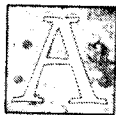


TERMINAL CLASSIC STATUS-LINKED CERAMICS
AND THE MAYA "COLLAPSE"
DE FACTO REFUSE AT CARACOL, BELIZE

Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase



At the heart of considerations of the Classic Maya "collapse" is the identification of any and all activities that took place at the end of the Classic period during the ninth century A.D. However, it often has proved difficult to isolate the latest activities within sites in the southern lowlands. In northern Belize, ceramic blending and continuities make it difficult to know where the Classic period ends and the Postclassic begins (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982, 1988; Graham 1987b; Pendergast 1967, 1986a). Farther south and west in the southern lowlands, clear distinctions existed between Classic and Postclassic-period traditions (Bullard 1973; A. Chase and D. Chase 1983, 1985; Sharer and Chase 1976). However, here it often proves difficult to demarcate the line between the Late and Terminal Classic periods.

Post-A.D. 790, Terminal Classic Caracol, in contrast to some southern lowland Maya sites, had a vibrant and expansive population. There was substantial occupation within Caracol's surrounding settlement area, and monumental architecture (presumably indicative of mobilized labor) continued to be constructed within the site epicenter after A.D. 800. Stone monuments inscribed with hieroglyphs continued to be erected in the central plazas of Caracol until at least A.D. 859. Terminal Classic special deposits—both caches and burials—were made within established ritual traditions. Isotopic analysis also shows a continuation of the distinctive elite diet that is characteristic of the individuals in Caracol's Classic-era epicentral tombs (A. Chase and D. Chase in press; D. Chase et al. 1998). Thus, the latest occupants to live in Caracol's epicentral palaces were a functioning

elite, and not merely squatters. They appear to have maintained their material well-being and long-distance trade contacts until approximately A.D. 895.

Archaeologically, the Terminal Classic is often identified by specific ceramic traits and markers—in some cases categorized as complete fine paste complexes, such as Boca, Jimba, and/or Bayal (Adams 1973b; Sabloff 1973), and in other cases recognized through particular forms or decorative modes, such as modeled-carved scenes or banded "dress-shirt" designs (Smith 1955; Culbert 1973c). Contextual analysis of material found on the latest floors of Caracol's buildings, however, indicates that most commonly used and easily recognizable Terminal Classic ceramic identifiers have a fairly restricted distribution at the site and, in fact, formed a distinct ceramic serving ware subcomplex. At Caracol, easily recognizable Terminal Classic material is strongly associated with epicentral palaces, only rarely being encountered in the residential groups that comprise the site core (in spite of extensive testing). Thus, the latest Caracol elite appear to have utilized ceramic serving vessels that were, for the most part, not widely available to the site's general populace. However, on-floor remains from Caracol's palaces contain a great variety of vessels and include non-fineware, plainware forms that are also found in situ within the site's general settlement. Thus, if solely traditional fineware markers were employed as identifiers for the Terminal Classic, population outside the Caracol epicenter could inappropriately be dismissed or be considered absent. But the combined archaeological information from Caracol suggests the opposite.

Research at Caracol is significant to a broader understanding of the "Classic Maya collapse" in that it provides a variable view of Terminal Classic activities. The city of Caracol maintained much of its previous activities and vibrancy. Nevertheless, final activities do suggest significant variances with Late Classic patterns, and it is in these differences that some clues may be found as to what caused the ultimate abandonment of the site. Furthermore, the differential distribution of Terminal Classic ceramics at Caracol may have methodological implications for the identification of Terminal Classic activities at other southern lowland sites.

CERAMIC IDENTIFICATION OF THE TERMINAL CLASSIC

Until recently much of what we thought we knew about the Maya collapse was based upon limited data that were difficult to interpret. Stone monuments, with their easily readable dates, provided one clue as to how late a given site was occupied. Certain ceramic types were found in the latest occupation levels at many Classic-period sites and, thus, came to be associated with the collapse. In particular, Fine Orange paste wares and modeled-carved vessels—ceramics that were easily recognized, and at the same time infrequently found, in the southern lowlands—came to play a defining role; the even rarer Plumbate was viewed as being even later, a true "Postclassic" ceramic vessel form. Thus, along with stone monuments, certain ceramics became defining artifacts for the latest Classic Maya.

With the exception of the easily identified finewares, it can prove extremely difficult to distinguish materials related to the “collapse” era from those dating to the Late Classic height of Maya civilization. The problems are perhaps best illustrated at Uaxactun, Guatemala, where the final ceramic phase, Tepeu 3, “was determined by subtracting all recognized earlier types from the vast surface accumulations” (Smith 1955: 13). Sabloff (1973: 114, 121) pointed to similar analytical problems in phasing late ceramics at both Seibal and Altar de Sacrificios. He indicates that “it is virtually impossible to point to a definitely pure Bayal deposit at Seibal” or “to isolate a pure Jimba deposit” at Altar de Sacrificios. At Tikal, however, Culbert (1973c: 69) noted that the “Eznab Complex [Terminal Classic] shows a clear continuity with Imix [Late Classic] but fortunately includes a number of common and distinctive markers that make identification easy.” More interesting from the standpoint of this paper, both he (1973: 69–70) and Fry (1969: 166) generally found the relatively rare Eznab materials in and among stone-constructed range structures or “palaces,” commenting that the “total avoidance of small structures for residence is surprising, even for a period with such light occupation.”

Part of the inability to identify and interpret abandonment materials at the central Petén sites excavated in the 1960s and earlier may be attributed to methodological considerations, such as excavation strategies that did not overly focus on horizontal context and analytical difficulties in dealing with surface materials and large “sherd scatters.” However, problems in identifying late use-related deposits may also be related to the history of Maya archaeology. For instance, we surmise that, at the time that many central Petén sites were dug, a general belief existed that in situ living floors—akin to those found in the American Southwest—likely would not be encountered in Maya palaces or range buildings because of a widespread perception that these buildings were not really lived in. Even though early Mayanists, such as Maler, camped out in these palaces, all noted the dampness of the buildings, the hard bench surfaces, and their general unsuitability for long-term occupation. Following up on these earlier observations and looking at their architectural plans, George Andrews (1975: 43) specifically suggested that these “spaces are not really suited to living purposes.” To some degree the idea that Maya stone palaces were nonresidential may have been a holdover of the “vacant ceremonial center” model that dominated Maya archaeological thought in the 1950s and 1960s (Bullard 1960, 1964; Vogt 1961, 1964; Willey 1956). This view of Maya palaces began to change through the work of Harrison (1969, 1999), who ascribed a habitation function to some of the palace buildings at Tikal’s Central Acropolis, and Adams (1974), who explicitly correlated Uaxactun’s palace benches with sleeping space.

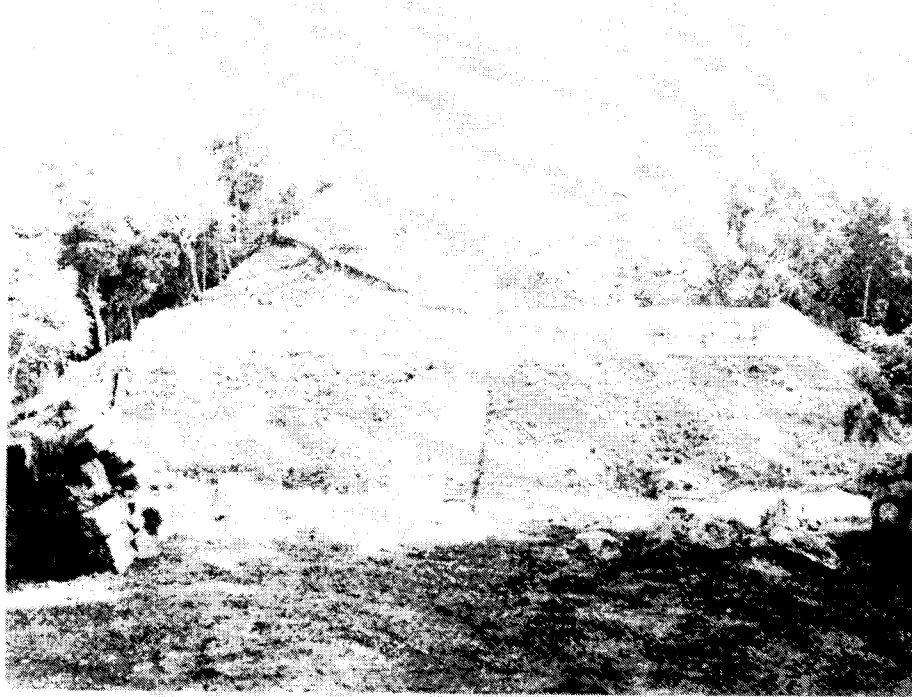
The latest materials found within and about epicentral buildings at many Maya sites generally were not believed to have resulted from the intended use of these structures. Instead, these remains were ascribed to the sporadic activities of popu-

lation remnants who were camping out in largely deserted centers. At Tikal (Harrison 1999: 48) and Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990a), rooms that were full of Terminal Classic refuse were initially interpreted as confirming such a disjunctive situation. For various reasons, then, the latest materials at many southern lowland sites were deemed to be "worthless" for meaningful interpretation (Adams 1971: 8) and often were interpreted simply as the incomplete remains of squatters from the "commoner" sector of Classic Maya society (Culbert 1988: 74). Within this context, then, any southern lowland Maya site with substantial, use-related Terminal Classic occupation is likely to provide an elaborated, if not an alternative, view of the events leading up to the "collapse."

TERMINAL CLASSIC CARACOL

Evidence for Terminal Classic occupation at Caracol comes from varying kinds of data. Numerous carved stone monuments with hieroglyphic texts date to this time horizon. Caracol's monuments continued to be erected until 10.1.10.0.0 (A.D. 859; Stela 10 [Houston 1987c: fig. 71b])—much later than at some sites, such as Dos Pilas—but ended slightly earlier than at others, such as Tikal. These stone monuments have varied content. Some, such as Stelae 11 (A.D. 800; 9.18.10.0.0 [Houston 1987c: fig. 71a]) and 19 (A.D. 820; 9.19.10.0.0 [Grube 1994: fig. 9.6]), are relatively traditional in portraying single rulers in standard pose. Others are less continuous with earlier traditions—showing portraits of two individuals and portraying captives or themes of alliance (A.D. 800 to A.D. 849; Stela 17 and Altars 10, 12, 13, 22, and 23 [Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991; Grube 1994: fig. 9.4, n.d.]). Some are composed only of incised texts (A.D. 798 and A.D. 859; Ballcourt Marker 3 [Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991] and Stela 10). One monument dating to A.D. 810 (9.19.0.0.0; Stela 18 [A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b]) portrays a huge upreared snake or vision serpent above a bound captive. Terminal Classic monuments are erected outside (Stela 17; Altars 10 and 22) the epicenter as well as within it. The hieroglyphic texts at Caracol contain some of the latest warfare events in the southern lowlands. Altar 12, dating to 9.19.10.0.0 (A.D. 820), records a warfare event that may reference the decapitation of a Tikal lord in the context of a shared ceremony between Ucanal, Naranjo, and Caracol (Grube 1994: 97). The very latest Caracol monuments have iconographic themes—captives and alliance—suggestive of warfare, but no specific textual references to war.

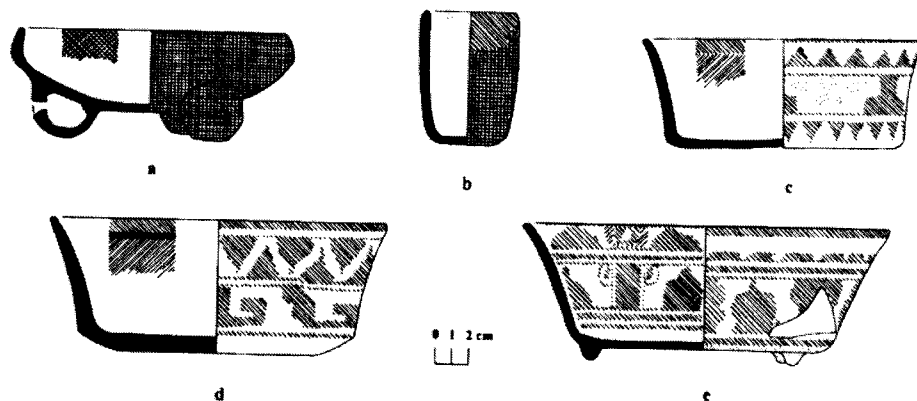
There is evidence for significant construction activity in the epicenter of Caracol during the Terminal Classic period. The final renovation of Caana (Figure 16.1), the tallest and most massive palace construction at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase in press) was undertaken after A.D. 800 and likely required the mobilization of considerable labor. The latest phase of this construction entailed raising the summit floor approximately 4 meters as well as substantial palace-room construction. Late construction activity in the form of finished architecture was also



16.1 View of Caana, Caracol's largest architectural complex, from the summit of Structure B5. The range buildings that are visible were all constructed during the Terminal Classic period.

undertaken in the C Group and the elite residential area called "Barrio" located east of Caana. Unused building materials were also stored adjacent to Structure A7. Interrupted construction efforts are in evidence immediately south of the epicenter; excavations during the 2000 field season in the vicinity of Caracol Structure B71 proved that its underlying platform was a massive repository of Terminal Classic trash—presumably a huge unfinished fill block that was to have supported a raised complex like the Central Acropolis. Building efforts outside of the site epicenter are less easy to document, partially due to a research sampling strategy that resulted in very limited architectural penetration and areal clearing operations within the residential core of the site—as opposed to the more substantial penetration and clearing that was done in Caracol's epicenter. However, late building efforts are also more difficult to isolate in the site's non-palace residential groups because of the relative lack of fineware markers. That occupation continued in this area is evident, however, as discussed below.

The identification of special deposits—burials and caches—that are purely Terminal Classic in date is also a problem because the vessels accompanying these deposits largely continued within the already established Late Classic ce-



16.2 Vessels from an unsealed cache intruded through the latest summit floor of Structure B19: (a) burned Tinaja Red; (b) burned Tinaja Red; (c), (d), and (e) Danta Orange-polychrome.

ramic traditions. However, there are several burials within the epicenter that can be clearly associated with the Terminal Classic because of both their decorative modes (on fineware offerings) and their stratigraphic associations. These include interments in Structures B5, B34, and the C Group. Stable isotope analysis was undertaken on bone from one of these individuals, the person buried in a crypt in Structure B5 (part of a palace compound); significantly, that analysis indicates that the individual ate the same diet as other Late Classic individuals living in the epicentral palaces, suggesting a continuity of the Late Classic palace diet into the Terminal Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase in press). Identification of Terminal Classic special deposits outside the Caracol epicenter is exceedingly difficult, as residential interments generally do not contain ceramics that match those in the epicentral on-floor palace deposits. However, there are several interments with vessels that are stylistically Terminal Classic in that they include "coffee-bean eye" applique bowls (Caro Incised) and footed vases with ridged decorative panels.

Like the burials, Terminal Classic caches are also difficult to identify, with the exception of clearly late and unsealed deposits in Structures A6 and B19 (Figure 16.2). It is likely that some Terminal Classic caches are undifferentiated from earlier versions. However, the latest caches in the core residential area are not typical Late Classic-period face caches (barrel-like vessels with crude faces on their exterior [A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.7]) or finger bowls (small lip-to-lip dishes literally containing fingers [D. Chase and A. Chase 1998: fig. 4]), but rather crude undecorated barrels and cups. Thus, caching vessels and, by extension, practices, may be slightly discontinuous in the Terminal Classic.



16.3 In situ vessels from the floor of the rear room of Structure B4.

Perhaps the most abundant Terminal Classic database at Caracol exists in the on-floor debris associated with the epicentral stone architecture (Figure 16.3). This debris includes bone (animal and human, worked and unworked), artifacts (including jadeite and marine shell), and pottery (in many cases whole, or almost

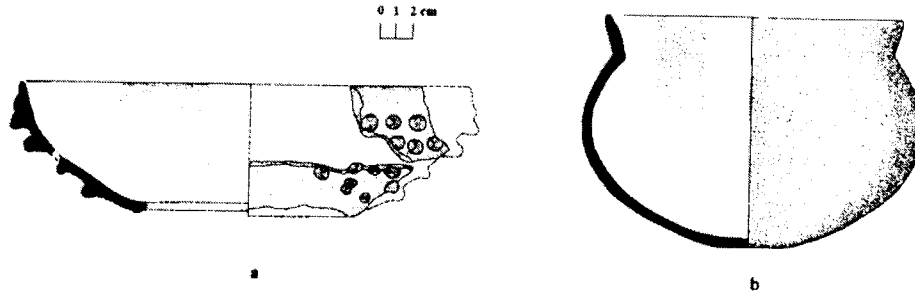
Table 16.1.

<i>Building</i>	<i>Lot</i>	<i>Lab #</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Corrected</i>	<i>one-sigma</i>	<i>two-sigma</i>
Str. A6	C8N/2	Beta-43518	880 ± 60	cal A.D. 1166	1039–1225	1020–1270
Str. A6	C8S/4	Beta-61211	1140 ± 50	cal A.D. 893	880–979	781–1012
Barrio	C76N/6	Beta-61790	1150 ± 70	cal A.D. 890	789–984	709–1020
Str. B6	C18B/19-5	Beta-18065	1160 ± 70	cal A.D. 886	780–969	680–1010
Caana sum.	C4B/26-15	Beta-18053	830 ± 120	cal A.D. 1221	1030–1280	980–1392
Caana mid	C17K/9	Beta-43524	1170 ± 50	cal A.D. 883	785–941	714–980
Caana r. 1	C16I/16&17	Beta-43520	1230 ± 50	cal A.D. 781	689–881	670–890
Caana red	C16L/12	Beta-43522	1320 ± 80	cal A.D. 673	647–777	590–890
Caana r. 2	C17G/4	Beta-43523	1640 ± 100	cal A.D. 411	257–540	140–620

whole, vessels). On-floor palace materials indicate continued access to trade items and faunal remains that suggest a healthy variability in diet (Teeter 1997). By far the most abundant on-floor materials consist of smashed pottery vessels. Although each location has some different items, there is tremendous continuity in the forms that occur from one palace context to the next (Table 16.2). These ceramics are perhaps the best data source for discussions about Terminal Classic Caracol.

The abandonment of epicentral Caracol appears to have happened suddenly. Many of the epicentral palaces are associated with provisional trash (Schiffer 1987: 65) in exterior areas and had crushed, but complete, serving, storage, and fineware pottery on their interior floors. Importantly, an unburied child was found in an interior doorway of one of Caracol's palaces (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994a: 5) and a burning layer appears on the floors of many of the central palaces (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a: 35–36). Dates for the burning on the floors of Caracol's palaces cluster shortly before A.D. 900 (Table 16.1) and, in conjunction with the unburied child and use-related (non-ritual) pottery and trash, are suggestive of the sudden abandonment of the epicentral buildings (D. Chase and A. Chase 2002). The discovery of incomplete, but in-progress, building modifications (in the vicinity of Structures A7 and B71) also supports this interpretation. Thus, the archaeological situation at Caracol apparently differs from that at sites like Tikal (Harrison 1999) and Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990a), where entire rooms were piled full of secondarily deposited trash. At Caracol, in contrast, the latest palace deposits are seemingly *de facto* refuse—items and garbage caught in a hurried or unplanned exit.

The latest epicentral Caracol ceramics can be dated via a series of associated radiocarbon dates to between A.D. 800 and 1100 (Table 16.1). Nine samples have been run from floor contexts in the epicenter of Caracol. Three of these dates are early; either they are out-of-context, represent the burning of earlier materials, or correlate with previous ritual activities that took place in certain palace rooms in Caana; possibly all three explanations are pertinent. Four dates from four different



16.4 Late vessels from Structures A2 and A6: (a) *Miseria Applied*; (b) *Nohpek Unslipped*.

epicentral locales (Structures A6, B6, B14 [Caana], B23 [Barrio]) all cluster about a ten-year time period dating from A.D. 883 to A.D. 893. In combination with the unburied child in the summit Caana palace, these four contexts may represent the final palace activity at Caracol and could conceivably be correlated with a single violent episode and abandonment. However, two other dates—both associated with temples (one from the floor of Structure A6 and one from near Structure B19 on the summit of Caana, which date to A.D. 1166 and 1221, respectively)—suggest a later occupation or at least visitation of the site. The dates and recovered ceramic data from Structure A6 (specifically a *Nohpek Unslipped* vessel [Figure 16.4b]) could be used to argue for lingering populations at Caracol well past A.D. 1000 that may have continued to use the abandoned epicentral temples for ritual purposes.

ON-FLOOR DEPOSITS AT CARACOL

From the beginning of the Caracol project in 1985 we have been concerned with the identification of in situ floor deposits and what they could reveal about the Maya collapse (A. Chase 1994). At Caracol a number of latest-use in-situ deposits were recovered on the floors of specific buildings. With the exception of the temple buildings Structures A6 and B19, most multiple-vessel on-floor contexts from Caracol were found in the site's epicentral palaces (Structures B4 and B6 from the south side of the B Plaza; Structure B64 in the "C Group," Structure B24 in "Barrio," Structure A39 in the "Central Acropolis," and the various palace buildings of "Caana"), architectural descriptions of which have been presented in detail elsewhere (A. Chase and D. Chase in press). The recovered vessels are found both within and immediately outside these palace buildings. Besides sharing general ceramic forms (Table 16.2), most of these palaces are also associated with a similar set of faunal remains (Teeter 1997).

Thus far some eleven discrete on-floor contexts, exclusive of Caana (Caracol's massive central building complex), have yielded vessel sets within Caracol's epi-

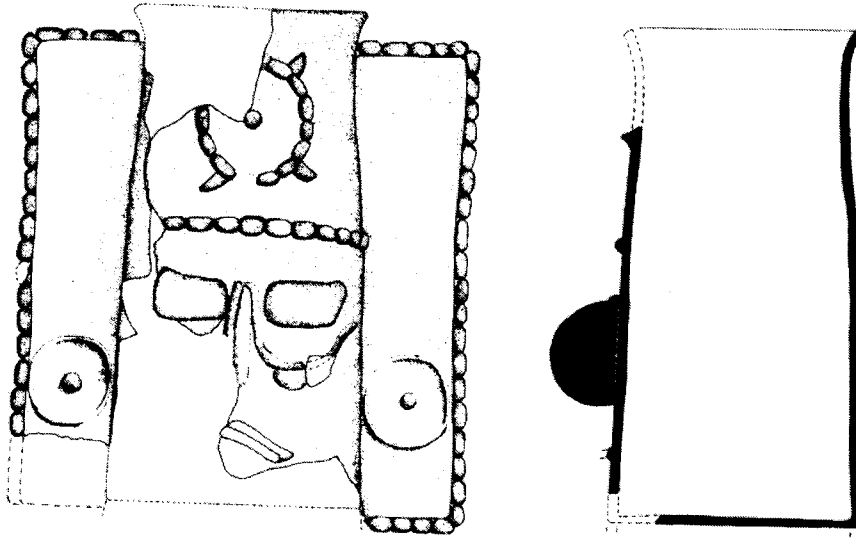
Table 16.2.

	Caana																		
	A39	B4f	B4r	B6	B24	B64	A8	D16	Cedro	Sam	Bayal	Tabanos	palaces	B19	A3	A2	A6	Zero	Rooster
footed vases	1	1	—	—	2	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	—	—	—
pedestaled vases	1	—	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
flat vase	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	—
footed plates	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	15	—	—	—	—	—	—
footed bowls	1	2	—	—	3	4	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	—	—	(6)	—	—
pedestaled dish	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	—	—	—
molcajete	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
deep bowls	1	—	1	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
spouted bowls	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	—	—	—	1	—	—
other small bowls	2	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
collared bowl	—	—	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	2	—	—	1	—	—
large bowls	—	—	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—
cups	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	3	—	—	4	—	—
large platters	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
plainware ollas	2	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	1	—	—	—	2	—	—
cooking bowls	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	23	—	—
candelario	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—
small jar	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
punctated jar	—	—	2	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
plain jar (monkey spouts)	—	—	1	(1)	(2)	1(1)	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
barrels	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
miniatures	—	1	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	3	—	—
drum	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
3-prong burner	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
effigy lid	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
scored platter-like censers	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	—
pedestaled barrel	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
censer & lid	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
pedestaled large brazier	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—
spiked censers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	2	—	—
effigy censers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	2	1	—	1

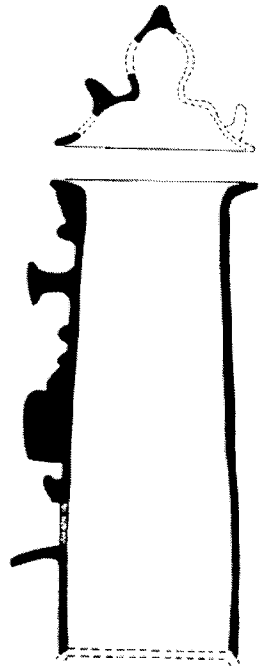
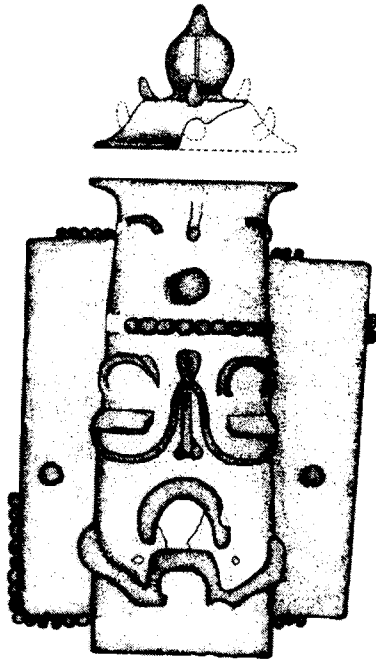
center; all have a bearing on the interpretation of the latest use or abandonment of the site's buildings and architectural complexes. Six test excavations from the outlying settlement have also yielded at least one reconstructible vessel associated with the latest building floor or stairs. Twelve more discrete contexts have been identified in and around the buildings of Caana, for a total of twenty-nine relevant contexts that have provided associated sets of on-floor reconstructible vessels. These materials may be integrated with a tightly dated set of vessels that come from more than 220 burials and over 150 caches excavated at Caracol. Few equivalent comparative on-floor materials have been derived from excavations at other sites of the southern lowlands; one exception is Aguateca (Inomata 1997; Inomata and Triadan 2000).

Approximately 140 whole or largely reconstructible vessels are represented in these "abandonment" deposits. Contextually, these deposits and vessels can be separated into "ritual" or "domestic" deposits, although some contexts exhibit both ritual and domestic aspects. Latest-use ritual deposits include: (1) unsealed caches of pottery vessels intruded through earlier floors, as occurred in Structures B19 (Figure 16.2) and A6; (2) censerware positioned either at the base of or within "temples," as occurred in epicentral Structures A3 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a: fig. 9), A6, and B19 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a: fig. 19) as well as in residential groups "Zero" and "Rooster" (Figure 16.5); and, in the outlying Caracol region, (3) the deposition of pottery in caves (Pendergast 1969, 1971; Helmke n.d.). Latest use-related domestic materials include: (4) in situ ceramics and artifacts within palace buildings, such as occurred in Structures B4, B6, B24, A39, and in many of the rooms on Caana; and (5) the dumping of garbage outside formal buildings, presumably for collection and movement elsewhere (Schiffer's [1987: 65] "provisional trash"), such as is associated with epicentral Structures A39, B4, and B64 and with outlying "core" residential groups "Tabanos," "Bayal," "Sam," and "Cedro" (Figure 16.6). More problematic contexts combining ritual and domestic items are also seen in (6) the deposition of vessels and skeletal remains on the floors of certain "temple" buildings, such as Structures A6 and B19. Importantly, the Maya practice of dumping large quantities of refuse into abandoned rooms has not been encountered at Caracol, presumably indicating that the site's garbage removal system was still functioning at the time of epicentral abandonment (and possibly also that portions of Caracol's terraces were still being built and used [A. Chase and D. Chase 1998b]).

There do appear to be differences between the ritual and domestic Terminal Classic vessel sets. In particular, effigy censers occur in ritual contexts both within and without the epicenter; they are located in epicentral temples and are also found in outlying residential groups (Figure 16.5) on the basal stairs of eastern buildings that once functioned as shrines or mausoleums (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b). The only polychrome Terminal Classic vessels derive from an unsealed cache through the summit floor of an epicentral temple (Figure 16.2).

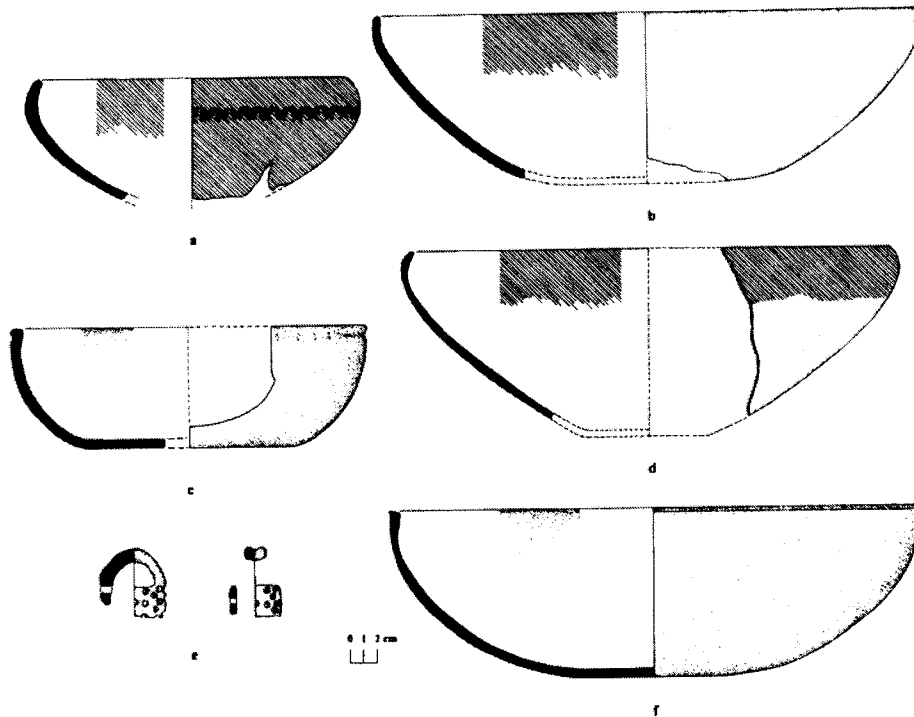


0 1 2 cm



b

16.5 Incensarios from core settlement: (a) and (b), Pedregal Modeled.



16.6 On-floor vessels from core settlement: (a) Pantano Impressed; (b) and (d), possibly Tinaja Red; (c) and (f), possibly Valentin Unslipped; (e) Chaquistero Composite.

Of even more interest, the only clearly identifiable cooking vessels in the site epicenter occur on the floor of Structure A6, a ritual building with the greatest longevity of use at Caracol (approximately one thousand years). Because cooking vessels are not associated with Caracol's palaces (presumably because elite food was brought from a communal kitchen located outside the palace itself [A. Chase and D. Chase in press]), then their presence in the Structure A6 temple requires some explanation. The Postclassic cooking vessels (Figure 16.4b) may represent the desecration of an important ritual building, perhaps by individuals other than native Caracoleños. Alternatively, these vessels may represent late food offerings left in place by Postclassic peoples, similar to the situation known for Late Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal (Structure 81; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988, 2002).

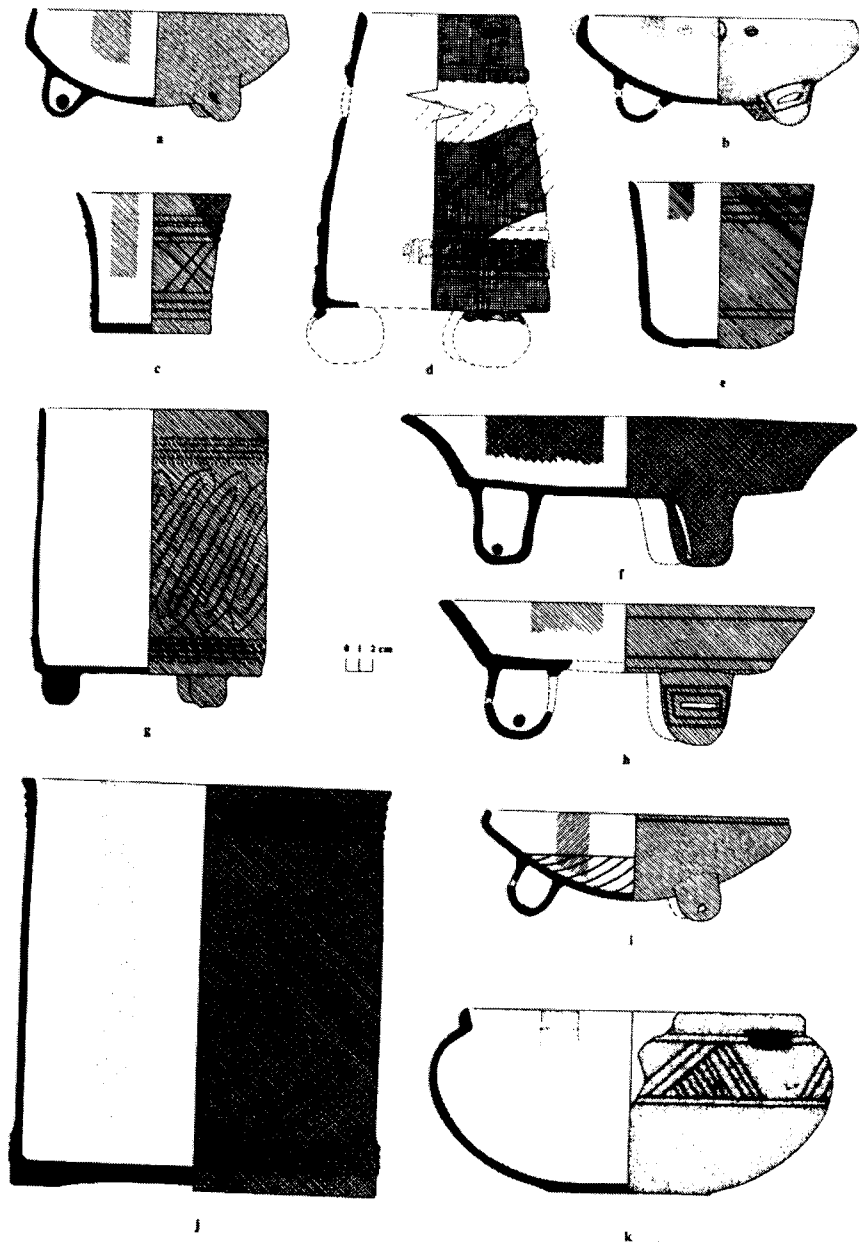
Following extended analysis and vessel reconstruction, however, the Caracol deposits form recognizable ceramic groupings (Table 16.2) that are distinct from the ceramics known from Late Classic contexts (as represented by the finewares, plainwares, and censers from the site's burials and tombs). Thus, unlike the situations reported for Altar de Sacrificios, Seibal, and Tikal, the Caracol materi-

als can be sequenced into an identifiable entity or phase. This diverse ceramic corpus exhibits ties to Terminal Classic materials found at other sites.

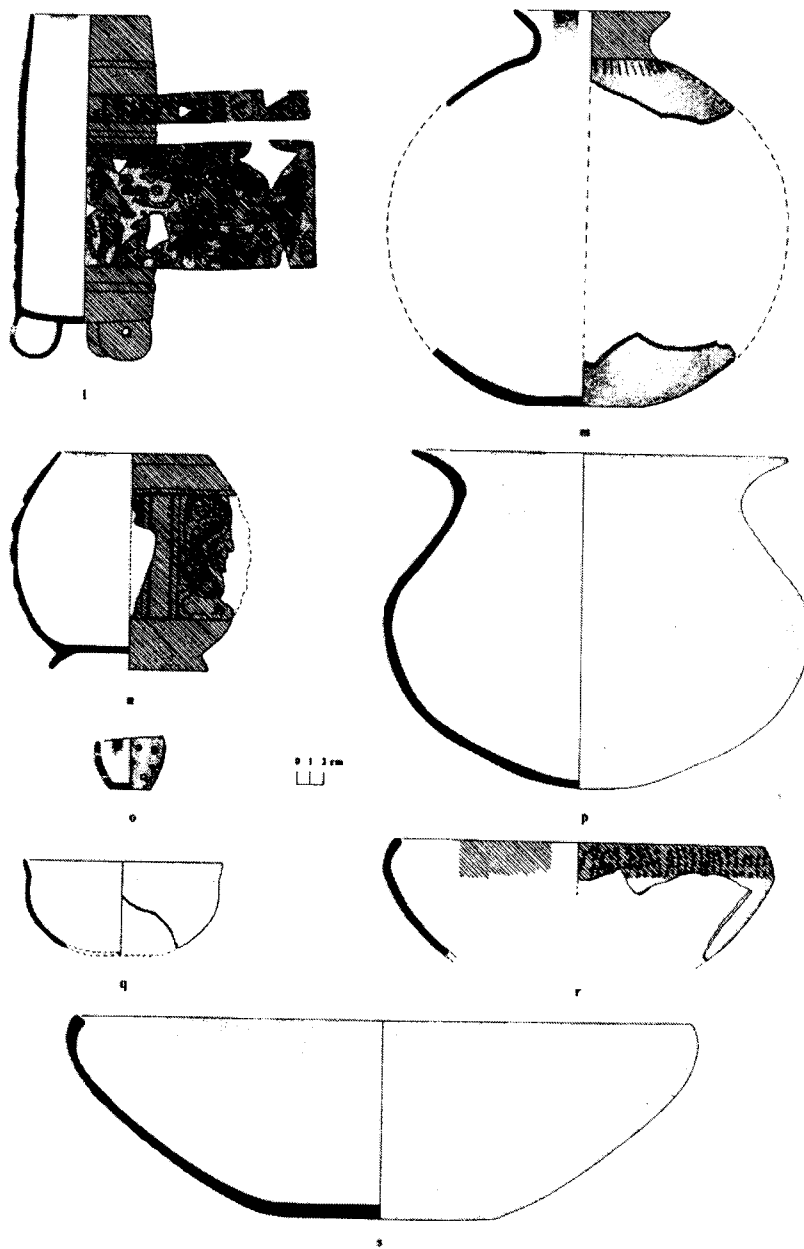
Ceramically, the Caracol refuse deposits are characterized by:

1. Tinaja Red footed bowls (some decorated) with incurving rims (Figures 16.7a, 16.7b);
2. flaring-walled deep bowls (some can be called "cups") that can be plain or associated with ridging and/or incision (Figures 16.7c, 16.7e);
3. footed cylinders with diagonal incision and/or fluting framed with raised ridges (Figures 16.7d, 16.7g);
4. flat-based, rounded-rim plates with oven-shaped tripod feet and occasional basal flanges and incision, both black-and red-slipped (Figures 16.7f, 16.7h; see also A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.11b, c, e, o);
5. incurved-rim *molcajetes* or grater bowls, some Fine Orange (Figure 16.7i);
6. large ridged barrels (Figure 16.7j);
7. collared bowls, both incised (Figure 16.7k) and Fine Orange (Figure 16.7q);
8. Fine Orange vessels or copies that exhibit modeled-carving and a variety of forms (low dish, pedestaled barrel, footed cylinder, collared bowl) of both Belizean (Figure 16.7l; see also Graham, McNatt, and Gutchen 1980) and central Petén extraction (Figure 16.7n; see also Sabloff 1975);
9. special forms, both small—such as *candeleros* (Figure 16.7o), some with handles (Figure 16.6e)—and large—such as drums (Figure 16.7v);
10. jars with minimal impressed shoulder decoration (Figure 16.7m);
11. large incurved bowls, both plain and decorated on their shoulders with stamping, impressing, punctated designs, or rocker incision (Figure 16.7r);
12. non-striated plainware ollas, some fairly wide-mouthed (Figure 16.7p; see also A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.11.k)
13. large, usually interior-slipped, platters (Figure 16.7s); and
14. a great diversity in censers (Figures 16.7t and 16.7u; see also A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a: figs. 9 and 19), possibly including portable burners (Figure 16.7w).

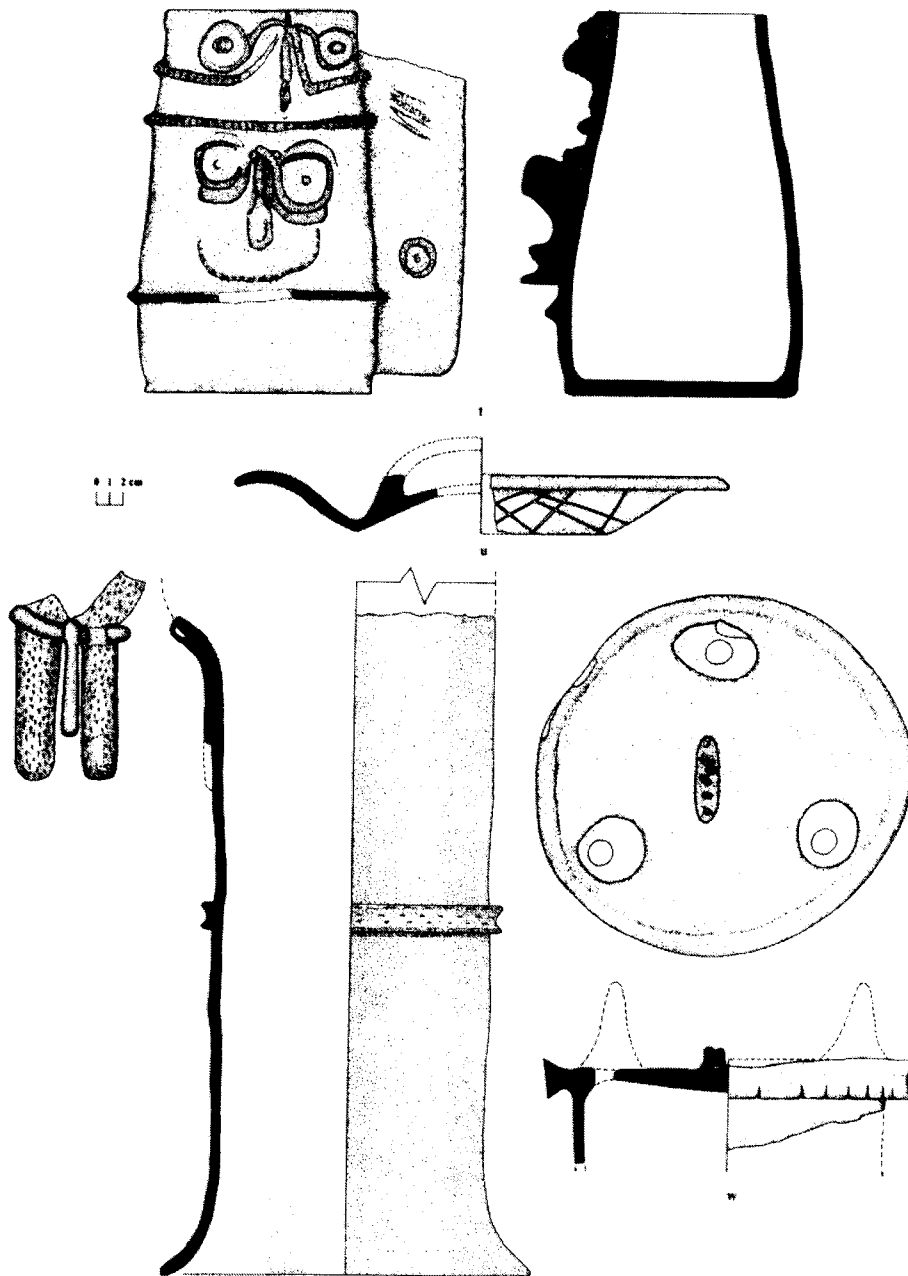
Importantly, many types believed to be diagnostic of a Terminal Classic date in Petén (A. Chase and D. Chase 1983; Culbert 1993a, n.d.) and Pasión regions (Sabloff 1975), such as Encanto Striated, Chaquiste Impressed, Subin Red, and Cameron Incised, either do not occur or are extremely rare in the Caracol sample. And elaborately stamped Pantano Impressed jars (Sabloff 1975)—dated to the



16.7a. On-floor vessels from epicentral Caracol: (a) Tinaja Red; (b) eroded San Julio Modeled; (c) Cohune Composite; (d) possibly Holtun Gouged-incised; (e) Cameron Incised (variety unspecified); (f) Infierno Black; (g) Cohune Composite; (h) Platon Punctated-incised (variety unspecified); (i) Trapiche Incised; (j) possibly Bambonal Plano-relief; (k) Conchita Incised.



16.7b. On-floor vessels from epicentral Caracol: (l) related to Sahcaba Modeled-carved (see Graham et al. 1980); (m) and (r), possibly Pantano Impressed; (n) Pabellon Modeled-carved; (o) Chaquistero Composite; (p) Valentin Unslipped; (q) Altar Orange; (s) possibly Valentin Unslipped.



16.7c. On-floor vessels from epicentral Caracol: (t) possibly Pedregal Modeled; (u) unnamed incised; (v) and (w), Cohune Composite.

Terminal Classic elsewhere (Culbert 1973c)—appear to be stratigraphically earlier at Caracol.

LIMITED DISTRIBUTION STATUS-LINKED CERAMICS

The traditional ceramic markers of the Terminal Classic—fineware pottery and decorative modes—are well represented in the Caracol on-floor sample (Table 16.2, Figure 16.7). These materials largely come from the site's epicentral masonry buildings but are generally not in evidence in the outlying settlement. In fact, these ceramic markers were recovered in only a very limited way in the settlement area. Nor are any of the traditional markers, such as Fine Orange, noted from burials, although some interments can be ascribed to this late era based on stratigraphic position and/or on the possession of other ceramic traits. While this could be the result of sampling problems, we feel that the widespread absence of these materials in the core test units is significant (D. Chase and A. Chase n.d.).

Although an epicentral palace fineware subcomplex is fairly well documented at Caracol, such a subcomplex is not well represented in the surrounding residential group excavations. Part of the reason for this may be the different excavation methodologies that were employed. While the central palaces were areally stripped, thereby leading to the recovery of vessel sets, most of the outlying residential groups were only tested by smaller excavations. However, more than 100 outlying residential groups were tested through more than 300 excavations. In four residential groups (Cedro, Sam, Bayal, and Tabanos), almost completely reconstructible non-ritual utilitarian vessels were recovered in small test excavations. These vessels are generally large platters or bowls that are similar in form to some of those found on the floors of the epicentral palaces (Table 16.2; Figure 16.6). Nearly whole examples of some of the censer types found in association with the epicentral buildings have also been recovered in primary contexts in small test excavations in outlying residential groups (Rooster, Zero), again implying contemporaneity in occupation. However, no complete "Terminal Classic" ceramic subcomplexes were recovered in the outlying settlement and, even more telling, traditional Terminal Classic fineware markers were extremely rare.

The Caracol Terminal Classic ceramic situation, with its strong correlation of clearly identifiable late fineware ceramics with the epicentral masonry buildings (as opposed to the outlying settlement), is by no means unique in the southern lowlands. In fact, a similar dichotomy is in evidence at Tikal (Culbert 1973c: 69–70; Fry 1969: 166) and Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1973b: 148). At Seibal, Terminal Classic ceramics were so distinctive that Sabloff (1973: 122) argued that "it would appear that there was a replacement of one group of pottery with a special function—serving vessels—by another group with a similar function." Contrary to the Caracol, Tikal, and Altar de Sacrificios situations, Sabloff (1975: 110, 238) indicated that Terminal Classic ceramics were common in small structure units at

Seibal. More recently, however, Tourtellot (1988b: 405–406, 1990) revised the Seibal picture by noting that only those Seibal house mounds in or close to that site's epicenter yielded Terminal Classic Bayal deposits. He has further argued that the Bayal ceramic materials might not indicate the complete temporal replacement of earlier Tepejilote pottery at Seibal; instead, as a ceramic subcomplex, Bayal pottery could be representative of an intrusive population that grafted their pottery styles onto a continuing Late Classic Tepejilote ceramic tradition (Tourtellot 1988b, 1990).

Thus, southern lowland Terminal Classic ceramic materials at large centers generally correlate with epicentral (or major architecture) distributions associated with the latest use of masonry constructions (Culbert 1973c: 67–68; Adams 1973b: 148) and also appear to be additive to pre-existing Late Classic complexes. In general, contexts outside of site epicenters that contain Terminal Classic ceramic markers are rare (caves are one exception [Pendergast 1971; Helmke 1999]).

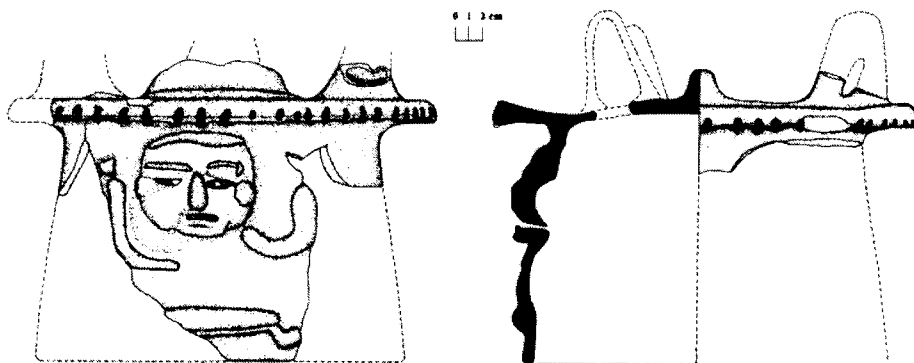
Burial associations are also informative. At Seibal, many burials with Terminal Classic ceramic markers occur in special "residential units" (in which a small low shrine is located in the middle of the group's residential plaza) located relatively close to that site's epicenter (Tourtellot 1990: 140). However, Terminal Classic burials with definable ceramic markers and the special residential groupings seen at Seibal are barely represented at other sites. Only two possible examples of Seibal-like residential units are noted at Tikal (Becker 1982, Plaza Plan 4) and only two potential examples have been noted at Caracol thus far. At Uaxactun, two architecturally sealed burials, both in epicentral monumental architecture, yielded easily identifiable Terminal Classic ceramic markers. At Tikal, very few burials are correlated with the site's latest occupation and most Terminal Classic Eznab ceramics occur only in the site's epicenter. At Caracol, none of the site's burials contain traditional Terminal Classic ceramic markers (D. Chase 1994), although some of these markers do occur in burials found in southeastern Petén (Laporte 1994), which was part of Caracol's wider political domain (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996c: 808).

Overarching ceramic similarities appear to have existed on the elite level for many southern lowland sites during the Terminal Classic, even though "regionalized" Late Classic ceramic complexes often continued into the Terminal Classic at such sites. Terminal Classic ceramics at Caracol, Tikal, Seibal, Altar de Sacrificios, and Uaxactun are closely linked through the sharing of several identical shapes, finewares, and even decorative scenes. Specifically, the basic fineware tripod bowls at all sites are almost identical, showing great standardization within a broad geographical range. Molded-carved finewares bearing similar iconographic scenes are also shared. Finally, a broad range of fine paste wares, known to be of external origin, also occurs at all these central lowland sites. At Seibal such Terminal Classic materials can be associated with the uppermost population stratum iconographically and contextually. At Caracol, not only is this material explicitly

correlated with the continued use of palace locales, but rooms were also not filled with refuse as occurs at some sites, suggesting a functioning garbage recycling system. The wealth of artifactual materials—jadeite, carved shell, and carved bone—found in the latest provisional and de facto refuse at Caracol is typically associated only with the Maya “elite.” Rather than being impoverished and disorganized “commoners,” the final occupants of the epicentral stone palaces probably represent the final Maya elite at Caracol.

But how are these latest materials—and the inferred elite—related to the rest of a site’s population? Various contradictory scenarios have been offered. Tourtellot (1988b: 404–405) questioned whether there was a depopulation of the outlying areas at Seibal or whether the use of the latest finewares was linked to status. He was at an impasse over whether or not the Seibal archaeological situation represented a foreign elite concentrated in that site’s epicenter “surrounded by a sea of native commoners” (Tourtellot 1988b: 405) or whether it represented “a highly stressed and greatly diminished population living in a relatively nucleated settlement” (Tourtellot 1990: 140). The Tikal situation was similarly nebulous. Ford (1986: 62, 65) argued that Terminal Classic outlying occupation in the area intermediate to Yaxhá and Tikal was only slightly decreased from that of the Late Classic era; however, Culbert and his colleagues (1990: 119) suggested that there was a significantly reduced population within greater Tikal. At Caracol Terminal Classic finewares were concentrated in the epicenter, but the distribution of Terminal Classic censerware and certain utilitarian plainwares indicated that both the epicenter and the urban core were still occupied.

The latest deposits of on-floor de facto refuse at Caracol reveal a multiplicity of censer types in use during the Terminal Classic: platform-prong incensarios (burners; Figures 16.7w and 16.8), broad scored incensarios (sometimes with handles; Figure 16.7u), spiked bowls (Figure 16.4a), and flanged and modeled cylinders (Figure 16.7t). With the exception of the spiked bowl censers, which have been found only in Caracol’s A Group and may represent a very late ritual use of this plaza area, the other three kinds of censers have been found liberally scattered throughout the more than 300 test excavations carried out in residential groups in the Caracol core (Figures 16.5 and 16.8). The late ceramic associations of the various epicentral censers are contextually clear (and earlier censer forms can also be securely placed in stratigraphic contexts [e.g., D. Chase and A. Chase 1998: 305]). In the settlement core of Caracol, censer materials that are similar to those in the epicenter are always stratigraphically late, with pieces of these censers occurring in both surface deposits and, more rarely, in upper building and plaza fills. Thus, the censer distribution and deposition at Caracol supports coeval occupation of both the residential core and site epicenter immediately prior to final abandonment. The distribution of certain late plainware and other domestic forms (ollas, jars, bowls, and platters; Figures 16.6b, 16.6c, 16.6d, 16.6f, 16.7m, 16.7p, and 16.7s) also supports such an interpretation.



16.8 Effigy three-prong burner (*Cohune Composite*) associated with a burial in the outlying core settlement.

We would suggest that these distributions point to two things: first, dating terminal Maya archaeological remains based solely on the presence of distinctive finewares is problematic because they may have had only limited distributions; and, second, there is a strong probability that the limited distribution of Terminal Classic finewares is due to a “status-linked” ceramic subcomplex. These conclusions have important implications for interpreting the Terminal Classic period. It makes it a difficult time period to recognize in other than elite- or upper-status contexts, meaning that inferences of population decline based solely on the lack of standard Terminal Classic “type-fossils” in settlement test-pit and sherd data are likely not valid. The lack of these presumed “status-linked” ceramics in the majority of excavated contexts at Caracol is in striking contrast to the homogeneity seen in the distribution of earlier Late Classic ceramics (and serving wares) at the site and may be a factor in the site’s demise. Nevertheless, the uniformity of fineware Terminal Classic forms and vessels found both at Caracol and across sites throughout the southern lowlands suggests increased contact between the elites at these sites (especially as indicated in physical trade items). Both the disjunctive ceramic distributions within sites and the similarities in fineware ceramic distributions (and types) between sites should be considered in Terminal Classic “collapse” scenarios.

The magnitude of contact between elites in the Terminal Classic—as represented in physically shared ceramic types over a broad area—is strikingly different from the smaller-scale regionalization that characterizes the Late Classic period. The sharing of Terminal Classic ceramic forms and types by the latest elites across the southern lowlands may have been indicative of an attempted incorporation of many of the late elites of the southern lowlands into an extremely large political unit—perhaps along the lines of elite incorporation into the Inca empire in

South America (Bauer 1987, 1992; Malpass 1993a). There, distinctive Inca ceramics are found only among the elite stratum of conquered groups, grafted onto already existing independent local ceramic traditions. Thus, on the basis of an interpretation of Caracol's on-floor contexts and a re-evaluation of materials at other southern lowland sites, the Terminal Classic period may be framed as an era that manifested a greater differentiation of elites from the rest of the population—the potential incorporation of many diverse Maya elites into one (or more) large-scale political system(s).

CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the length of the Terminal Classic era, the latest de facto on-floor deposits at Caracol indicate that the final abandonment of the epicentral buildings was sudden and relatively rapid. In several cases a series of complete vessels and other artifacts (including chipped stone from weapons and iconography on ceramics related to warfare) are found crushed in situ on floors. In other cases, sheet deposits of reconstructible ceramics are found exterior to residential palace structures and are considered to be "provisional refuse" (Schiffer 1987); materials in such deposits range from complete to partial ceramic specimens to sherds and are indicative of either partial or interrupted collection procedures for garbage removal. Judging from content and contextual considerations at Caracol, these deposits do not appear to be related to termination rituals (e.g., Mock 1998d).

The occurrence of easily recognizable late fineware materials in surface and collapse levels of epicentral stone buildings across the southern lowlands and their general absence in residential units has been used to argue for a rapid population breakdown at the end of the Late Classic period, a breakdown associated with an epicentral coalescence of disorganized commoners in a situation of "cultural impoverishment" following the disappearance of the traditional Classic elites (Culbert 1973c: 65, 1988: 74). However, the archaeological data from Caracol appear to be indicative of a different scenario.

Caracol evinced significant late epicentral monumental construction activity and appears to have maintained continuity in elite diet (D. Chase et al. 1998). Caracol Terminal Classic fineware deposits are epicentrally concentrated and unevenly distributed throughout the site. As at Tikal, they correlate with vaulted architecture and palaces. However, censerware and plainware ceramic materials that co-occur with such finewares in the epicenter are found throughout the outlying residential settlement, usually in association with eastern buildings that functioned as mausoleums (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b). These deposits suggest that there was occupation and construction at Caracol in the epicenter for at least forty years after the site's last dated monument (Stela 10—A.D. 859 or 10.1.10.0.0) and that the surrounding core probably continued to be occupied even later. A depleted population does not appear to have hurriedly migrated into the site center as part of a "last gasp" of Classic Maya civilization.

The Terminal Classic situation indicated by ceramic distributions contrasts greatly with that seen during the preceding Late Classic period, when access to almost all material items appears to have been widespread at Caracol. It has been suggested instead that “status-linked” ceramics were in use during the Terminal Classic era by those individuals occupying the site’s epicentral palaces. And, it is suspected that the breakdown in uniform ceramic subcomplex usage correlates with a breakdown in the shared identity that was a unifying factor at Caracol through the eighth century. Evidence instead suggests the implementation of a more strict two-part structuring of Terminal Classic Caracol society into “elite” and “other” individuals, potentially mirroring earlier (i.e., Early Classic) more restrictive social orders.

The probability that “status-linked” ceramics existed during the Terminal Classic period has other potential implications for the Maya collapse. Besides sharing similar forms, many of these ceramics also exhibit almost identical iconography and decorative scenes. Many of the fineware vessels also were tradewares into the sites in which they occur. The use of these ceramics appears to have been restricted to the latest elites. It is this elite association that we find so informative, for it would appear to mirror both Aztec (Brumfiel 1987a, 1987b) and Inca (Malpass 1993b: 10–12; 1993c: 237; Murra 1980) patterns of elite incorporation through the presentation of foreign goods. We take the widespread distribution of these ceramic markers in the southern Maya lowlands (in conjunction with changes in iconographic themes, particularly seen on stone monuments) to indicate that the last elites at a great many sites were bound together in some way—potentially as part of a broader political (or minimally ideological) system, even as they were segregating themselves from the rest of their own societies.

Although both occupation and construction continued at Caracol during the Terminal Classic period, there are apparent discontinuities. Not only do certain ceramics not continue to be widely shared and distributed at Caracol, but the predominant Late Classic ritual patterns begin to break down. There appears to be a lessened focus on the highly standardized Late Classic Caracol pattern of veneration of the dead (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1998) that is correlated with burials and caches in eastern buildings in residential groups. These important eastern buildings, however, still continued to be associated with ritual, as can be seen by the incense burners deposited on their steps in several excavated groups. Caracol stone monument erection enjoys a brief flourish at the onset of the Terminal Classic period (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991), but the carved stones embrace new iconographic themes (A. Chase 1985) and are also more widely distributed at the site than at any other time. There is also a general reduction of rulers’ portraits and textual foci on rulers’ life histories on these final stelae and altars. And, no monuments appear to have been erected during the final forty years of elite dominance. The lack of focus on rulers’ portraits and texts, the dichotomy in the final material culture remains at the site, and the unity of elite

ceramic types and iconographic themes with other Maya sites of Terminal Classic date suggest to us that the carefully established Caracol-specific identity of the Late Classic period (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996b) was supplanted by a more pan-Maya elite identity at Caracol in the Terminal Classic period. We argue that the archaeological materials found on the floors of Caracol's epicentral palaces do not represent a group of disorganized peasant squatters, who were the survivors of some unknown calamity, but rather an organized group of people who were tied into a much broader non-local frame and perhaps linked to a new ideological reality (A. Chase 1985; Ringle et al. 1998). The recovered deposits from the site's epicentral buildings represent the material remains of its final elite—an elite who witnessed, if not directed, this changed ideological order.

Caracol and other sites (particularly the excavations at Dos Pilas that demonstrate Maya defensive posture [Demarest 1993; Demarest et al. 1997]) do show substantial evidence for increased warfare toward the end of the Classic period and at the beginning of the Terminal Classic era (A. Chase and D. Chase 1992; Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). At Caracol, captives are depicted on Terminal Classic monuments and pottery; conquests and captives are also noted in late inscriptions. In fact, Caracol records the latest war events known in the southern lowlands, but within a framework of increased iconographic portrayal of alliances between former enemies (Grube n.d.). Weapons are frequently found within Caracol's floor refuse, as is human bone. And, the extensive burning found in many buildings, especially when combined with the remains of an unburied child on the floor of one of Caracol's palaces, could be viewed as evidence of a site-wide final calamity caused by war. Warfare clearly continued into and through the Terminal Classic era. But warfare for what goal and what reason?

Contrary to the traditional paradigm (in which small-scale, site-specific political systems abruptly fragment, with ensuing rapid depopulation during the late eighth and early ninth centuries), the archaeological evidence for heightened warfare, shifting identities, changes in monument erection, and the shared distributions of status-linked ceramics across sites, may be interpreted alternatively as representing the integration of the latest Maya elites of the southern lowlands into larger, but highly competitive, political units as the Terminal Classic period progressed toward the tenth century. Sites such as Caracol may have been aspiring to create their own Terminal Classic expansionist polities or "empires." Ceramic similarities among sites and the replacement of past site—or even region-specific—patterns (such as those correlated with the veneration of the dead at Caracol) may be seen as reflective of greater cohesion among the elites of what had been a more regionalized mosaic of polities earlier in the Late Classic period. Some of the latest monuments in the southern lowlands depict local rulers whose changing style of dress suggests that they may have joined this new order; this is particularly seen iconographically on the monuments at Machaquilá (A. Chase 1985b). The termination of a site's carved stone monument record during the Terminal

Classic period might, in fact, reflect the final incorporation of previously independent elites into a higher-order expansionist polity. Whether centered on Seibal, on Chichen-Itza, or on one or more other unknown centers, the widespread distribution of uniform elite finewares throughout the southern lowlands is archaeologically undeniable.

In comparing the Maya "collapse" to the trajectories of other early state societies, Lowe (1985: 160) noted that "most state systems have ended in a universal empire" and that the current scenarios of the Maya collapse make the Classic Maya a "glaring exception" to this generalized pattern. However, it seems to us that the Maya case may not be as unique as previously implied. Thus, whether imposed from without, simply emulated by an indigenous elite, or resulting from a combination of processes, the similarity of materials, archaeological distributions, iconography, and, potentially, processes across Terminal Classic sites of the southern lowlands can be viewed as reflecting the existence of one or more attempted expansionist polities that ultimately fell apart and, in so doing, completely ruptured Maya society in the southern lowlands.

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