

Heart and Soul: A Plaza and Settlement Research at Caracol, Belize:

A Report of the 1999 Field Season

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The 1999 field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project, which took place from late January through the end of March, represented the 15th continuous year of work by the University of Central Florida at Caracol, Belize. The total in-field staff during 1999 consisted of 27 individuals. As in past years, work was parceled into several different programs:

- **investigation in the epicentral A Group;**
- **investigation in the settlement immediately north of the A Group;**
- **survey and mapping in the northern part of Caracol; and**
- **the installation of an exhibit in the new on-site museum facility ([Figure 1](#)).**

Funding for the 1999 field season was obtained from the Ahau Foundation, the Stans Foundation, the University of Central Florida Trevor Colbourn Endowment, and private donations to the University of Central Florida. Important additional support came from the Belize Department of Archaeology.

Continued Investigations in the A Plaza

The A Plaza formed a focus for investigation during the 1999 field season. Research built both on work undertaken during the 1998 field season of the Caracol Archaeological Project and on work undertaken by the Department of Archaeology during the summer of 1998. Three areas in particular were identified for further investigation during 1999: (1) the rear of Structure A1; (2) the axis and basal portion of Structure A2; and (3) the basal stairs and axis of Structure A3. Although no Special Deposits were encountered, these investigations uncovered significant architectural details at all three locales that were excavated. Also of importance was the dating of the construction of the massive basal platform of Structure A2 to the Late Preclassic Period.

Structure A1

Excavations in the southern or rear side of Structure A1 were undertaken during both the 1997 and 1998 field seasons. During 1997 a tomb, two elaborate caches, and a buried stucco statue were recovered in association with what appeared to be a rear outset attached to Structure A1 (Chase and Chase 1997). Investigations in 1998 succeeded in defining the basal shape of Structure A1, but did not fully articulate the rear outset with Structure A1's basal terraces (Chase and Chase 1998). One goal of the 1999 field season was to gain an understanding of how the outset architectural feature recovered through the earlier excavations was spatially articulated with the basal terrace(s) of Structure A1 ([Figure 1](#)).

Suboperation C141I was started during the 1998 field season. It had initially consisted of a 5 meter long (north-south) by 1 meter wide trench along the eastern edge of Linton Satterthwaite's excavation pit made in the early 1950s to remove Caracol Stela 1 and Caracol Altar 1. The original C141I excavation squared off the eastern limit of this investigation down to the level of the uppermost plaster floor and included a narrow "slit" tunnel, measuring 0.5 meters wide, to the north through architectural collapse to locate the rear basal facing for Structure A1. At the end of the 1998 field season, the tunnel was refilled and the excavation was backfilled.

During the 1999 field season, Suboperation C141I was partially reopened (along its northern side) and expanded to the west. Eventually, an area encompassing approximately 2.8 meters north-south by 4.2 meters east-west was exposed and planned (see [Figure 3](#)). The excavated area succeeded in defining the rear basal architectural

features of Structure A1. First, the western tunnel was reopened and the plastered basal facing followed west for approximately 1.2 meters where it ended in a perpendicular facing. This second facing projected 1.1 meters to the south from the original basal facing. The southern face of this feature ([Figure 4](#)) was then followed to the west for 3 meters, where tree roots effectively halted excavation. This southern facing proved to be raised 0.60 meters above its associated floor and to have had a plastered horizontal surface at this level. The upper surface of this rear bank, or bench, was not excavated. A perpendicular 20 centimeter high step, perhaps a plinth, jutted out from the bench near the western limit of Suboperation C141I. It aligns almost perfectly with a small stone facing found during the 1997 excavations in this area (see [Figure 3](#)). Both facings may, thus, be representative of the "plastered step" noted on by Satterthwaite as having existed in this area (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:8). Also in evidence in the Suboperation C141I 1999 excavation are the limits of Satterthwaite's penetration through the rear floor of Structure A1 to remove Altar 1 (see the floor limits in [Figure 3](#)). The entire excavation was backfilled at the end of the 1999 field season.

Although the exact articulation between Structure A1 and the tomb and caches found in the rear outset is not yet defined, it is clear that these deposits were not placed within an independent construction. Rather, the outset into which these materials were set is architecturally integrated with the rear Structure A1 terraces. This location would benefit from further areal exposure should appropriate stabilization funds become available.

Structure A2

Structure A2 rises some 25 meters above the A Plaza ([Figure 5](#)). During 1990, the summit of Structure A2 was investigated and an axial trench additionally penetrated its summit to a depth of approximately 5 meters. In the course of these summit excavations, Caracol Stelae 22 and 23 were discovered (Grube 1994:figures 9.3 and 9.5). Also uncovered on the summit during the 1990 field season were three caches and one burial. While the burial appeared to have been of Terminal Classic date, all three caches were tentatively placed as being Early Classic in date. Although areal excavations were undertaken in the A Plaza during the 1990 field season, these did not reveal much architectural detail.

During the summer of 1998, the Department of Archaeology placed a single excavation into the northeast base of Structure A2 as part of their field school. This excavation succeeded in recovering basal architectural features. The excavation was left open by the Department of Archaeology in anticipation of our return for the 1999 field season and with the hope that we would help place the recovered architectural features in relation to the broader building.

Suboperation C71G encompassed the Department of Archaeology excavations that had been undertaken in the summer of 1998. It used the northern limit of the field school investigation and expanded this excavation to the south following the exposed basal facings. Eventually an area measuring 7.1 meters north-south by 4.1 meters east-west was areally cleared ([Figure 6](#)). Suboperation C71G's southern limit encompassed the inset corner for the latest stairway for Structure A2. While the stairs themselves were not preserved on the steep frontal slope of Structure A2, the basal portions of the northern facing for the projecting stair was still in evidence ([Figure 7](#)), extending more than 3.5 meters to the east of the basal terrace. No diagnostic artifacts were recovered in this areal excavation.

The junction of the basal terrace and the stair outset had also preserved a large portion of the basal terrace. This was not a simple basal terrace, but rather a complex construction consisting of multiple insets and outsets ([Figures 6, 7, and 8](#)). As preserved, the basal terrace for Structure A2 consisted first of a bench-like plinth that ran the whole length of the excavation, rose 40 centimeters above the plaza floor, and projected 80 centimeters to the east of the vertical middle section of the A2 basal terrace. The mid-section of the basal terrace rose vertically for 1.2 meters above the level of the lower bench. This mid-section was divided into three equal parts with a recessed central element. The 40 centimeter high central element was recessed 15 centimeters and began 1.1 meters north of the stair outset. An upper section of the basal terrace projected 20 centimeters beyond (east of) the mid-section and rose at least an additional 40 centimeters. The entire basal terrace for Structure A2 was, therefore, at least 2 meters in height.

In consultation with the Belize Department of Archaeology, Suboperation C71G was covered with zinc roofing and left open in anticipation of an upcoming stabilization package.

Suboperation C71H was an axial trench into the base of Structure A2 measuring 8.2 meters in length by 2 meters in width ([Figures 9 and 10](#)). It was aligned with the 1990 summit axial trench and covered a vertical rise of 6.70 meters above the plaza floor of the A Group. The only formal architectural feature recovered within the trench was the remains of an earlier basal step. Even though penetration into the core of Structure A2 continued for 3.4 meters behind this step, no other architecture was encountered. Instead, a multitude of crude construction floors or levels were encountered which must have articulated in some way with the earlier step. The only artifactual material recovered within the intact basal core of Structure A2 consisted of Late Preclassic pottery sherds. As a result of this penetration, it is believed that the large platform underlying the Structure A2 summit was constructed in the Late Preclassic Period.

The axial trench was completely backfilled upon the completion of the 1999 field season.

Structure A3

Structure A3, the northernmost building in the A Plaza ([Figure 11](#)), was first excavated by the Caracol Project in 1986 (Chase and Chase 1987) and was one of the earliest foci for stabilization at the site. In 1998 excavations focused for the first time at the axial base of this building. An axial probe uncovered evidence of a central stair mask and of a relatively well preserved stairway (Chase and Chase 1998). Excavations during the 1999 field season had two goals: first, to determine the extent of the preserved Structure A3 stairway; and, second, to determine whether the collapsed basal stair mask marked the entryway for a tomb similar to that encountered in Structure A34 (Chase and Chase 1996).

Suboperation C12G consisted of the lateral expansion of the basal excavation at the Structure A3 locus to the west ([Figure 12](#)). This involved opening up an areal excavation measuring 3.8 meters east-west by 3.9 meters north-south in order to encompass the remainder of the western part of the Structure A3 stair.

As a result of Suboperation C12G, a basal area measuring 5.8 meters by 3.9 meters was exposed ([Figure 13](#)). Within this area approximately 55% of the basal mask and 7 full steps were uncovered. Based on projected measurements, it can be estimated that the basal portion of the Structure A3 stairs were 10.3 meters in total length and that the central stair mask was 2.7 meters wide. Unlike the well-preserved central steps, the westernmost 70 centimeters of the basal stairway was extremely disrupted. Unlike Structure A2, only the very base of the edge wall for the stairs was preserved. Based on the pattern evident in the plan ([Figure 12](#)), it is suspected that this final 70 centimeters of stair may represent a raised balustrade, perhaps constructed differently than the rest of the A3 stairs and potentially reminiscent of the medial Caana stair (Chase and Chase 2000).

Artifactual remains recovered in association with the Structure A3 stairs included Terminal Classic pottery vessels, specifically a stamped bowl and a striated jar ([Figure 14](#)). Additionally, pieces of human cranium were recovered in the building collapse just above the stairs.

After discussion with the Belize Department of Archaeology, at the end of the 1999 field season Suboperations C12F and C12G were covered with zinc roofing and left open in anticipation of future stabilization funds.

Suboperation C12H consisted of a 1.5 meter wide by 3 meter long excavation set immediately north of and on the same axial line as Suboperation C12F. This excavation eventually reached a vertical depth of 5.25 meters below its northern limit ([Figure 15](#)). A well-preserved floor was found in the upper reaches of the trench. This floor was both overlain and underlain by dry core fill consisting of large boulders which made digging difficult. A deep probe to bedrock was made at the point where the floor ended and behind the basal mask. This probe succeeded in finding the remains (3 steps) of an earlier, but largely destroyed, stairway that sat on one of two floors that overlay bedrock. No indications of any special deposits were discovered behind the Structure A3 mask. Some ceramics in the sealed dry core fill behind the mask dated to the Early Classic Period.

All of Suboperation C71H was backfilled at the end of the 1999 field season.

Structure A10

Structure A10 defines the northern side of the A Group ballcourt. The structure's long axis runs east-west and it rises some 6.5 meters above the level of the A Group ballcourt playing alley ([Figure 16](#)). cursory examination of the summit of the building revealed the eastern stub of a medial wall. In order to determine if a well-preserved building was located beneath the surface, two excavations were placed into Structure A10 ([Figure 17](#)).

Suboperation C150B was a 2 meter wide by 1.85 m deep excavation set on basal axis to Structure A10. The excavation was dug to bedrock. The lower two steps for Structure A10 were uncovered in the northern part of the excavation approximately 70 centimeters below the ground surface. Four plastered floors were also located; two of these surfaces abut the recovered steps and two underlay the steps. Sherd material beneath the lowest floor was only of Late Preclassic date. After being recorded, this excavation was backfilled.

Suboperation C150C consisted of a 4 meter long by 1.5 meter wide summit excavation ending to the north in the south facing of the medial wall ([Figure 18](#)). Extensive stone collapse indicated that the latest version of Structure A10 had been a vaulted building. A total of 6 sequent floors were uncovered at the summit. Only the latest abutted the medial wall. Removal of the two latest floors revealed plaster turn-ups forming a square pillar measuring approximately 0.95 meters by 0.95 meters. This pillar had been removed in antiquity and sealed by a later flooring. This architectural feature indicates that an earlier version of Structure A10 had a very different building plan than the final construction. A circular hole cut through the next flooring directly below the square pillar (and slightly northwest of the pillar) dropped to a depth of 2.2 meters below its associated floor. Loosely packed material had been placed within this fill-in cut. The cut penetrated two even earlier floors. Based on the placement of the circular hole relative to the square pillar and the similar size of the two features, it is believed that this cut represented the removal of a large wooden post that had been utilized to construct an even earlier version of Structure A10. The sherd material from within the earliest coring of Structure A10 was of Late Preclassic date.

Even though no special deposits were encountered, the combined data from Suboperations C150B and C150C are strongly suggestive of sizeable Late Preclassic construction at the Structure A10 locus. the latest materials on the last floor associated with Structure A10 consist of a very fragmentary Late Classic / Terminal Classic cylinder effigy incense burner. Thus, the Structure A10 locus has a very long history of use.

Core Investigations: Valentine Residential Group

One residential group was investigated during the 1999 field season. Nicknamed "Valentine" because of the date it was discovered, it is located some 250 meters north of the A Group approximately 100 meters west of the residential group investigated during 1998 (Chase and Chase 1998). Valentine is immediately north of a plaza containing the round stone altar that was first recorded during a preliminary visit to Caracol in 1983. The plaza containing this ball-like altar is presumably the "Group D" referred to by Satterthwaite (1954) in his early visitations to the site. Valentine is dominated by a southern pyramid that sits on a higher terrace and overlooks the residential plaza. The plaza itself is bounded on its east, north, and west sides by low structures. Excavation in the neighboring "El Vez" group during 1998 had recovered an impressive Early Classic cache within the associated plaza and a well-constructed Late classic tomb within the eastern building. Given the similarities in plan and layout between El Vez and Valentine, the eastern building of Valentine was selected for excavation ([Figure 19](#)). A sump was also in evidence in the summit of this building. Two excavations were laid out on the axis of the eastern structure ([Figure 20](#)).

As a result of these excavations, 2 caches and a crypt interment were recovered. The plaza area was clearly utilized during the end of the Early Classic, but the eastern building itself appears to have been constructed in a single effort during the early part of the Late Classic Period. The group continued to be used into the Terminal Classic ([Figure 21e](#)). That the group was extensively modified is suggested by the recovery of cache vessels, both

whole and broken, from general excavation lots ([Figures 21f, 21g, and 21h](#)).

Suboperation C151B was a 1.5 meter by 1.5 meter test excavation that was set on axis and tangent to the eastern structure of Valentine. The entire investigation was dug to bedrock. The excavation was extended to the north in two increments, both measuring 80 centimeters east-west by 1.0 meters north-south; the first eastern extension was offset 15 centimeters from the original eastern limit of the excavation; the second was offset 0.55 centimeters. These extensions were necessary to expose the limits of a burial crypt encountered in the northern part of the original excavation. A single facing, presumably the lowest step for the building, was found at the eastern limit of the excavation; it was not in a good state of repair. No evidence of a floor surface was definitively encountered, although one must have abutted the step at one point in time.

Special Deposit C151B-1 (C151B/2): Set just in front of and below the level of the lowest step for the east building, yet north of the axial centerline, was an urn-shaped, unslipped cache vessel and lid ([Figure 21a](#)). Although there was nothing within the cache vessel itself, a large piece of worked quartzite and an obsidian nodule were located just south of this upright urn. It is possible that the urn was associated in some way with the burial crypt as it is located near its southern limit. It is also possible, however, that the urn was placed subsequent to the burial and that its siting on the southern edge of the crypt is accidental.

Special Deposit C151B-2 (C151B/14): A well-constructed crypt was encountered beginning at a depth of 0.42 meters below ground surface; it extended to a depth of 1.2 meters below ground surface and was dug into bedrock on its western side. Thus, the side walls of the crypt were formed from a combination of vertical slabs and bedrock. Sizeable slabs, one averaging 90 centimeters by 80 centimeters in area, capped the crypt and created an air pocket within the surrounding matrices. It was this air pocket that first caused the crypt to be discovered in the northern wall of the excavation. At its maximum, the space enclosed by the crypt measured 1.78 meters in length by 0.64 meters in width by 0.50 meters in height. Even though the bone was badly preserved, it could be established that two individuals had been placed in the crypt. The primary individual was between the ages of 25 and 35 at time of death and had been placed in the crypt in a supine position with head to the north ([Figures 22 and 23](#)). A set of crenellated circular shell earflares 3.8 centimeters in diameter (and with a central perforation) lay to either side of what was left of the skull. An Early Classic basal-flanged bowl ([Figure 21c](#)) was set over the left part of the body at the hip. No sex identification was possible. One of the individual's teeth was notched laterally; another exhibited calculus. Also recovered in the southern part of the crypt were a few teeth and bone remnants from a subadult between 18 months and 4 years of age.

Special Deposit C151B-3 (C151B/15): Set at the southwest corner of the excavation was another unslipped ceramic urn and lid ([Figure 21b](#)). Because the vessel was located directly within a hole in bedrock, the pottery was very water-logged and in a bad state of repair. The majority of this cache was actually outside (and just west of) the C151B excavation limit. Most of the lid was located immediately north of and tangent to the urn just above bedrock. Under the western extent of this lid, and also set directly on bedrock, was a large carved jadeite pendent ([Figure 24](#)). The pendent has incised designs on one side which resemble two crude human figures, one seated and one standing. In form, these incised figures resemble the "Charlie Chaplins" (Moholy-Nagy 1985) found in caches of Early Classic, and perhaps Late Preclassic, date. The pendent is 6.8 centimeters long (tall) by 6.4 centimeters wide by 2.2 centimeters deep. A central perforation bisects its long axis.

Suboperation C151C was placed on axis to the east building in the Valentine Group over the front portion of the summit. The excavation encompassed a visible sump on its southern side. The investigation measured 2.5 meters east-west by 1.5 meters north-south. A building facing and a well-made plaster floor are in evidence in section, but do not extend to the south throughout the rest of the suboperation. Excavation into the core continued to bedrock, which was found at a depth of 2.8 meters below the surface of the summit. The fill appeared to have deposited in a single effort. Large boulders underlay the plaster floor and facing. These in turn were underlain by smaller cobbles which were set above a dense layer of a clay-like matrix. Pieces of an almost complete deep rounded bowl ([Figure 21d](#)), believed to date to the early part of the Late Classic era, were distributed throughout this lower clay-like layer.

During the 1999 field season, mapping of Caracol's residential settlement was initially undertaken immediately north of the Puchituk terminus in an area of extremely broken terrain ([Figure 25](#)). In order to complete three 500 meter square blocks of residential settlement in this portion of the site, a western boundary transect was cut and the area to its east swept for residential structures. The area mapped in 1999 extended north to the limit of the original northern boundary of the northeast settlement program sponsored by the National Science Foundation (Chase and Chase 1995). It is expected that the remaining settlement in the three 500 meter square blocks that would connect the Puchituk and Cohune survey areas will be mapped during a future field season.

Additional effort and manpower was concentrated on block mapping at the northern limit of Caracol (see [Figure 25](#)). This work - the Cohune Ridge Archaeological Settlement Survey - forms part of the basis for dissertation research undertaken by Timothy Murtha of Pennsylvania State University on the agricultural systems in this area. During the summer 1998 Department of Archaeology field school, some terrace tests were undertaken in this area by Murtha as part of this field program. After the end of the 1998 field season 2.5 kilometers of the eastern part of a 500 meter wide east-west settlement transect were mapped by Murtha and Kirk Straight. This transect was extended west for an additional 1.25 kilometers during the 1999 field season and the elite residential group of Chaquistero (Grube 1994:100) was tied into the overall Caracol site map. Additional mapping was undertaken at the eastern end of this northern transect near the Cohune terminus. The 500 meter square block immediately west of Cohune was mapped. Also mapped was the residential settlement in a 1 kilometer by 500 meter area to the south of the first two transect blocks. Then, the terraces within this easternmost square kilometer area were mapped and will form one of the areas to be tested in Murtha's dissertation. As a result of this work a much better understanding of Caracol's northern limit has been gained.

Summary

The 1999 field season filled in many gaps in our knowledge of Caracol's A Group. The complexity of the architectural features on the south side of Structure A1 became fully apparent. Structure A2 appears to have been a massive single construction that was first built in the Late Preclassic and then subsequently modified for a thousand years. The inset and outset panel decorative elements on the lower basal terrace of Structure A2 is not known from elsewhere at Caracol. Half of the basal stairway for Structure A3 was exposed. Trenching within the base of Structure A3 demonstrated that the mask here was not associated with a tomb as in Structures B19 and B20 on Caana, nor is the Structure A34 basal tomb pattern replicated here. The association of large jadeite objects in a residential group plaza cache, first found in El Vez in 1998, was replicated again in the Valentine Group. It has now become clear that the outlying Early Classic residents of Caracol must have been quite prosperous. It is also apparent that Early Classic residential settlement at the site does not generally have the same east-structure focus as occurs throughout Caracol during the Late Classic Period. Exactly how Early Classic residential settlement is organized is a question for future research. Finally, the distant block mapping that was undertaken during the 1999 field season shows that a very dense residential settlement continues to the limits of Caracol's termini. The current map of Caracol at last permits an on-the-ground (and on-paper) demonstration as to how large the site actually was at its height in the Late Classic Period.

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Figures

[Figure 1.](#) Interior of Caracol on-site museum.

[Figure 2.](#) View of Structure A1 showing 1999 excavations; the circular cut indicates the original location of Caracol Altar 1.

[Figure 3.](#) Preliminary plan of Structure A1 1999 excavations in relation to the 1997 tomb.

[Figure 4.](#) Preliminary elevation of bench face in Suboperation C141I.

[Figure 5.](#) View of Structure A2 showing location of 1999 excavations.

[Figure 6.](#) Preliminary plan of Structure A2 Suboperation C71G excavations.

[Figure 7.](#) Preliminary elevation of Structure A2 north stairwall.

[Figure 8.](#) Preliminary elevation of basal terrace for Structure A2; inset shows reconstruction.

[Figure 9.](#) Axial excavation of Structure A2.

[Figure 10.](#) Preliminary section of Structure A2 1999 trench.

[Figure 11.](#) View of Structure A3 1999 excavations.

[Figure 12.](#) Preliminary plan of Structure A3 lower stairway exposed during 1998 and 1999.

[Figure 13.](#) Photo of Structure A3 stairway.

[Figure 14.](#) Vessels associated with Structure A3.

[Figure 15.](#) Preliminary section of Structure A3 from 1998 and 1999 excavations.

[Figure 16.](#) Photo of Structure A10.

[Figure 17.](#) Preliminary section of 1999 excavations undertaken on Structure A10; elevations of C150B and C150C are correct relative to each other, but horizontal distance separating the two excavations is actually twice

that shown.

[Figure 18.](#) Photo of 1999 summit excavations on Structure A10.

[Figure 19.](#) Photo of the east building in the Valentine Residential Group.

[Figure 20.](#) Preliminary section through Valentine east structure.

[Figure 21.](#) Vessels recovered from Suboperations C151B and C151C.

[Figure 22.](#) Photo of Special Deposit C151B-2.

[Figure 23.](#) Preliminary plan of Special Deposit C151B-2.

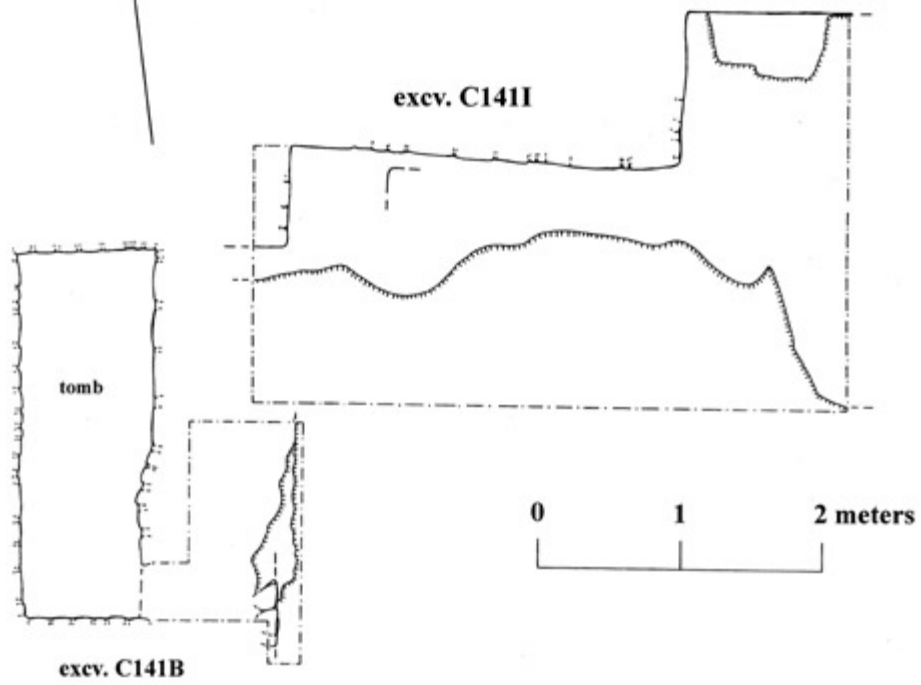
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[Figure 24.](#) Photo of jadeite pendent from Special Deposit C151B-3.

[Figure 25.](#) Caracol site map as of the conclusion of the 1999 field season.



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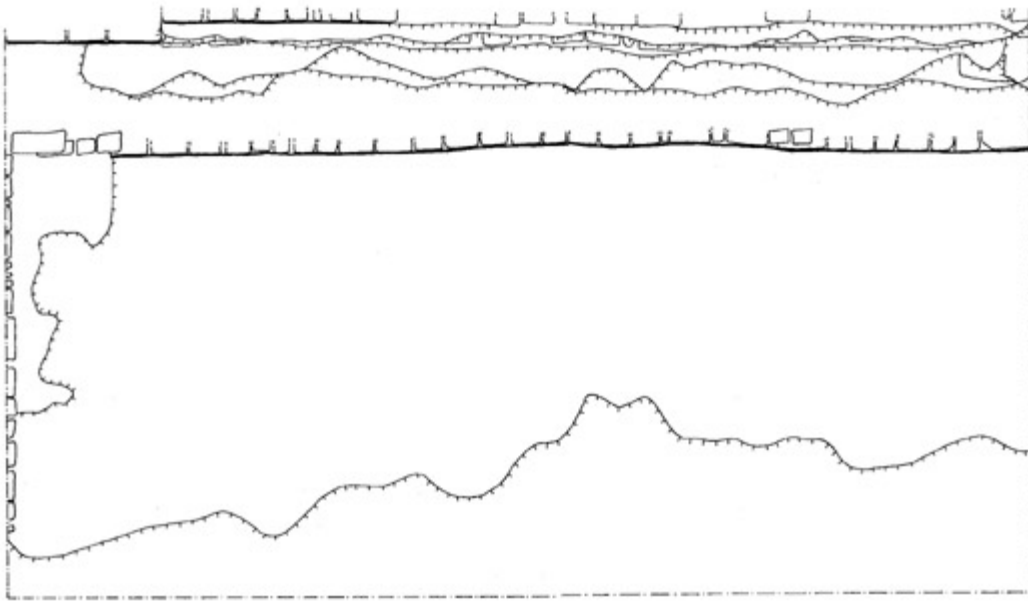


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A horizontal scale bar with vertical tick marks at 0, 1, and 2 meters.

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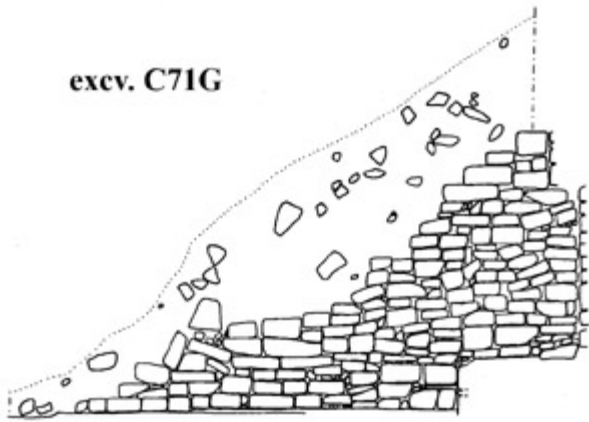




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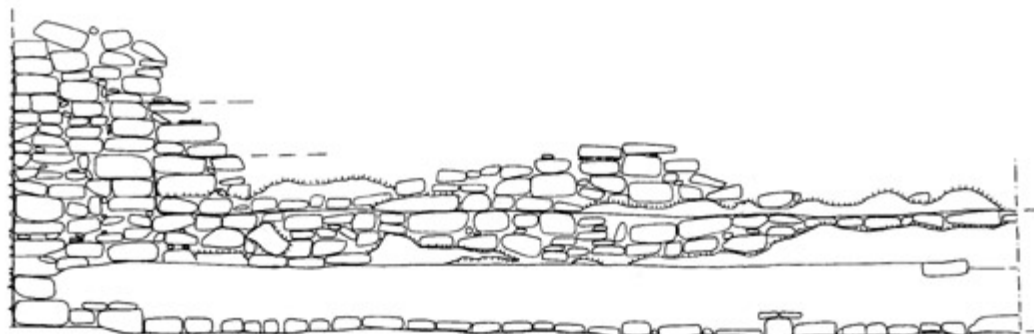
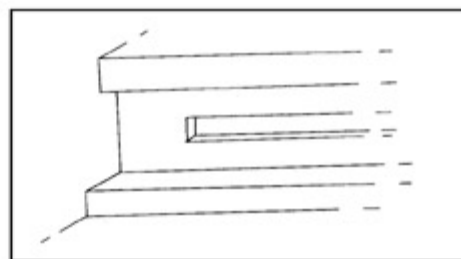
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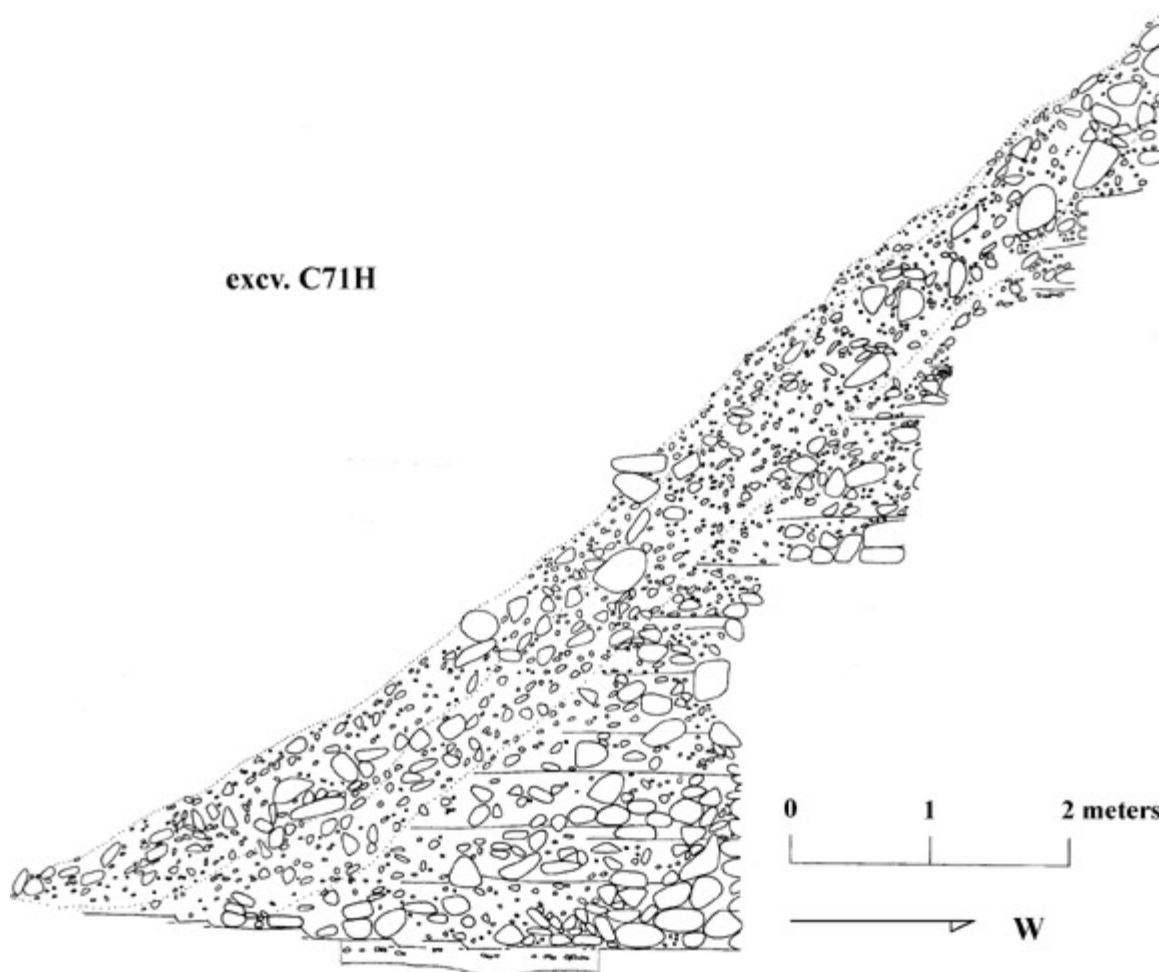


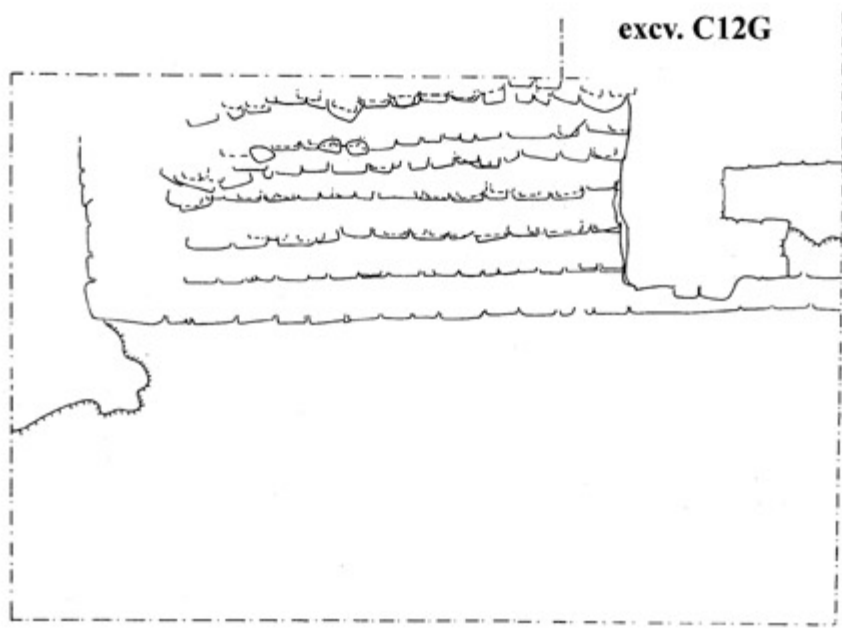
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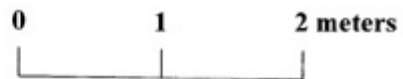




excv. C12F

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excv. C12E





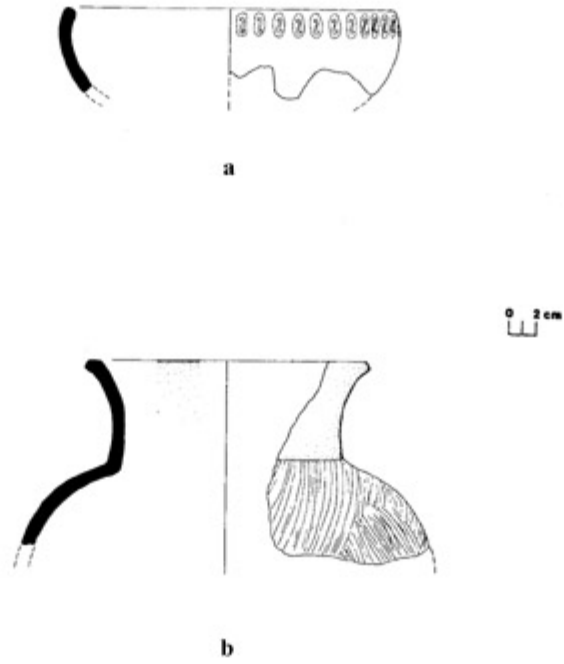
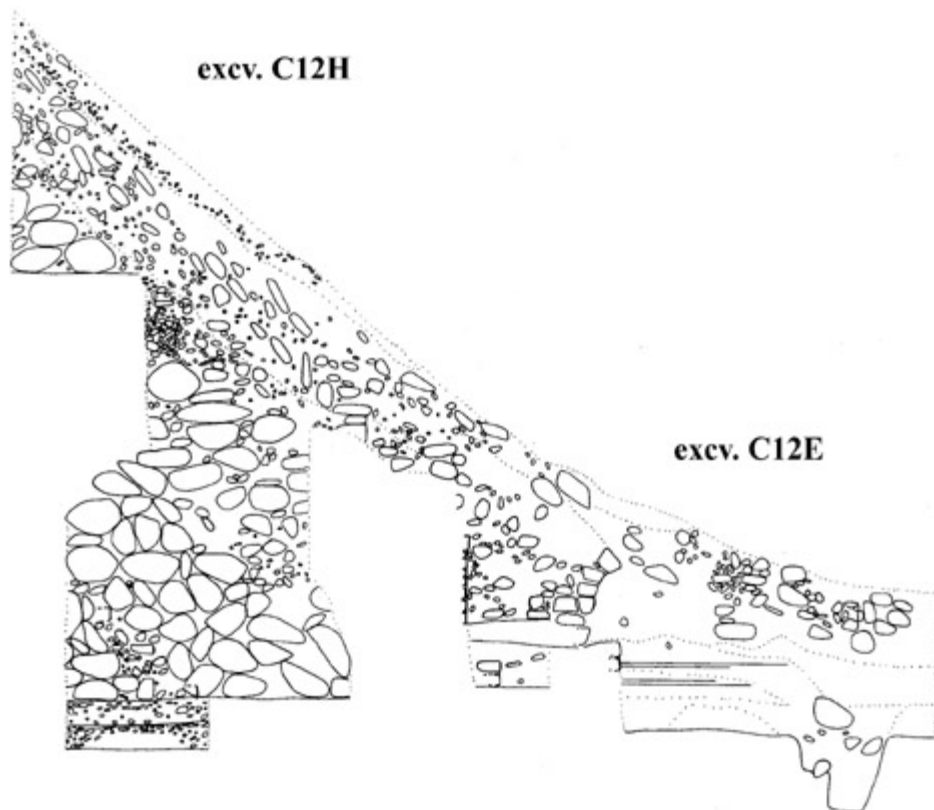


Figure 14: Vessels associated with Structure A3



excav. C12H

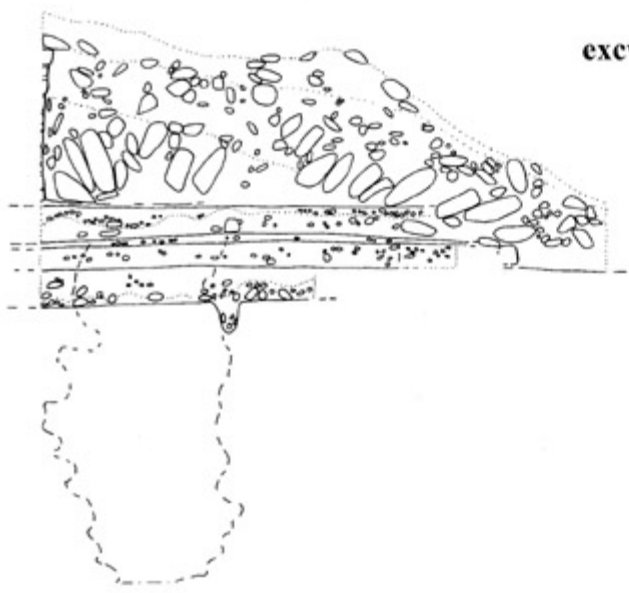
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excav. C150C



excav. C150B

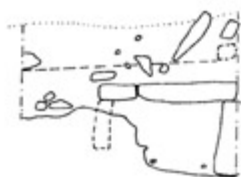






excav. C 151C

excav. C 151B



S.D. C151B-2



0 1 2 meters



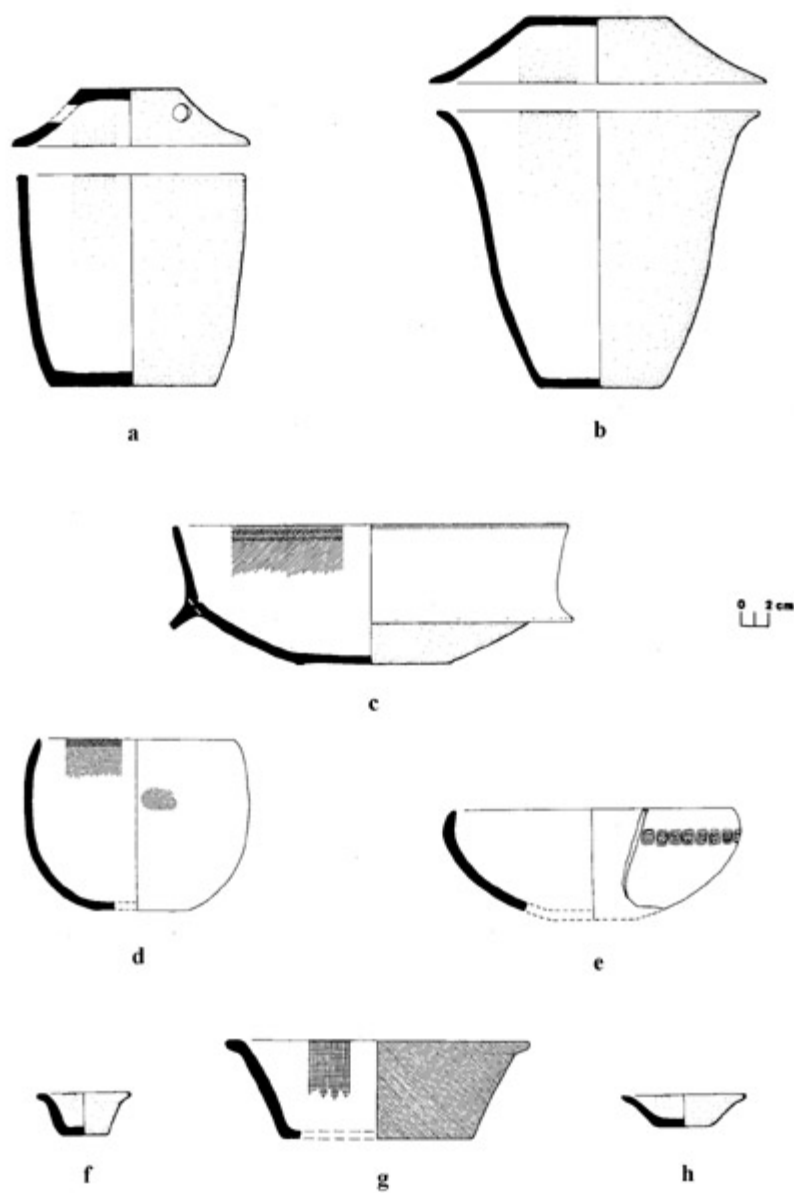
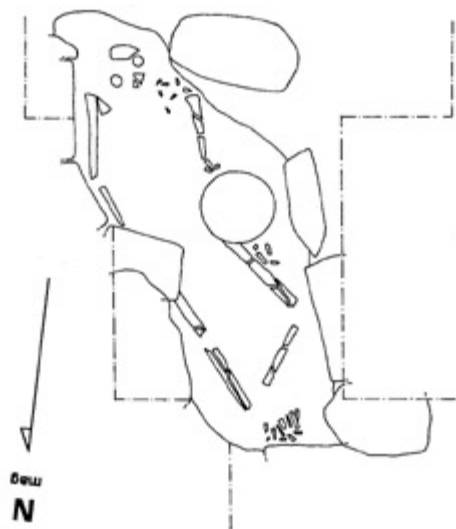


Figure 21: Vessels recovered from Suboperations C151B and C151C.



excav. C151B



0 1 meter



