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## The Royal Court of Caracol, Belize: Its Palaces and People

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Although it is true that activities and actors in ancient Maya courts can no longer be directly viewed and examined, they can be interpreted from archaeological, epigraphic, and iconographic data in combination with careful analogy. If one assumes that Maya courts were palace-based, then architectural form can provide significant clues as to their structure and

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organization. Just as there are different kinds of palaces, there may well have been differences among courts. When found in association with palaces, numerous kinds of residues—ranging from in situ artifactual materials to stable isotope analyses of human bone—can help flesh out the activities that were carried out as well as identify the people who were integrated into a given court. Iconographic details found on buildings, painted and modeled pottery vessels, and other artifacts can also help elucidate what transpired in these ancient settings; in some cases, hieroglyphic records are also relevant.

Like others before us (see Adams 1974), we define a "Classic period Maya palace" as an elite or royal dwelling place, usually constructed using stone walls and a vaulted roof. We differentiate such a structure type from a purely ritual building, such as a temple or shrine (also often of stone construction), and from more humble residences, largely made of perishable materials. However, a Maya palace was not only a residence, as it probably also had administrative functions. The conjoining of functions in a single building is noted by Landa (Tozzer 1943:118, 124, 171, 306) for the sixteenth-century Yucatec Maya. Although some may identify a single-room building as a palace (cf. Valdés 1997), we agree with Peter Harrison (1986:55–56) that the term "palace" implies more than one room.

There is great variation in the kinds of structures that have been called palaces archaeologically, presumably due to a constellation of factors. First, there is temporal variation in the form of palaces: Classic period palaces are generally sited on elevated substructures and use stone construction; however, Post-Classic Maya palaces may rest directly on their associated plaza levels and use perishable materials. Second, even within the temporal span of the Late Classic period, a single building might have had several different uses and been extensively modified, thereby resulting in great variation in form. Finally, given the diversity among groups that we lump together as "the Maya," there was likely regional variation in the form that palaces might take. It is important to note at the outset that the presence of a palace in and of itself does not imply the existence of a specific form of social, political, or economic organization. Palaces, as a kind of building, cut across a variety of political and economic forms.

In this chapter we seek to examine the "royal court" at the Classic period Maya city of Caracol, Belize. Although similar tenets and beliefs may have been shared among the ancient Maya, particularly among the ancient elite, at many Maya sites, as represented by a shared writing system, this does not mean that all Late Classic Maya royal courts were similarly structured and organized. Caracol exhibits great differences from its Late Classic Maya neighbors. Elsewhere, we (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; D. Chase 1994, 1998; D. Chase and A. Chase forth-

coming) have suggested that a specific cultural identity was cultivated among the site's populace in order to foster the expansionist goals of its various sovereigns. We have also commented on Caracol's centralized organization (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a, 1996c, 1998), its administered economy (A. Chase 1998; A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a; A. Chase et al., 2001), and its expansive midlevel society (A. Chase 1992; A. Chase and D. Chase 1996a; Jaeger Liepins 1994). Thus, Caracol's palaces and courts may not reflect the structure and organization of these units in the Maya lowlands at large.

### Interpreting Maya Courts

The archaeological data for reconstructing the social aspects of a Maya court come in various forms. For example, architectural plans and the features of palaces can be studied both from the standpoint of traffic flow and architectural configuration to suggest how a given building could have been used. Remains of ancient activities can be found on palace floors or buried within their construction fills. Painted scenes on pottery vases can suggest aspects of palace life. Carved stelae can also provide information on at least some of the individuals who lived in palaces. The bones of the individuals buried throughout a site can be compared to assess social relations and diet.

Yet each class of data has its limitations. Stone buildings can be easily and quickly modified; and perishable modifications, such as wooden benches and wall partitions, which could have substantially altered traffic flow or how a given building or room was utilized, are not generally recovered in the archaeological record. The latest artifactual materials left on a floor do provide some sense of how a given building was utilized immediately prior to abandonment (Inomata 1997; Inomata and Triadan 2000; A. Chase and D. Chase 2001; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000), but again many subsidiary considerations must be weighed in making interpretations of function. Were any materials removed prior to abandonment? How and why did items end up on a floor or bench? Do the remains accurately reflect how a given building was used throughout its life span, or are the materials simply the reflection of the terminal use of a building within a changed social context?

Monument portraits and texts provide only very limited information on court life. Palaces themselves are also often devoid of human skeletal remains. It thus becomes more difficult to talk about the people who may have lived in these buildings. Iconographic images that may be related to palaces (and that show individuals) are sometimes painted on pottery vessels, but these usually consist of highly standardized poses and, even though they may show activities taking place near thrones or benches, are generally difficult to correlate with specific buildings. Architectural



most Classic Maya sites (e.g., Proskouriakoff 1960). At Caracol, portraits of these sovereigns are presented in essentially public spaces, specifically the central plaza areas. These portraits do not correlate clearly with specific palaces or palace compounds. Although stone portraits of Caracol's past sovereigns are found in the site's epicenter, they do not directly indicate where these individuals lived or held court. Other data classes, however, do imply that the site's sovereigns and royalty were associated with epicentral palaces. In particular, the iconographic decoration that is found in the upper facades of Caracol's epicentral palaces includes stuccoed indications of elite costuming and dress as well as the use of royal symbols and cosmology. And the epigraphic texts that are found on these same buildings record historic information relevant to the royal dynasty, including the names of several individuals who are directly associated with Caracol's emblem glyph and who are also represented in the epigraphic texts that are carved on the stone monuments. Additionally, one of the artifacts found in association with an epicentral palace complex was a carved slate axe, upon which was inscribed the name of a Caracol sovereign. Thus, it can be inferred from the associated epigraphy, iconography, and artifactual remains that the epicentral palace buildings were used by Caracol's sovereign and the royal court.

The site of Caracol has many palace compounds. However, the synchronic and diachronic relationships of these compounds need to be considered in assessing their functions. In addition, a series of questions needs to be addressed. Were palace compounds time successive at any given Maya site, with each sovereign constructing and living in his own building complex, perhaps similar to the situation postulated for Chan-Chan, Peru, by Michael Moseley (1990:13)? Was more than one palace compound used simultaneously by the royal court? Were palace compounds built and utilized by individuals who were not part of the royal court?

Archaeological data from Caracol would appear to indicate that most epicentral palace compounds were used coevally throughout the Late Classic period. All, additionally, have evidence that they were contemporaneously occupied at the time of site abandonment. Whether specific palace compounds were constructed or refurbished in association with a particular ruler is unclear. Most were modified over time and continued in use after their initial construction. There is also substantial evidence at Caracol for the engulfment of previously used palace compounds within the platforms of later palace constructions. In some cases, similar building plans are in evidence, and in other cases building orientation shifted 180 degrees or building types changed. Thus, even though the construction or refurbishing of specific palace compounds can be correlated with specific sovereigns, it cannot be proven at this point.

If one considers the royal court to have been localized in the Caracol epicenter, then a further question arises over the function of outlying,

nonepicentral, palace compounds. Such palace compounds, many of which are located in residential groups linked by their own vias or causeways to the plazas of Caracol's causeway termini, may have been representative of social and political factions at the site; however, some of their members were clearly integrated into the royal court (see below). In our estimation, these outlying palace compounds were occupied by both royal (not the sovereign *per se*, but rather members of his extended family) and nonroyal (secondary elite) family groups, all of whom were ultimately subject to the centrally based royal court and were presumably instrumental in carrying out administrative matters. With more than 115,000 inhabitants (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a:5), Caracol had more than enough population to sustain the multiple palace compounds that have been recorded.

#### Caracol's Palaces

Over the course of sixteen consecutive field seasons, a wealth of architectural information has been gathered on the structures that occupy the 177 square kilometers that make up the site of Caracol. Although much of the larger stone-constructed architecture is found in the site epicenter, equivalent stone buildings also occur in the site core and are especially associated with Caracol's causeway termini (at distances from less than 1 kilometer to roughly 8 kilometers from the site epicenter). However, not all stone constructions at Caracol with more than one room are palaces. There are a number of multiroom stone constructions that are not considered to be palaces, largely because they do not appear to have any residential function. Perhaps the most common of these structures are buildings that have features suggesting a predominantly ritual function and that are elsewhere referred to as "temples" (Andrews 1975:39-43). At Caracol, temples are often indicated by rounded substructure "corners" (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a:7) and by ritual deposits of incense burners (D. Chase 1988).

#### *The Caracol Palace Sample*

The Caracol sample of known palaces consists of minimally nine epicentral and twelve core palace compounds. As standing architecture and room configuration are generally not visible at Caracol prior to excavation, the actual number of palaces is likely greater. Each area identified as a palace compound may contain several palaces, and each palace may contain varying numbers of rooms and different building plans.

*Different Kinds of Palaces at Caracol.* Two very different kinds of palace compounds are in evidence in epicentral Caracol. One kind of palace com-

pound includes pyramidal temples within the courtyard groups. These temple-palace groups appear to overlap in use with east-focused residential groups found throughout Caracol's epicenter and core areas in that they combine domestic architecture with ritual constructions that contain the remains of mortuary activity (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b). Unlike Palenque, Uaxactun, and most of Tikal (except for the Tikal South Acropolis), where palaces and temples are not integrated into the same architectural courtyards, four areas within the Caracol epicenter effectively demonstrate the conjunction of palace compounds and temples: the Central Acropolis, the Northwest Acropolis, the summit of Caana, and the B Plaza; the South Acropolis may be yet a fifth example. A second kind of epicentral palace compound does not exhibit these tall, squarish, pyramidal temples and also lacks the distinctive burial and ritual component generally found in association with Caracol's residential groups. Two palace compounds in the eastern part of the Caracol epicenter, Barrio and the C Group, are architectural examples of this kind of complex; both had a residential function. It may be that such nonpyramid palace compounds formed a supplementary unit to nonresidential buildings and plazas in the epicenter. For instance, impressive tombs and caches are found in the pyramidal temples that surround the A Plaza, but this architectural unit is neither directly associated with any palace buildings or compounds, nor does it contain evidence of any Late Classic residential debris.

*Special Palace Compound Entryways.* In two extensively excavated palace compounds at Caracol, a formal architectural plan that permitted entryway to the palace courtyard can be identified (Figure 4.2). Full versions of this specialized entryway occur in association with the Caana summit and with the Barrio group; an abbreviated version occurs in association with the South Acropolis. The standard architectural plan occurs as the central element in tandem-room buildings. A long room with three exterior doorways forms the front room of the building. No architectural features such as benches occur in this first room. A single central doorway permits passage into the "rear" room and then from there to an enclosed courtyard. However, the rear room consists of small inset side benches or small inset side rooms that are entirely raised to form benches. The constricted plan of these rear rooms or benches clearly controlled and reduced traffic into and out of the associated enclosed courtyards and contrasts greatly with the open expansiveness of the front rooms of these architectural units. This formal architectural entry plan is not restricted to Caracol; it is also evident in the great palace Structure A-V at Uaxactun (Smith 1950: Figure 69).

*Variability in Caracol Benches.* Benches are an especially important and integral part of Caracol's palaces. Virtually all of Caracol's presumed palaces contain benches that may have been used for sleeping (e.g.,

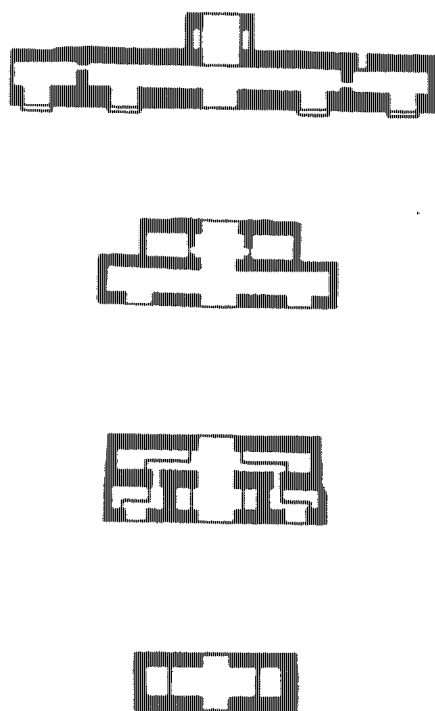


FIGURE 4.2 Restricted entrances in Caracol palaces: (a) upper front building, Caana (see Figure 4.3); (b) western building, Barrio (see Figure 4.9); (c) mid-level front building, Caana (see Figure 4.3); (d) northern building, South Acropolis (see Figure 4.8).

Adams 1974; Harrison 1986) or as throne, display, guard, or reception areas. As Harrison (1986) has noted for Tikal, their number and kind varies substantially. Some palaces have one or two benches, whereas others have much larger numbers. Some benches have armrests (also referred to as "side screens" [Harrison 1986]); some have borders; others are decorated with paint. They vary in form from square to rectangular to *U*-shaped to *L*-shaped. Some benches are attached to only one wall; others are attached to three or four walls and may take up most of a room. The central banks of Caracol benches vary in height from 22 to 80 centimeters. They may be located immediately opposite entryways or within enclosed rooms. The kinds of benches present and their location provide architectural clues as to how a given building was utilized. At Caracol, at least two functional variants are apparent. Benches with arms are most likely used in formal throne, reception, or display areas; the area bounded by the arms generally indicates that this kind of bench is ill-suited for sleeping. "Unarmed," or "simple," benches were more likely used for a wider variety of purposes. The largest surface area occurs on *L*-shaped benches; because such benches are also often tucked into side rooms, it is suggested that this kind of bench lent itself well to sleeping. Other simple benches at Caracol probably served multiple purposes that were context-dependent and ranged from guard areas to reception locales to domestic sleeping areas. In addition to architectural variation,



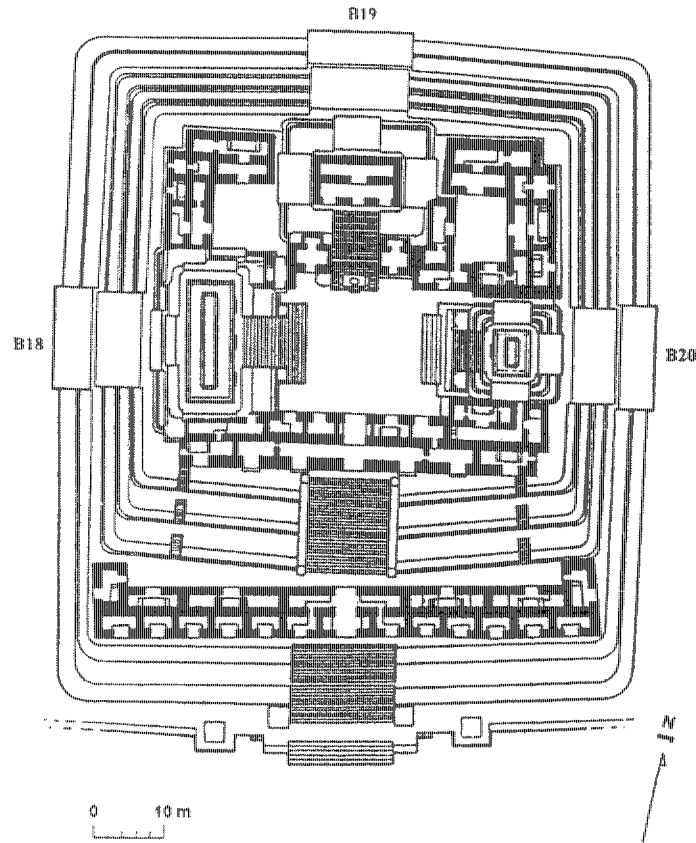


FIGURE 4.3 Plan of Caana, Caracol's most elaborate palace compound.

many of the excavated palace compounds have on-floor artifactual remains as well as special deposits (caches and burials) located within adjacent nonresidential buildings that offer other detailed functional information. Thus, a comprehensive study of Caracol palaces requires a consideration of palace and group configuration, architectural details, and contextual associations.

#### *Caana*

Caana forms by far the most elaborate palace compound at Caracol (Figure 4.3). It contains minimally sixty-six contemporaneously used rooms in four palace units integrated with three temples. These rooms contain at least forty-five and most likely forty-eight benches (several rooms are not completely excavated). There is clear stratigraphic evidence for the longevity of this palace compound and for substantial rebuilding efforts.

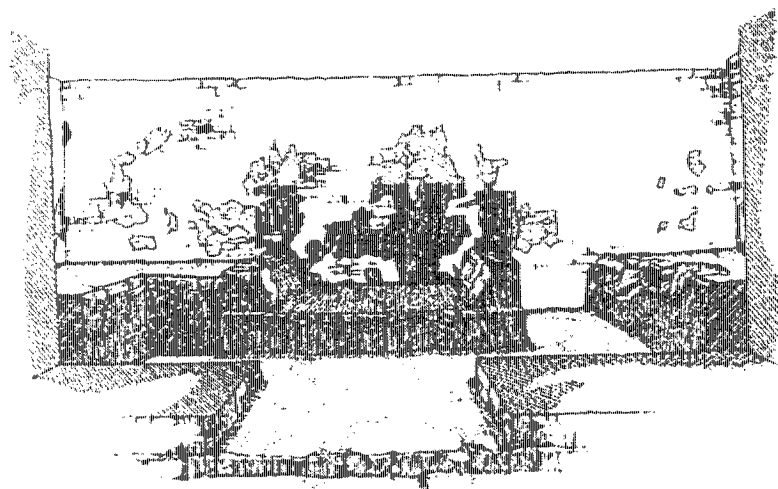


FIGURE 4.4 Detail of eastern inner room of Caana mid-range palace looking south; lower "bar" equals 1 meter (drawing by J. Ballay, Caracol Archaeological Project).

*Midrange Palace.* Twenty-four rooms are located in a single building placed halfway up the southern face of Caana. Thirteen rooms span the front of this generally tandem-plan building, each with a central door; two transverse rooms occupy the western and eastern ends of the structure. The only rooms without benches occur in the two lateral rooms of one of the rear three-room suites. The benches facing the front plaza are generally U-shaped. Each of the four main rooms in the alley contain benches with arms. Many rooms were decorated with red floors, with red wall stripes, or with red wall blocks that were used to further define bench areas (Figure 4.4).

We can speculate as to how this central building was utilized by Caracol's court. Based on spatial relationships, it probably was paired with Structures B4, B5, and B6 to the south of B Plaza (see Figure 4.6). There is redundancy in bench form in each of the south-facing rooms. The benches are positioned so that an individual would be clearly visible through the door of each of the rooms, and it is suspected that this suite of twelve rooms functioned as part of a public display for the royal court. Only two of the southern rooms on this range building contained on-floor artifactual materials: One contained three vessels—two jars and a large platter; another contained a tripod plate and portions of a *metate*. Although the vessels are likely indicative of either domestic or ritual food serving or consumption, the partial nature of the *metate* and the documentation that *metates* can be used for other than food processing (e.g., Sharer 1977) in combination with a lack of any ash or hearth areas precludes any identification of food preparation in association with this

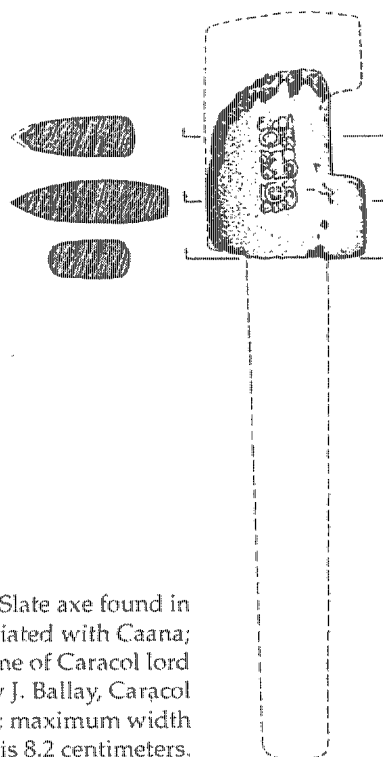


FIGURE 4.5 Slate axe found in collapse associated with Caana; it records the name of Caracol lord K'an II (drawing by J. Ballay, Caracol Archaeological Project); maximum width of the axe is 8.2 centimeters.

building. The central front room had benches to either side, and we suspect that these smaller seats held individuals, or guards, who controlled the flow of traffic going farther into Caana. In contrast to the southern exposure, a good amount of refuse was recovered from the eastern part of the north-facing alley. The suite of rooms adjacent to the eastern alley exhibits the greatest variability in terms of benches and additions to benches. In combination with the trash (ceramic tripod plates, two large ceramic barrels, and a bone tool), this area seems most likely to have seen residential use, although these materials could have been the result of some specific rite or ritual. Each of the four north-facing doors fronting the alley exhibits an "armed" bench. The dimensions and placement of these benches make it unlikely that they were used for sleeping. Instead, they appear to have functioned more like thrones; the walls behind these areas are also decorated to emphasize these architectural features (e.g., Figure 4.4). They thus give the appearance of audience rooms, and we suspect that part of the administrative efforts of Caracol's royal court were carried out from these locales.

Trenching the central axis of the midrange palace revealed no deposits but recovered earlier construction activity and both Late and Terminal

Classic ceramics. On-floor debris is exclusively Terminal Classic in date. A stone axe, hieroglyphically name-tagged with Caracol's ruler K'an II, was also found in collapse within the inner alleyway (Figure 4.5). Glyphic texts from the stucco facade of the building record historical events for a period of time in which there are no known stone monuments (late Late Classic—9.16.0.0.0), indicating that the building was decorated after A.D. 760. The construction of this palace, then, likely took place at the beginning of the Terminal Classic period.

*Upper-Range Palace.* The frontal palace on Caana's summit functioned to shield the upper main court from public view. Like the midrange palace, it consisted of a tandem row of rooms with direct central passage. Seven doors, leading to five rooms, faced the B Plaza. The central three rooms, accounting for five doors, had no benches and formed a single, interiorly connected suite. Each of the two end rooms had armed benches; neither bench would have formed a comfortable sleeping area, suggesting that these areas functioned as audience/administrative rooms. Artifacts on the floor of the outer western chamber included nonutilitarian items—part of a broken bone artifact inscribed with hieroglyphs and part of a ceramic flute. Also at the western end of the frontal summit palace, a blocked inner door led to an in-filled rear room; excavation demonstrated that this engulfed room had a large L-shaped bench and crude red *ahaws* painted on one of its white plastered walls, indicating that this room may have once served a more combined residential/administrative function.

Besides its central access, Caana's main summit court could also be entered through a door that connected two tandem rooms; the in-filled western end room (completely engulfed by the latest version of Structure B18) also at one point permitted lateral passage into the summit court. To gain central access to Caana one passed first through a broad room with three doors into a small room with side benches and then stepped-down into the summit court. Like the front room of the midrange palace, this rear central room with its side benches presumably was used by individuals or guards who monitored and controlled those who entered Caana's main court.

*Main Court.* Like the B Plaza, the upper summit plaza was delimited on its northern and southern sides by suites of rooms. One of the southern rooms facing the court held an armed bench and was presumably used as a reception area. Another of the southern rooms faced the court but was tucked into the corner at the base of Structure B18; it had a simple, L-shaped bench and was possibly used as a sleeping area. The other two rooms on the southern side of the summit court were devoid of such obvious architectural features. Little in the way of artifactual material

was recovered from the floors of any of these rooms, with the exception of a human long bone.

Separated from this upper court, yet connected to it, was a more private building compound located immediately south of Structure B20. This area was accessed from a raised alleyway immediately south of Structure B20. Entrance was through a presumably roofed hallway into a small, open-air court that had a western stairway to the roof of the upper frontal summit palace. Two suites of rooms faced this private courtyard. The northern suite consisted of three rooms with an armed central bench and with a substantially elevated bench in the eastern room; the floors and central bench were painted entirely red. An inset niche was set behind the central bench, and a window opened into the complex's access-way from the eastern room. A two-room building suite occupied the eastern side of this private court; most of this building had collapsed off the side of Caana. Artifactual materials associated with the red-room suite included a complete spiked and pedestaled incense burner with its lid as well as a deep bowl with an effigy-lid. Deep penetration in multiple places revealed no special deposits but did find a buried palace directly beneath the current one. This earlier palace had its eastern roof facade intact; this facade was elaborately decorated and associated with a stucco hieroglyphic text describing important Late Classic Caracol events and names. The dates included in this text indicate that the building was engulfed within a raised Caana summit sometime after A.D. 680.

On the northern side of the summit plaza, to either side of the central stairway for Structure B19, a set of tandem rooms was set into the lower terrace of the temple. A rear bench had been ripped out of the western rear room set. An oval, benchlike dais—stuccoed with a mat fringe and set against an oval backing painted with jaguar spots—was situated at plaza level to the west of the central stair and in front of the inset rooms.

In addition to the architectural details already described above, the summit plaza was fronted by three temples to the west, north, and east (Structures B18, B19, and B20), and the entrances to two additional palace compounds that were situated on the northwestern and northeastern corners of Caana's summit. Surface indications show that the western temple, Structure B18, supported a tandem-room building with three frontal doors. It had a wide frontal stair with two side masks. An enormous amount of stucco was associated with the building. In addition to a mat design on the building's northern substructure, there were several fallen life-size and larger human figures, the largest of which (three times life-size) is female.

Currently rising some 43.5 meters above the B Plaza, Structure B19 is the tallest temple at Caana and at Caracol. It supported a tandem-room building with one inner and three outer doors. Latest remains include in situ Terminal Classic ceramics and an unsealed cache of four vessels. The partial and unarticulated skeletal remains of at least two children were

also found on the building floor. At the base of Structure B19, and associated with Altar 17, was a deposit of two incense burners, a bowl, a human skullcap, and several hundred chert drills. The building was penetrated to a depth of over 20 meters below the building summit and revealed a series of caches, a simple burial, and an elaborate, presumably royal, tomb dating to A.D. 634 (associated with an earlier version of Structure B19; see A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a).

The summit of the eastern temple, Structure B20, was approached by a frontal stair flanked by balustrades and stuccoed masks. An earlier version of Structure B20 exhibited a tandem-room plan and a rear bench. It had been painted black and contained graffiti in its front room showing a person being carried in a litter or palanquin (Figure 4.12). A central basal mask was set into the stair of this earlier building, and a body had been left in the hollow mouth of this mask when it was covered over by later construction. Four elaborate tombs and one crypt were recovered in association with various construction episodes for Structure B20. Two painted dates are known from these tombs: A.D. 537 and A.D. 576.

*Northeastern Court.* The northeastern palace quadrangle was completely excavated. It attached directly to the eastern side of Structure B19, but a narrow alleyway ran between this compound and Structure B20. Formal access to the enclosed plaza formed by this quadrangular palace was through a room containing an L-shaped bench that attached to the southeastern corner of Structure B19. Two-room suites defined the east, west, and south sides of this enclosed plaza; a three-room suite bounded the northern part of this court. At least one room in each suite had a bench (five out of nine rooms). Overall, benches occur in nine of thirteen rooms. No buildings were penetrated by excavation. However, there were extensive on-floor remains. Large storage vessels were found in three rooms. Three almost complete *metates*, several *manos*, animal bone, and part of an effigy pedestal drum were found in the plaza. No cooking areas or cooking vessels were encountered anywhere in the northeastern court. The two-room suite that abutted Structure B19 had been sealed in antiquity and contained twelve relatively complete tripod plates, four incised deep bowls, and one large storage jar. A small child, five or six years old, was found unburied in the inner doorway of the southern suite of rooms.

The combination of armed and L-shaped benches in the rooms around the northeastern courtyard would indicate that residential and administrative space was combined. The L-shaped bench in the western room suite was long and spacious. In the northern suite, an L-shaped bench dominated the rear room. In the southern suite, a central bench was set opposite the entranceway, and a large L-shaped bench occupied most of the space in the inner room. On the eastern side of this courtyard, a central armed bench occupied the inner room of the two-room suite.

Two exteriorly facing rooms, not connected to the inner plaza, were also set within the eastern building. These rooms were probably approached by means of the alley between the northeastern court and Structure B20. The southernmost eastern room contained an armed bench, which would have held a seated figure of the Caracol court. The northern side door led to a two-room suite, the inner room of which contained a U-shaped bench. In our estimation, and in contrast to the rooms set about the more private courtyard, both of these exteriorly facing rooms were nonresidential.

*Northwestern Court.* The northwestern quad was entered through a single room with an armed bench. This room had been inserted into an earlier palace building that had been engulfed by the latest construction efforts directed at Structure B18. In this latest manifestation, it is likely that an individual positioned in this locale closely monitored (presided over) access to the private northwestern court. Hieroglyphic cartouches were associated with this entrance. Unlike the northeastern court, there were no multiple-room suites on the southern or eastern sides of this court. The interior plaza was defined to the south and east by Structures B18 and B19. Structure B18's substructure exhibited a huge stuccoed mat design.

The entire northwestern palace compound was not excavated. Only the front rooms of the northern and western buildings were completely cleared. Interior corners for other rooms were visible, however, on the surface. The buildings in this courtyard exhibited finer construction technique than was found in the northeastern summit court. The northern building was also entirely painted red on its interior floor. Compared with other palace areas, there was little on-floor debris. If one were to predict where the royal sovereign was housed, however, the seclusion, spatial arrangement, and architectural detail would suggest this court.

*Caana Summary.* Overall, a wealth of archaeological information is known about the Caana palace compounds. Food-serving vessels and large storage containers are found in various palace rooms, but there is no indication that cooking took place within any of the Caana palace compounds. The combined architectural plans, stucco texts, in-situ artifactual remains, and tombs all suggest that Caana was the residential compound for the sovereign and played a major role in the royal court.

#### *Structures B4, B5, and B6*

Structures B4, B5, and B6 together form a palace-temple compound (Figure 4.6) that is directly opposite Caana and that commands the southern side of the B Plaza. Structures B4 and B6, both "palaces," were initially added to the sides of Structure B5, a temple, in the Early Classic period

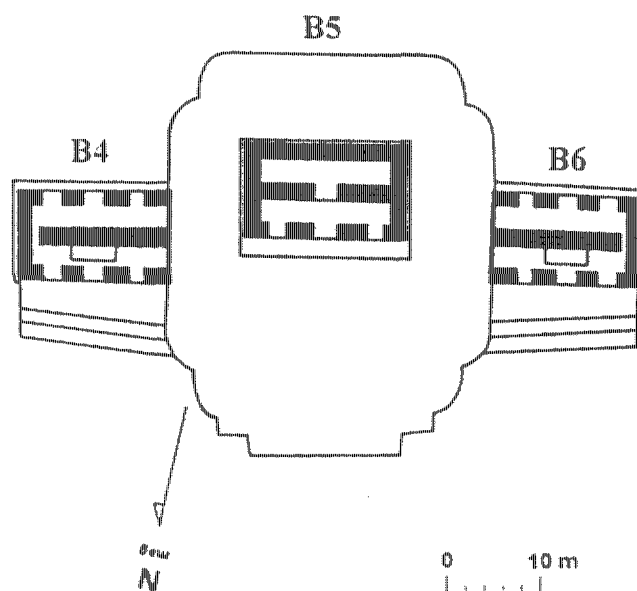


FIGURE 4.6 Plan of Structures B4, B5, and B6 palace compound.

and underwent extensive modifications during the Late Classic period. Three doors are set into both the front and rear facades of Structures B4 and B6. Each of these buildings contains two tandem rooms, connected interiorly by a single lateral door. Both buildings also have a simple bench centrally located in the front rooms.

In addition, both structures had substantial in situ floor refuse and burning. Both buildings were associated with high-status trash that included jadeite (a partial earflare in Structure B4) and shell jewelry and Terminal Classic fineware vessels; both also contained smashed domestic pottery in their rear rooms and substantial deposits of animal bone throughout their loci (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000); both were also associated with more chert points (mostly atlatl) than were normally recovered in other palace contexts (ten atlatl points for Structure B6 and six for Structure B4). Structure B6 also had a mace head in its southern (rear) room. Trenching of Structure B6 in two places revealed no special deposits but did recover portions of an earlier underlying palace construction, presumably of Early Classic date.

Structure B5 rests on a substructure with rounded corners and is associated with two summit burials as well as one dating to the Terminal Classic period that was placed within the axial stairway. It is considered to be a temple. No on-floor refuse was recovered from the summit building.



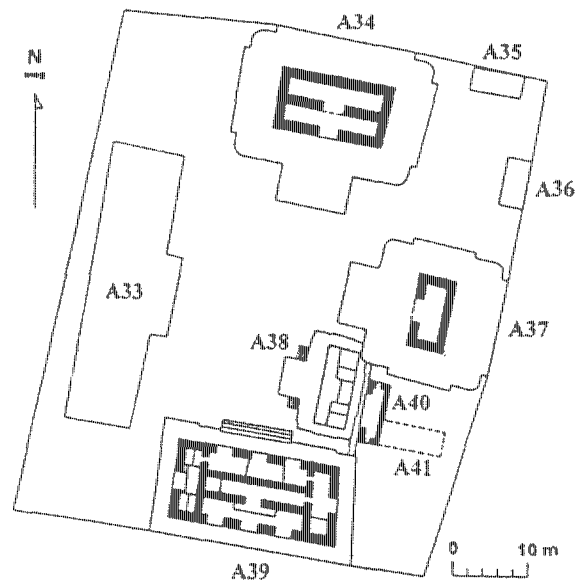


FIGURE 4.7 Plan of Central Acropolis (after D. Chase and A. Chase 1996:Figure 2).

At least in their latest use, Structures B4, B5, and B6 served as an elite residential compound, although the simple tandem plan and presence of weapons may suggest a somewhat variant, perhaps military, function. Evidence exists for food serving, but not food cooking. The in situ burning appears to be coincident with the final abandonment of the compound. Buildings of similar form have been designated as "temporary residences" at Tikal (Harrison 1986:55).

#### *Central Acropolis*

Two palace buildings occur in the Central Acropolis (Figure 4.7). They are located on the southern and western sides of this plaza group. Only the southern palace has been excavated. It has five rooms and evidence of extensive modification. Three tandem rooms are bounded by two transverse end rooms. Each outer tandem room has three doors. The central room is connected only to the southern and eastern rooms. Simple benches occur in the northern and the two lateral rooms; evidence of a ripped-out bench was found in the western end of the central room. Axial excavation of this southern palace revealed no special deposits but did uncover an earlier version of this palace. On-floor debris inside the structure and to its north in an alleyway produced Terminal Classic finewares (including Sacaba Modeled-Carved), large storage jars, a three-pronged pedestal *incensario*, animal bone, and several smaller artifacts.

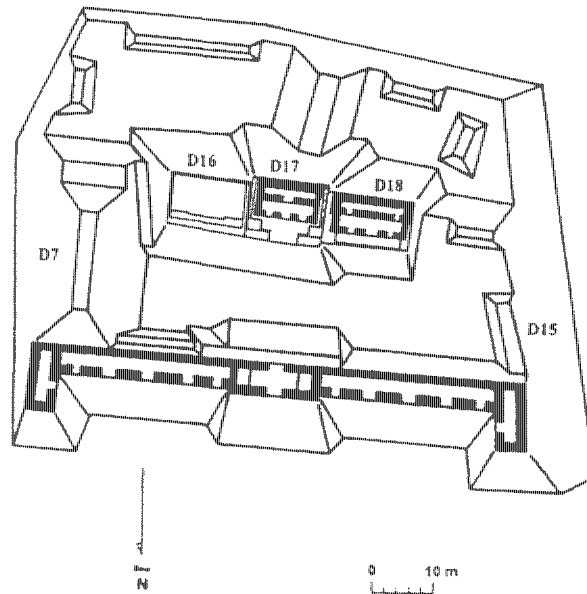


FIGURE 4.8 Plan of South Acropolis.

Other excavations into the Central Acropolis demonstrate that the northern building, Structure A34, was a temple. This building housed two tombs, one at its summit and one at its base. The basal one was certainly royal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1996). Both eastern buildings also housed tombs. Excavations into Structure A37 yielded one early Late Classic tomb, one burial, and two caches—indicating the edifice's function as a mortuary shrine. Investigation of Structure A38 similarly produced one tomb, one burial, and one cache—proving the building to be a shrine that was temporally later than Structure A37.

Excavation data demonstrate that the Central Acropolis was a royal residential compound that was in use from the beginning to the end of the Late Classic period. Given the large size of Caracol, the site's royal family was probably quite large and certainly occupied several palace compounds simultaneously. A similar, albeit factionalized, use of multiple royal residential compounds has been demonstrated for Tikal (Haviland 1981; Laporte and Fialko 1990).

#### *South Acropolis*

Excavation has shown that the South Acropolis (Figure 4.8) has been extensively modified over time. Based on its spatial layout and the single-room depth on its northern range building, it is suspected that much of this palace compound may have been largely nonresidential and func-

tioned only within specific settings related to the royal court. However, some of the unexcavated buildings within the compound will certainly prove to be residential upon investigation, and the three recovered tombs from the South Acropolis were all likely royal, so this complex is considered to be part of Caracol's royal court.

In terms of compound layout, a long single-room range building faced the A Group reservoir. The very identifiable central unit of this range building was excavated and produced a single room through which all traffic into the South Acropolis must have passed. Like the central passage areas in the frontal Caana range palaces, the central elevated unit of the South Acropolis range building exhibits two lateral benches, and this architectural unit presumably served a similar guard function; unlike the small Caana benches, each of the South Acropolis lateral benches is quite expansive and could have accommodated multiple individuals. No in situ refuse was recovered on the floors of this central building, but the cremated remains of several individuals were placed exteriorly to the northwestern corner of the central unit. Axial penetration of the range structure revealed an earlier building platform that faced south, the opposite direction of the current range building.

A series of three distinct stone buildings occupies the central east-west platform in the interior court of the South Acropolis. Each of these buildings has produced a high-status tomb (Anderson 1958, 1959; A. Chase 1994:167–169). Based on structure plans and building features, it is doubtful that any of these central buildings served a residential function. Little in situ trash was found with any of these buildings; the only object of any note was a Terminal Classic pottery tripod cylindrical vase recovered in the alleyway between Structures D17 and D18. None of the other buildings in the rest of the South Acropolis was excavated.

### *Barrio*

Extensive stripping excavations were undertaken in the Barrio palace compound (Figure 4.9), resulting in the definition of three separate palaces and a raised northern substructure with rounded corners. The southern building was entirely excavated, revealing eight rooms. A central four-room suite was laid out in a T shape. Its front room, which had no benches and had its floors painted entirely red, permitted access to a raised tandem room; its floors were also painted entirely red. This rear tandem room had a simple bench centrally situated on its rear wall and lateral access to benched side rooms. The other four rooms in the southern palace were self-contained units, each with its own exterior door and bench (both transverse rooms had L-shaped benches). A deep axial trench revealed no special deposits. Only one of the rooms in Barrio's

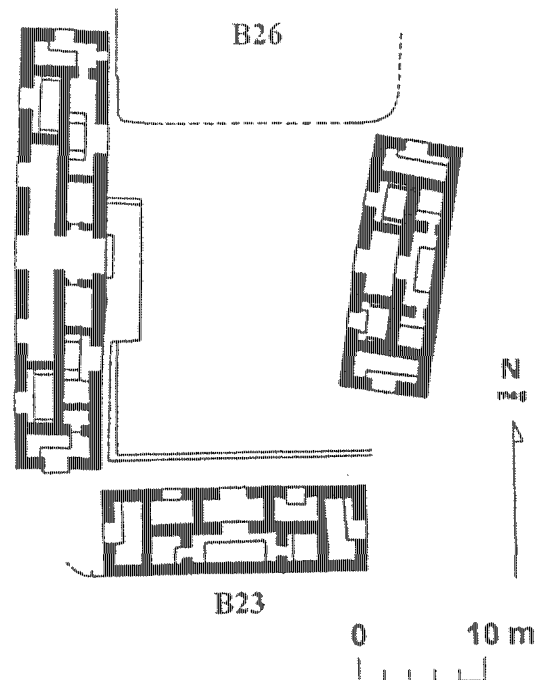


FIGURE 4.9 Plan of Barrio palace compound.

southern palace was associated with in situ debris; the western transverse room had been extensively burned and had in situ shell beads and other refuse on its floor.

Barrio's eastern palace is almost a mirror image of the southern building. Six of its eight rooms were excavated, and the form of the remaining rooms can be easily inferred. Like the southern palace, the eastern palace also had four single rooms with exterior access and benches as well as a central T-shaped four-room suite. The benches in the eastern building are more elaborate than those in the south, with the two that directly face the interior plaza both exhibiting arms. In situ trash, which included a partial jadeite pendent, was found on the plaza floor in front of the eastern palace. All three rooms facing the interior court were axially trenced; no special deposits were recovered.

The western building differs from both the southern and eastern palaces. It shows extensive interior and exterior modifications with at least four blocked doorways, suggesting great variation in its use over time. Approximately 65 percent of this building was excavated. Six of its estimated ten rooms were exposed. Like the other two palaces, there is a central four-room suite; however, unlike the other two palaces, the three conjoined rooms (with benches in the lateral rooms) face the private

courtyard with a single doorway connecting the central room to the interior court; the rear western tandem room has a greater total length than the three linear front rooms combined, as well as three doorways to the plaza west of Barrio. Thus, direct passage was permitted through this palace from the interior Barrio plaza to the western plaza. However, the interior central door of this four-room suite was ultimately blocked, preventing access through the building and effectively dividing the function of this western palace between two different plazas. Excavated single rooms that face both the interior and exterior plazas exhibit armed "display," or "reception," benches, thus suggesting a nonresidential function for these quarters. One of these interior rooms contained the remains of a large drum on its floor. An excavated transverse room on the southern end of this palace has an L-shaped bench. Red and green stucco painting and modeled stucco medallions were recovered in structure collapse. A deep axial trench revealed no special deposits. An east-facing platform was added to the latest building version in the interior plaza. Material associated with the protruding platform included Terminal Classic finewares and debris that indicates that manufacturing was undertaken on *Oliva* shell.

Barrio's northern building may have been a low nonpyramidal temple, based on both its elevation and its rounded substructure corners. Basal excavations uncovered a simple burial with a stingray spine in the fill beneath its stair.

Excavation data, therefore, indicate that Barrio was an elaborate Late Classic to Terminal Classic residential compound that was integrated with formal display and reception areas. However, these data vary from the general residential plaza group pattern at Caracol in that there was no eastern mausoleum and no eastern interments. The existence of coeval palace compounds within the Caracol epicenter indicates how large the royal court must have been at the site, as well as perhaps some functional differences with the different compounds. The lack of eastern "family" temples or mausoleums at Barrio suggests that the inhabitants, even though the group was clearly residential, differed from those who occupied Caana and the Central Acropolis in that none of their honored dead were placed within the Barrio compound.

### *C Group*

The C Group contains a U-shaped complex of palaces containing tandem and transverse rooms (Figure 4.10). Excavations have been undertaken both in the western (central) and southern palace buildings of this compound. These excavations (as well as surface mapping) suggest that the northern and southern C Group palaces each consisted of six rooms; in the excavated sample, no passage was permitted between the tandem rooms. Unlike the other palaces at Caracol, no bench occurs in the exca-

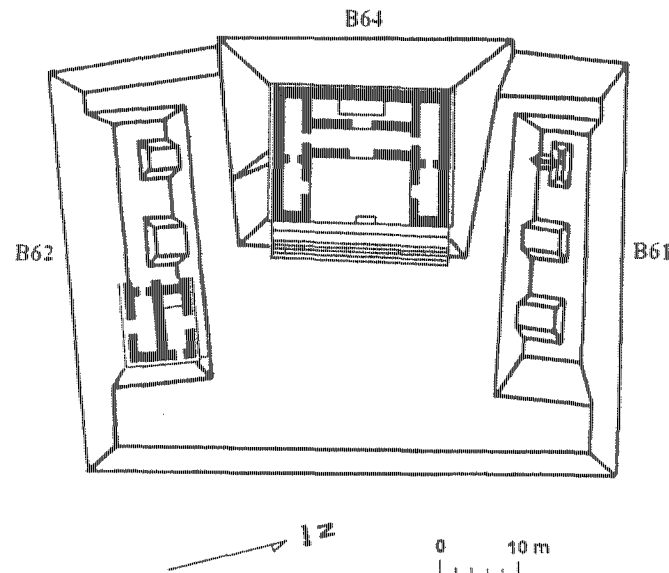


FIGURE 4.10 Hypothetical plan of C Group palace compound.

vated rear room of the southern palace. A low flat bench, however, was set across the western side of the front room.

Excavations were undertaken in the central elevated western building in the C Group. This structure forms a smaller U-shaped unit within the larger U-shaped complex. An axial east-west trench was placed through the central doors of the central tandem rooms of this palace, encountering a bench in the rear room. None of the other rooms was investigated; earlier interior floors for the building were also not penetrated, even though the axial trench was dug deep into the courtyard plaza. This central C Group palace occupied its own elevated plaza area. The U-shaped central palace defines three of the sides of this raised court with a small altar or shrine occurring on the eastern side. Excavation within this small eastern construction recovered two Terminal Classic burials. An extension of the axial trench to this shrine recovered a cache beneath the plaza floor sealed within an earlier construction. An extensive trash deposit recovered on the floor of the elevated courtyard associated with this central palace contained fineware and domestic ceramics, animal bone, lithics, and carved bone pins. Parts of an elaborate stucco facade from the palace building, which had fallen into the central court, were also recovered. It contained a partially reconstructible hieroglyphic text referring to the birth of a previously unknown Caracol lord. The combined textual and artifactual remains suggest that this palace compound was used by high-status occupants—possibly members of the ruling family—until its abandonment around A.D. 890 (see also A. Chase and D. Chase 2001).

### Other Caracol Palaces

Other largely unexcavated palace areas are located throughout the site. Some of these are located in the epicenter (Northeast Acropolis, Northwest Acropolis) and may have been directly associated with the royal court. At least thirteen other palaces or palace compounds have been identified as a result of surface mapping. Most are concentrated at or in the vicinity of causeway termini (Pajaro, Royal, Tulakatuhebe, Retiro, Ceiba, Sage, Dos Tumbas, Cohune, and Machete). In some cases members of the extended royal family may have resided in these outlying palace compounds; this may be directly indicated by the painted tomb chambers that are known from Machete (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a:43), Royal (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a:46), and Retiro (D. Chase and A. Chase 1996). These outlying palaces, however, were not homes to the sovereigns of Caracol but probably housed the wealthy and elite personages (both nonroyal and members of the extended royal family) who formed a part of Caracol's extended administrative bureaucracy. Thus, it is conceivable that they could be considered part of the court, regardless of their status and distance from the epicenter. Multiroom stone buildings, probably small palaces, are also found scattered throughout the settlement that makes up Caracol's residential core (Northwest Group, South Group, Monterey 2); even though located in nonfocal parts of Caracol, such buildings likely housed wealthy, possibly even elite, personages. However, we suspect that the use and construction of such palace buildings were independent of any central administrative or court function.

### The People in Caracol's Royal Court

Although it may never be possible to fully reconstruct the vibrant actions and intrigue of ancient Maya court life, the people in Caracol's royal court can be identified and described through iconographic, epigraphic, and archaeological data. However, these data are not always simple to interpret. For example, although they can identify individuals, epigraphic statements and iconographic portrayals serve specific purposes that must be considered. History can be rewritten. Individuals can be made to appear more important than they really were; titles and offices can accrue, perhaps not mirroring reality. Iconography can be similarly employed to create alternative meanings and realities, projecting what one hopes a given situation or cosmic setting will be, rather than reflecting what it actually is. Other archaeological remains are not completely unambiguous. Thus, epigraphy and archaeology are data classes that should be reviewed carefully—and conjunctively—in relation to Maya courts.

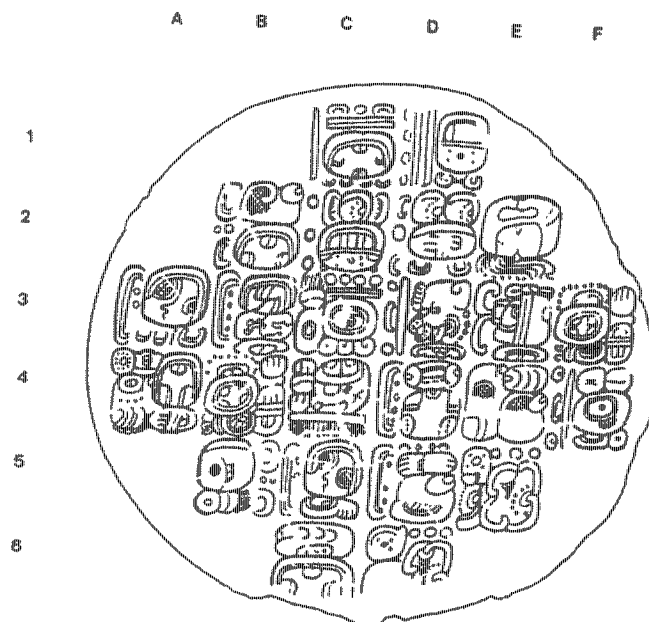


FIGURE 4.11 Caracol Ballcourt Marker 3; the "Second Sul" glyph is located at position D5 (drawing by N. Grube, Caracol Archaeological Project); monument averages 51.2 centimeters in width.

### *History and Epigraphy in Caracol's Royal Court*

The hieroglyphic texts at Caracol, whether from stone monuments or stucco facades, provide information on Caracol's history and sovereigns but only limited information on other members of the site's royal court. Epigraphic texts indicate that Caracol had a sequence of at least twenty-eight sovereigns, beginning with the initial founding of the dynasty in 8.14.13.10.4 or A.D. 331 (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). The relationships between sovereigns is sometimes explicit in the hieroglyphic texts, as in the parentage statements made by the two sons of Lord Yahaw Te. In other cases, succession is less clear, and in some cases, such as after Lord Hok Pol in the Late Classic period, direct succession lines may have been broken. Caracol's hieroglyphic texts include the usual information on birth, accession, warfare, and captives found at most other Classic period sites. However, there are also indications of individuals besides the sovereigns. For instance, Caracol Ballcourt Marker 3 contains reference to a "Second Sul" (Figure 4.11:D5), presumably a titled member of the royal court (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991:7). And Caracol Altar 23 names an individual who is associated with the Caracol Glyph but who is surely not the sovereign;



again, presumably this person was a member of the royal court. Although limited, these data suggest that members of the royal court other than the sovereign may have had formal titles or held named offices. Based on the iconographic and dietary data (discussed below), it would appear that they also could live in an area outside of the Caracol epicenter.

### *Iconography and the Royal Court at Caracol*

Iconography provides some additional information on the Caracol royal court. The site's stone monuments predominantly portray only one or two individuals that are usually some combination of sovereigns, captives, or dwarves. Although the carved stone monuments are expectedly not replete with court scenes, their locations and associations suggest that Caracol's royal court included individuals who lived outside the site epicenter. In the Terminal Classic period, this is specifically seen in the positioning of carved stone monuments containing the Caracol emblem in the Plaza of the Two Stelae (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991), 1 kilometer distant from the epicenter, and presumably in the Machete Group, 500 meters distant from the epicenter. Another carved monument is located in the Sage Group, which is attached to the Puchituk terminus and is more than 3 kilometers distant from the epicenter.

Iconography from stucco facades is replete with images of male and female individuals, presumably ancestors or past sovereigns in combination with representations of deities. The iconographic images in stucco facades, however, serve more to set the sovereign's (or other individual's) place in the universe than to define the activities of the royal court. Iconographic scenes portrayed in other nonmodeled mediums, however, may provide at least some insight into court activities.

Structure B20, the eastern temple at the summit of Caana, was rebuilt several times. The blackened stucco interior wall of the front room of Structure B20-2nd, just south of its door jamb, was incised with graffiti that formed an elaborate scene (Figure 4.12). This graffiti depicts what may have been a Late Classic event that occurred in the plaza associated with Caana's summit. Retainers support a litter that contains what surely must have been a royal individual based on the elaborate headdress iconography. To the front of the palanquin stands a figure with his arms bound behind his back. Facing the litter and prisoner are three individuals, whose headgear seemingly denotes differences in status. It is suspected that this scene reflects formal negotiations between the individual in the palanquin and the three other individuals over the future of the prisoner—an activity that could have appropriately occurred in the royal court at the summit of Caana.

A collapsed crypt uncovered within the frontal stair of Structure B5, the central building of the palace compound that brackets the southern



FIGURE 4.12 Graffiti incised in Structure B20-2nd (from A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:20); human figure to the left is 13 centimeters in height.

side of the B Plaza, provides further iconographic information. This interment, which dates to the Terminal Classic period, contained the remains of a single individual and three pottery vessels. The diet of this individual, as indicated by isotopic analysis, matches that of others who constituted part of the royal court (see below); his placement within a formal burial in the central temple unit of a palace compound also suggests court membership. Ronald L. Bishop's (personal communication, 1998) neutron activation study of Caracol pottery indicates that the elaborately painted Joyac cream polychrome cylinder (A. Chase 1994:177) included with this individual was locally made. The cylinder shows a court scene that likely was representative of court activities at Caracol (Figure 4.13).

The scene on this vase portrays six individuals and takes place within and at the doorway of a room with a bench. The primary individual is seated on the bench and holds a broad, perhaps feather, fan. Five other individuals face him, two kneeling and three standing; all have their arms crossed over their chests. The three standing individuals all wear the same kind of frontally elongated headdress, probably indicating their similar (lower) rank. Identical headgear is worn by secondary figures on a miniature wall panel from Palenque Temple 21 (Stuart 1998:Figure 31); similar forward-swept (or bound) hair occurs on secondary figures on Lintel 2 from Tikal Temple 3 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Figure 72) and from Panels C and D from X'telhu in the northern lowlands (Robertson 1986: figs. 8 and 11). Both individuals who are kneeling on the vase have different headgear and directly face the individual on the bench, one within and one outside the room. The kneeling individual outside the

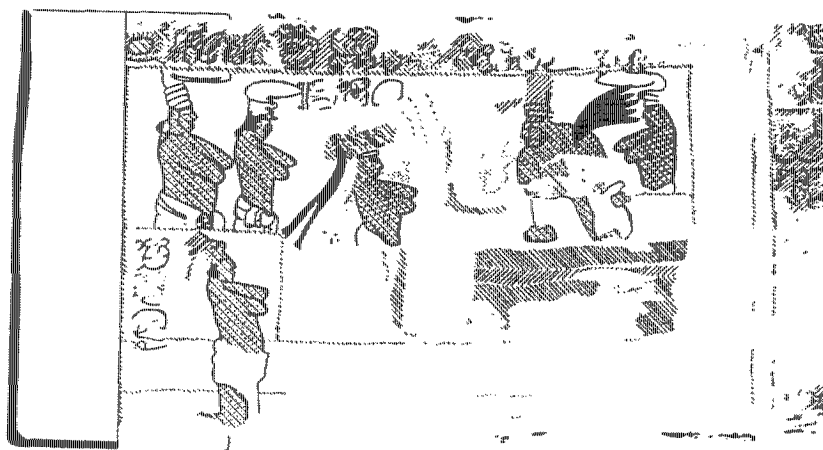


FIGURE 4.13 Court scene recorded on a vessel from an interment recovered within the Structure B5 stair fill; height of the vase is 25.6 centimeters.

room has headgear similar to the individual on the bench. Although the scene is one of supplication and consultation, it is suspected that the kneeling individuals are of higher rank than those individuals with the frontally elongated headgear, who are probably courtiers of the primary figure. Given its architectural location, the scene indicates the formal use of palace buildings and benches and also shows the interaction of individuals of different rank within the court.

#### *Archaeology and the People of Caracol's Royal Court*

Archaeological data permit special insight into the people of Caracol's royal court. Perhaps the most revealing information derives from burials that are sited within palace compounds and from stable isotope analysis of human bone that demonstrates the existence of different diets. At Caracol, burials that occur within palace compounds are associated with temples rather than with the palaces themselves. And the burials that are associated with these epicentral temples may be further broken down into tomb and nontomb interments. Tombs are usually situated directly in the core of a given temple. In the epicenter, these chambers tend to be quite large, in some cases encompassing over 20 square meters of space (A. Chase 1992:38). In general the epicentral tombs hold from one to five individuals of both sexes, the majority of which are adults between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five at the time of their death (see D. Chase 1994). These individuals are sometimes accompanied by large numbers of ceramic vessels and a wide variety of shell, bone, and stone artifacts, as well as unique faunal material that includes, in some cases, complete birds and jaguar paws (see D. Chase 1998).

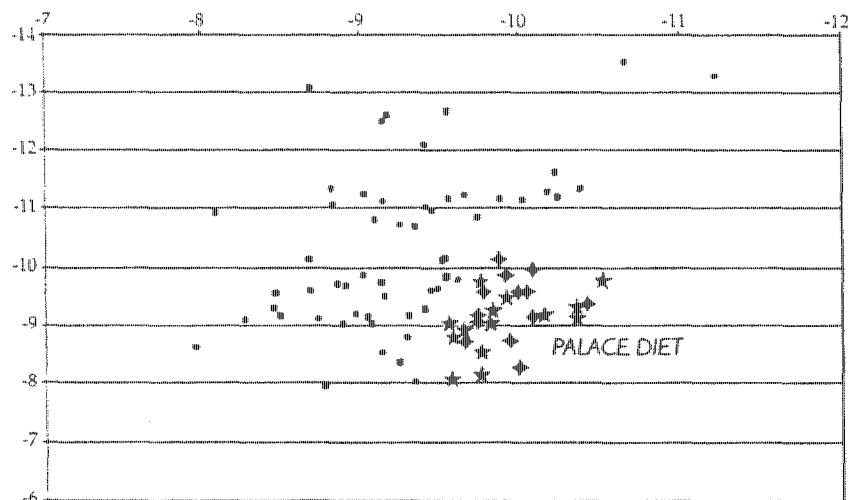


FIGURE 4.14 Caracol stable isotope data showing "palace diet." Higher levels of  $^{15}\text{N}$  Collagen indicates the consumption of more protein. Lower levels of  $^{13}\text{C}$  Collagen indicates higher levels of maize consumption. "★" indicate individuals in epicentral tombs, including those associated with palace compounds. "◆" indicate individuals with a "palace diet" who are not buried in palace compounds. "■" indicate other Caracol burials that were sampled.

It is possible to identify royal tombs at Caracol (A. Chase 1992, 1994; D. Chase 1994; A. Chase and D. Chase 1996b). These chambers contain hieroglyphic texts on their walls or capstones. In one case, the individual's name precedes a Caracol emblem; in another, the text indicates that the Caracol ruler witnessed the tomb consecration. Royal tombs are among the largest at the site, and with one exception (Machete's Structure L3) all of these royal tombs are located within epicentral constructions. Most of these tombs are located within epicentral palace compounds. Thus, we can easily identify at least some of the royal members of Caracol's court.

Stable isotope analysis of the skeletal remains of individuals buried within both painted and nonpainted Classic period tombs located in Caracol's epicentral palace compounds confirms that these individuals shared a similar diet, which remained relatively consistent over time (Figure 4.14). This so-called palace diet was uniformly higher both in protein and in maize than any diet consumed by other segments of Caracol's population. A number of simple, nontomb epicentral burials, particularly those located within the fill of stairway additions or placed in the plaza to the front of a given temple, have been identified as sacrifices. They include children and adults, often in association with perforators or obsidian eccentrics. Stable isotope analysis of the diet of these individuals indicates that they did not

share in the palace diet; these people consumed lower levels of both protein and maize (A. Chase et al. 2001; D. Chase et al. 1998). Thus, location, associated artifacts, and dietary information indicates that minimally some (if not all) of these nontomb burials were placed within private palace compounds as part of ritual or sacrificial practices.

It is also interesting to note certain other dietary patterns that can be found in the stable isotope evidence of Caracol's ancient Classic period inhabitants. Most of the individuals associated with Caracol's causeway termini and their associated residential groups did not share in the same diet as the royal court, as they appear to have eaten significantly more maize but less protein. However, stable isotope analysis indicates that the occasional individual from these locales manifests the same diet as that seen in the royal court, confirming linkages that would have been inferred based on the archaeological data alone. Structure L3 produced the only tomb with a painted capstone that has thus far been found outside of the site epicenter. Stable isotope analysis confirms that the individual in this chamber had the same general diet as the individuals that came from other royal tombs. Thus, the high status accorded to this tomb based on archaeological data is confirmed by stable isotope analysis.

Residential groups adjacent to Caracol's epicenter exhibit some of the worst dietary regimens known at the site and are especially different from the diet found in the epicentral palaces and the epicenter in general (A. Chase et al. 2001; D. Chase et al. 1998). However, specific individuals within the clearly nonroyal residential groups that ring the epicenter exhibit anomalous diets compared to the other individuals interred within their residential groups. Interestingly, these seemingly anomalous diets—usually confined to a single individual per group—match the values for the epicentral palace diet. Given the proximity of these groups to the epicenter or to direct causeway linkage with the epicenter, we believe that these individuals provided services that made them a functional part of the royal court. They would not have maintained a permanent residence or burial place in the epicentral palace groups; rather, they likely traveled from their outlying residential complexes to the epicentral palaces on a regular basis. They did not eat the majority of their meals in their own residential units but apparently were fed from the same kitchens that fed the Caracol royalty. Thus, by looking at stable isotope analysis relating to diet, we are able to see individuals who were seemingly part of the royal court and to examine the spatial distribution of its attendants and lesser members (Figure 4.15).

#### *Economics, Administration, and Infrastructure*

The archaeological data also permit discussion of the functions of palaces and the relationships between palaces and other areas and units of the

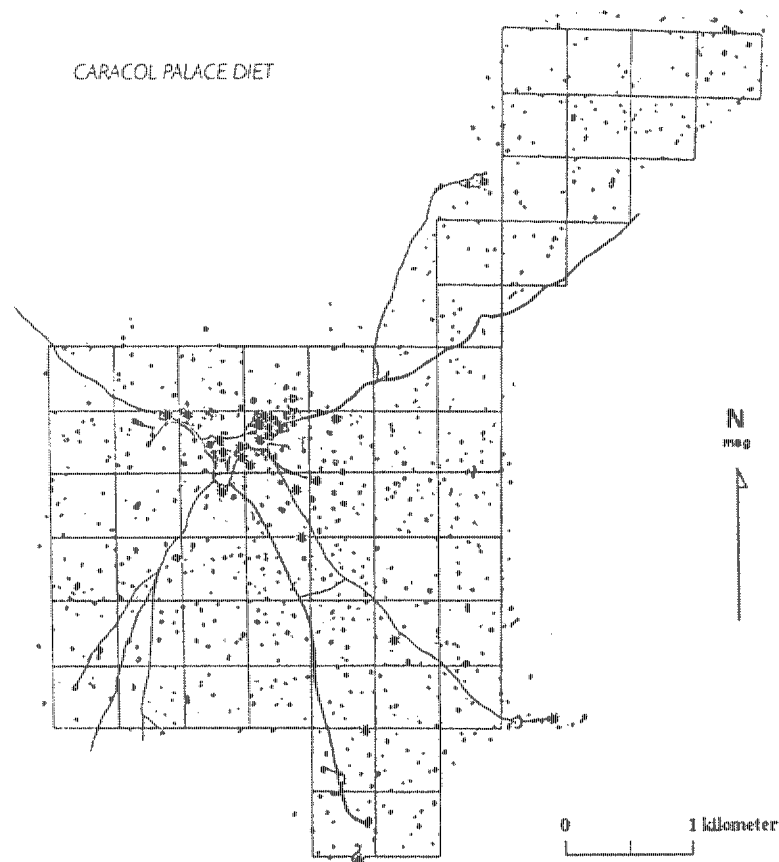


FIGURE 4.15 Spatial distribution of Caracol interments evincing the epicentral "palace diet" (those individuals shown by "★" and "➤" on Figure 4.14); the outer ring of Caracol termini is not shown on this map.

site. These data reflect day-to-day activities, economies, administration, and infrastructure.

Extensive on-floor remains have been recovered from the latest use of Caracol's palaces (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). As indicated previously, these remains may be taken to indicate that the palaces, and by extension their respective plazas, had a domestic component. Well-made ceramic vessels used for serving food and cruder storage vessels are found in various palace rooms. Other items that would have been useful in food preparation, such as complete or almost complete *manos* and *metates* as well as grater bowls, have also been recovered in limited numbers. However, thus far no hearths or burned cooking vessels have been recovered in association with Cara-

col's excavated palaces, suggesting that the majority of food preparation and cooking likely took place in areas outside the formal stone palaces.

Other tools—specifically awls, needles, and antler tines—have also been recovered from the floors of Caracol's palaces. These strongly suggest that specialized domestic activities were taking place within these buildings. Although these kinds of bone artifacts are found in outlying burials, they generally are not recovered from nonpalace floor contexts. With the exception of *Oliva* shell being worked in the Barrio group (Cobos, personal communication, 1999), manufacturing debris related to shell, lithics, or other items does not occur in association with Caracol's palace floors or plazas. However, such debris is sometimes secreted in specialized contexts within palace compounds (particularly in association with temples), such as in caches or above tombs (e.g., Moholy-Nagy 1997).

In contrast, residential *plazuela* groups outside the Caracol epicenter contain far more evidence of manufacturing activities, especially in terms of lithic and shell debris (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a; Cobos 1994; Pope 1994). These artifactual residues clearly indicate that production at Caracol was household-based. Adjacent core households focused on the manufacture of different products. Conch shell was worked in three known households, all located more than 1 kilometer distant from the epicenter in different parts of the site. *Spondylus* shell was worked in a residential group more than 1 kilometer distant from the site epicenter. Yet another residential group, 4 kilometers from the epicenter, focused intensively on lithic production; the resultant debris was visible on the plaza surface of this group. A dozen other residential groups, all widely separated from one another and located anywhere from 1 to 4 kilometers distant from the Caracol epicenter, exhibited large numbers of lithic chips and drills, presumably indicative of extensive woodworking (Pope 1994).

In contrast to the household-based production of a wide variety of products, distribution appears to have been more centrally controlled in Caracol's administered economy (A. Chase 1998). Caracol's extensive causeway system was likely utilized to administer and integrate its people and resources. As Caracol's most impressive palaces occur in the epicenter, which is also the central hub for all of the site's roads, as well as in association with high-status residential groups, which are attached to the site's causeway termini, it can be inferred that the individuals who occupied and used these buildings and compounds were instrumental to the functioning of the overall urban center. Thus, just as Caracol's economic, sociopolitical, and religious organizations were integrated via the site's extensive causeway system, so, too, were Caracol's many palaces and, by extension, the royal court.

### Conclusion

The Caracol investigations provide information on the physical form of a royal Maya court, on the people that were part of that court, and on some of the activities that took place there. For these reasons, the Late Classic to Terminal Classic palaces at Caracol are of interest on several levels, ranging from definitional to interpretative. The palaces have been identified as a functional unit based on a conjunction of architectural features with on-floor deposits of trash. Most—if not all—of the defined palaces contain more than two rooms, associated benches, and a configuration that does not allow a simple interior access into all of the rooms in the building or compound. Armed benches, thought to have been used for nondomestic purposes, often but not always face toward open plazas. The smallest identified Caracol palace compound consists of four rooms; the largest contains sixty-six or more. More usual is the fact there are five to ten rooms per palace. Epicentral palaces generally contain two or more palace buildings within a single compound.

There are generally no caches or burials within the physical palace buildings at Caracol, although special deposits may be found in temples or shrines located within the palace compound. The latest refuse on palace floors is generally distinctive from debris found in the vast majority of residential groups that do not include palaces (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001). These same on-floor items indicate continued access to trade items by Caracol's final elite.

There are a large number of palaces at Caracol. They cluster in the epicenter and causeway termini but may also be located at some distance from major architectural nodes and causeways within the core settlement. We suspect that, were Caracol completely mapped (and excavated), approximately 1 percent of all groups (estimated at ninety groups) would be classified as having palaces. Not all palaces at Caracol were royal, although all were likely elite. Thus, palaces may be a more discriminating status indicator than features such as tombs, which are present in over 60 percent of Caracol's residential groups. Finally, the large number of palaces at Caracol undoubtedly reflects the site's Late Classic size and prosperity.

The evidence for the people utilizing palaces at Caracol comes from a variety of data classes. Significantly, this combined information indicates that there was a distinctive palace diet. Members of the court included high-status individuals, presumably maintaining residence in a palace, as well as lower-status individuals (i.e., nonroyals), who presumably performed services in the court but had their burial rites within their outlying residential groups. For the most part, such secondary members of the court resided within residential groups ringing the epicenter. The sovereign's immediate royal family does not appear to have moved to outly-



ing causeway termini. Termini residences were likely occupied by lesser nobility (such as Tulakatuhebe individuals) or alternative elite factions, all of whom were integrated into the epicentrally based royal court. Some of these people were likely attendant in the epicentral court (based on consumption of a palace diet) but were interred in their own outlying palace compounds. Nonkin, nonroyal burials within the court appear to represent sacrificial victims.

Activities taking place within the Caracol palaces probably included the production of a limited number of items needed for or related to the court. However, only minimal evidence of anything related to food preparation has been recovered within the site's palace compounds, and it is suspected that food was carried to these palace groups from one or more central kitchens. Within and around palaces there is also no evidence of manufacturing at the scale that is present within many of the site's residential groups. The fact that the palaces had a domestic component, however, is apparent in the on-floor debris, especially the presence of serving vessels. The fact that they were also used for administrative purposes is suggested both in overall architectural design and in iconographic details.

The administrative system housed in the royal court at Caracol was a functional entity, a fact that is seen especially in the growth and prosperity of Caracol during the Late Classic period. It has been suggested that this success was due in some part to a sitewide focus on shared identity (D. Chase 1998; A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b, 1996b), effective systems for communication and transportation (A. Chase 1998; A. Chase and D. Chase 1996a, 1996c), and an intensive agricultural system based on terrace farming (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1998). The strategy of shared identity is apparent not only from the distribution of items such as tombs at Caracol but also from the site's relatively widespread palaces and in the shared similarity of items found on palace floors. Thus, investigations at Caracol provide substantial insights into the relationships among the royal court and the political, social, and economic activities of one key political unit within the Late Classic Maya landscape.

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