

Polities, Politics, and Social Dynamics

“Contextualizing” the Archaeology of the Belize Valley and Caracol

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What constitutes a Maya “political system?” How large were Maya polities? And how were they organized? Mayanists are currently wrestling with these questions with opinions ranging from centralized states to balkanized polities to hegemonic empires (Ball 1993, 1994; Ball and Taschek 1991; A. Chase and D. Chase 1992a, 1996c, 1998a; D. Chase et al. 1990; Culbert 1991, 2000; Fox et al. 1996; Marcus 1993; Martin and Grube 1995; Sanders and Webster 1988). Basic to this topic is a consideration of how archaeologists define political and cultural units and the interactions among them (e.g., “boundaries,” “areas of influence,” and “cultural spheres”).

This chapter seeks to briefly examine the archaeological relationships between two geographically and environmentally distinct regions: the upper Belize Valley and Caracol, the valley’s huge and influential neighbor to the south. It is clear—based on ceramics, burial patterns, and settlement—that the upper Belize Valley and Caracol are archaeologically different. Yet it is also evident, based on the known epigraphic data, that Caracol must have had a great impact on the upper Belize Valley, probably even at the level of having included this area within the Caracol political sphere for a substantial period of time following A.D. 631, when Caracol subsumed Naranjo into its political orbit (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998a, 2000). Through comparing and contrasting what is known about the archaeology

of Caracol with that of the Belize Valley, it is possible to make some comments regarding the interpretation of archaeological data with regard to politics, political boundaries, and their changing nature over time.

Interpreting Ancient Settlement and Politics

Settlement archaeology in the Maya area had its recognized beginnings in the upper Belize Valley (Willey et al. 1965). Thus, it is a fitting locale from which to digress briefly into an assessment of the current state of settlement research in the Maya area—and of the relationship between settlement and political organization.

The primary goal of settlement archaeology has been to understand how humans have distributed themselves over a given landscape (e.g., Ashmore 1981). For the most part, settlement archaeology has incorporated an ecological approach that examines the relationship of environment or natural landscape factors to the physical location and density of human settlement. This, in turn, has led to the development of predictive models for the location of settlement (e.g., Ford 1986) and even terraces (Fedick 1994) based on factors such as terrain, soil, and water. A cultural approach also has been a part of settlement archaeology in the Maya area; attempts are made to place the settlement area under investigation into a wider social system, often with a focus on political economy or political hierarchy. However, most settlement work has not pursued wider issues, instead focusing on the function of specific buildings or groups (e.g., Becker 1982) and/or the proposed nature of the household unit (Wilk and Ashmore 1988) or other corporate group (Gillespie 2000). The visibility of ancient constructions on the settlement landscape has contributed largely to such interpretations.

Although the relationship between environment and settlement may be relatively easy to define, understanding social dynamics confronts practitioners of settlement archaeology with a host of perplexing problems on both methodological and theoretical levels: ancient populations must be reconstructed for numbers and status, excavation methodology must match stated goals, and functional interpretations must be incorporated into broader theory (A. Chase and D. Chase 1990, 2003). While it may be simple to identify nodal settlements in the Maya area—the kinds of sites that came to be called “major” or “minor” centers (Bullard 1960)—the unanswered, and sometimes unasked, question is, Do such nodes fit into a larger regional picture? And if they do, how? This in turn raises the question of whether what is defined as a region in terms of settlement archaeol-

ogy (e.g., A. Chase 1979; A. Chase et al. 2001; Willey et al. 1965:25) or as a polity in terms of epigraphy (e.g., Martin and Grube 1995; Mathews 1991) represents an actual cultural or political entity. How does the settlement system being investigated fit into a larger context? Or, does it?

Settlement archaeology results in maps of visible constructions and other remains, but there is a major debate over the degree to which all is visible on the ground surface of a Maya site (e.g., Culbert and Rice 1990). For if all is not visible on the surface, how can social interpretations be made? The simplest solution to this problem is to assume that all archaeological remains are visible on the ground surface—an assumption that is patently false. Alternatively, one could assume that all “hidden structures” pertained to a single lower level of society—an assumption that is, at best, undocumented, especially given the vicissitudes of time and landscape. To be fair, most researchers in the Maya area currently attempt to test for hidden structures as part of their research designs. Further complicating the interpretation of mapped surface remains, however, is the difficulty of identifying the function of structures based solely on surface form without excavation. Buildings are often arbitrarily designated as “domestic” and “ceremonial” because of the general difficulty in inferring more complex functions without extensive (and intensive) excavation. Even if extensive excavations are undertaken, this does not necessarily guarantee that absolute function can be determined (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000a).

Certain typically utilized methodological aspects of settlement pattern research are unfortunately ill-equipped to deal with questions of social organization or social variability (A. Chase and D. Chase 1990). A test pit, the standard mode of excavation in settlement research, usually provides only an idea of chronology and of the kinds of remains that may be found at a given locus; this kind of investigation often does not provide the kind of information that lends itself to making interpretations of status and social variability, let alone economic organization.¹ The intensive investigation of entire groups—involving both widespread horizontal stripping and deeper penetration, such as has been done at Tikal (M. Becker 1999; W. Coe 1990; Haviland et al. 1985; Jones 1996), Copan (Webster 1989; Webster and Gonlin 1988; Webster et al. 2000), Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001b; Jaeger 1991), Seibal (Smith 1982; Tourtellot 1988), and Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988)—is more rarely undertaken often because of financial constraints. Yet it is generally only through combining these intensive investigations with other archaeologically gathered data that social questions can be answered.

To model a social system, one needs to define relationships among groups at a single site and among neighboring sites, and thus, one needs to undertake settlement archaeology. However, the identification of political units and their boundaries is not a simple matter. While mapping may reveal settlement drop-off and, therefore, the presumed physical boundaries of a given settlement, it does not necessarily identify the boundaries of social, political, or economic interaction. Thus, survey, excavation, and detailed analyses of material remains (from ceramics to hieroglyphic writing) are critical to this endeavor.

Heuristically useful models, adapted to settlement situations, can result in caricatures of the Maya political situation. For instance, the application of central place theory to Maya occupational concentrations or architectural nodes can produce a perception of equal geographical polities or units with little horizontal integration. Some archaeologists (e.g., Blanton et al. 1993:164), in fact, see each Maya political unit as having “a radius of thirty-three kilometers, roughly a one-day journey on foot,” meaning that each polity is conceived as centering about a single major or minor architectural site. Military theory related to warfare suggests a slightly larger unit of maximum territorial control in the Maya case—60 km beyond any central node, given considerations of terrain and foot transport (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998a). However, a focus on territorial control centered on major or minor centers can mask other potential polity forms, such as the hegemonic empire of the pre-Conquest period Aztec (Hassig 1985, 1988).

Hieroglyphs are also commonly used to make interpretations about the nature of Maya political units. A version of central place theory employs “emblem glyphs” to demarcate polities (Mathews 1991). Epigraphically based models of Maya political organization have, with few exceptions (Marcus 1976; Martin and Grube 1995), been directly adapted to a Greek-like city-state model (Mathews 1991). An assumption is generally made that each emblem glyph represents an independent polity (a postulate that is not necessarily true). Because emblem glyphs are generally associated with specific sites, these sites have been advanced as focal points for separate Maya polities. As the distribution of any specific emblem glyph is relatively limited (usually corresponding to a single site), the areal extent of interpolated polities is also viewed as being limited. Interpretations of Maya social boundaries based on this view of emblem glyphs and on postulated evolutionary processes have produced a “balkanization” model that sees the fragmentation of the Maya lowlands into increasingly smaller polities as the Late Classic era progresses (Dunham 1990). However, it is

now evident that some sites share emblem glyphs (e.g., Tikal and Dos Pilas; Houston 1993), that a single site can have more than one emblem glyph (e.g., Yaxchilan; Mathews 1988), and that one emblem can potentially control another (Martin and Grube 1995). Thus, no one-to-one correspondence between emblem glyph and polity can be assumed. In fact, the real meaning of an emblem glyph—whether it was kinship-based, religious, territorial, or something else—remains to be determined.

Just as certain Maya political models derived solely from epigraphy or general theory have their problems, so too do those political models derived from a cursory examination of archaeological data alone. Attempts have been made to organize the Maya politically based on considerations of plaza group or “courtyard” counts (Adams and Jones 1981) as well as architectural scale (Adams 1981). Such archaeologically based schemes, however, are handicapped by unequally mapped (and excavated) Maya sites and thus can lead to simplistic and, usually, incorrect conclusions. Adams’s (1986) version of large regional Maya polities, while probably correct in a broad sense for limited periods of time, needs modification given new epigraphic and archaeological data that suggest the possibilities of both larger and smaller political units.

Conceptions of Classic Maya polities are sometimes cast in potentially inappropriate Western modes of thought. For instance, Maya polities often are viewed as comprising contiguous territory. Yet the composition of the Aztec empire demonstrates that Pre-Columbian polities may not always have been so easily bounded (Hassig 1988). Thus, following the Aztec model, some Mesoamerican polities could have presented a patchwork appearance of loosely joined units, which hop-scotched over other independent states but expanded to include areas far removed from any central core. And there is no reason that Maya polities could not be similarly constituted.

Often, models for social, political, and economic organization are borrowed from outside the Maya area. Examples found in Maya archaeology include the use of temperate zone feudalism (Adams and Smith 1981), tropical zone galactic polities (Demarest 1992), and Western-style urbanization (Sanders and Webster 1988). The categorization of Maya sites as “regal-ritual centers” or “regal-ritual cities” (Ball and Taschek 1991; Sanders and Webster 1988; Taschek and Ball 1999) has been lauded by some and extensively critiqued by others (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996c; D. Chase and A. Chase 1992b; Marcus 1993, 1995). Particularly telling are that differing interpretations have resulted from the use of the same data framework by separate researchers. While there is nothing overtly

wrong with this, it does clearly indicate the need for more refined data collection; it also may indicate that the database is not appropriate for the models being used and the questions being asked.

In spite of half a century of professing interest in settlement studies, we actually know very little about Maya settlement and the organizational systems that must have defined it (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). Central architecture has been mapped and excavated, and long-distance transects have been laid out and tested according to sampling designs (Ford 1986; Puleston 1983). But large areas of non-epicentral architecture are rarely mapped in their entirety and archaeologically tested. We need this kind of archaeological data to be gathered first before we deign to understand Maya political systems and their relationships. Otherwise, we will continue to use preconceived models and solutions without knowing or understanding the full extent of our database.

Unlike much of the Maya area, both Caracol and the Belize Valley have been blessed by years of continuous and widespread research. Thus, reasonable databases are available from each area and it should be theoretically possible to make some statements relative to the political interdependence or independence of these two regions.

The Caracol Polity

To understand the Caracol polity, one needs to look at the epigraphic and archaeological data that have been recovered from Caracol (fig. 20.1), its outlying region, and neighboring sites. The boundaries and relationships of the Maya who inhabited Caracol can be explored through an examination of the archaeological record in terms of ceramics, architectural plans, settlement layout, burial practices, epigraphy, and the distribution of certain goods and features. Obviously, this is a complicated set of factors to be considered. But the conjunction of a multitude of variables is necessary to interpret the past situation, for a single focus view is likely to warp any conclusions that are offered.

Caracol is blessed with numerous hieroglyphic texts as well as carved and plain stone monuments. These texts have significantly enriched our understanding of Caracol's past in ways that archaeology alone cannot. We can talk about a dynastic history stretching back to A.D. 331 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996b:table 1, 2000b; Grube 1994; Houston 1987). We can talk about the accomplishments of different rulers and attempt to relate them to the archaeological record. We can understand Caracol's rise during the transition between the Early and Late Classic eras through

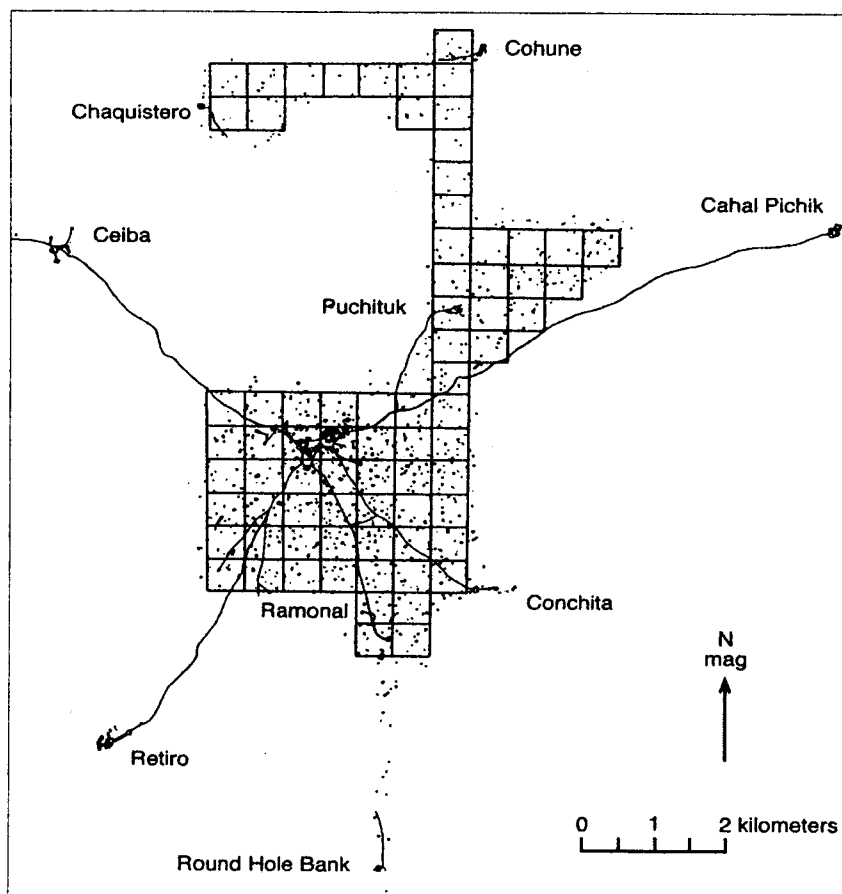


Fig. 20.1. The City of Caracol. Each blocked square represents an area of mapped settlement 500×500 m. Lines that cross the grid blocks are causeways that integrate Caracol's settlement by connecting several rings of outlying termini groups directly to the site epicenter.

its success in warfare (A. Chase and D. Chase 1989; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000b). We also can tentatively begin to understand some of the interpolity intrigue involving Tikal, Guatemala and Site Q (Calakmul?) that characterized Caracol's rise to power (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998a, 2000; Grube 1994; Martin and Grube 2000). We can examine Caracol's intense relationship with the Guatemalan site of Naranjo. All of this wealth of political information and propaganda can be garnered from the site's texts.

Epigraphy alone cannot provide the full story of Caracol. Hieroglyphic texts primarily record dynastic details pertaining to the site's "royal" echelon, yet little information is gained from this database that pertains to the vast majority of Caracol's population, and even less is gained from the epigraphy concerning how the site was organized politically or economically. Even when the epigraphy can be clearly read, it does not fully answer questions of royal relationships or, perhaps, even mirror political reality. For instance, Caracol rulers are named in monuments both at Naranjo and at La Rejolla, but does this mean that Kan II "lived" at Naranjo or that Smoke Skull "lived" at La Rejolla? That hieroglyphic texts focusing on Caracol individuals and dynastic events occur at Naranjo is fact. But could such texts have been moved there from Caracol? And for what purpose? Obviously, other information is necessary to consider these questions. It is only when other archaeological data are combined with epigraphic information that we understand the impact that the "Naranjo wars" (A.D. 626–636) had not only on Caracol but also on Naranjo and, by extension, the upper Belize Valley. The dates for the Naranjo wars are correlated with a burst of monument activity at Caracol and a general lack of stone monuments at Naranjo (other than those that deal with Caracol individuals). When the Naranjo epigraphic record burst forth again, it was under the auspices of a foreign female who gave birth to an heir that established a new dynastic line. Thus, a break in the textual record of a site can be conjoined with other information to interpret meaning more fully. Major war events at Naranjo and earlier at Tikal correlate with an extended lack of stone monuments at both sites following the respective events. This has been interpreted as meaning that the political orders of both sites may have been subject to external control. Yet a lack of stone monuments cannot be directly correlated with subjugation and war events as can be seen in the Late Classic excavation record of Caracol, where such an absence is correlated with substantial population and prosperity—and, potentially, an internal change in political organization (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000b). Nor can epigraphic statements of alliance and authority be assumed to be entirely accurate without other confirmation, especially as such statements are, after all, pronouncements intended to mollify, control, and impress in the arenas of politics and propaganda. However, epigraphy can provide a framework that can be revised and augmented by other archaeological data.

Likewise, not all connections among sites are indicated in stone monuments. Epigraphic texts must be conjoined with a wide variety of data sets

to interpret relationships within and among sites more completely. For instance, although few texts directly link Caracol and the southeast Petén around Ixkun and Ixtutz, the burial practices and settlement information recovered by Juan Pedro Laporte (1991, 1994) and his cohorts (Laporte et al. 1989) place this entire area within the Caracol archaeological tradition. Both areas share a settlement emphasis on eastern focus plaza groups and the widespread use of tombs; ceramically, the areas are also similar. Thus, even though epigraphic data are lacking, the archaeological data are highly suggestive of the direct connection of this region with Caracol. A consideration of site hierarchy and spatial proximity are also indicative of control of this area by Caracol, especially when viewed in terms of scale and intrasite integration. In the future, the detailed settlement data currently being collected by Laporte (1996, 2001) for the southeast Petén may possibly be used to fix the southern and eastern boundaries for a Classic era Caracol polity.

Certain goods and features also can prove to be useful in interpreting boundaries and relationships. I have previously demonstrated that tomb volume can be used in the Caracol region as a way of inferring both status and site hierarchy (A. Chase 1992). Other archaeological indicators are also useful. Caracol has specific ritual traditions that can be used to archaeologically identify its populations. These traditions include an east structure focus in over 60 percent of the site's residential groups, the widespread use of tombs associated with the eastern structure, and residential caching practices that use specially formed ceramic containers, called "face" caches and "finger" caches (A. Chase 1994:174; A. Chase and D. Chase 1994; D. Chase and A. Chase 1996, 1998). Such ritual practices are either infrequent or unknown from Tikal, Copan, Coba, and other excavated Maya sites outside the Caracol area. However, finger caches have been recovered at Cahal Pech (Awe, personal communication 1994; chapter 8). Thus, it is possible that the ritual occurrence of this caching complex at this Belize Valley site is part of a Caracol connection. Similarly, while minimal terracing is known from the Belize Valley (Fedick 1994), the distribution of widespread agricultural terracing appears to have centered on Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998b). Extrapolating from this fact, it is possible that the practice of terraced agriculture in the southern lowlands may further provide some spatial indication of Caracol's sphere of influence during the Late Classic era.

Lack of certain objects may also be significant. Caracol does not share in the widespread pattern of ceremonially depositing eccentric flints, a practice that is found throughout many lowland sites (Coe 1959, 1965)

and especially in the Belize Valley (Morris, personal communication; Willey et al. 1965; chapter 5). Rather, one finds the fairly regular use of crude obsidian eccentrics both in the site epicenter and in the residential groups located in the extensive site core (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998). Also, as noted above, other excavated sites do not apparently share in Caracol’s proclivity for specialized cache vessels, especially associated with eastern structures in residential plaza groups. Presumably such ritual differences may prove significant in any determination of relationships. Conversely, multiple and/or disarticulated burials found at a number of Belize Valley sites may suggest further ties with Caracol. However, exactly how these associations reflect sociopolitical relationships is unclear, for it is conceivable that different distributions may reflect a combination of an intentionally created identity and increased prosperity at Caracol.

Caracol and the Belize Valley

Where, then, does this leave us in any attempt to understand relationships between Caracol and the upper Belize Valley during the Classic period? For the most part, there is little in the way of Belize Valley epigraphic texts that can guide such a consideration. This is understandable given the differences in scale between the two areas. Caracol is at the summit of any hierarchical arrangement while the sites in the Belize Valley, for the most part, comprise the middle and lower end of any defined hierarchy. Caracol was one of the major players in the Late and Terminal Classic eras, while most of the sites in the upper Belize Valley were either small independent units or pawns within other polities. Although Xunantunich erected some stone monuments, these all date to the last part of the Classic period and unfortunately contain little information that can be related directly to dynasty or political connections.

It has been argued based on ceramic affiliation and proximity that Belize Valley sites were under the control of Naranjo for most of their history (e.g., Ball and Taschek 1991). This assumption, however, cannot be tested without excavation at Naranjo. The epigraphic evidence, though, indicates that Naranjo was under the direct sway of Caracol for approximately 50 years from A.D. 631 to 680 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998a). Thus, if Naranjo were in control of the upper Belize Valley, then epigraphic interpretation would suggest that Caracol was in fact the valley’s ultimate overseer for at least a similar period of time. This assumption, however, also requires further archaeological testing and support.

Even though methodological questions remain over the degree to which

uniformity in material remains (including settlement) can be used to suggest cultural and political boundaries, certain things can be said about the archaeological relationships expressed between the upper Belize Valley and Caracol. The upper Belize Valley was never a full participant in the Caracol cultural tradition. It may have been under Caracol control, but the settlement pattern, architectural layouts, ceramic subcomplexes, and burial practices all place it as an area culturally peripheral to or distinct from the Caracol archaeological tradition. Based on archaeological data recovered by Paul Healy (1990, 1999), Pacbitun (located 40 km from Caracol's epicenter) may represent the northernmost known extension of the complete Caracol tradition (as represented primarily by ceramics and burial patterns). Excavations by the Department of Archaeology at Ponces (Morris, personal communication) to the northeast of Pacbitun suggest that this area was beyond the direct Caracol ritual sphere in the Late Classic era, given the eccentric flints recovered in the site's caches. Further to the west, epigraphic evidence suggests that Ucanal, Guatemala was a border town between the Late Classic Naranjo and Caracol spheres; Late and Terminal Classic individuals from Ucanal are discussed as prisoners on both the monuments of Naranjo (Schele and Freidel 1990) and Caracol (A. Chase et al. 1991). Recent excavations at Ucanal have revealed ceramic assemblages that are consistent with those found at Caracol, but a surprising lack of burials in its excavated residential groups, something inconsistent with both the Caracol and southeast Petén archaeological data (Laporte and Mejia 2002). However, epigraphic texts suggest that Ucanal must have spent much time under direct Caracol administration; its distance from Caracol, some 28 km, make this plausible. Preliminary publication of archaeological data from Arenal (Las Ruinas, 35 km north of epicentral Caracol) suggest that it was outside of the Caracol sphere in the Late Classic era and had only minimal Terminal Classic overlap (Taschek and Ball 1999). However, the more northern site of Cahal Pech exhibits part of the Caracol cultural tradition in having finger bowl caches; thus, some direct relationship between Caracol and Cahal Pech during the early part of the Late Classic period is archaeologically plausible. For the most part, the Late Classic ritual patterns recovered from Arenal and the other sites of the Belize Valley differ from those known from Caracol (Taschek and Ball 1999:227), potentially indicating Naranjo's control of the upper Belize Valley after A.D. 680 in accord with its epigraphic resurgence.

Ceramics have often been used to suggest cultural affiliations. Analysis of available ceramic data suggests that there is no simple relationship

among Naranjo, Caracol, and the upper Belize Valley. Like the Belize Valley, Caracol has a widespread and common distribution of Belize Red wares throughout its Late Classic history; in fact, Belize Red is one of the more common mortuary types at Caracol and may have ultimately been manufactured somewhere in the Caracol political system (A. Chase 1994). Yet the rest of Caracol’s ceramic assemblages are divergent from those found in the Belize Valley (Gifford 1976; LeCount 1999). How, then, is this to be interpreted in terms of social relationships between the two areas?

A variant of Holmul style red-and-orange-on-white pottery may have been manufactured at Buenavista in the Belize Valley for distribution either locally or to other locales further afield (Reents-Budet 1994). Taschek and Ball (1992) suggest that such pottery was within the purview of the elite, arguing that more elaborate examples, such as the “Jauncy Vase” from Buenavista del Cayo, were distributed by the Naranjo royal elite as special gifts to loyal local lords (chapter 9). Houston et al. (1992) point out that the artist of the Buenavista cylinder, on which the name of Smoking Squirrel of Naranjo appears, also named an Ucanal lord on another of his cylinders; Reents-Budet (personal communication 1994) has shown, however, that the pastes on these two cylinders are different, implying they were made (if not painted) by different individuals. Taschek and Ball (1992, 1999:231) would see the presence of such epigraphic vases at sites as direct gifts of owned possessions by a royal ruler to either a peer or a lesser noble, thus implying political affiliation (see also Grube and Schele 1990). To me, however, this is too direct an application of a presentation or gift-giving model to what was likely a much more complex situation. Indeed, the naming of individuals on this pottery may not have been a mark of personal possession by a given ruler at all, but rather a form of advertising or support, much like the modern-day possession of a Walt Disney World “Mickey Mouse” hat. We need to know much more about the distribution and manufacture of these goods before we take the hieroglyphic readings literally. The archaeological record at Caracol also proves potentially instructive on this point, for it indicates that Holmul-style red-on-orange-on-white pottery was locally available to a broad portion of Maya society during the Late Classic era. At Caracol, although limited in amount, it has a wide distribution at the site and is not restricted to the elite. In fact it is usually encountered in outlying residential groups in cist or crypt burials, but not in tombs. Individuals buried with these ceramics also are not characterized by the “palace diet” as determined by stable isotope studies of bone (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2001a). Thus, the

inferred social associations of such pottery and the overarching application of any presentation models are called into question by the Caracol archaeological data.

The recovered settlement data and site layouts of the upper Belize Valley are also different from that of Caracol and are suggestive of the distinctive political history of this area. However, the site plans of both Cahal Pech (Healy and Awe 1996; chapter 8) and Xunantunich (chapter 10) exhibit the use of causeways; those at Cahal Pech are more dendritic than those at Xunantunich and thus similar to those found at Caracol. The limited amount of terraces reported from this region (Fedick 1994) is also suggestive of “filtered” Caracol contact.

Caracol’s settlement is continuous and evenly spaced over a huge area (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001a). The placement of its plaza groups implies both bureaucratic control of these residential settings (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998b) and a population who did not consider themselves to be militarily threatened. This continuous settlement amid extensive terrace systems has been followed for almost 10 km to the north of the Caracol epicenter. This evenly spaced and continuous Caracol settlement (see fig. 20.1) contrasts greatly with that thus far recorded in the upper reaches of the Belize Valley.

In the foothills above and around the modern town of Cayo and beyond the fertile river valley investigated by Gordon Willey so long ago, the settlement is concentrated in small nodes with only a sparse scattering of outlying plazuela groups. Even the site of Buenavista del Cayo, argued as being “open” by Ball and Taschek (1991), shares this concentrated settlement pattern. Xunantunich is placed on what is a militarily defensible summit. Based on the spacing seen between architectural centers and the noncontinuous nature of the residential settlement, it may be suggested that the upper Belize Valley was not well integrated politically. As the land in this region is generally quite fertile (e.g., Ford and Fedick 1992), there is no agricultural reason that its settlement should be so sparse and yet so nodal in appearance. The main settlements in the upper Belize Valley—Cahal Pech, Buenavista del Cayo, and Xunantunich—are fairly compact and situated on ridges or promontories with concentrated surrounding residential settlement. I would argue that what is being seen in the settlement of the upper Belize Valley is exactly what one might expect for a border area—a settlement response to a contested region. Control of the upper Belize Valley presumably switched back and forth between different polities and, at certain times in its history, it probably formed the first line

of defense for an area that was subjected to extensive raiding by groups attempting to commandeer trade goods coming up the Belize River. The central Belize Valley, with its almost continuous settlement in the riverine alluvial terraces, was seemingly less affected by any political maneuvering and, in fact, may have prospered the most when the region was left to its own political devices.

Conclusion

In spite of differences of scale, it is useful to compare the archaeology of Caracol with that of the upper Belize Valley. Strikingly apparent are the differences that exist between the two areas. When such variability is explored, it becomes clear that Maya settlement and ritual patterns were often directly related to political or social situations. At Caracol the settlement distribution provides a situation of uniform spacing almost as if zoning laws were in effect, presumably indicative of a well-integrated political system (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001a; A. Chase et al. 2001). In the upper Belize Valley, settlement location was also dictated by political and social exigencies; the many smaller nodes that exist indicate that the area was probably not well integrated politically. Caracol also enjoys a ritual unification of its Late Classic population (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994, 1996b) that is not evident at other excavated Maya centers but that, at least partially, permeated the upper Belize Valley in the early part of the Late Classic period. In my estimation, the volume of work that has been undertaken in the upper Belize Valley and neighboring areas like Caracol, especially since settlement archaeology was formally started in the Belize Valley some forty years ago, is finally permitting settlement research to move beyond the simple ecological correlations and functional identifications that have dominated the field. With the amount of settlement work that has been carried out in western Belize we are finally poised to move beyond speculation and to use a solid body of archaeological data to examine questions of political and social relationships and their reflection in Maya antiquity in a way that is not possible elsewhere in the Maya area.

Notes

1. It should be noted, however, that test-pitting is preferable to solely using surface collections as a basis for higher order interpretations.

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