
3 **METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION OF THE TERMINAL CLASSIC AND POSTCLASSIC TRANSITION IN THE MAYA AREA**

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The transition between the Terminal Classic and Postclassic Periods remains an enigma. The traditional model is one of collapse followed by gradual replacement. As more archaeological work has been undertaken in the Maya area, problems with this general model have emerged. It is our contention that a major part of the difficulty in conceptualizing this transition is methodological and theoretical. At issue is the identification of the latest use of various sites and determination of both the speed of abandonment and the status of occupants. The use of a type-fossil approach in classification and identification has hampered these interpretations. Our analytical tools frequently are inadequate to deal with non-uniform artifact and ceramic distributions. Seriation analyses based on partially sampled materials also compound the problem. The confluence of these issues with regard to the Terminal Classic / Postclassic transition means that we have a flawed understanding of cultural change and the archaeological record. This paper suggests new avenues for approaching this crucial temporal transition in Maya prehistory

Introduction

The analytic units that are used in archaeology directly affect the interpretations that are made about the past - perhaps more than we care to admit. This paper seeks to examine the inter-relationship between ceramic analysis in the Maya field and our interpretations of both cultural units and traditions. It argues that the type-variety-mode system of ceramic analysis is ineffectual and, in fact, misleading for deriving both temporal and spatial interpretations about past societies. Finally, the paper suggests a different method for accomplishing an understanding of the past through ceramic analysis.

The Ceramic Lens

When an archaeologist makes interpretations about a past culture, he or she is using the material residues of the past to effect their reconstruction. These residues, however, are not a direct reflection of the past; instead, they are viewed through inexact interpretational lenses. These lenses form part of an epistemological package that sometimes acts as a blinder for the

archaeologist. At least in terms of ceramic analysis, there are "conceptual limitations" to the "existing archaeological paradigm in which researchers often associate differences in archaeological remains, particularly pottery, with temporal change prior to evaluating evidence for the presence of spatial and/or cultural factors" (A. Chase 1986:99).

Many of the problem areas in archaeological interpretation stem from poorly framed assumptions relating to the scale of the phenomena being observed. Of particular note here are considerations of continuity and discontinuity in the archaeological record over time and space. Within the culture historical paradigm a site generally was conceived as a continuous use of space that could be characterized by its artifactual content, usually referred to as an "assemblage." Variations within artifactual assemblages were frequently thought to be due to temporal differences that could be stratigraphically demonstrated. Left out of this discussion, however, was the fact that more complex sites could exhibit several contemporaneous, yet distinct, artifactual

expressions due to any number of reasons (e.g., function, status, wealth, or ethnicity). In the past, contemporaneous variability was sometimes incorrectly framed as temporal difference within a seriation because artifactual analysis was generally undertaken apart from contextual considerations.

Various researchers have recognized the problem of scale of place and/or occupation in archaeological analysis. Dunnell (1971:151) opted to use the term "occupation" to define "a spatial cluster of discrete objects which can reasonably be assumed to be the product of a single group of people over that period of time during which they were in continuous residence at that particular locality." Dunnell's definition of "occupation" goes a long way towards dealing with problems of scale and is certainly useful in a contextual analysis. But even he (1971: Figure 14) conflates "occupation" with the overly broad unit of "phase" (thus implying a single occupation at any one time within a given site), although he (1971:151-153) notes that "additional scales are being recognized" and that "the term 'occupation' can be used for the scale of phenomena above that of 'discrete object' if cognizance is taken of the fact that the label only suffices to continue the discussion and does not constitute the resolution of this serious problem."

Binford (1982:5) framed comments about problems in archaeological analysis in terms of an "archaeology of place," demonstrating "that the two most common forms of archaeological systematics, 'assemblage'- versus 'type'- based systematics, are not appropriate for the study of places." Yet, all sites are places by definition. He further argued that places cannot be analyzed as "types" and that "places with different 'content'" are difficult to encompass within a single system "assemblage." Thus, he effectively recognized the problems in using traditional

archaeological units in complex situations. But, even 25 years after Binford (1982) decried the use of "types" and "assemblages," standard archaeological methodology has not really moved beyond the inexact ethnographic equivalencies ascribed to artifacts and assemblages by Deetz (1967: Figure 17) and repeated in most textbooks (Sharer and Ashmore 2003:305-7; Renfrew and Bahn 2004:119).

Most Maya archaeological sites are extremely complex units. Yet, we Mayanists have traditionally used the synthetic definitions afforded us methodologically in the culture history school of thought and have only rarely questioned the broader implications (e.g., Ball 1979; A. Chase 1986; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987). Looking at ceramic analysis, specifically, certain assumptions have often been made with regard to how ceramics are distributed in the archaeological record:

(1) In the Maya area, type-variety-mode analysis has focused on the description of pottery; the synthetic complexes that result are predicated on the pottery types being evenly distributed throughout a given society at any one site. From a social standpoint, this implies that ideally all members of a society had access to the ceramic repertoire, with some potential exceptions as noted below. From an investigational standpoint, this means that all excavations have an almost equal chance of encountering ceramic types from a given time period. These assumptions are clearly not tenable. Maya ceramic assemblages are traditionally conceived as containing domestic, serving, and ritual wares. Analysis and interpretation of each of these ceramic sub-groupings is also predicated on other ingrained, although potentially unstated, suppositions:

- Domestic wares are considered to have been generally similar in all contemporaneous contexts at any specific locus at a single site. They are also often assumed to have been

made locally with little trade in such items. Archaeologically, we know that this is not the case (e.g. Fry and Cox 1974).

- Serving wares are assumed to have been made in set locations by specialized potters, usually considered to be attached specialists (e.g. Ball 1993). These materials are believed to have been distributed to the extended population through either direct exchange or a hierarchical patronage system; only rarely are painted Maya wares viewed as having been made available to a populace through a market system (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2004a).
- Ritual wares, such as incensarios or cache vessels, are assumed to have been very restricted in their distribution and to have been controlled by a given site's elite both in terms of manufacture and distribution (e.g., Rice 1999).

(2) Because Maya ceramic analysis has focused on sherd materials as its fundamental unit, easily identifiable decorated finewares (or serving vessels) have tended to be used for dating purposes. Certain ceramics are more easily recognized than others and, over time, these types have been used to assign a temporal value to the recovered archaeological remains. In fact, lack of such ceramics at a given site has sometimes been interpreted to mean that a given temporal era is largely lacking in the archaeological record of a given site. This methodological use of "key" or "marker" types to both establish chronology and to identify "distinct cultures" was explicitly spelled out by Willey and Woodbury (1942:236) in their work on Florida pottery. As Lyman, O'Brien, and Dunnell (1997:5) have noted, these units – "types not only as analytical units allowing the measurement of time but also as accurate reflections of distinct ethnographic units" – "were products of two diametrically opposed ontologies." Yet,

most active Mayanists are still wedded to these basic tenets.

In point of fact, there are impediments to correlating ceramics and change. Using standard methodology, it is difficult to know what ceramics are coeval, how various groups of ceramics changed, how rapid this change may have been, or how ceramic change may be documented archaeologically. Not only are transitions difficult to see and identify ceramically, but the behaviors associated with these transitions are even harder to discern. A major part of this problem stems from the use of a type system, which tends to normalize and encompass variation, especially for incomplete vessel fragments or sherds, which form the basis for most analyses. "The simple typological description of pottery is a synthetic exercise stressing similarities while the explanation of the behavior behind that pottery needs to examine the variability that is hidden within the integrative type-variety-mode system of analysis" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:47-48). Culbert and Rands (2007) have noted that t-v-m analyses in the Maya area have failed to deal with pottery holistically within a single classification system; they suggest that multiple descriptive typologies, based on surface, paste, form, and decoration, are now necessary to adequately deal with Maya ceramic variability. Perhaps more important is the need to methodologically and theoretically integrate ceramic analysis with the social conditions of the archaeological record.

A large part of the methodological problem derives from the interpretation of partial sub-assemblages in the archaeological record without regard to context. While the concept of a "sub-assemblage" is framed by Deetz (1967) as a unit between an artifact and an assemblage, methodologically this concept remains vague and poorly defined. To deal with this

issue, for the last 20 years we have emphasized the analytic use of the ceramic "subcomplex" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987), originally defined as "a subdivision of a complex that has significance in cultural interpretation other than that of chronological differentiation" (Willey et al. 1967:304). While subcomplexes are more easily defined for caches, incensarios, or burials, we have attempted to use the subcomplex to focus on refuse deposits that are contextually associated with buildings, seeing the ceramics recovered from such contextual situations as forming *meaningful* behavioral units (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:48).

In contrast to the analytically constructed subassemblage, our use of the subcomplex is context driven. It is not "synthetic" in that it does not merge pieces of the contextual ceramic subcomplex with analytically constructed subassemblages derived from fill materials. Subcomplexes are kept as distinct units in our analyses so that both the functional and temporal parameters of these important units are not confused through the analytic process. Besides providing functional information relevant to the use of specific buildings and, inferentially, to specific social groups, subcomplexes form relatively discrete temporal units that contain contemporaneously-used ceramic vessels. Rather than analytically aligning types found in out-of-context structural fill, subcomplexes are temporal snapshots of materials that were definitely associated with each other for some specific purpose. Thus, subcomplexes can sometimes provide far more refined temporal discrimination than the simple identification of a ceramic marker.

Ball (1977:3) noted that subcomplexes were dependent for their formulation "upon the recovery of functionally specialized contexts." While

caches and burials are easily recovered and synthesized, primary refuse is neither as easily encountered nor dealt with in the archaeological record. There also are issues concerning the identification of "rapid" versus "gradual" abandonment in the archaeological record (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000; Inomata and Sheets 2000). Thus, it may be difficult to identify the completeness of refuse deposits, especially as gradual abandonment may lead to partial subassemblages in the archaeological record (Plunket and Urnuela 2000). Only infrequently are domestic and serving vessels found associated together on building floors and, even if they are found together in such contexts, it is often a Herculean task for the archaeologist or analyst to piece together and delineate how many and what percentage of certain vessels may be present in a single context. Larger unslipped sherd materials are far more difficult to piece together than the smaller patterned and decorated finewares. Thus, it is only rarely that the important subassemblages from such contextually significant deposits are recovered and then fully presented. But, it is precisely these kinds of deposits – and the hours, indeed days, of analytical work that are needed on such deposits – that prove most useful for dating purposes, for making functional interpretations, and for understanding archaeological change.

Transitioning Classic to Postclassic

What does this preceding discussion have to do with the Maya Terminal Classic and the Postclassic Periods? Realistically, a lot! Traditionally, these two temporal eras are the hardest ones to define in terms of the archaeological record.

First, Classic and Postclassic sites are not usually found in the same spatial locations in the Southern lowlands. Thus, discontinuous occupations are the norm.

The general archaeological focus on Classic Period sites in the Southern lowlands also means that we know far less about the Postclassic Period than the Classic Period.

Second, both Terminal Classic and Postclassic occupations have tended to be identified through the traditional use of ceramic markers in the Maya archaeological record. Thus, for both periods, identification of specific ceramic types is taken to be indicative of chronological position. And the discovery of these types often directly leads to the positing of the requisite dating.

The Terminal Classic has been notoriously difficult to isolate in the archaeological record (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004b, 2005; Culbert 1973; Graham 1987). In the Southern Maya lowlands, the Terminal Classic Period has been identified largely based on the occurrence of ceramic temporal markers in the archaeological record, particularly modeled-carved (Figure 1) and fine orange pottery (Figure 2). With few exceptions (e.g. Culbert 1973 and Sabloff 1975), polychrome ceramics have been assumed to be restricted to earlier time periods. Modeled-carved pottery has come to be viewed as representing either imports or local paste copies of imported fine orange vessels (e.g. Adams 1973, Sabloff 1973). Fine orange pottery was seriated into 5 different groups (X, Y, Z, U, and V) by Smith (1958) in 1958. While Smith saw these 5 groups as representing 5 different temporal eras, X, Y, and Z fine orange are all coeval and date to the Terminal Classic Period, representing different, but overlapping, geographic expressions of this marker (Ball 1979). The other two fine orange types (U and V) are not as common, but appear to represent coeval geographic expressions of this ware in the Postclassic Period. While easily recognizable, we believe that the strict use of modeled-carved and fine orange ceramics as a dating tool has

led to errors of interpretation relative to the Terminal Classic Period and the Maya collapse.

At many sites, fine orange ceramics are rare (Smith 1958) and at other sites modeled-carved ceramics tend to be almost exclusively associated with stone buildings and palaces (A. Chase 1994). At Caracol it was possible to define both of these ceramic types as part of a status-linked palace ceramic subcomplex that was frequently encountered on and outside of epicentral stone buildings (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004b, 2005). The contextual associations of these ceramic markers and the emphasis on defining subcomplexes at Caracol helped to make it clear that such materials could only be expected to occur in the archaeological record outside of a site epicenter if the locus being dealt with was of a high status. Thus, although widespread in the broader Maya area, these two ceramic markers were spatially restricted in the archaeological record.

Methodology and the Abandonment of Tikal

A different interpretation of these materials was derived from the archaeological data excavated in the 1960s at Tikal, Guatemala. This interpretation has come to color our general view of the Maya collapse. While a similar correlation of stone buildings and modeled-carved ceramics was noted for Tikal, the focus there on the tenets of type-variety-mode ceramic analysis and ceramic markers led to the belief that a lack of modeled-carved ceramics in the site's sustaining area was necessarily correlated with a lack of Terminal Classic population (Culbert 1973, 1988). Thus, because such materials were generally not found in residential groups surrounding the downtown area, the broader settlement area was interpreted as being

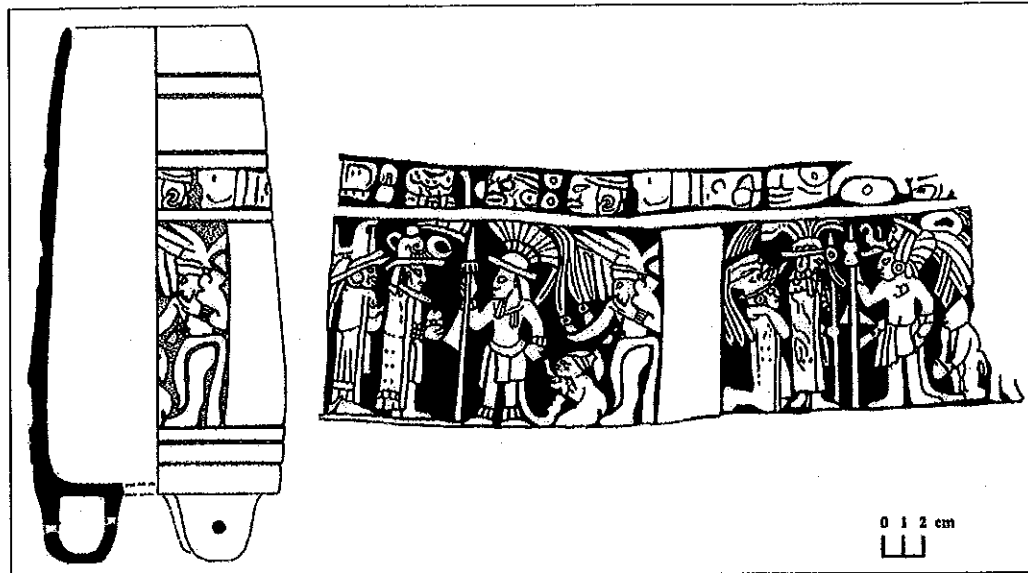


Figure 1. Modeled-Carved pottery, like this vase from Caracol, Belize, has been used as a temporal marker to identify and date Terminal Classic remains in many lowland Maya archaeological contexts. At Caracol these ceramics are part of a status-linked ceramic subcomplex.

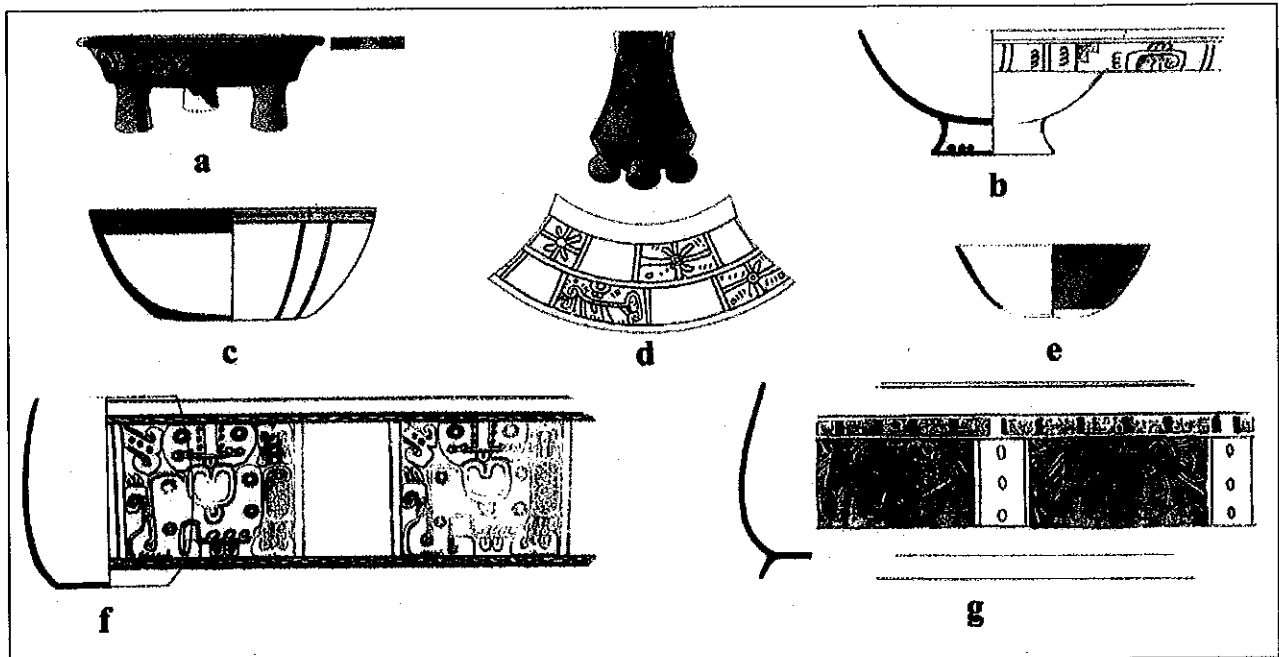


Figure 2. Several different kinds of Fine Orange pottery have been identified in the Maya archaeological record; these are referred to as “X” (a and d) “Y” (g) and “Z” (b, c, and f) Fine Orange. That these three different “kinds” of Fine Orange are largely coeval and date to the Terminal Classic Period can be seen in their contextual recovery as the latest remains on the building floors of Uaxactun, Guatemala (after Smith 1955 and 1958).

temporally discontinuous with the occupation that occurred in the site’s epicentral palaces and stone buildings. The groups that occupied these palaces at Tikal were also viewed as “the impoverished

descendants” of the Classic populations and were described as being “like barbarians living untidily among the ruins of vanquished cities” “amidst the rubble” (Culbert 1974:107). What is unstated in this

description is that Tikal's Terminal Classic Eznab ceramics were isolated based on forms that were taken to be temporal markers:

"There are marked differences between Imix and Eznab complexes in vessels shapes. A series of new shapes appear in Eznab to provide easily recognized markers for the complex. Three of the new shapes, the incurved-rim tripod dish ..., the bulging-neck jar ..., and the tripod plate with notched sharp z-angle ..., are common enough that one or more are almost certain to appear in any lot containing a significant number of rim sherds. In addition, a number of rare vessel shapes are restricted to the Eznab Complex.

These shapes include the bead-rim jar, the barrel with tall ring base ..., the everted-rim jar, and the everted-rim, composite silhouette vessel ... (usually with *molcajete* interior)." (Culbert 1973:84)

It is apparent, therefore, that ceramics temporal markers played a crucial role in the interpretation of collapse at Tikal. Culbert (1974:106), in fact, explicitly noted that "of several hundred housemounds that have been tested by excavation in Tikal and its vicinity, *not one* shows any hint of Eznab occupation. All of the Eznab debris comes from in and around palace structures." Testing in "rural" areas of Tikal revealed the same result: "the situation in the countryside was identical to that in the center – tiny Eznab population remnants in crumbling palaces and nobody at all in housemound areas" (Culbert 1974:107). Taken as a whole, Tikal's latest population was seen as "squatting" in stone buildings that formed palace groups, definitely tossing garbage into the abandoned buildings (Harrison 1999:193-198) and possibly undertaking the looting of earlier structures and their burials (Coe 1990).

A reconsideration of the Tikal data, in light of the Caracol contextual

information, poses a different interpretation, instead postulating a continuous temporal distribution between Tikal's site center and sustaining area in which different ceramics were used by remnant epicentral elites. While the deterioration of the site's garbage system (e.g., Harrison 1999:193) may signal changing social conditions, long-distance trade was still ongoing (Harrison 1999:198) and it is suspected that the palace inhabitants represented only the elite of a broader population – an elite who utilized their own ceramic subcomplex. This would mean that the collapse scenario and the archaeological contexts at Tikal need to be re-evaluated.

The Problem with Plumbate

Even more problematic is the ceramic marker known as plumbate. In her tome, entitled *Plumbate*, Shepard (1948:1, 147) noted that plumbate is spread from Lake Nicaragua in the south to Nyarit, Mexico in the north and that "its associations indicate a relatively short time period of manufacture," making it "the most outstanding 'index fossil' for this region." However, she assiduously declines to attempt any sort of dating for this ware, instead arguing that "we need more digging." The inability to firmly date plumbate continues to cause problems in interpreting the transition between the Terminal Classic and Postclassic Period.

In the southern Maya area, archaeological contexts at Quirigua and Copan would indicate that plumbate was in use during the Terminal Classic Period (A. Chase 1986:111). Contexts from Zaculeu in the Guatemalan highlands suggest that plumbate overlapped with X and Z fine orange (Woodbury and Trik 1953: figs. 82 & 83). Shepherd (1948:133-141) noted that plumbate overlaps with X Fine Orange, Nicoya Polychrome, and Tiquisate Ware. Yet, while its extensive trade contacts are well established, plumbate has yet to be

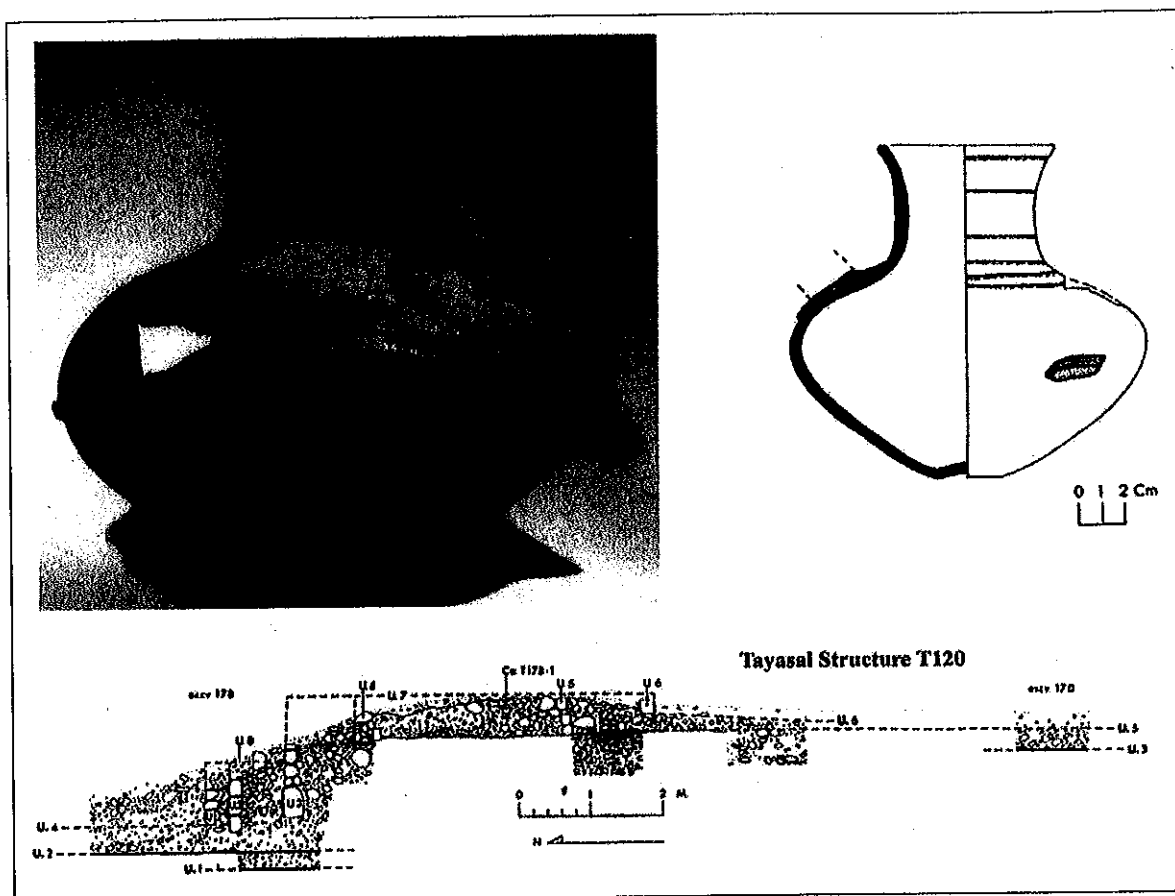


Figure 3. A Plumbate cache vessel from the core of Tayasal (Guatemala) Structure T120, probably placed in the building in the Terminal Classic era (after A. Chase 1983)

recovered in a refuse context in the Southern Maya lowlands that would permit a proper chronological assessment of its subcomplex placement (although W. Coe [personal communication, 1982] noted that plumbate occurred in contextual association with other Terminal Classic ceramics at Tikal). For the Northern lowlands, indications are that plumbate was in use at Chichen Itza in the Terminal Classic Period (Lincoln 1986; Cobos 2004) and presumably occurred in a similar temporal siting at Uxmal (Kowalski et al. 1996:286), where at least one of three offerings appears to be associated with the construction of the basal platform for a round building. The fact that plumbate is so well known as a marker throughout Mesoamerica - and yet so rarely found in good contextual situations in the Maya

lowlands - led to an almost automatic assignment of a Postclassic date when it did occur (e.g., A. Chase 1986). Yet, it is not well represented in excavated Postclassic sites like Mayapan, Mexico (Smith 1971:26-27), Lamanai, Belize (Graham 1987), or Santa Rita Corozal, Belize (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, but see Sidrys 1983).

While it is present at the site of Tayasal, Guatemala in eight spatial locations, here, too, it is difficult to distinguish between Terminal Classic and Postclassic Period dating (A. Chase 1983:1217). At Tayasal, a Tohil Plumbate cache of an effigy bird jar was recovered in the building core of Tayasal Structure T120 (Figure 3; A. Chase 1983:599-600); while originally placed as "Postclassic" based on its ceramic marker status, the contextual

position of the vessel on axis to and in the rock core of the building clearly suggests a Terminal Classic date – a dating considered highly unlikely in 1983 (when originally described). Another undecorated tripod plumbate jar at Tayasal (A. Chase 1983:910-911) was associated with a burial that is covered with fill than can be dated to the Postclassic. Thus, without further recovery of other dateable contexts, plumbate remains an enigmatic temporal marker.

Even with plumbate conventionally placed in the Postclassic Period, the initial lack of other recognizable ceramic markers for this time meant that early researchers had trouble dating materials to this era. At Barton Ramie, where 95% of the excavated areas actually evinced Postclassic materials, the original ceramic assessment of the excavations noted that nothing of Postclassic date had in fact been found (Willey 1955). Researchers who excavated Tayasal in 1971 similarly reported being uncertain of finding any Postclassic ceramics, although 48 of the 99 structures tested proved to be associated with Postclassic materials in subsequent analysis (A. Chase 1990:163). Perhaps the one ceramic marker that has been used most commonly to identify Postclassic remains in the archaeological record is the full-figure human-like effigy incensario (e.g. Bullard 1973; Smith 1971). Apart from these items, however, ceramics have been given a Postclassic dating largely on the presence of certain redware forms and decorative styles. For instance, slipper and trumpet-shaped feet on redware tripod plates have come to be used as ceramic markers for this period (Figure 4; A. Chase and D. Chase 1985). Yet, distinguishing temporal variants between Early and Late Postclassic remains based on redwares is challenging at best.

How do ceramic subcomplexes help to understand the Terminal Classic?

So, why should we focus on subcomplexes in order to understand the Terminal Classic to Postclassic transition? . . . because our focus on ceramic temporal markers has led to methodological mishaps in terms of both dating and process . . . and because a focus on subcomplexes will contextualize functional and social groupings, leading to a better definition and, hopefully, understanding of this crucial time. The Terminal Classic has traditionally been defined in terms of ceramic markers. For the most part, any contextual associations with these ceramic markers have been inferred, rather than demonstrated, by analysts. However, the use of subcomplexes permits us to contextually see contemporary vessel forms (and types) that co-exist with these markers.

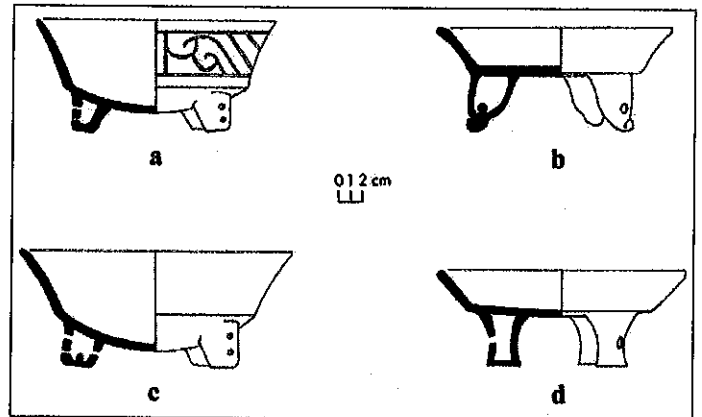


Figure 4. Tripod redware bowls/plates with distinctive feet are used as temporal markers for identifying Postclassic Period remains. The vessels illustrated here are identified as dating to the Postclassic Period: a., c Tulum (Payil) Red; b. Augustine Red; e. Paxcaman Red (after D. Chase 1986:373).

And, when we look at the subcomplexes, some established preconceptions fall by the wayside. Examples from Caracol demonstrate how poorly this transitional era is understood. Materials traditionally seriated or typed as

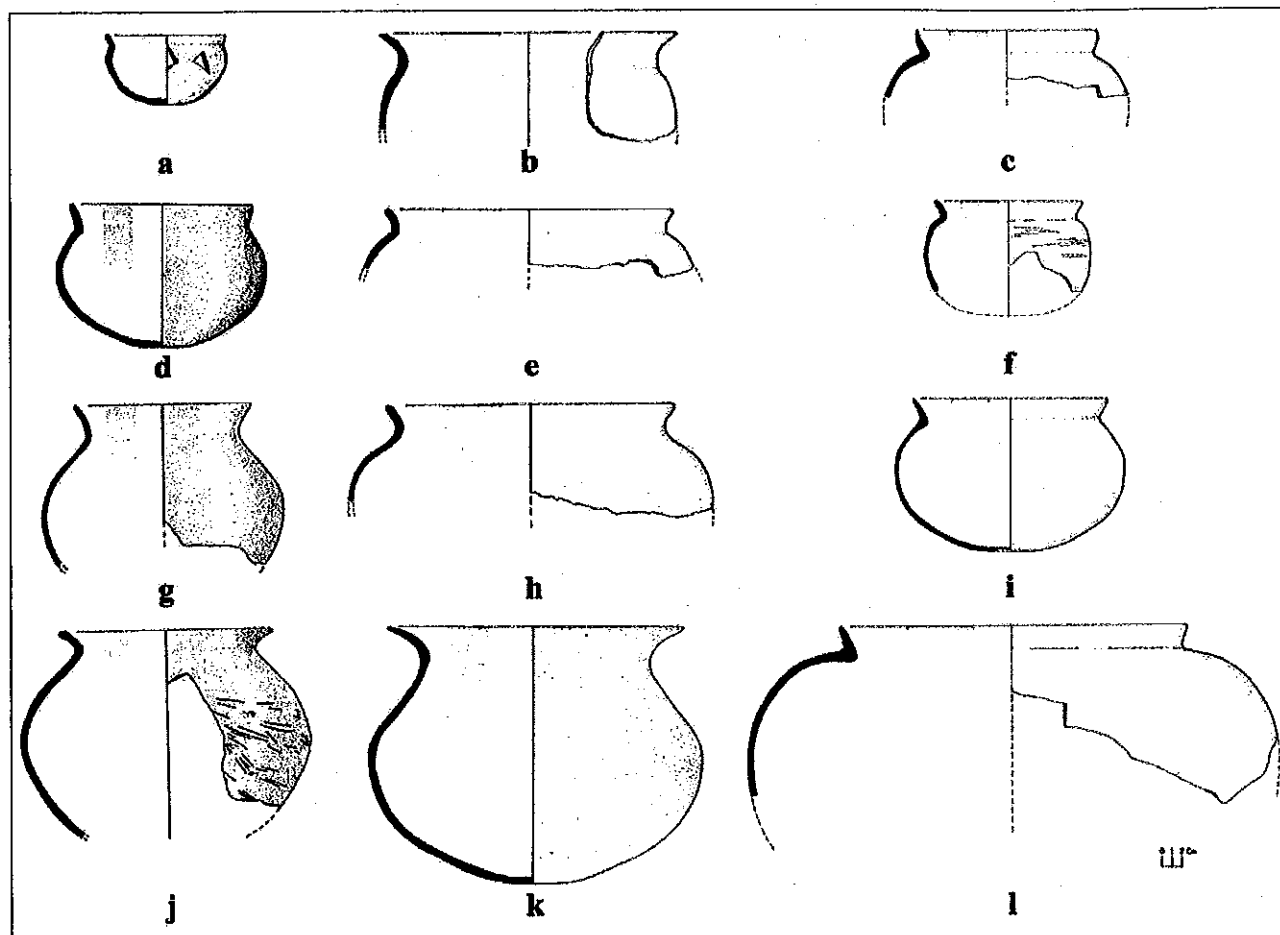


Figure 5. Unslipped collared-necked ollas comprise a ceramic form that has sometimes been used as a temporal marker for identifying Postclassic Period remains. The collared-necked ollas illustrated here all come from different contexts at Caracol, Belize and date to the Terminal Classic era: a. Structure A2; b., e., and h. Structure B25; c., i., f., and l. Structure A31; d., g., j. Structure A6; k. Structure A40. Modally, necks applied to the olla bodies that do not form smooth curves (e.g., c, d, e, i, and l) are closer in form to known Postclassic examples.

“Postclassic” occurs in Terminal Classic contexts, often repeatedly. And, finewares are not the only materials affected. An unslipped form that is frequently incorrectly seriated is a collared-necked olla (Figure 5). When the first unslipped collared-necked olla was recovered at Caracol on the floor of Structure A6, the modal dictates of the form were assumed to require a Postclassic date and to indicate a potential reoccupation of the site (in spite of being found in direct association with a Terminal Classic fine orange vessel). A similar vessel was found in a context associated with a human effigy figure on the summit of Structure A2; the human effigy figure was similarly thought to

be Postclassic in date, even though human effigy censer forms occur in earlier Classic Period contexts elsewhere (specifically at Quirigua, Guatemala in Terminal Classic censer materials associated with Structure 1A-10 [personal observation]). The collared-necked olla form, however, has now been recovered in several other contextual units and is recognized as being Terminal Classic in date and as a part of the palace ceramic subcomplex. It has been recovered in the Barrio palace complex both in the fill of a building addition and on the floor of a room in association with a Sahcaba Modeled-Carved vessel. The form also occurs in association with other vessels

in front of Caracol Structure A31. Thus, the automatic assignation of this form to the Postclassic Period at other Maya sites should be questioned, unless additional contextual information is supplied.

While the contextual Caracol Terminal Classic palace subcomplex is associated with standard forms and types, there are also specialized forms and tradewares in evidence. These include locally made items such as barrels, drums, and burners as well as foreign items that include bowls, cylinders, and censers (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004b). Holistically viewed, the Terminal Classic Period at Caracol exemplifies a great variety of materials. Some redwares (plates, ollas, and specialized forms) exhibit affinities to materials recovered at Lamanai in northern Belize. At Lamanai, one of these forms has traditionally been dated to the Postclassic era; at Caracol it is associated with a fine orange vessel and is in a Terminal Classic context (A. Chase and D. Chase 2007:21). Thus, the use of contextually driven ceramic subcomplexes is useful for re-analyzing both the Terminal Classic to Postclassic transition and the more widespread political and ritual connections in Mesoamerica at the time of the collapse.

Conclusion: A Brave New World

Years ago, Brew (1946) admonished archaeologists to use new and different forms of classification. We have not followed his advice. Half a century later we are still using hackneyed recipes for our archaeological interpretations, at least in terms of ceramics. For the most part, our dating is still done through the use of ceramic markers and we still use a type-variety-mode system of classification as a basis for cultural interpretations.

Maya ceramicists look at polychrome ceramics and pronounce a dating of "Classic Period." Form may be

used to refine the dating to Early Classic (basal flange) or Late Classic (cylinder). Modal combinations may be perused to attempt finer temporal discrimination. Ceramics may be classified as "unslipped" or "slipped;" surface decoration may be used for sorting; basic forms may be discerned; and sherds may be sorted, counted, and even weighed by archaeological unit. Burial and cache ceramics may be reassembled and drawn, but only rarely are refuse materials contextually analyzed (if they are even recovered). Instead, ceramic markers provide dating and bulk ceramics are sorted and described according to t-v-m analysis, being seriated into ceramic complexes that are independent of archaeological context (but to which burial and cache vessels are linked). Higher order units, like ceramic spheres, may be used to manipulate these homogenized data masses into even more abstract pictures that bear little resemblance to actual archaeological units and past social groupings.

Our current practices in ceramic analysis separate us from the spatial variability that clearly existed in the use of pottery by the ancient Maya. These practices also mean that temporal parameters are often subjectively set on the data that we analyze. Thus, it is difficult to see spatial variability in the archaeological record, which in turn hinders the identification of temporal change, catching Maya analysts in an interpretational helix.

If we truly want to understand what happened in the past, we need to re-focus our research and analysis. From a ceramic perspective, we must make the excavation and reconstruction of functional subcomplexes a priority, expending more time on the in-field laboratory analysis of these deposits. These contextually-driven archaeological units are the building blocks for future archaeological interpretation in the Maya area.

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