the majority of these vessels could be classified as either serving or utilitarian wares, four exotic incensarios were also recovered (Figure 5). These censers, clearly in a Terminal Classic abandonment context, are of relevance to issues of cross dating both within and outside of the Maya area.

Although important, ceramics do not constitute the only data class that informs us about the Terminal Classic at Caracol. Other artifact classes and non-portable remains also provide important clues. *In situ* remains on Caracol's latest residential floors include imported seafood, shell, jadeite, and obsidian. Small line-of-stone buildings of Terminal Classic date are found in many epicentral plazas at Caracol and crude substructures of similar date ring the epicenter and were used as manufacturing loci for stone tools and bone implements. In at least one case, the low epicentral remains are associated with a reset altar. It is suspected that some of Caracol's other monuments, such as Stela 3, were also

moved about and reset in the Terminal Classic, perhaps also accounting for a sheet-copper frog that was found in a Caracol sub-stela cache by Satterthwaite. However, the latest date on any of Caracol's monuments is A.D. 859 on Stela 10 in the A. Plaza. Based on radiocarbon dates from epicentral palace floors (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a), occupation of Caracol's epicentral palaces continued at least 40 years beyond this date, indicative of a disconnect between monument erection and the latest palace occupation.

Excavations at Caracol also have revealed vibrancy to Terminal Classic construction efforts. Not only was Caana remodeled and elevated after A.D. 800, but the rebuilding of Structure B20 was most likely undertaken after the cessation of monument erection. Similarly, two Late Classic tombs at the base of Structure B19 were ritually desecrated in the Terminal Classic Period, possibly the end result of internal political squabbles (D. Chase and A. Chase 2003). Other late Terminal Classic modifications are in evidence in the Barrio palace buildings, dated by late material deposited as fill. Interestingly, a number of unfinished constructions or incomplete re-

modeling efforts have also been recovered (Figure 6). This can be inferred from various archaeological data. In Barrio, the Central Acropolis, and the South Acropolis, stone robbing, as well as potentially contemporary rebuilding, of latest structures was in evidence. Excavation immediately south of the Caracol epicenter revealed a huge fill pile containing Terminal Classic artifacts and garbage; it is suspected that this mound of earth was destined to become the supporting platform for a late acropolis. Unused piles of cut stones, undoubtedly destined for use on remodeled constructions were recovered from in front of Structure A7 and from within the inner courtyard of the Northwest Acropolis. All of these data suggest that the end of Caracol occurred rather unexpectedly.

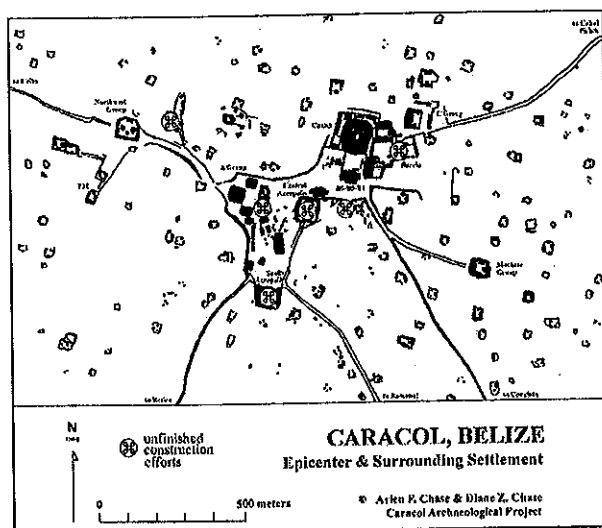


Figure 6. Map of epicentral Caracol showing locations of unfinished constructions or of incomplete re-modeling efforts at the site at the time of abandonment

Clues to the end of Caracol's epicentral occupation also may be found in several deposits on Caracol's latest plazas and building floors that have yielded unburied bodies and human bone. In particular, the complete body of a 6-year-old child was found in an inner doorway of a palace on the Caana summit (D. Chase and

A. Chase 1998, 2000) and two bodies were found at the western base of Structure B28, partly beneath a stela fragment and in association with an additional 17 human mandibles. Many excavations in the Caracol epicenter have yielded isolated human bone. While a common explanation would be to ascribe the occurrence of this human material to cannibalism by the site's latest inhabitants (e.g. D. Chase and A. Chase 1982), not all the material was partial or disarticulated. Other associated artifactual remains include implements of war (D. Chase and A. Chase 2002). It is, therefore, also possible that there was a slaughter of some of the last epicentral inhabitants of the site, which would explain the abandonment material, the sheet refuse, and the scattered human remains indicative of the differential survival of human bone in a tropical environment.

Conclusion

Gaining an understanding of the Maya Terminal Classic has proven to be a long and winding road characterized by numerous potholes and detours (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004). Originally defined in terms of dates on stone monuments and type-fossil ceramic markers, the archaeological data now emphasize the great diversity in the archaeological record that exists for the Terminal Classic Period. Some sites, like Dos Pilas (Demarest 2004), collapsed before the advent of the Terminal Classic and the cessation of monument erection. Other sites, like Caracol, successfully lasted at least two generations past the latest monuments. The final remains at Caracol are indicative of a prospering elite with access to fresh fish from the sea (Teeter and Chase 2004) and exotic materials from elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

That Caracol had widespread exterior contacts during the Terminal

Classic is quite clear in the archaeological record. Fine Orange ceramics (e.g. Smith 1958), all traded into Caracol, occur throughout the site epicenter, as do copies of model-carved ceramics suggesting a fusion of disparate styles on the elite level. The two smaller censers associated with Caracol Structure A31 (one called a "frying pan" incensario and the other a "Mixtec" incensario) are both parts of a widespread Mesoamerican ritual pattern that Ringle and his colleagues (1998) have tied to a Quetzalcoatl cult. These censer types are known from Chichen Itza (Brainerd 1958), Tayasal (A. Chase 1983:1097), Zacualpa (Wauchope 1948), Zaculeu (Woodbury and Trik 1953), Chinkultic (Ball 1980), Oaxaca (Caso et al. 1967), Teotihuacan (Linne 1934:111), Cholula (Acosta 1975; Joyce 1914), Teotenango (Vargas 1975), and Tula (Diehl 1983; Cobean 1990:488). Although the dating for these materials is nowhere precisely established, for the most part these kinds of censers appear to be dated to approximately A.D. 900, which also matches the inferred Caracol dating. Importantly, the Caracol Mixtec incensario is composed of Fine Orange paste, a feature that serves to emphasize its inclusion as Terminal Classic pottery.

Two of the censers recovered in association with Structure A31 during 2006 (Figure 5) emphasize how much we have yet to learn. One large globular vessel has no known stylistic analogies; the second large urn is a tradeware from the Lamanai area, 125 kilometer north of Caracol. While tentatively dated to the Middle Postclassic at Lamanai (Graham 1987), the piece occurs in a Terminal Classic context at Caracol. Interestingly, an almost identical censer comes from Actun Yaxteel, where a Terminal Classic date was suggested based on related material (Awe, personal communication, 2006; Awe and Helke 2000). This dating confusion goes to the

heart of the Terminal Classic problem in dealing with rapid transitions in the archaeological record.

For Caracol, the Terminal Classic represented a behavioral shift from the Late Classic Period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006). Whereas trade items were widely distributed throughout the population during the Late Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004b; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004), this was not the case in the Terminal Classic when the site's elite essentially hived themselves off from the general population and emphasized their status through the ostentatious use of different, and usually foreign, goods (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a). Final abandonment materials at Caracol suggest a marked separation between the site's elite and other population segments. Archaeological data also suggest that the final abandonment of Caracol may have been the result of aggression in which some of the epicentral inhabitants were killed and left unburied on plaza and building floors.

Whatever caused the ultimate end of Caracol at approximately A.D. 900 (based on radiocarbon dates), the latter half of the century leading up to this abandonment was a time of great external contact throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeological remains indicate that Caracol was clearly a player within this broader arena. The pan-Mesoamerican activities participated in by the site's latest epicentral inhabitants sharply contrasts with the internal disintegration of long-standing social patterns that in the past had stressed a shared identity between the elite and the rest of Caracol's population. In contrast to the Late Classic Period, the latest Caracol elite was not concerned with displaying even symbolic egalitarianism (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006). Elsewhere, we have suggested that the last elite at Caracol were incorporated into a broader political

hegemony (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a, 2005).

So, then, what does this entire picture mean? To us, these data suggest that the Maya collapse was related to both local and wider Mesoamerican phenomena. The latest elite at Caracol was outward looking, participating in far-flung trade and actively using disparate styles and items in new ritual patterns. At the same time, the non-elite of this era maintained a more traditional and less exotic lifestyle, making them harder to identify archaeologically without substantial effort. As archaeologists, we have problems dealing with transitional periods like the Terminal Classic. Only now, after 22 field seasons, are we beginning to understand the complexities involved in dating and modeling the Classic Maya collapse at Caracol through the long-term and time-consuming excavation and analysis of carefully defined archaeological contexts.

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