

Chapter 4

Underlying Structure in Maya Persistence: An Archaeological Perspective

Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase

Maya civilization is remarkably persistent. Even though buffeted and changed by a half millennium of Western influence, many of its original underpinnings are still in existence. This is particularly evident when the archaeological records in the Maya lowlands are compared and contrasted with ethnohistoric and ethnographic data.

Change occurs in different ways and parts of societies. At the end of the fifteenth century, Maya civilization underwent profound transformations. With the advent of the Spanish, Maya society was largely destroyed and then reconstituted. Aspects of this metamorphosis were both purposeful and accidental. Accidentally introduced diseases rapidly decimated native societies in huge numbers; some 90 percent of the precontact population disappeared in less than 100 years (extrapolating figures from Farriss 1984:57-58). Spanish records from the later part of the sixteenth century, such as those of Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941), reflected social situations already modified by severe population loss. Subsequent Spanish administrative practices further transformed any remaining social patterns through policies of forced resettlement and religious conformation. In spite of Spanish contact and domination, however, it is still possible to recognize the persistence of much earlier Maya social and religious patterns.

Unlike the Spanish, who were intent on

making the Maya conform to their own societal mores and religion, earlier foreigners in the Maya region did not always have the same impact. For instance, even though the Maya had clear contact with the Aztec—and Aztec mercenaries may even have been used in Maya inter-polity disputes—direct Aztec influence was relatively minimal (Pollock et al. 1962:61, 137). Even had the Maya been subsumed into Aztec empire, Maya cultural patterns likely would have survived relatively unscathed given the Aztec practices of expansion and incorporation (Hassig 1985, 1988). Unlike the Spanish, the Aztec included the icons of other religions with their own, going so far as to place foreign religious symbols within the temples of Tenochtitlan (Broda, Carrasco, and Matos M. 1987). The Aztec also did not seek to completely change local socio-political patterns; rather, they created a hegemonic empire leaving indigenous cultures largely intact. Their goal was instead to increase the influx of tribute to Tenochtitlan. Thus, foreign influences in the Maya area immediately prior to the Spanish did not, in and of themselves, dramatically modify local patterns. In this chapter we will focus on changes in indigenous Maya culture from the Classic through the Postclassic Period as well as on the impact of foreign Spanish influences during the early contact era. The predominant database is the archaeological record.

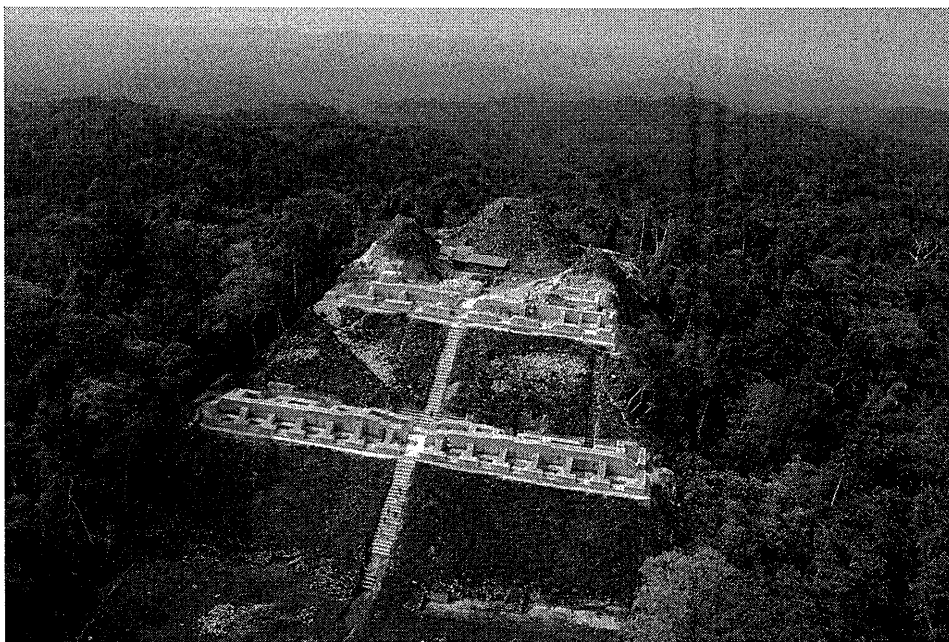


FIGURE 1
VIEW OF CARACOL'S CENTRAL "CAANA" ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEX LOOKING NORTH

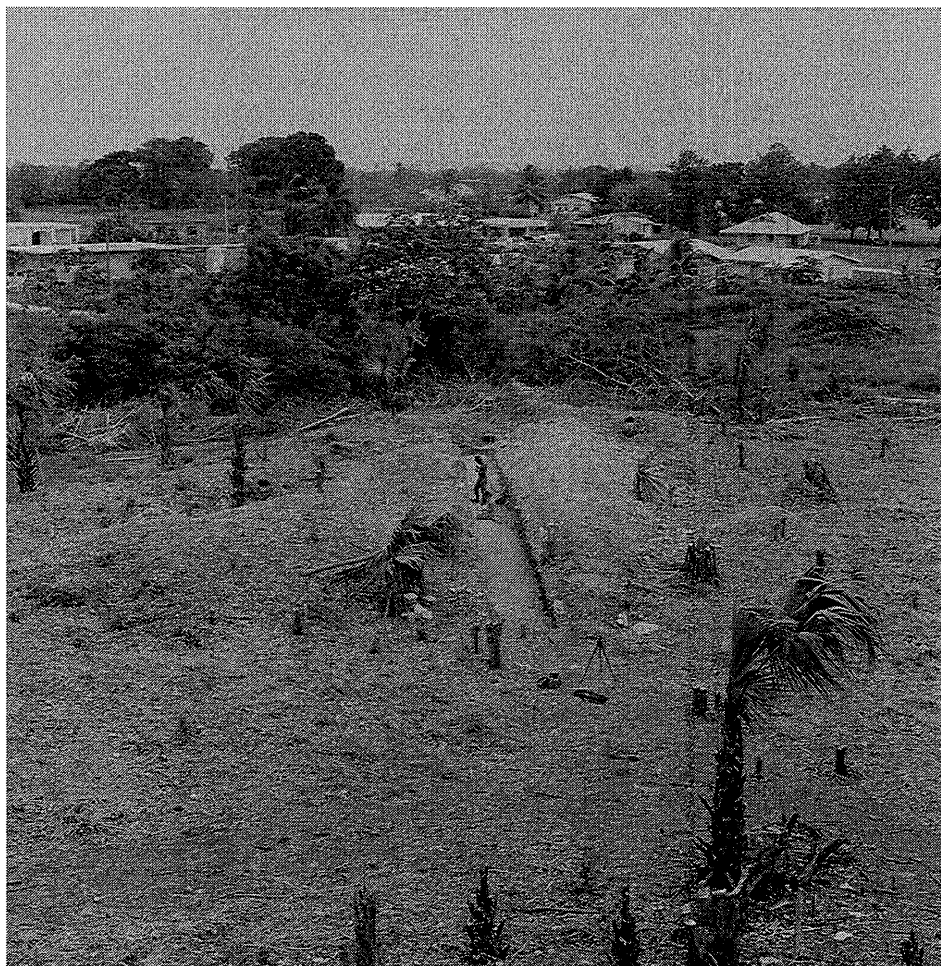


FIGURE 2
VIEW FROM THE TOP OF SANTA RITA COROZAL STRUCTURE 7 LOOKING TOWARDS THE BAY AND
SHOWING THE ENCROACHING MODERN SETTLEMENT

Continuities and discontinuities

The existing paradigm for Maya prehistory is based both upon archaeological (and hieroglyphic) data and upon ethnohistoric documents. However, popularly held concepts are not always supported by archaeological data. Over the years, the Postclassic Maya came to be viewed as a devolved and degenerate "Mexicanized" version of the more "high culture" Classic Period Maya (Pollock et al 1962:16-17)—a conclusion initially derived from the archaeological data and from the ethnohistoric documents (which were once naively assumed to be accurate and apolitical). Similarly, an early and continued focus on Classic Maya hieroglyphic dates on carved stone stelae and altars led to an emphasis on a sudden "Maya Collapse" in the Southern lowlands (see, for instance, Lowe 1985). However, variant interpretations of the Classic to Postclassic transition are possible given different databases as well as whether one is searching for change or continuity. Before examining survivalism among the Maya, it is appropriate to view the actual archaeological situations and evidence for continuities and discontinuities.

Our understanding of the Maya Postclassic in the Southern lowlands is predicated, to a large degree, on the *Books of Chilam Balam* (Edmonson 1982; Roys 1933), on oral traditions recorded by Landa (Tozzer 1941), and on interpretations of relationships and chronology derived from these texts (A. Chase 1986). In point of fact, the initial archaeological reconstructions of both Chichen Itza and Mayapan emphasized interpretations of the ethnohistory rather than archaeology (Pollock et al. 1962). Thus, great stress was placed on a "Mexican" presence at Chichen Itza by Tozzer (1957) and on the presence of influence from the central Mexican site of Tula on Maya culture and history. As a result of such interpretations, Chichen Itza became a unique Early Postclassic Maya center. More recent work based on archaeology (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982; Lincoln 1986; Cobos in press), iconography (Kubler 1962; Miller 1985), and epigraphy (Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Mathews 1998:203) challenge both the dating and the "Mexican presence" at Chichen Itza. Similarly, a lack of contemporary Postclassic information led the archaeological data at Mayapan to be described predominantly relative to ethno-

historic interpretation (Pollock et al. 1962; Smith 1971). As our knowledge about Postclassic archaeology has increased (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988; A. Chase and Rice 1985; Sabloff and Andrews 1986) the reliance on ethnohistory as the dominant database has lessened.

The Classic Maya collapse was traditionally presented as a rapid, but poorly understood, event of dramatic proportions (e.g., Chase and Rice 1985 or Culbert 1988). Populations were believed to have vanished almost overnight from many cities in the Southern lowlands. Elite knowledge and writing, as represented by carved stone monuments (but not codices), were viewed as being largely lost to later populations. Architectural skill, as represented by tall temples and stone-vaulted palaces, also disappeared. What was interpreted as great Classic artistry in painting and portraiture devolved into a cruder, pan-Mesoamerican "international style" (Robertson 1970). Thus, great discontinuity came to be projected between the Classic and Postclassic Periods. Following some historic interpretations, the impetus for this change was the advent of degenerate foreign elites in the Maya lowlands (Pollock et al. 1962).

While the above scenarios have been incorporated into popular books (e.g., Coe 1999; Thompson 1954) and introductory texts (e.g., Fagan 1999), current archaeological data suggests substantial continuity rather than the projected discontinuity as well as a far more complicated picture (Rice, Rice, and Demarest in press). Thus, it is particularly relevant to compare and contrast archaeological patterns from the Classic and Postclassic Periods. In order to do this, data that have been collected from the sites of Caracol, Belize and Santa Rita Corozal, Belize over the last 20 years will be used. Caracol was the primate city of a huge Late Classic Maya polity (A. Chase 1998; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987, 1996, 2001; D. Chase and A. Chase 1994). Santa Rita Corozal is believed to be the capital of the ethnohistorically known province of Chetumal (D. Chase 1981, 1986; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988).

Caracol, Belize

Located high in the Vaca Plateau in western Belize, the site of Caracol covers approxi-

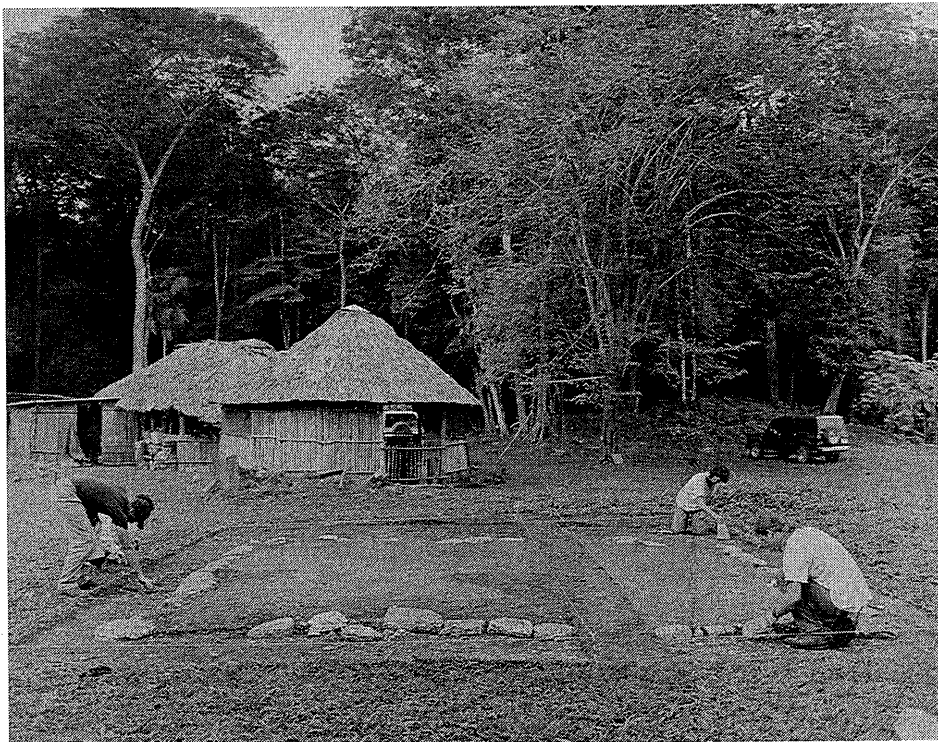


FIGURE 3
CARACOL STRUCTURE A28, A TERMINAL CLASSIC LINE-OF-STONE BUILDING



FIGURE 4
SANTA RITA COROZAL STRUCTURE 79, A LATE POSTCLASSIC PERIOD LINE-OF-STONE BUILDING

mately 177 square kilometers (Figures 1 and 7). This large area was bound together by causeways which dendritically connected the site epicenter to purposely constructed plazas or engulfed pre-existing nodes. Two rings of civic plazas embedded in the site's settlement have been recognized: one ring existed at a distance of 3 kilometers from the epicenter; a second ring was located at a distance ranging from 4.5 to 7.5 kilometers from the site epicenter. Within the zone defined by these plaza areas and linking causeways, the dispersed household settlement is continuous and integrated with dense and ubiquitous terraced field systems (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998). The site has been excavated by the Caracol Archaeological Project on an annual basis from 1985 through present. This has resulted in the areal exposure and trenching of many of the site's epicentral buildings. Data has also been collected from all of the known causeway termini. Additionally, over 100 residential groups have been tested; these investigations range from looters' clean-up to intensive excavation using a combination of strategies. The recovered archaeological remains from Caracol date from approximately 600 B.C. through about A.D. 1050. However, both the archaeological data and the site's extensive hieroglyphic texts indicate that the acme of Caracol was during the Late Classic Period from A.D. 550 through A.D. 790.

Santa Rita Corozal

Located in northern Belize on Corozal Bay, the site of Santa Rita Corozal is located in and around modern Corozal Town (Figures 2 and 8). The ancient site is constantly being disturbed by modern construction. The Corozal Postclassic Project carried out four seasons of excavation at the site between 1979 and 1985. As the systematic destruction of the site has been occurring for more than a century (e.g., Gann 1900), it is difficult to talk with certainty about the complete settlement pattern and site plan; however, portions of the site have been intensively excavated. As a result of Corozal Postclassic Project work, a map of the existing structures was produced and approximately twenty groups were excavated. These investigations recovered archaeological materials dating from 1200 B.C. through the present. However, the majority of the excavations un-

covered remains that could be dated to the Maya Late Postclassic era between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1532.

Archaeological survivals

Comparisons can be made of several different classes of data from the archaeological records of Santa Rita Corozal and Caracol. Perhaps the most basic level is that of "artifacts"—especially ceramics and lithics. Overall, the kinds of artifacts found at both sites are similar given the temporal and spatial distance between them. While the ceramic types present at Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal are different, the same general forms are present in the various complexes. Thus, although stylistically variant, the domestic sub-complexes from both sites contain unslipped ollas and red-slipped footed bowls. Perhaps the greatest differences are found in the incense burners. The cylindrical Classic era incensarios from Caracol focus on modeled deity faces which are very stylized, while hourglass-shaped Postclassic incensarios generally feature full-figure, very human-looking deities. The lithic assemblages resemble each other as well, with one exception. The Santa Rita Corozal lithics focus on small arrow-points that are generally not found in Classic assemblages.

Statements of Classic architectural superiority are clearly overrated with regard to domestic architecture. Line-of-stone housing platforms are found at both sites (Figures 3 and 4). While housing platforms found at Caracol are generally higher than those from Santa Rita, they are not necessarily better constructed (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase n.d.). Santa Rita's platforms also tend to have vertically-set slabs whereas those at Caracol are generally horizontal. Both sites exhibit raised platforms that support entire groups of residential structures. The arrangement of residential structures about a common plaza is definitely a survival over time and is, in fact, still present in modified form within modern Yucatec Maya housing arrangements (Wauchope 1938). At Caracol, these residential groups were also integrated with extensive agricultural fields (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998). Even though the boundaries of these terraced fields are not clearly demarcated at Caracol, the siting of the residential groups as integral

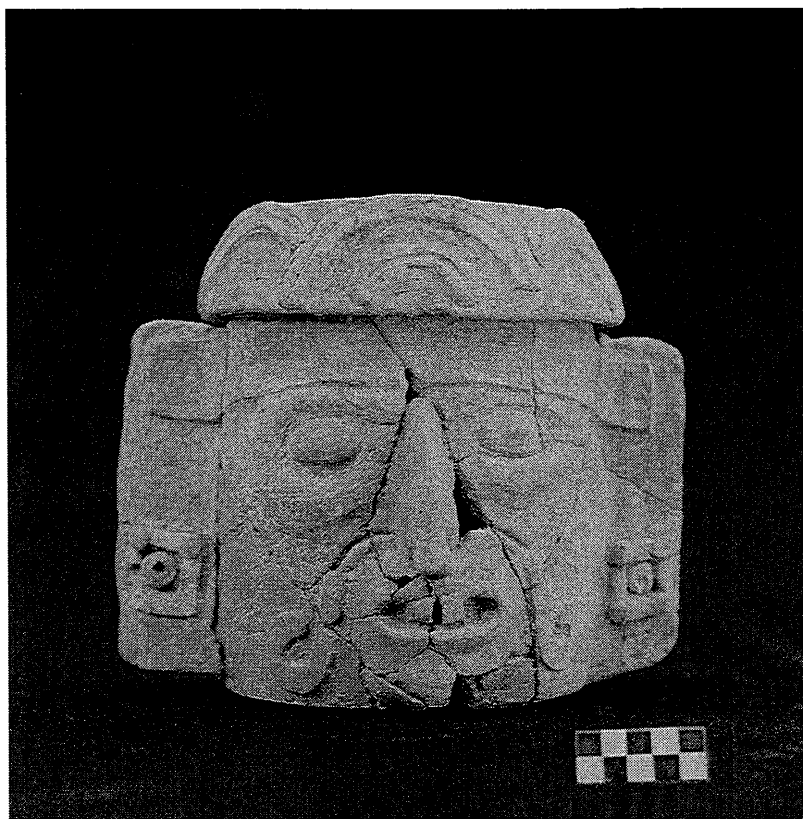


FIGURE 5
CLASSIC PERIOD "FACE CACHE" FROM CARACOL STRUCTURE B34



FIGURE 6
POSTCLASSIC PERIOD CACHE FROM SANTA RITA COROZAL STRUCTURE 37

parts of the fields mirrors the Classic use of boundary walls, and probably kitchen gardens, at Classic Coba (Folan, Kintz, and Fletcher 1983) and Postclassic Mayapan (Bullard 1952).

On a broader settlement level, the dispersed nature of the residential groups is in evidence at both Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal (Figures 7 and 8). While these are integrated by means of causeways at Caracol, modern disturbances have disrupted whatever traffic patterns may have once existed at Santa Rita Corozal. However, at Postclassic Mayapan passageways between the boundary walls connected several, spatially separate, urban plazas to the site epicenter and to gateways through the encircling city walls (Pollock et al 1962). The multiple civic nodes seen at Mayapan resemble the multiple civic nodes, which doubled as causeway termini, found at Caracol. While settlement at Santa Rita Corozal is dispersed over the landscape, the settlement at Mayapan is concentrated within an encircling wall. The settlement configuration outside this wall is not known. It is suspected, however, that the differences between the Santa Rita and Mayapan Postclassic settlement had to do with environmental, and perhaps historical, differences between these two sites. Relative settlement densities at the three sites may be derived from their mapped structure density (adapted from Rice and Culbert 1990:30-31): Caracol, 300 structures per square kilometer (projected from 2.26 square kilometers surveyed); Santa Rita Corozal, 400 to 712 structures per square kilometer (projected from 0.3 square kilometers surveyed); Mayapan, 986 structures per square kilometer (4.2 square kilometers surveyed). Thus, Postclassic sites may have been more densely occupied, but often extended over smaller areas.

The ethnohistoric documents have been interpreted as indicating that Maya settlement was concentrically organized with the wealthy living in the center of the community adjacent to the central plaza and the poorer population living farther afield (Tozzer 1941). This is not the situation at either Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:57-58; A. Chase in press) or Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:68-71). It is also not reflected at Mayapan (D. Chase 1992). In each of these sites, high status households may be found at some distance from the site epicenters and lower

status housing may be found adjacent to the epicenters. Ethnohistoric documents also have been used to argue that the Postclassic Maya were organized into a two-tiered social organization consisting of peasants and nobility (Marcus 1992). However, the archaeological data do not readily conform with this dualistic interpretation (A. Chase 1992; D. Chase 1992; Haviland 1970). While it is extremely difficult to deal effectively with social status archaeologically (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 1992), the distribution of artifactual material and certain constructed features at sites can help make status interpretations. At both Santa Rita Corozal and Caracol, wealth—as represented by fineware pottery, obsidian, shell, and other tradewares—was widely distributed in the archaeological record. This widespread distribution of material well-being throughout both sites is consistent with a hierarchical society with market access (Hirth 1998; see also A. Chase 1998). Thus, it is extremely unlikely that either the Postclassic or Classic Maya were characterized by a simple two-tiered social structure.

Maya religion

One of the cultural realms most severely modified by Spanish influence was that of native religion. The Spanish converted the Maya to Catholicism, sometimes torturing them to obtain Maya confessions of a native religion that conformed to Spanish preconceptions of idolatry (Tedlock 1993). The Spanish attempted to obliterate the old religion, but the Maya often produced interesting amalgamations—such as the placement of two Christ children in the Christmas manger in Chiapas (Vogt 1969) and the siting of human skulls on the altar of the Catholic church in the Peten (Reina 1962). Historically documented *pibilnal* or “first fruits” ceremonies (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934; Reina 1961) also have potential analogies in the Classic epigraphy (Houston’s *pibnail* [1996] likely represents a *pibilnal*). Thus, there are survivals of pre-contact religion in modern Maya culture, but neither these survivals nor the ethnohistory provide a definitive view of pre-contact religious practice. The archaeological data from Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal, however, permit us to expound at greater length about continuities and discontinuities in the realm of

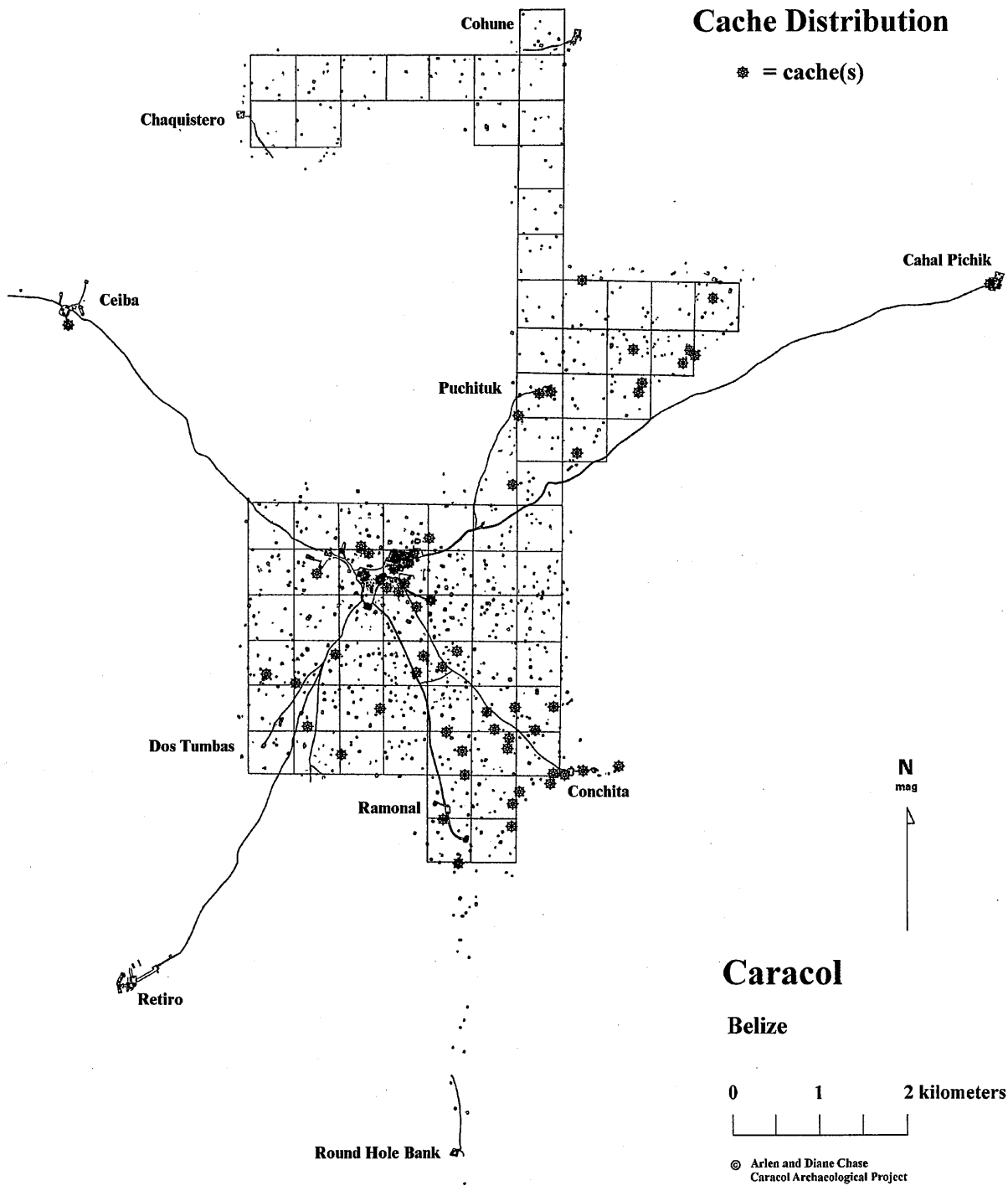


FIGURE 7
DISTRIBUTION OF EXCAVATED CACHES WITH CERAMIC CONTAINERS AT CARACOL, BELIZE

Postclassic Cache Distribution

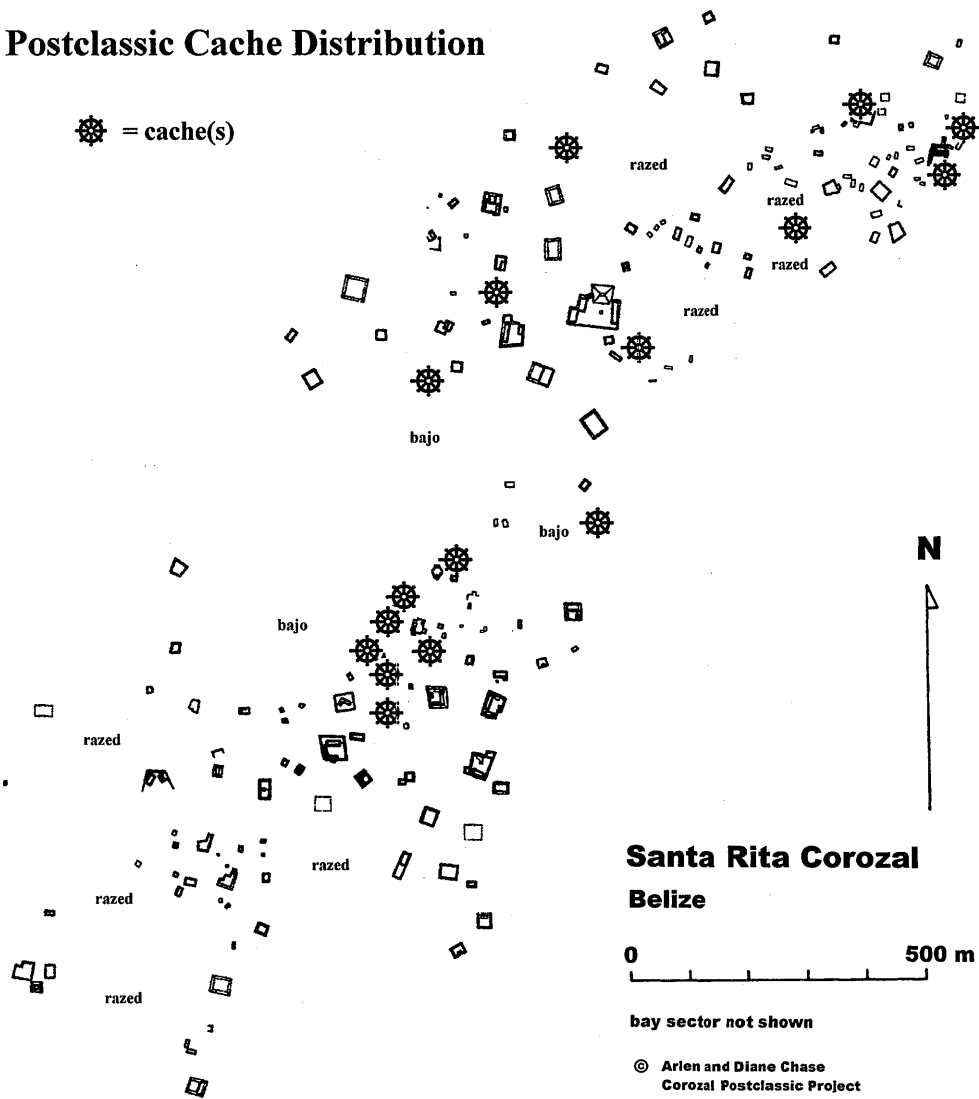


FIGURE 8
DISTRIBUTION OF EXCAVATED POSTCLASSIC CACHES WITH CERAMIC
CONTAINERS/FIGURINES AT SANTA RITA COROZAL, BELIZE

Maya religion between the Classic and Postclassic Periods.

Perhaps surprisingly, Classic Period Maya religious practice at Caracol was dispersed throughout its many residential—households from those in the site epicenter to those in distant agricultural fields (Figure 7). Each residential group appears to have contained minimally one structure which served as a shrine or mausoleum. At Caracol this structure was normally sited on the eastern side of a plaza group and was associated with ritual practices involving deposition of incensarios, caching, and the burial of certain dead. One or more tombs were often located in these eastern buildings, usually containing multiple individuals; these tombs were sometimes re-entered and re-used (D. Chase and A. Chase 1996). Other interments were placed inside or in front of the stairs of these structures (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994). However, only a small portion of the group's dead were interred in this fashion (D. Chase 1997). Cache vessels modeled in the shape of human heads (Figure 5) and smaller lip-to-lip vessels containing human fingers were deposited in front of these buildings (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Incensarios were also placed within the tombs associated with these buildings or on the building stairs.

Similar patterns, but with some significant variations, are found in the archaeological record from Santa Rita Corozal (Figure 8). Household shrines are still in evidence, but the east structure focus so prevalent at Classic Caracol is not found at Santa Rita. Postclassic shrines also took a variety of forms. They could be free-standing miniature platforms constructed over interments of dead individuals, separate buildings, or rooms within larger multi-use structures. When shrines were located in buildings, benches or altars were often present; these also could contain interments. Modeled caches (Figure 7) were placed in front of these benches and both within and to the front of free-standing shrine buildings. Paired incense burners also were commonly associated with these ritual locations. Similar ritual patterns were uncovered at Mayapan (Pollock et al. 1962).

The modern Maya continue to affirm the importance of ritual within the Maya residential household through the use of family shrines (Wauchope 1938:135; Vogt 1969). The

transformed shrine-room now contains Catholic symbols, but is still recognizable as a survival from not just the Postclassic, but also the Classic Period. Incense is still burned. Offerings are still made. But, the honored dead are no longer interred within or in the vicinity of the shrine. However, even in the Classic and Postclassic Periods the majority of the dead were not interred within shrines or even within their associated residential groups, so perhaps interment within a Catholic cemetery may not have been a difficult transition to make.

Of great significance, however, are the shifts seen in religious practice between the Classic and Postclassic eras. While the dispersed distribution of caches at Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal may superficially resemble each other, the physical contents and social contexts are often different. For Classic Period Caracol, the community was centered in the site epicenter through the use of tall temples, carved stone monuments, and more elaborate caches with contents that had cosmological meaning. The widespread residential use of face, finger, and ceramic urn caches was part of uniform Caracol practice, but was undertaken in households relative to individual ancestors. For Postclassic Santa Rita, the omnipresent Classic era ancestor cult was gone. There were no eastern shrines. There was no central dynasty. Instead of centering individual residential units (as at Classic Period Caracol) or centering temples in the site epicenter, the dispersed caches seen at Santa Rita Corozal acted to center the entire community.

The Postclassic caches did not memorialize dead ancestors. Rather, they acted to spatially integrate the urban settlement through community-wide participation in ceremonies that were once the sole purview of the dynastic elite. Many of Santa Rita's caches are clear representations of *uayeb* ceremonies and mythological episodes (D. Chase 1985, 1991; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). However, rather than being placed in a site epicenter, as they would have been in the Classic Period, they were placed throughout the residential units of the city. Such a spatial distribution may mirror modern Maya community patterns of transporting ritual objects from household to household or through a given town as a means of community integration (Vogt 1969; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934; Reina 1962). Thus, although the Classic and Postclassic cache

distributions are superficially similar, the encoded messages have been transformed.

Recognition of this Postclassic focus on community religion suggests further insights. The ethnohistoric references to *multepal* or "joint rule" may not refer to the sharing of power by a ruler and his key relatives or allies (cf., Schele and Freidel 1990:361); rather, the term may refer to the multiple voices of the Postclassic Maya who participated in community governance and rituals that were once the purview of the Classic dynasties. Thus, the contact era Maya may have been more amenable to Catholicism because of its focus on the "church" as a "community."

Conclusion

The archaeological record of the Maya is an important starting point for examining Maya survivalism. In order to see what has persisted and what has changed in modern Maya society, it is imperative that archaeological data be used as the basis for defining its pre-contact state. The more traditional models of contact Maya society that have been generated from ethnohistoric documents do not accord well with the excavated archaeological data. Archaeological data do not support concentric settlement models for the contact Maya. These same data do not support a strict two-tiered social organization, but instead indicate that a complex hierarchical social arrangement has great time depth in Maya society. In contrast to ethnohistoric interpretations, the archaeological data do not indicate that Maya contact era religion was privatized, individualized, idol worship. Instead, these archaeological data reveal multiple levels of complex religious structures within Maya society that were modified and changed internally over time. Although transformed, parts of this structure, particularly those pertaining to religion and community, continue to operate in the modern world.

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ACTA MESOAMERICANA

Volume 12

MAYA SURVIVALISM

EDITED BY

Ueli Hostettler and Matthew Restall

Separatum / Offprint



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2001