

External Impetus, Internal Synthesis, and Standardization: E Group Assemblages and the Crystallization of Classic Maya Society in the Southern Lowlands

Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase

Continuities and discontinuities in material remains are key factors in archaeological interpretation. Discontinuities are considered to represent change or replacement and are thus often used to suggest significant societal transitions. Archaeologically, continuous strands are sometimes lost in the face of more striking discontinuities. Thus, change is often emphasized. And, even though a transition may be interpreted as an abrupt discontinuity, in reality change may have spanned several generations. To comprehend the nature of change, the archaeologist must examine what is discontinuous - what has been replaced and what has not, and, in what contexts and circumstances.

The transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic era in the Southern Lowlands has been interpreted as a time of major societal transformation for the Maya. It has been correlated with changes in nearly all aspects of material culture. However, this era is not well understood for a number of reasons, four of which are provided here. First, in archaeological terms, this transition appears to have been a rapid occurrence; it is difficult to distinguish activities preceding and following this change. Second, many of the sites that weathered the transition went on to prominence, resulting in the obfuscation of early archaeological materials and features beneath later massive building programs. Third, the cultural phenomena of the transition may not have affected all of Maya society equally; thus, there may not be uniform changes in the material record. And fourth, much of the non-public architecture during these eras may not have been built on highly mounded constructions or have been characterized by highly raised buildings (cf. Bronson 1968; Rice and Culbert 1990:15). Thus, the use of traditional mound-based archaeological sampling schemes might not be appropriate for discovering representative materials dating to this transition (cf. A. Chase 1990: Table 7.4).

However, one architectural arrangement is directly relevant to interpretations of the transition between the Preclassic and the Early Classic Period. This architectural form is known as an "E Group Assemblage" after its original member, Group E of Uaxactun (Fig. 56); it is widely distributed in the Southern Lowlands (see Fig. 55). This grouping has also been referred to as a "Commemo-

rative Astronomical Assemblage" by Laporte and Fialko (1987, 1990), but this label ascribes a functional meaning to this kind of group and will not be used here, especially in light of Aveni and Hartung's finding that the majority of such groups do not have any archaeoastromical meaning. In our estimation and as we have previously pointed out (A. Chase 1985:35-38), the E Group Assemblage is associated with the crystallization of what was to become Classic Maya society in the Southern Lowlands. An exploration of the temporal and spatial ramifications of such an assemblage indicates both continuity and discontinuity and permits some explication of what was involved in the Southern Lowland Maya transition from the Preclassic to Classic Periods.

THE LATE PRECLASSIC - EARLY CLASSIC TRANSITION

The antecedents for Classic Maya society are clearly evident in the iconography and architecture of the Maya Preclassic Period. The old view of the Preclassic Maya as a simple agricultural society (cf. Thompson 1966) has been seriously challenged by new data from the northern Peten (Dahlin 1984; Matheny 1986, 1987; Hammond 1986a; Hansen 1992a) that seem to indicate a substantial population constructing many massive architectural complexes during the Late Preclassic era. Additional data from Tikal (W. Coe 1990), Cerros (Robertson and Freidel 1986), Lamanai (Pendegast 1981), and Komchen (Andrews V and Ringle 1992) similarly show that the Preclassic Maya built massive constructions and used complex modeled iconography. But, realistically, what does this indicate about Preclassic Maya society? And, what implications do these data have for our understanding of the subsequent Classic Period?

Use of these data to move back the timing of state development in the Maya area to the Preclassic Period would appear to be premature. Construction of large complexes can be undertaken with relatively small numbers of people, a point already documented by Abrams (1987) for Late Classic Copan, by D. Chase (1990:207) for Early Classic Santa Rita Corozal, and indirectly by

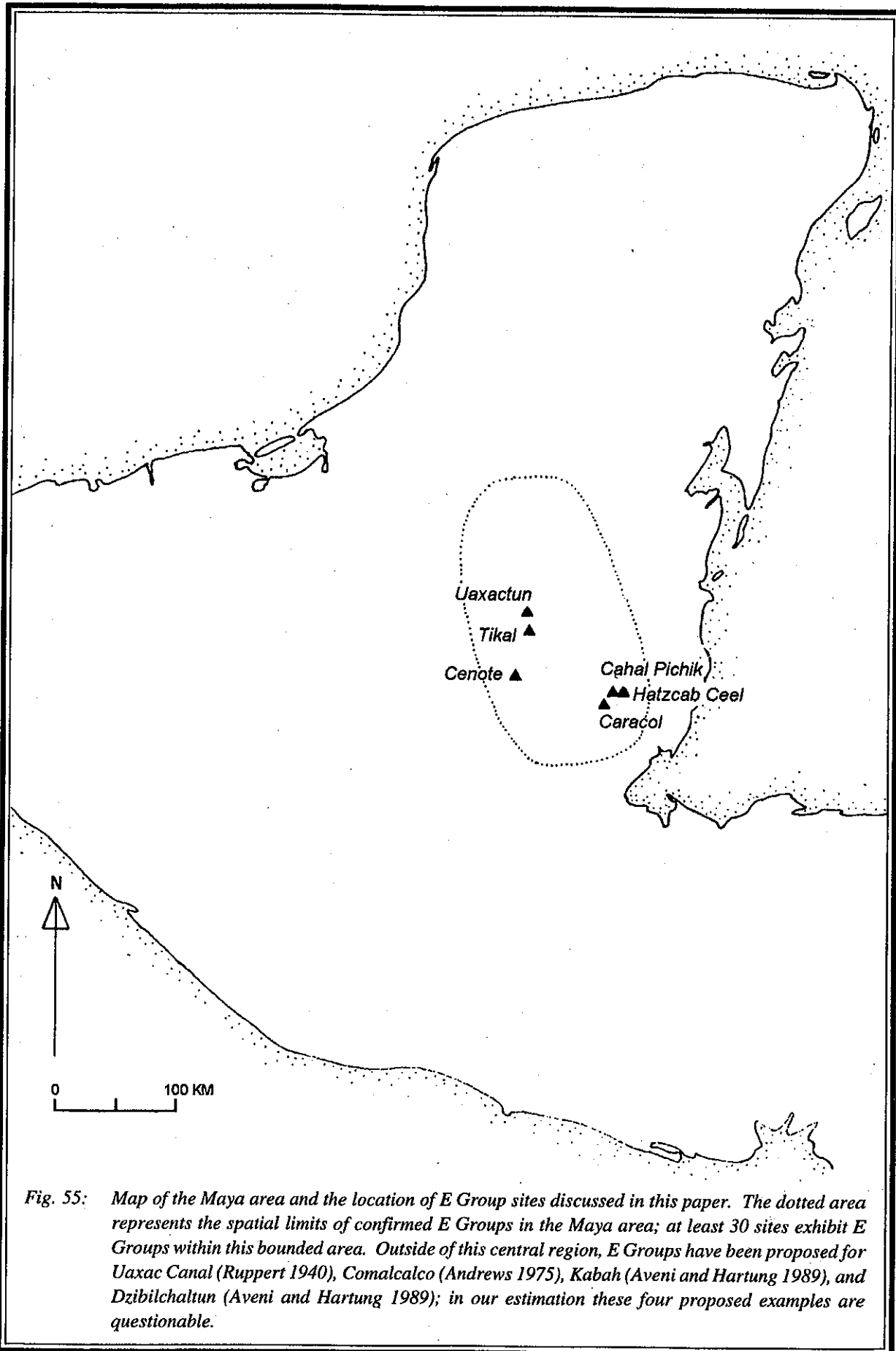


Fig. 55: Map of the Maya area and the location of E Group sites discussed in this paper. The dotted area represents the spatial limits of confirmed E Groups in the Maya area; at least 30 sites exhibit E Groups within this bounded area. Outside of this central region, E Groups have been proposed for Uaxac Canal (Ruppert 1940), Comalcalco (Andrews 1975), Kabah (Aveni and Hartung 1989), and Dzibilchaltun (Aveni and Hartung 1989); in our estimation these four proposed examples are questionable.

R.E.W. Adams (this volume) for Rio Azul. The idea of greater complexity for the Preclassic Maya would gain credence if the road system of Mirador could be securely dated to the Preclassic era, thereby showing hierarchical linkage on an early temporal horizon. However, this placement has not been securely demonstrated. Given the prevalent Late Classic materials at the site and the dating of similar transportation features elsewhere to a later time, it is likely - at least in our estimation - that the Mirador causeways date no earlier than the Protoclassic (i.e., an era of uncertain and possibly variable date that is transitional between the Preclassic and Classic Periods) and quite possibly much later.

Maya civilization has traditionally been viewed as having crystallized at the onset of the Early Classic Period. The new Preclassic data do not negate this view. Rather, by pushing architectural constructions and iconographic renderings back into the Maya past, they provide time depth for traditional Maya traits, thus amplifying the indigenous nature of the Maya cultural process.

The archaeological underpinnings for our current definition of the Early Classic Period ultimately derive from research at Uaxactun in the Peten heartland of Guatemala. In fact, our present understanding of Maya prehistory, with few exceptions, was heavily influenced by the publication of this first large-scale excavation in the Maya Lowlands. Temporally, the era was bracketed into a 315-year span of the Maya long count which ran from 8.12.0.0.0 (A.D. 278 in an 11.16.0.0.0 correlation) to 9.8.0.0.0 (A.D. 593) by the excavators (Smith 1950:67). Culturally, A.L. Smith (1950:vii) summarized the Early Classic Period as follows:

"It was a time of great cultural development; the erection of dated monuments was begun, and some stone superstructures replaced those of perishable materials. . . The ceremonial centers became more imposing. . . Burials took on a new importance. Crypt and the more impressive chamber graves were introduced and mortuary furniture in important burials was very elaborate. Polychrome superseded monochrome in the decoration of pottery. The use of jade was much more common."

Elsewhere, he (1950:67) added that

"...the Early Classic Period saw the introduction of two very characteristic elements of Maya culture, the corbel-vaulted building and the stela cult, both of which must have bulked large in the ceremonial life of the people."

This original interpretation of the "great cultural development" of the Early Classic Period based on the Uaxactun data is still largely with us today (Willey 1977b:147; Willey and Mathews 1985), even though there are obvious problems with the specific identifications on which it was based. The Early Classic at Uaxactun was conceived

through a specific trait list that was then combined into a whole to serve as a "type-fossil" for the rest of the Maya area. Yet, almost all of the component elements once defined as Early Classic can now be pushed back into the Preclassic era.

To paraphrase A.L. Smith (1950:vii), the Preclassic era was clearly a time of great "cultural development" when "ceremonial centers became more imposing." Carved monuments were produced and erected; many of these were destroyed and reincorporated into later constructions, as can be seen at Tikal by their inclusion in Preclassic fills (W. Coe 1965b:1406,1409); eroded monuments from this period still stand at Mirador (Hansen 1991). Preclassic stone superstructures, probably complete with corbeled-vaulting, are also in evidence at Tikal by about 25 B.C. (W. Coe 1965b:1413). "Impressive chamber graves" with "elaborate" mortuary furniture, including jadeite and dating as early as 100 B.C., are well known from the Preclassic North Acropolis at Tikal (W. Coe 1965b, 1990). Thus, with the exception of polychrome ceramics, the original definition of the Early Classic at Uaxactun now applies equally to what we know about the Preclassic Period. Does this therefore mean that the transition between the Preclassic and Early Classic is meaningless? The answer must be a resounding "No." It simply means that there are many material continuities. How, then did our picture of the Early Classic get so skewed?

The origins and antecedents of the Early Classic Period at Uaxactun were quite murky. In fact, R.E. Smith, who analyzed the ceramics of Uaxactun, was hardpressed to explain how the Preclassic led into the Early Classic at Uaxactun. He (1955:22, cf. Culbert 1977:30), in fact, suggested that the Terminal Preclassic Period was missing altogether from the Uaxactun collections:

The hypothetical basis for the existence at Uaxactun of a transitional phase between Chicanel and Tzakol 1 depends on Holmul 1 plus certain Uaxactun incongruities and rarities. At Uaxactun no such transitional ceramic phase appeared stratigraphically. If it were not for Holmul I, such an intermediary development would hardly be suspected.

But, Tzakol 1 and Tzakol 2 ceramics at Uaxactun were also largely lacking (cf. Adams 1971:148; Lincoln 1985). Thus, the transition between the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic Periods came to be viewed as being quite disjunctive.

This transition proved so problematic for the Carnegie archaeologists of Uaxactun that it also resulted in the eventual assignation of the Uaxactun E Group to the later part of the Early Classic Period, in spite of the knowledge that Structure EVII-sub was likely of Preclassic date (compare Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:135 and A. Smith 1950:63 with Kidder 1950:1 and A. Smith 1950:67). To a large extent, the emphasis on this full "Early Classic"

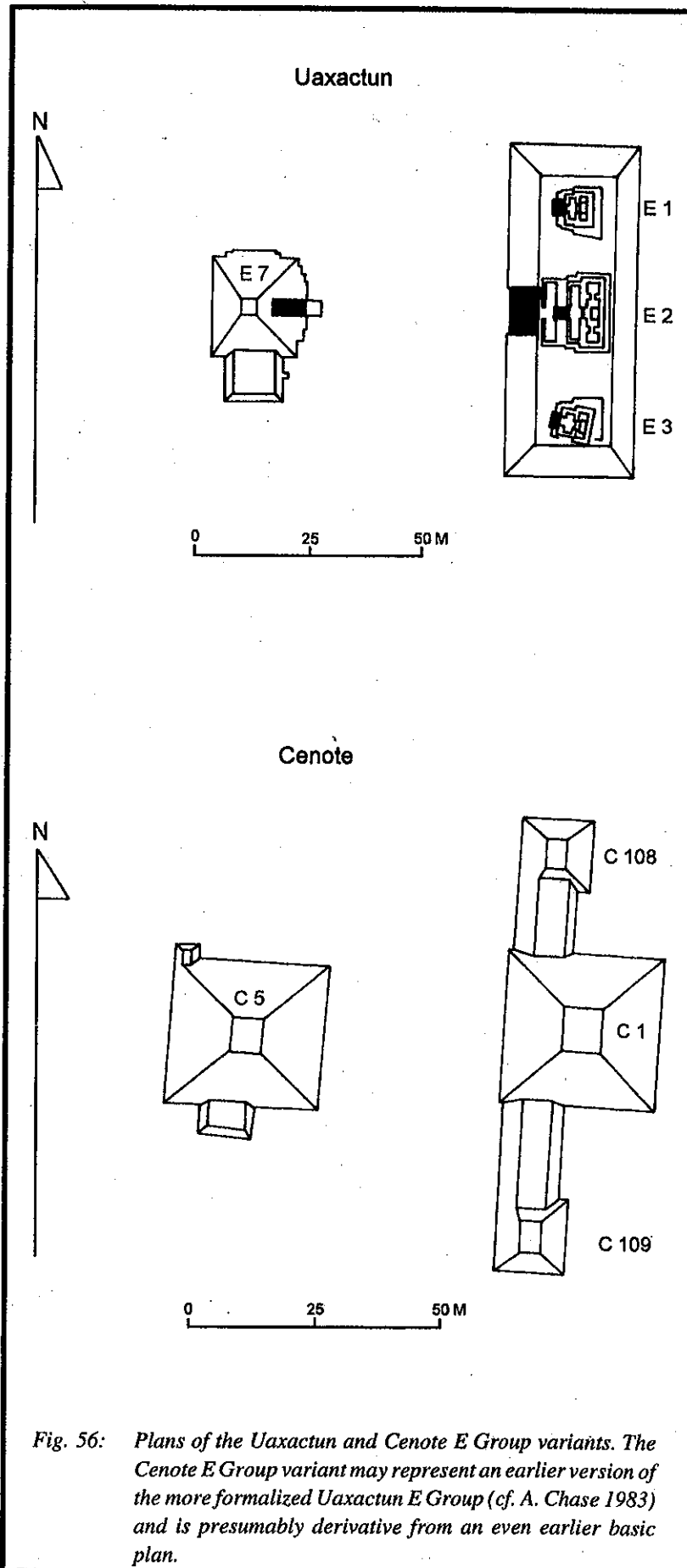


Fig. 56: Plans of the Uaxactun and Cenote E Group variants. The Cenote E Group variant may represent an earlier version of the more formalized Uaxactun E Group (cf. A. Chase 1983) and is presumably derivative from an even earlier basic plan.

dating was predicated on the presence of two 8.16.0.0.0 stelae and one 9.3.0.0.0 stela in the plaza associated with the Uaxactun E Group. The extension of these stelae dates to the E Group architecture eventually obscured both the earlier nature of the recovered archaeological materials and the bearing that this entire complex has on an understanding of the Preclassic-Early Classic transition (cf. A. Chase 1985).

E GROUP ASSEMBLAGES IN THE MAYA AREA

As described first for Uaxactun (Fig. 56), the E Group assemblage consisted of a pyramidal western mound facing an eastern platform which supported three linearly arranged buildings (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937; Ruppert 1940:222). Group E at Uaxactun was believed to have functioned as a solar observatory (Ricketson 1928) in that "these buildings were placed in their respective positions as temples dedicated to ... the four most significant positions of the sun in the course of the solar year" (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: 108-109).

While the astronomical implications of the Uaxactun example are (and were) well documented, it was noted very early that other examples of this structural grouping were extremely problematic with regard to archaeoastronomy (Ruppert 1940:5-6). Aveni and Hartung (1989:455) now explicitly acknowledge that, with the possible exception of the Uaxactun example, "none of these [other] Group E-type complexes appear to have functioned either as precise or approximate observatories that registered both solstice extremes and/or equinoxes."

Yet, the E-Group assemblage is noted for at least 30 sites in a rather concentrated area within the Southern Lowlands (A. Chase 1985; Aveni and Hartung 1989:455; Hansen 1992a; see Fig. 55). There is no

doubt, as Ruppert and Dennison (1943:5) pointed out, that "the obvious similarity in orientation and arrangement" of these standardized groups "suggests their use for a common function." But, exactly what this function was is still not known. A major difficulty in understanding E Groups has been their temporal assessment.

The Uaxactun E Group was accorded temporal priority to all other known examples because of its exact fit with the recorded astronomical measurements, because of the early dating of the associated stelae, and because of the importance ascribed to Uaxactun in overall Maya prehistory by Sylvanus G. Morley (cf. Kidder 1950:1). Ruppert and Dennison (1943:5) deduced that the Uaxactun group was the original and purest expression of the assemblage. Therefore, it was easy to accommodate the wide amount of variation within the other known E Group assemblages by reference to their having become "provincially and decadently . . . merely ritualistic" and, by definition, later than the Uaxactun example. Thus, under this reasoning, all examples of E Group assemblages would have dated to the Early Classic Period, a conclusion that largely has been followed by later researchers until very recently.

In reaching this conclusion, Ruppert and Dennison (1943) ignored extant data collected from other excavated examples of this architectural assemblage at Cahal Pichik and Hatzcab Ceel by Thompson and published in 1931. These data suggested the possibility of an earlier Late Preclassic dating for this architectural form (cf. A. Chase 1983:1241-1244). Amplification of E Group development also comes from excavated data collected from the sites of Cenote (A. Chase 1983, 1985), Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1987, 1990), and Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987, below). The potential dating of antecedents for this architectural complex to an even earlier Middle Preclassic era receives further support from the work of Juan Pedro Laporte and Vilma Fialko (1987, 1990) at Tikal and the Cenote E Group variant (see below and Fig. 56) is also dated to the Middle Preclassic by Richard Hansen (1992a:56) at early sites in the northern Peten. These data make it clear that all excavated E Group assemblages, while perhaps elaborated in the Early Classic era, form the primary focus at each site in which they occur during the transition from the Preclassic to Classic Period. An examination of the archaeology associated with these complexes permits us to understand how Classic Maya society crystallized during this transition.

THE UAXACTUN E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

At Uaxactun all four structures that formed part of that site's E Group (Fig. 56) were investigated by the Ricketsons (1937). Smith (1950:63) noted that the latest pottery

within all of these constructions was Early Classic Tzakol in date. All three of the buildings that rested on the summit of the eastern platform were investigated. All three constructions proved to have been tandem-roomed buildings which had been presumably vaulted at one time. However, the earliest form of the eastern platform and the earlier constructions within it were not well defined.

Structure EI yielded two deposits. The first, "Feature 1," dated to Late Classic Tepeu 1 or 2 times (see Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plate 86 and Fig. 10) and is an intrusive pottery dump placed within the altar of the building. The second deposit, "Cist 2," was located south of the same altar and consisted of a skull burial accompanied by 12 jadeite objects encased within two Early Classic Aguila Red bowls (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plate 81a,b). It would appear that Cist 2 was intrusive to the structure as "it had been plastered over and was detected by the hollow sound produced by tapping as well as by a faint line of demarcation in the floor" (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:49).

Structure EIII, the other end structure, evinced unclear stratigraphy associated with its three Early Classic deposits (Cists 3, 4, and 7), all of which produced Aguila Red vessels. Cist 3, which contained an Aguila Red barrel (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plate 81e,f), was located on the midline of the building's altar against the back wall, but could have been secondarily placed in its recovered position. Cists 4 and 7 each contained skull burials encased inside Aguila Red plates; Cist 4 was located south of the altar while Cist 7 was "found in the floor in the doorway between the two galleries" (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:58).

The central eastern building, Structure EII, also produced three Early Classic deposits containing Aguila Red plates (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plate 81d,l,m,h,i). Cist 1 contained one vessel and the body of a child; Cist 8 contained two vessels which encased 2 obsidian lancets; Cist 6 contained two plates which encased a human skull. While it is unclear whether Cist 6 was sealed or unsealed, Cists 1 and 8 are probably both non-intrusive (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:55-56). Another unlabeled cache was sealed in the fill below Cists 1 and 6 and produced two vessels of uncertain date (either Late Preclassic or Early Classic; see Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:56, Plate 79j-l).

"Additional excavations were carried out around Structure EII and revealed the presence of earlier constructions of so complicated a nature that only complete removal of the whole mound would have given a clear picture . . . the additions and refloorings here are very complicated and indicate that the East Mound itself was probably not originally built to its present dimensions" (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:52).

Based on Fig. 14 in the report, there were minimally three and up to five earlier construction phases at this locus dating to Early Classic or Late Preclassic times. Similarly, excavations at the basal level of the platform (see Figs. 94 and 95 in Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) indicate the presence of several different facings and an inset side panel, also indicative of substantial time depth. Thus, although the latest offerings dated primarily to the Early Classic, there are indications that the eastern construction of the E Group itself was started prior to the Early Classic era.

The large western pyramid, Structure E-VII, was also investigated. Although the form of the latest substructure was difficult to ascertain, it measured 24.3 m by 24.7 m, was flanked by stucco masks, and had no structure at its summit; it had definite stairways on its eastern and northern sides with suspected ones on its southern and western sides (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:67-68). Excavations into the core of this pyramid produced four Early Classic deposits: one burial (Cist 10) and three caches (Cists 9, 11, and 12) containing 15 Aguila Red and Balanza Black vessels (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plates 81n-o, 82a-e, 84a-h). Plate 86 in the Ricketson's (1937) study shows a polychrome basal-flange bowl from the hearting of Pyramid E-VII, thus dating the structure to no earlier than the Early Classic Period. One additional deposit (Cist 13) containing 16 various Early Classic vessels (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: Plates 82g-i, 83a-e, h, i, 85a-6, Fig. 190e) and four eccentric flints was located in the coring of an associated platform; among these vessels is a Protoclassic Ixcantio Polychrome vessel (Fig. 190e), thus indicating that this deposit dates to the onset of the Early Classic era. Whereas the Ricketsons (1937:93) argue that Structure E-VII-sub is followed by E-VII-secondary and then by the E-VII-platform, this sequence of construction is inverted as can be seen in their Fig. 57 which shows E-VII-sub followed by E-VII-platform and then by E-VII-secondary. The summary of deposits reviewed above confirms this inversion and would indicate that E-VII-sub is probably Late Preclassic in date.

This re-examination of the Uaxactun Group E data demonstrates that the assemblage as a completed whole must have come into being during the transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic Periods. This can be inferred from both the dating of the associated deposits and the presence of earlier constructions beneath the outer facade of both the eastern platform and the western pyramid. Uaxactun Structure E-VII-sub is probably Late Preclassic in date based on the stratigraphic data presented by the Ricketsons. And, in fact, the Preclassic antecedents for Uaxactun Group E assemblage were explicitly recognized by the Ricketsons (1937:Fig. 98) in their reconstructed plans for the development of this group.

THE CAHAL PICHIK E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

Seemingly ignored in the literature on E Groups are the excavations undertaken by Thompson (1931) at Hatzcab Ceel and Cahal Pichik in the 1920's. These investigations uncovered data on E Groups which was pertinent to and varied from that recovered at Uaxactun. These excavations, however, were not used as comparative data either by the Ricketsons (1937) or by Ruppert (1940; Ruppert and Dennison 1943).

At least in its later history, Cahal Pichik formed a part of the massive site of Caracol and is direct connected to the Caracol epicenter by a 7.6 km long causeway that runs into the rear of Thompson's Structure B (A. Chase 1992:39). The Cahal Pichik E Group is formed by Structure B as the western pyramid and by Structures D, E, and F on or attached to Platform L as the eastern component of the assemblage. Structure G, which supported two plain stelae immediately west of Platform L, may additionally be tentatively assigned to the site's E Group complex.

At Cahal Pichik, Thompson excavated on the summit of three of these structures (B, E, and F). The western Structure B was composed of 3 terraces, was 13 m high, and probably had an eastern stairway. On its summit, it supported a 2.5 m high structure which had an 8 m long back wall to which a 1.05 m high, 1 m deep, and 5 m wide bench or altar was attached. Based on the extant floor the structure extended 8.10 m to the east, indicating that the associated building could not have been vaulted. An earlier altar was found directly beneath the later one. Importantly, "Votive Cache 4" was found sealed beneath the back wall of the structure on axis with the bench. This cache consisted of two lip-to-lip unslipped vessels encasing a jadeite bead and a jadeite amulet (Thompson 1931:276-277, Plate 36). It likely dates to the Preclassic-Early Classic transition; other looted barrel-shaped cache vessels, of probable Late Preclassic date, were recovered in association with the summit of this same building in 1989 by the Caracol Project.

Thompson (1931:243) also briefly investigated Cahal Pichik Structure E, the central construction associated with the eastern platform, which he found to be 9.5 m high with a stairway on the west side and no traces of a building on its top; it was terraced and had square corners, but had no associated deposits. By 1989, this building was completely halved by a looters' trench; it was apparently constructed in a single building effort; its non-dry core fills probably predate the Late Classic era based on comparative data from elsewhere at Caracol.

Cahal Pichik Structure F, the southern building associated with the eastern platform, rose 1.5 m more above this platform's 3 m height. Thompson's (1931:244) excavations at this locus found a tandem plan building. The front

room measured 4.5 m by 5.4 m and had only vestigial walls, but the back room was formed by dressed stone walls that were 4.8 m long by 1.1 m wide. The stratigraphic situation recorded by Thompson clearly showed that the back room preceded the construction of the front room. Importantly, a refuse dump that produced whole vessels, was located under the floor of the back chamber. The vessel illustrated by Thompson (1931: Fig. 10d) is a censer that may be cross-dated to the Early Classic Kaatan Complex at Tikal (cf. Ferree 1967: Fig. 4). Whether earlier versions of Structure F had existed was not ascertained by Thompson.

Thus, the Cahal Pichik data, like those from Uaxactun, are indicative of a Preclassic to Early Classic transitional date for the E Group assemblage at that site.

THE HATZCAB CEEL E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

Thompson excavated in a second E Group located a short distance east of Cahal Pichik. At Hatzcab Ceel, the E Group is composed of the western Structure A and the eastern Structures I, E, and F. As at Cahal Pichik, the eastern platform is fronted by a low structure, "G," which may also be a component of the E Group at this site. Thompson (1931:260) excavated on the summit of Structure A, which had a height of at least 10.4 meters. The remains of a formal building was located but was destroyed by a landslide before measurements of it could be made. Although he uncovered three floors within Structure A, he recovered no deposits which could be used to date the construction.

Thompson partially excavated Structure E, which was 6 m high, and uncovered an earlier building in its fill, but found no associated deposits. The upper building stage of Structure E consisted of a destroyed building with low stone walls.

Structure F at Hatzcab Ceel had a total height of 10 m and, presumably, a stairway on its western side. In this construction, Thompson uncovered a pair of superimposed buildings. The uppermost building consisted of a single room 5.35 m long by 1.75 m wide on the summit on Structure F; it had stone walls which rose over 1 m in height. The floor for this upper construction was found 1.2 m below the summit of the mound. An additional 1.2 m deeper, the floor of a second, 1 m wide chamber was found, the walls of which were covered with red stucco. The back wall of the second room was directly below the back wall of the upper room. A third flooring was located 1.25 m below this second surface. Centered on and below the doorway of the earlier building, Thompson (1931:275; Plate 34) found "Votive Cache 3" which consisted of a red-slipped barrel-shaped vessel placed within an open air cist. In this vessel was placed an unslipped everted-lip,

flat-based bowl; into this second vessel one iron pyrite mirror, four shells, eight shell beads, six jadeite beads, and three shell figurines were set. Based on comparisons with Caracol, the ceramics associated with this deposit date the earlier Hatzcab Ceel Structure F to the Late Preclassic era.

THE CENOTE E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

Three E Group assemblages are known from the Tayasal-Paxcaman zone (A. Chase 1983:1244). Only one, however, was excavated. The Cenote E Group assemblage (Figs. 56 and 57) consists of the traditional western pyramid, Structure C5, and a long eastern platform associated with Structures C1, C108, and C109. Elsewhere, it has been described in detail as a variant form of the E Group assemblage that likely came into existence before the more standardized Uaxactun assemblage (A. Chase 1985). The major difference between the two E Group variants lies in the form of the eastern platform; in the Uaxactun E Group variant, the platform comprises a separate rectangular unit, usually about 70 m in length and supporting three buildings; in the Cenote E Group variant, the supporting platform is much longer and narrower and there is a focus on the squarish central pyramid which appears in plan to be appended to the much lower platform. Excavations at Cenote have demonstrated that some version of this complex was already in existence by the Late Preclassic era. Subsequent to the Cenote investigations, Hansen (1992a) has independently confirmed the earlier temporal placement of the Cenote E Group variant by demonstrating that this spatial plan dates to the Middle Preclassic at sites in the northern Peten.

Several deposits were found in association with the Cenote E Group assemblage. A simple burial attributable to the Early Classic was uncovered within the latest version of Structure C5, the western pyramid. The majority of the deposits, however, were found in association with Structure C1, the central building on the eastern platform (A. Chase 1983:90-154). Set behind a plain altar in the plaza to the front of Structure C1 was a lip-to-lip cache of two Protoclassic black tetrapod vessels. A Protoclassic tetrapod cylinder and plate, possibly representing a corner cache, were also associated with the latest construction. On the summit of Structure C1, a series of burials and caches were found. Sealed beneath the steps leading to the latest building was an extended body associated with two lip-to-lip Early Classic *Aguila Red* vessels. Another pair of Early Classic *Aguila Red* vessels containing a skull was set immediately above this burial. Within the Structure C1 summit building a crypt burial of two people, dating to "Protoclassic" Yaxcheel (equivalent to Manik 1) times, had been placed with at least 15 vessels,

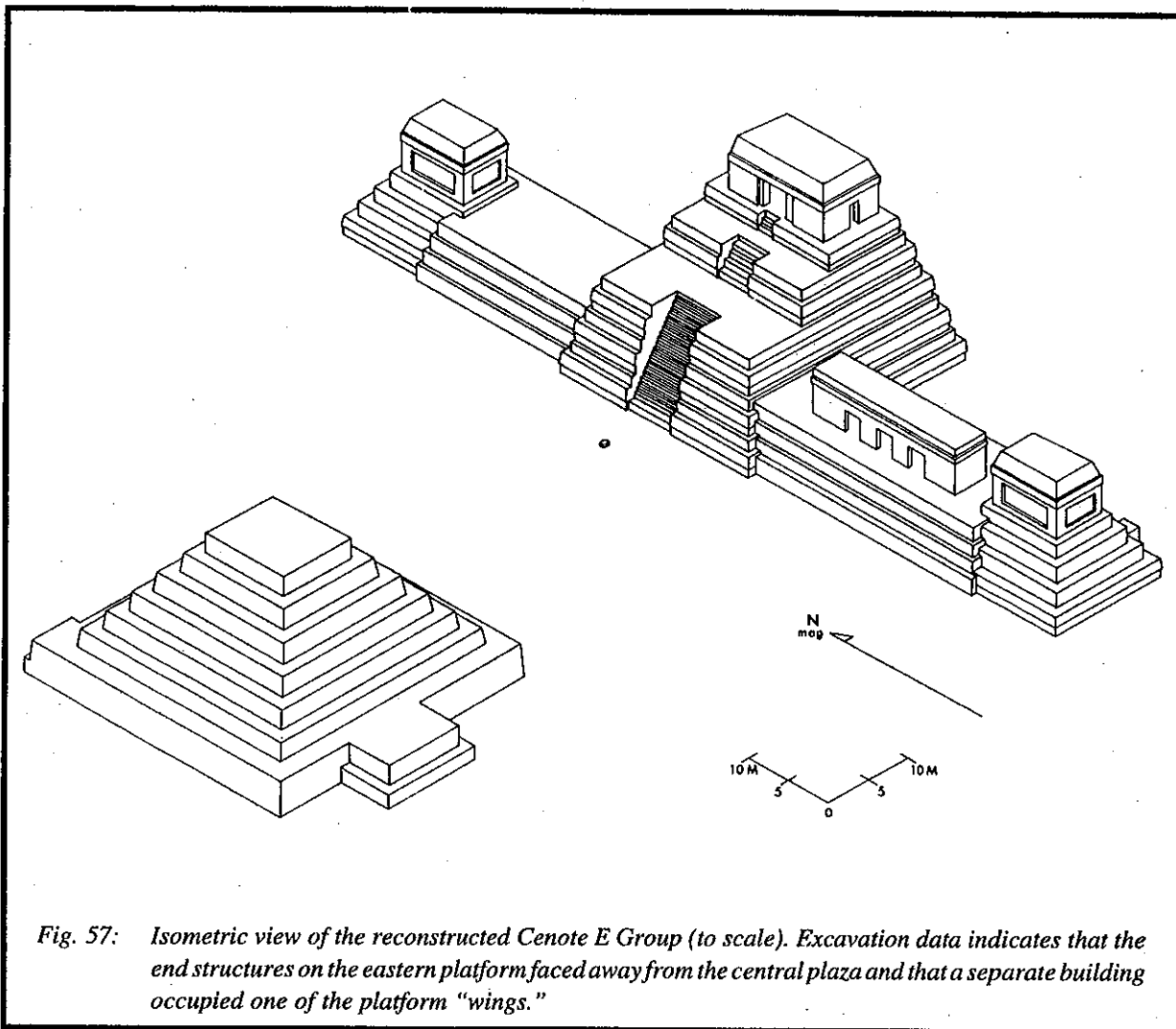


Fig. 57: Isometric view of the reconstructed Cenote E Group (to scale). Excavation data indicates that the end structures on the eastern platform faced away from the central plaza and that a separate building occupied one of the platform "wings."

2 chimney censers, a stingray spine, and several pieces of jadeite. It had been disturbed at the beginning of the Late Classic era and is probably missing some of its more important contents. Following the deposition of this burial, however, there was no more building at this locus. Thus, while the eastern center building of the Cenote E Group continued to be used into the Late Classic era, the actual construction of the latest version of the building can be securely placed at the onset of the Early Classic era. Excavation into the platform and pyramid supporting Structure C1 recovered even earlier constructions, indicating that building at this locus must have extended back into the Late Preclassic era.

Also associated with the Cenote E Group at its north-eastern corner was a formal raised stela enclosure with the remnants of a still erect plain monument. The complicated sequence associated with this construction shows it to have been first built at the point of transition between the Preclassic and Classic Periods and to have been used throughout the Early Classic era (A. Chase 1983:200-233). Thus, the "stela cult" appeared at Cenote at the very onset of the Classic Period.

THE TIKAL E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

The Tikal E Group, although obscured under later construction, has been well documented by Laporte and Fialko (1987, 1990). This Tikal architectural complex, colloquially known as "the Lost World," exhibits great time depth. A derivative version of the eastern platform (Structure 5D-84-88) and the western pyramid (Structure 5C-54) are dated to the Middle Preclassic era (Laporte and Fialko 1990:47). As with other sites noted above, however, it is not until the point of transition between the Preclassic and Classic Periods that the Tikal example exhibits all of the more typical E Group characteristics, at least relative to the eastern platform and its three associated structures (5C-84, 5C-86, 5C-88).

The Tikal E Group contains a very important series of deposits in its three eastern buildings. The earliest deposits, dated by Laporte and Fialko (1987) to the inception of the Classic era (Manik 1) consist of two structural caches set into the axis of the central eastern building. These two caches contain bone beads, green

stone beads, shells, bones, and some marine items for the most part encased within Aguila Red plates; a series of glyphs occur on the base of one set of these vessels. A mass burial (PNT-022), potentially of similar date, was set in front of the same structure, following well established Preclassic patterns for important burial placement seen in the Tikal North Acropolis (cf. W. Coe 1990).

Following these initial deposits a series of elaborate burials, mostly in chambers and dated by Laporte and Fialko (1987) to Early Classic Manik 2 times, are deposited in the cores of each of the eastern buildings. The high status of these individuals is evident both in their placement and in the grave goods that accompany them. Laporte and Fialko (1990:45) in fact argue that the most ostentatious chamber (and perhaps the earliest) may be attributable to one of Tikal's early rulers, Jaguar Paw III.

Associated with these burials is only one cache that has been assigned an Early Classic Manik 2 date. This cache (PNT-008) was found in the central east building of the E Group assemblage and contained a stingray spine, a mirror, worked bone, lithics, and greenstone beads within a smaller vessel - all located within another barrel-shaped pottery vessel. The composition of this cache is very reminiscent of the one found at Hatzcab Ceel (and dated to the Late Preclassic) in an analogous building.

Following this explosion of Manik 2 activity, no other reported deposits are placed in these buildings with the exception of Tikal Stela 39, an 8.19.0.0.0 (A.D. 416) monument, that is encased within the latest version of Structure 5D-86.

Thus, the Tikal data exhibit an architectural plan of great antiquity which becomes focused into a recognizable E Group assemblage at the very point of transition between the Preclassic and Classic eras. At this time, there was a corresponding burst of ritual deposits placed within this assemblage. But, like Cenote and unlike Uaxactun, these deposits consisted primarily of important burials. The ritual activity at this locus, however, largely ceased before the advent of later part of the Early Classic Period, or Manik 3, at Tikal when the North Acropolis of Tikal must have ritually replaced the Lost World E Group complex.

THE CARACOL E GROUP ASSEMBLAGE

The A Group at Caracol constitutes that site's central E Group assemblage. The majority of the buildings within this plaza grouping have been archaeologically investigated. While the formal E Group assemblage is partially obscured under later building activity in this area, its component parts are quite clear.

The western pyramid, Structure A2, rises almost 25 meters above the associated plaza floor and is not crowned

by a building - similar to Structures E-VII at Uaxactun and 5C-54 at Tikal. Excavation into the summit of this substructure revealed a series of caches as well as three monuments. The latest version of Structure A2 may be dated to the early part of the Late Classic era based on the associated Stela 22 set into the upper substructure wall and dated to 9.10.0.0.0 (A.D. 633). Like the Tikal E group, the Caracol example is also associated with the redeposited remnants of a late 8th cycle monument, in this case placed beneath a 9.11.0.0.0 (A.D. 652) altar. While the Late Classic modifications made to the western pyramid of the E Group at Caracol is to some degree anomalous, the version of Structure A2 that preceded its latest rebuilding may be dated to the Early Classic Period on the basis of an associated barrel-shaped cache vessel.

The eastern platform of the Caracol E Group has been extensively investigated and is, to a great extent, understood developmentally. The primary focus on this platform was always the central Structure A6. This building was constructed in a series of at least four stages during the Late Preclassic Period; a series of deposits and radiocarbon dates stratigraphically associated with the various floorings and versions of Structure A6 allow this building's secure placement in time to the Late Preclassic era.

Four caches were recovered from within Structure A6, the central eastern building of the Caracol E group assemblage; all date to the Late Preclassic era and all were on axis to either of two latest versions of this building. The earliest two were associated with use of Structure A6-2nd and were sealed by the latest floor of this building; these two deposits were stratigraphically sequential. The first cache was set into a pit in an existing floor and consisted of a lidded squat barrel-shaped vessel that had been interiorly burned; set within this vessel were a large shell, animal bones, stingray spines, a jadeite bead, a shell bead, and a piece of pyrite. This initial cache was then sealed by a new flooring. Another cache was then intruded into this floor and then sealed by a subsequent floor. The second cache consisted of lip-to-lip unslipped vessels bedded on a substantial layer of broken and crushed greenstone beads (conservatively estimated at over 500); only a single shell bead and a single jadeite bead were found within this second cache.

The latest version of Structure A6 (-1st) was also associated with two deeply buried caches. The first of these (Fig. 58) was set into the latest floor for Structure A6-2nd on axis and tangent to its rear wall (which was ripped out). The container for this deposit was a hollowed-out stone (geode?) measuring 16 cm in height by 20 cm in width by 32 cm in length. An upper corner area revealed a shaped stone plug sealed into the side of the stone container with a red clay mortar. Within the hollow stone rested a complete jadeite earflare with its stucco backing intact (and with a central jadeite tube and associated pearl end) and a pair of spondylous shells, all



Fig. 58: Expanded view of the initial cache deposited beneath Caracol Structure A6-1st showing pooled mercury in the bottom of a hollow stone and the contents of a cloth bundle which enclosed a jadeite pendant with three associated beads set in hematite between two spondylous shells and a single earflare assemblage set among many malachite pebbles. Drawing by Joseph Ballay.

covered with a layer of malachite pebbles. The remains of cloth were evident on the earflare and upper shell indicating that the whole had once been wrapped together as a bundle; a "string" was also recovered from within the earflare's jadeite tube. Within the lower (covered) spondylous shell, a large jadeite pendent in the shape of a face (528.7 grams), measuring 10.8 cm in length by 7.4 cm in width and 4.6 cm in depth, rested on a bed of powdered cinnabar. Also bedded in this red matrix were large jadeite and shell beads, set as if earrings for the face pendent, and a jadeite "claw" bead, set as if a necklace at the throat of the carved pendent. Finally, 664.7 grams of mercury rested in the bottom of the stone container - more mercury than has been recorded from a single deposit at any other Maya site.

The second cache associated with Structure A6-1st was partially cut into Structure A6-2nd from above and was situated in an open air cist sealed by three capstones. This cache consisted of a barrel-shaped vessel bedded on a layer of shells and containing a host of items (Chase and Chase 1987:12-13). In the bottom of the barrel was a layer of malachite pebbles. On this was set a host of shell and jadeite figures, two pyrite mirrors, fish vertebrae, sharks' teeth, coral, seaweed, and natural as well as carved shells - all set among four directionally-oriented larger shells arranged about a central jadeite earflare assemblage (Fig. 59); pine needles and pumpkin seeds were also recovered as well as a beehive which had been placed on top of the other objects.

Both of the Structure A6-1st caches can be stratigraphically dated to the Late Preclassic era. This dating is confirmed by a series of radiocarbon dates from Structure A6. Carbon which overlay the floor and the associated stone "box" cache was dated to 1900 ± 50 BP (two sigma cal AD 10 [120] 240; Beta 61209). Carbon inside the latest barrel cache dated to 1980 ± 80 (two sigma cal BC 190 [AD 15] AD 210; Beta 18060). Burning on a sealed floor associated with Structure A6-1st dated to 1920 ± 140 (two sigma cal BC 354 [AD 77] AD 410; Beta 18059);

burning on one of the latest floors associated with Structure A6-1st dated to 2070 ± 60 (two sigma cal BC 350 [BC 101] AD 60; Beta 43519). Carbon associated with a garbage deposit containing Sierra Red ceramics and predating the construction of Structure A6-2nd dated to 1870 ± 90 (two sigma cal BC 90 [AD 123] AD 372; Beta 18061). Finally, two preserved wooden beams associated with Structure A6-1st dated to 2020 ± 60 (two sigma cal BC 190 [BC 36] AD 90; Beta 42004) and to 1990 ± 60 (two sigma cal BC 161 [AD 8] AD 120; Beta 42005). These radiocarbon dates and the associated archaeological stratigraphy strongly point to the construction of Structure A6-1st and the deposition of its non-intrusive caches during the first century AD. They were certainly deposited prior to AD 240 based on the sigma spread provided by the radiocarbon dates. Thus, the cache patterns seen in core of Caracol Structure A6-1st are the earliest known examples of what later became a common Early Classic cache pattern at other sites in the Southern Lowlands.

Excavation of both the eastern platform and its associated buildings has also permitted an understanding of the complex developmental sequence of the eastern side of the Caracol A Group (Fig. 60). As originally conceived, the Preclassic eastern side of the Caracol E Group plaza consisted first of a long range platform (Fig. 60a) and then of a raised central building with a projecting front terrace, flanked to either side by smaller substructures supporting buildings (Fig. 60b). These smaller substructures were buried within the first stage of the arms that came to comprise the formal eastern platform during the middle part of the Early Classic Period (Fig. 60c); an Early Classic tomb was included in the core of this construction effort beneath the later locus of Structure A4. These arms were subsequently widened to the east to encompass the full depth of the central Preclassic Structure A6; this was done during the later part of the Early Classic Period in conjunction with the construction of Structures A5 and A7 to form a formal version of the typical three-building eastern platform for an E Group assemblage (Fig. 60d). A major tomb (with entrance allowing for possible reentry) dating from the end of the Early Classic Period was placed within the core of Struc-

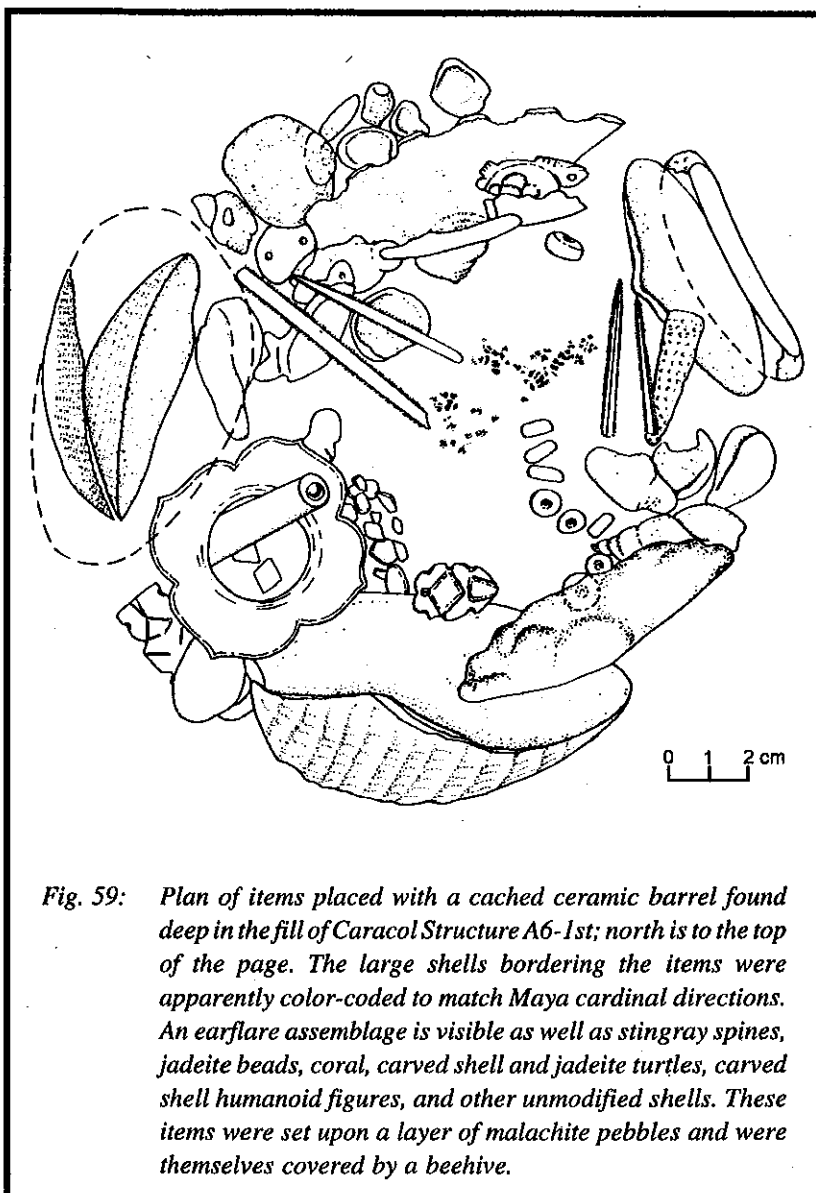
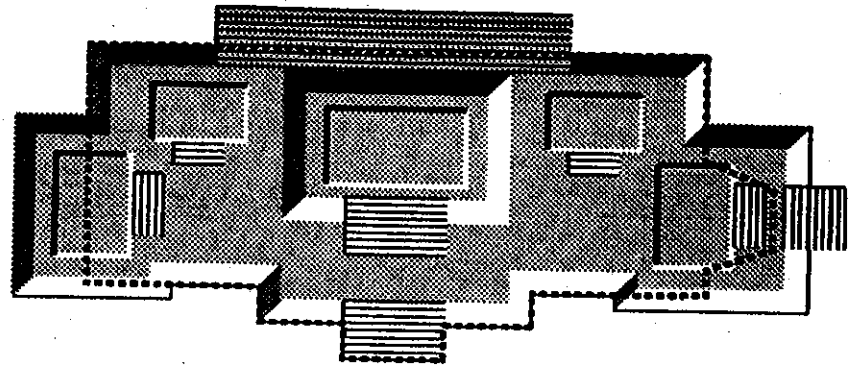


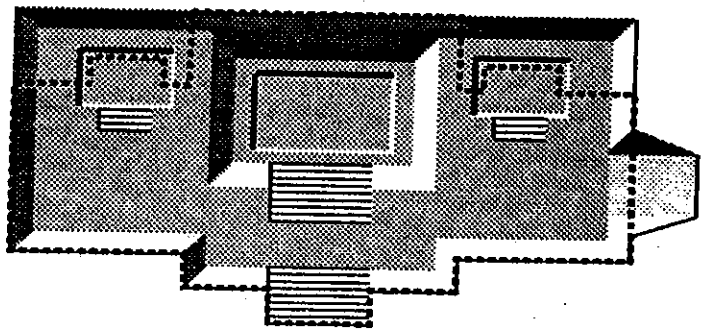
Fig. 59: Plan of items placed with a cached ceramic barrel found deep in the fill of Caracol Structure A6-1st; north is to the top of the page. The large shells bordering the items were apparently color-coded to match Maya cardinal directions. An earflare assemblage is visible as well as stingray spines, jadeite beads, coral, carved shell and jadeite turtles, carved shell humanoid figures, and other unmodified shells. These items were set upon a layer of malachite pebbles and were themselves covered by a beehive.

ture A7 and permits the latest use of this building to be dated. Later building during the onset of the Late Classic Period extended the platform even further to the north and to the south in association with the construction of Structures A4 and A8, resulting in the present configuration of the eastern side of the Caracol A Plaza (Fig. 60e). This final sequencing is dated on the basis of two caches in Structure A8 and a tomb in Structure A4; the monuments in front of Structure A4 would additionally support the sequencing of this building event anywhere from 9.6.0.0.0 (A.D. 554) to 9.11.0.0.0 (A.D. 652); this later 9.11.0.0.0 date is based on an associated Giant Ahau altar and matches a similar altar date from the summit of Structure A2.

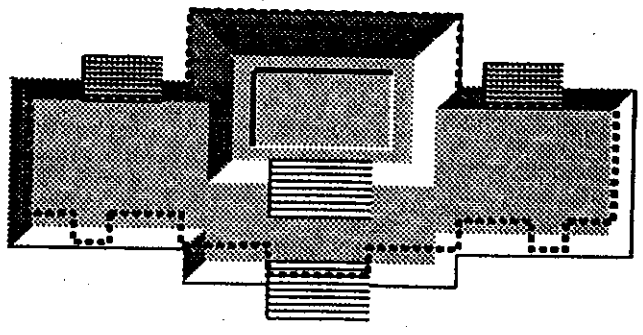
The long developmental sequence of the Caracol E Group is similar to those from the other excavated E Group assemblages, at least in terms of its early dating. The excavated sequence makes it clear, however, that in spite of the early and precocious development of parts of



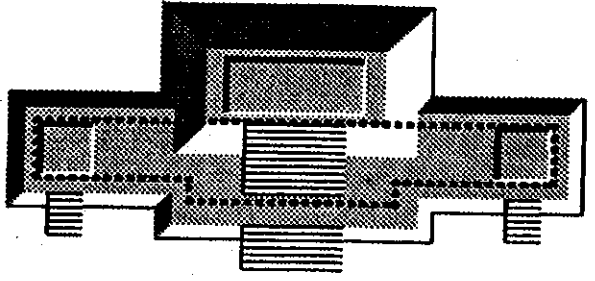
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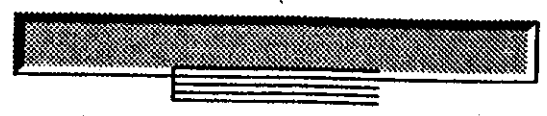
d



c



b



a

the assemblage (specifically the central east building) the completion of a full E Group assemblage at Caracol did not occur prior to the Early Classic Period. The continued elaboration of the Caracol E Group assemblage during the early part of the Late Classic era is unusual for this kind of complex and may perhaps be correlated with Caracol's unparalleled growth during this same time.

THE E GROUP PHENOMENON AND THE PRECLASSIC-CLASSIC TRANSITION

Ruppert (1940) noted that almost all known E Groups occurred within a 110 kilometer radius of Uaxactun and that there tended to be a minimum distance of 21 kilometers between sites with this plan. While it is still true that all verified E Groups are concentrated in the eastern lowlands, closer spacing between sites with this architectural assemblage is evident from both the Caracol (Caracol, Hatzacab Ceel, and Cahal Pichik), Tayasal-Paxcaman (Tayasal, Cenote, and Paxcaman), and possibly the Nakbe (Güiro, Tintal) regions. And, it is likely that still other sites evincing this assemblage will be located as further work is undertaken in the Southern Lowlands, especially given the unobtrusive nature of sites like Cenote, Paxcaman, Cahal Pichik, and Hatzacab Ceel.

E Groups appear to have great time depth in the East-Central Lowlands. An early version of the Cenote variant - minus the central east building - has been documented for both Tikal and Caracol; at Tikal this variant has been dated to the Middle Preclassic (Laporte and Fialko 1990:47). Versions of the Cenote-style E Group have also been tentatively dated to the Middle Preclassic era in the northern Peten (Hansen 1992a:182). While the Cenote-style E Group became fairly widespread during the Late Preclassic, the Uaxactun-style E Group appears with the onset of the Early Classic era. The Caracol data hint at the evolution of what may have been a Cenote-style E Group into the slightly later Uaxactun-style E Group.

With more research, it may be possible to either link or derive the development of the Southern Lowland E Groups from a Middle Preclassic settlement pattern (Escalera) found in the Upper Grijalva River area of Chiapas. Here Lowe (1977:224, Fig. 9.4) has demonstrated the occurrence of a plaza plan consisting of a large western pyramid juxtaposed with a long (ca. 100 m),

narrow rectangular eastern structure at 12 sites on a Modified Olmec horizon. This plaza plan is quite close both to that generated by Laporte and Fialko (1990) for the Middle Preclassic version of the E Group precursor at Tikal. Thus, it is possible to see assemblages of this form both within and outside of the central Maya area as an E Group prototype. Lowe (1977:224) suggests that this plaza pattern is derivative from the Olmec one found in Group A of La Venta, Tabasco.

"It is quite probable that the Late Olmec-derived settlement pattern so visible at the abandoned zones in the semiarid central depression of Chiapas is not unique; the steady but more obscure expansion of other and perhaps related peoples into the Lowland Maya riverine and water-hole forest regions at about this same time . . . may have had similar advanced organization in some regions." (Lowe 1977:226)

It would therefore appear that the architectural basis for the plaza plan that was to become the Maya E Group had great time depth. Yet, the formal E Group assemblage is not found outside the Maya area; it was a distinctly Maya phenomenon and, archaeologically, one that appeared as a focal architectural unit at a great number of sites at the time of transition from the Preclassic to the Classic Period.

There was likely extensive interaction throughout Mesoamerica on the Late Preclassic horizon as seen to some degree in the widespread prevalence and similarities of Sierra Red ceramics and in the slightly later widespread appearance of Protoclassic "Floral Park" ceramics (cf. Pring 1977). While an archaeological case can be made for some direct linkage between Protoclassic (Floral Park-linked) ceramics and E Groups at Cenote, Tikal, and Uaxactun, the overall geographic distribution of Protoclassic ceramics (Pring 1977:141) is wider than the geographic distribution of E Groups (Fig. 55). The present evidence does not warrant the old supposition that Protoclassic ceramics (see Pring 1977), and by extension E Groups, were related to the sudden emergence or introduction of a strong elite hierarchy in what had previously been a mostly undifferentiated Maya society. Maya society was already socially differentiated by the Late Preclassic. This is seen in the archaeology of both Tikal (Coe 1990) and Mirador (Matheny 1987). And it is also indicated in the data discussed here. First, there is too much time depth involved in the E Group assemblage and

< Fig. 60: The sequential development of the eastern platform and buildings of the Caracol A Group; dashed lines indicate pattern of engulfment; east is to the top of the page. Construction and dating for each version is as follows: (a) initial range platform, Late Preclassic or earlier; (b) initial construction of Structure A6 and northern and southern buildings, Late Preclassic; (c) new A6 construction and raising of associated platform, Late Preclassic; (d) expansion of platform and construction of Structures A5 and A7, Early Classic; and (e) expansion of platform and construction of Structures A4 and A8, later Early Classic or early Late Classic. Drawing by Joseph Ballay.

its evolution. Second, there is a similar time depth involved in the appearance of Late Preclassic finewares and forms presaging Protoclassic styles. Furthermore, Protoclassic ceramics at certain sites such as Caracol have a widespread distribution; thus, they cannot be considered as a solely class-linked phenomenon.

The standardization of the E Group plan (especially the Uaxactun variant, cf. A. Chase 1983, 1985) suggests that the presence of such an assemblage at a site indicates participation in cultural practices shared by a relatively large, but restricted, area in the eastern part of the Southern Lowlands during the Late Preclassic Period. The E Group, at least in its initial appearance, did not represent a tangential pattern on the outskirts of a site; it was instead the central organizational focus for a given center. At least initially an E Group represented a central place. While this central place was not originally part of any regional hierarchical settlement pattern (cf. Hammond 1974:326), at a later point in the Classic Period a number of these sites were combined to form larger political units (cf. Caracol and Cahal Pichik).

The appearance of E Groups at the point of transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic was probably directly related to the formalization of what was to become the Classic Period Maya social hierarchy. We would argue that the open E Group plaza seen in all versions of this architectural form was created for displays by an emergent ruling elite. The Preclassic elite differed in character from subsequent Classic Period dynasties; the E Groups mirrored these differences as seen in their increasingly standardized form and in their heightened ritual significance at the onset of the Classic era. Webster (1977:360) dates the development of a formal Maya theocratic elite to the Terminal Preclassic Period or from approximately A.D. 150 to 250, exactly the time of the E Group spread. Based on evidence of civic architecture by 400 B.C., Webster (1977:344) considers the Maya to have reached the level of a chiefdom; following this logic, it may be that the development of incipient states is indicated by the spread of E Groups; alternatively, given the close proximity of apparently independent and equivalent sites at this time, state development might best be seen once a greater site hierarchy exists and once E Groups are no longer the primary central site focus.

The positioning of important formal burials within the E Group buildings at both Cenote and Tikal shortly after the onset of the Classic era represents a significant break with earlier patterns of Maya interment and with earlier usage of the E Group itself. Late Preclassic patterns as seen in the North Acropolis at Tikal (W. Coe 1990) show that tombs were placed beneath special shrine buildings located in front of civic architecture; they were not intruded into this architecture. Similarly, the earliest burial in the Tikal E

Group assemblage is set in front of the central platform (PNT-022); only caches are placed in the civic architecture of the Manik 1 version of the Tikal E Group. These caches are then replaced by the burials of Tikal's first important dynasty in Manik 2 times. This conjoining of human interment and civic architecture marks a significant departure from the earlier Tikal elite burial pattern. It is our opinion that this placement of deceased members of a ruling family in central civic architecture indicates a conjoining of civic and dynastic ritual. Willey (1977b:151) has previously suggested that the Protoclassic sociopolitical changes were "leading toward political centralization." E Groups were presumably central to this process. The temporal shift from caches to burials seen in the archaeology of these assemblages at Tikal and Caracol likely represents first ritual centralization and then subsequent dynastic centralization.

Ultimately, what is being viewed in the archaeological data relating to the Late Preclassic - Early Classic transition is the transformation of Maya society. This transformation is in some way linked with the appearance of E Groups as a central focus for Maya sites in a restricted area of the Southern Lowlands. Sanders (1973, 1977) noted that the northeast Peten enjoyed the highest amount of arable land in the lowlands (but see Adams' comments of the poor soils of this region from this conference) and that this would have been conducive to the development of a dense population; he argued that complexity would have arisen in this area due to the need to manage the distribution of land. Freidel (1979:50) countered Sanders' position by arguing that "elite institutions arose through the interaction of local communities rather than as an adaptation by them to local conditions." Regardless of the position taken, the sites that exhibit E Groups are located precisely in the rich agricultural area identified by Sanders and are representative of a regional interaction sphere, as conceived by Freidel (1979) and expounded upon by Rathje and others (1978), in which the Classic features of Maya society coalesced. In our opinion, it is in fact the occurrence of the E Group in the Southern Lowlands that first signals the socio-political centralization that characterized later Maya society.

CONCLUSION

The transition from the Late Preclassic to the Early Classic Period in the Southern Maya Lowlands was a time of significant social change, which culminated in the reformulation of Preclassic Maya society into its Classic Period socio-political and dynastic patterns. The hallmark of this transition on an architectural level appears to have been the E Group, which served as an architecturally standardized focal assemblage for integrating Late

Preclassic and subsequently Early Classic Maya populations, first ritually and then dynastically. One other prominent aspect of Classic Maya culture - the emphasis on a "stelae cult" - is geographically, temporally, and in some cases physically linked with the Southern Lowland E Group phenomenon; as such, it too is presumably reflective of an organizational change indicative of the conjunction of rulership and centralized authority. Nowhere, however, can this juxtaposition be more clearly seen than in the purposeful placement of important burials in the formal civic buildings of the E Group assemblage. Roughly contemporary with E Groups, a multitude of new ceramic types are further found in the elaborate and newly polychromed Protoclassic ceramics. These may have coexisted with Late Preclassic pottery types at some sites

and, like E Groups, appear to have had a predominantly local origin. Interestingly, however, Protoclassic ceramics had a much wider geographic distribution than E Groups, probably reflective of the participation of local Maya groups within wider, and differing, interregional interaction spheres.

The redating and time depth now accorded to the Maya E Group phenomenon indicates that the transformation of Maya society between the Preclassic and Classic Periods was accomplished internally (rather than as a response to foreign stimuli) within a distinctly lowland Maya homeland. The area of the Maya Lowlands which witnessed the precocious development of E Groups continued to form the heartland of Southern Lowland Maya civilization throughout the Classic Period.

Acknowledgements

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Nikolai Grube

Editor

**The Emergence
of Lowland Maya Civilization**

The Transition from the Preclassic to the Early Classic