

1. Mesoamerican Elites: Assumptions, Definitions, and Models

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MOST archaeologists are familiar with the term "elite," as much from colloquial use in contemporary situations as from descriptions of past cultures. From an archaeological standpoint, it is used not only in reference to people and artifacts, but also in relation to theoretical discussions of the organization and complexity of ancient societies. Despite all of its uses, however, the term "elite" is imprecisely defined in the general archaeological literature and no less so in relation to Mesoamerica.¹

Most Mesoamericanists associate the use of the word "elite" with the "rich, powerful, and privileged in any society" (G. Marcus 1983d:3, 1983e:34) and correlate elites with a wide array of material remains. However, other definitions of the term would nearly preclude it from the material realm of archaeology, for elites may also be seen as *those who run society's institutions* (cf. G. Marcus 1983b:12-13; see also Mills 1956). Under this definition, elites are not necessarily characterized by luxury goods and other items found in the archaeological record; rather, the elite would be those who managed the political, economic, social, and religious institutions. A consideration of the elite, then, must by definition concern itself with the concepts of power and control; these are abstract notions that are difficult to identify concretely in the archaeological record.

This ambiguity in the definition and use of the term "elite" is not limited to the discipline of archaeology (cf. G. Marcus 1983b:7, 1983e:34) and the problems that archaeologists have are not unique (see G. Marcus 1983b:21-22). It is apparent that several issues require resolution with regard to elites in Mesoamerica (fig. 1.1). It is particularly important to attempt to define the ways in which elites can be identified archaeologically and to assess the relationships between elites and the overall social and political system(s) of a particular culture. While there are *a priori* models for Mesoamerican social organization, a brief review of contrasting opinions and strategies makes it evident that ground level identification of elites must be reevaluated as a prerequisite to the reconstruction of ancient Mesoamerican social order. Differences of opinion on the percentage of elites, on the amount of labor expenditure that is required to sustain them, and on their relationships to other social groups make for critical divergence in the analyses of the structure, function, and change of Mesoamerican society through time and over space.

Archaeological Identification of Elites

Although archaeological research has focused on major centers in Mesoamerica, we still do not fully comprehend their organization, much less how the elite or those who had access to elite goods were distributed in or about these centers. It is also unclear to what degree there is overlap among systems of sociopolitical organization throughout Mesoamerica.

The archaeological identification of elites exemplifies many of the problems found in the use of the term in Mesoamerica. In contrast to Fried's (1987:186) focus on limited access to basic resources as a primary condition for stratification, elites are generally defined in the archaeological record on the basis of their access to luxury goods (Rathje 1970; Tourtellot and Sabloff 1972; Pires-Ferreira 1975; Drennan 1976; see also Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:Table 9 for enumeration of these items), their presumed association with more elaborate architecture in their domiciles (Harrison 1969, 1970; Blanton 1978:67; Price 1978; Webster and Abrams 1983; Webster 1985a), and their supposedly sumptuous treatment in death (A. Smith 1950:90; M. Coe 1956, 1975:102, 1988; Rathje 1970). Just as the presence of certain items are used to attempt an identification of the elite, the absence of certain criteria are used in identifying those who are not elite. Furthermore, the presence of specific archaeological items is sometimes thought to indicate that particular buildings or constructions cannot have served an elite function. For instance, under the predominant interpretive paradigm for Mesoamerican studies, elites as consumers ideally should not be associated with flint tools that would indicate labor in agricultural fields (i.e., ones that are broken or used) and should not be directly associated with evidence of craft specialization (such as in the production of manos and metates or utilitarian lithics or pottery). However, the elite are often viewed as regulating the systems of production and distribution of all such items, whether luxury or utilitarian (Fried 1967; Sanders and Price 1968:161, 188-89; Rathje 1971, 1972; Grove 1984:71). Some members of elite groups also were involved in the painting of elaborate polychrome vessels (cf. Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1988).

The possession of luxury goods is viewed as having been a sign of wealth and prestige in Precolumbian society. C. C. Coggins (1975:5) has noted for Tikal that "it is reasonable to assume that most decorated objects were the possessions of the elite" and that "the possession of such objects has served to define an aristocratic class that is termed elite." The distribution, production, and ownership of these items is often conceived of as being entirely elite controlled (Adams 1970:492). Luxury goods include, among other things, jade (Leventhal, Demarest, and Willey 1987:187), pyrite mirrors (Flannery 1968), imported pottery (Coggins 1975:5; Leventhal, Demarest, and Willey 1987:187), sea shells (Andrews IV 1969:48, 60-61), and stingray spines (J. Marcus 1978:187). Such items are thought to be accessible to the

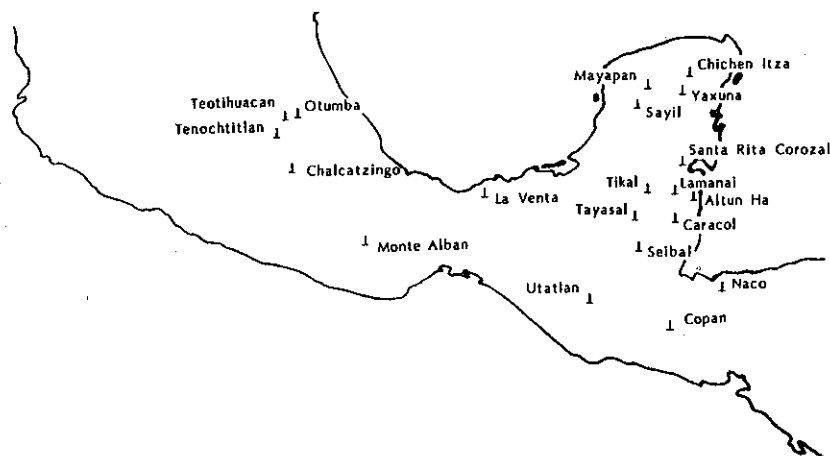


Fig. 1.1. Map of Mesoamerica with relevant sites noted (north is to the top of the page).

elite and perhaps a small group of close retainers, probably composing well under 10 percent of Maya society (Webster 1985b:388).

What is considered to be an elite or luxury item, however, often differs from site to site. At Preclassic Chalcatzingo, ceramic figurines and obsidian tools were both interpreted as elite-associated goods; they were either representative of the elite in and of themselves or were viewed as being "produced under elite direction" (Harlan 1979:472) as were the production and distribution of "greenstone" and "iron-ore" (Grove 1984:71). In the Maya area, elaborate polychrome pottery is often interpreted as representing an elite good (M. Coe 1975:95; Ashmore and Sharer 1978:17; Sharer 1978:63; see also L. Schele and M. Miller 1986) in spite of the fact that R. E. Fry (1979:496; see also Adams 1971:141) has pointed out that such vessels are often found in garbage dumps in Tikal's peripheral areas.

In death the elite are presumed to be more elaborately treated than nonelite members of society. The expenditure of effort that went into any one burial rite, as represented in the size of the associated grave or chamber and the rites associated with the interment, has been used as a worldwide indicator of status (Chapman, Kinnes, and Randsborg 1981; O'Shea 1984). Often the very location of the grave provides a clue as to the status of the individual (Sharer 1978:57; Flannery and Marcus 1983b:80; D. Chase 1986:359). Finally, the contents of the grave are used to provide data relevant to the status and role that the individual may have had in life. Some even argue that certain elaborately painted pottery vessels were produced only for elite burial and that their production served to bind together royal

lineages from various sites (Adams 1963, 1971:75-78; see also Coggins 1975 for Tikal).

One other common assumption seen in Mesoamerica is that stone architecture is more likely to be associated with, or even representative of, the elite than wooden construction—partially because of its permanence, but also because of the presumed labor expenditure involved (Kurjack 1974:83-84, 94; Arnold and Ford 1980:720; Folan et al. 1982:431). Elites are viewed as being associated with architecture that has better stonework, a higher elevation, or more monumental construction (Kurjack 1974:8, 92; Price 1978; Willey and Leventhal 1979:82-83; Sanders and Webster 1983:28-29, table 6; Webster 1985a:40; Abrams 1987:495), and often specific plaza plans (Flannery 1983b:293; M. Coe 1984:92, but see Willey et al. 1965:572; Becker 1972, 1982; Millon 1976; Blanton 1978:30, 67; Blanton et al. 1981:95; and A. Chase 1985a:38 in relation to "Plaza Plan 2"). However, arguments are made that the elite, and particularly the "royal household," did not live in masonry constructions, but rather in perishable buildings (M. Coe 1987:93).

In some cases, biological evidence or skeletal modification has been utilized to identify elites. It is possible that the Maya elite were more likely to have practiced skull deformation (Haviland 1971). Dental modifications, particularly inlays, have also been interpreted as representing elite status among the Maya (Becker 1973:401; Sharer 1978:57). At Tikal, the elite were interpreted as being taller and better fed than the rest of society based on skeletal remains (Haviland 1967). At Teotihuacan, R. Storey (1985) has similarly argued that the upper echelons of that society enjoyed better health, which is reflected in their osteological remains.

Thus, it is evident that in practice the archaeological identification of elites is often based on the possession of specific artifact types or traits, the association with certain constructions and architectural groups, skeletal indicators of health and stature, and interment in certain locations and types of graves. Other classes of data, however, exist—reading/writing (Houston 1989; Schele and Freidel 1990; C. Brown 1991) and iconography (Thompson 1973; M. Coe 1975; L. Schele and M. Miller 1986; Leventhal, Demarest, and Willey 1987; Grove 1987c:425-26; Laporte and Fialko 1987:156). The various stone monuments in the Maya and other areas of Mesoamerica that show individuals on their surfaces are interpreted as presenting portraits of rulers or other elite(s) in that society. Unfortunately, it often proves impossible to associate monumental portraits directly with specific human skeletal or residential remains, and it is extremely difficult for an archaeologist to assess an individual's role in a past culture; in fact, only on the uppermost tier of society, when one is dealing with the royal lineage(s), is it possible archaeologically to identify members of a group who must have occupied positions of power and extremely high prestige. Even these individuals may elude identification by researchers where there are no hieroglyphs to aid interpretation.

When one assembles all of the postulated archaeological indicators of elite status or goods at any one or combination of sites, a gap appears between theory and practice. In theory, and with a definition of the elite as "those who run society's institutions," their numbers should be small. In practice, following all of the various archaeological indicators that are cited, a large segment of society may be and has been classified as elite merely because of the presence of so-called elite goods—at least during the Classic and Postclassic periods. This usage of the word "elite" does not fit the predominant Mesoamerican conception of a small consumer group; it does, however, suggest that there is much room for refining the process of identifying elites using archaeology.

Ethnohistory: Mexico and Maya

Interpretations based on ethnohistoric records are nearly uniform in their discussion of protohistoric Mesoamerican social groups as consisting of two basic categories of people: rulers and the ruled—more particularly, nobles and commoners, with the addition of slaves (Roys 1943:33; Spores 1965:969, 973, 982, 984, 1983:228; Blanton et al. 1981:226; Flannery 1983a:133; J. Marcus 1983:470; Hicks 1986:38, 46). Early historic descriptions are largely responsible for later categorizations of Mesoamerican society as a two-class system (see, for example, Thompson 1966[1954] for the Maya). Further analysis of early historic material, however, suggests that this division of nobles and commoners was more complex than the cut and dry two-division approach would indicate: commoners could amass wealth, and nobles might on occasion be left to till their own land (Hicks 1986:38); in addition, there evidently were in-between statuses (Roys 1965:662). It would seem, then, that there were two distinct principles operating in Precolumbian society—on one hand, status in society was determined by membership in a social group-based kinship and descent on both the maternal and paternal sides (Roys 1943:33; Carrasco 1982:30), at least among the nobility (Edmonson 1979:10); but, on the other hand, actual material well-being could be affected by other factors such as line of work and achievements.

A basic contradiction exists between the groupings easily identifiable in the archaeological record and the groupings of people recorded in ethnohistory. Ethnohistory records the existence of commoners and nobles. However, the distinction between these two groups of people is made on the basis of kinship and descent (Roys 1943:33; Carrasco 1982:30), something very difficult to recover in the archaeological record; there are no direct material correlates for these abstract concepts, particularly if a ranking principle was operative within descent groups. Archaeological investigations, however, do provide information on the material well-being associated with particular individuals in death and in life. Even if we could identify kinship and descent archaeologically (see Haviland 1985), we could not expect a one-to-one correlation, for other principles were also operating.

We know, for instance, that Mixtec priests could come from either the commoner or the noble group (Spores 1983:231) and it is likely that other professions could derive from either group. Pedro Carrasco (1982:28-29) has noted that, for the Aztec and Inca, "one also finds intermediate social strata whose estate position was less precisely defined. Members of such strata might belong to the lower levels of the noble estate, or they might be individuals or groups chosen from among the common people." Among the Maya there were also individuals who fit somewhere in between the nobles and commoners (Martínez Hernández 1929:69; Tozzer 1941:62-63; Roys 1943:33-34; Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:18) and some professions, such as merchants, could be undertaken by noble and commoner alike (Roys 1943:33, 34, 51)—although perhaps at different levels. Among the Maya there may also have been strata between commoners and slaves and both nobles and "wealthy commoners" could own slaves (Roys 1943:34).

Thus, from an archaeological standpoint it could, and does, prove extremely problematical to discriminate between a noble and a commoner, for the status and roles available to each group cross-cut one another and it is probable that similar goods were also available to at least certain members of each group. While the elite of any society—by their very power over the various societal institutions—may well have had greater access to trade items or other luxury goods, the mere presence or absence of such items does not automatically prove that a particular building or burial belonged to a member of the elite. The reverse is also true. Likewise, an archaeological assessment of occupational specialization may or may not correlate with the distinct categories of noble or commoner. A strict two-part division of Mesoamerican society may not be appropriate and may be partially based on ethnocentrism supplied by the early European recorders.

While any given complex society may have a small group of elite people that run it, a larger group is necessary to ensure the maintenance of that society by undertaking a variety of administrative or other occupational tasks. While certain distinctions may be made between members of such a society based on kinship and descent, these are not necessarily reflected in the actual roles of individuals or in the archaeological record. Both archaeological and ethnohistoric data suggest that a simple model of a small number of elite and a much larger number of nonelite does not easily incorporate the complexity of Precolumbian Mesoamerican society. It is, however, one's perceptions about the nature of the relationship between elites and commoners that give rise to various ways of viewing the development and organization of the Precolumbian cultures of Mesoamerica.

Models of Mesoamerican Society

Traditionally, Mesoamerican society has been viewed as having been two-tiered, consisting of nobles, usually read as elites, and commoners, or nonelites (Haviland 1970; Blanton 1978:67; Becker 1979; Adams 1981:341;

Sanders 1981a:359; Flannery 1983a:133; Spores 1983:228; Webster 1985b). In this widely accepted and used model, the nobles governed society while the commoners constituted a large group of peasants or farmers. The elites (read "hereditary rulers") and what is usually referred to as an "upper class" (Adams 1970) or "hereditary noble" group (Spores 1983:228) resided in the center of sites within monumental architecture. The larger peasantry—also referred to as the "humble" or "plebeian class" (Spores 1983:228) or the "sustaining population" (Haviland 1970)—resided in the periphery. The latter group also included "landless tenant-servant tributaries," at least for the Oaxaca area (Spores 1983:228). Slaves are also mentioned, but were "not an identifiable social group" (Spores 1983:228). Importantly, this traditional model is used to portray a society that is either a highly developed chiefdom or an incipient state (cf. Adams 1981, Adams and Smith 1981, and Webster 1985b). Commercialization is not perceived as having played a major role in such a society.

A significant point within the two-tiered traditional model is that central architecture is associated with the elite and elite-related functions and residences. As noted, elites usually are seen as being intricately associated with the core of the site (Blanton et al. 1981:135, 138; Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:226). R. E. W. Adams and W. D. Smith (1981:341) have claimed that at least 90 percent of the formal architecture in Maya centers appears to have been for elite use and have explicitly noted "that there was thus a locational separation between Maya social classes and status groups." Site-center palaces were interpreted to be explicitly for elite residence (Adams 1974, 1981; Haviland 1982:427; Flannery 1983a:133; Flannery and Marcus 1983b:80). While Peter Harrison's (1969:172, 1969) early research at Tikal gave credence to the interpretation of palaces as being equated with elite residences (at least in the Maya area), his recent reanalysis of the data has shown that this was one of their lesser functions (Harrison 1986:53-54).

A variant of the two-class model of Mesoamerican social organization sees these societies as being much more complex than the above picture, but with the same "elite-equals-epicenter" focus (see Haviland 1970; Kurjack 1974:93). This greater complexity is based primarily on inferred occupational specialization (Adams 1970; Becker 1973; see also Haviland 1963, 1974; Blanton et al. 1981), although the existence of class structure in association with such specialization has been questioned by D. L. Webster (1985b:389). R. J. Sharer, however, has recently suggested that Maya society was "multiclass" and had an emerging nonelite "middle class" (Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:226, 249; but see J. Marcus 1983c:470). Sharer (Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:226), however, places his three groups—elite, middle class, and peasants—in a concentric arrangement around the archaeological site center, in conformance with the spatial dicta of the two-class model. In his analysis of Dzibilchaltun spatial dynamics, E. B. Kurjack (1974:93-94, 97) foreshadows Sharer's conclusions.

Two of the basic underpinnings of the Maya two-class model may be questioned: first, the association of all elite residences with the site epicenter (Ford and Arnold 1982:437; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:58) and, second, the projection of concentric rings of status-differentiated people about this epicenter (Arnold and Ford 1980; Ashmore 1981b, 1981c, 1988; D. Chase 1985b, 1986:364; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986a:23, 1986b, 1988:68-71). A contrasting model would view these cities as nonconcentric and the societies as more complex than either of the two-tier variants. Some elites and much of what has been referred to as an upper class may be seen as being distributed throughout a site. The central monumental architecture is viewed as combining both public and elite functions. While such interpretations are new and to some degree still contested in the Maya area (Folan et al. 1982; Haviland 1982), such a model has already been applied in the highland regions of Mesoamerica. The data that R. Millon (1976:220) has presented for Teotihuacan suggest that this site would fit this model: he notes that there was no "simple linear decrease in status from center to periphery," but rather that there was a "mosaic quality to the barrio structure of Teotihuacan." The apartment compounds that he has analyzed at Teotihuacan were replete with different status individuals and did not appear to co-vary in terms of status or elaboration with distance from the site core. Richard E. Blanton (1978:table 4-1, 97-98) seemingly describes a similar situation for Monte Alban. On a slightly different level, but consistent with such data, G. Tourtellot (1983:37) notes for the lowland Maya that "the average area of structures in Seibal dwelling classes seems not to change with distance from the site center."

This latter view of Mesoamerican social organization has been developed largely on the basis of recovered archaeological data. The discovery of luxury items and elaborate architecture and burials outside of the site epicenter is seen as indicating that the strict conception of "center-equals-elite" residence and "periphery-equals-peasant" occupation is incorrect. This does not mean that the site epicenters were not used by the elite, for clearly they were (see, for example, Blanton 1978:20-21, 64); however, not all elites were physically situated in the site epicenter. The archaeological recovery of luxury items in a large number of contexts throughout a site and its environs is also suggestive of a larger proportion of consumers (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1989) than some have suggested (Adams 1981; Webster 1985b), although some models of site organization deny a market function to a primate center (Blanton 1978:36). Market economy or not, the recorded distributions and patterns of luxury items and architecture within the Valley of Mexico, the Valley of Oaxaca, and the lowland Maya area during the Classic and Postclassic periods are indicative of a complexity conforming with Carol Smith's (1976) expectations of an extremely advanced economic system representing a high level of state organization.

Definitions and Assumptions

Based upon both archaeology and ethnohistory, it would seem that Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerican social organization was less clear-cut than a simple two-class system, for there appear to have been varying intermediate categories of individuals. Problems in the usage and theoretical definition of the term "elite" are also evident. If the archaeological data indicate that a large number of people had access to luxury goods, then it is perhaps inappropriate to use those goods alone to identify individuals as belonging to the elite. Rather, the ascription of an individual or architectural group to the elite requires careful consideration of a series of variables (see Haviland 1982:429; Sabloff 1983:419-20).

While it may be quite clear when one has found a royal burial based on its location, the associated objects, and perhaps even the hieroglyphic texts present, a large number of impressive remains are not so easily remanded to elite status. These remains have been ascribed to a "secondary elite" (Adams 1981:342) or an "upper class" (Adams 1970:493), often seen as being a minute segment of society. Yet the use of the word "class" (see Kurjack 1974:6 for a definition) may be inappropriate (see also Webster 1985b:385 for concordance on this point, but for a different reason), for we do not know whether Mesoamerican society was truly a class system. The hereditary nature of the nobility is stressed throughout Mesoamerica (Tozzer 1941; Haviland 1968:101; Thompson 1973; Spores 1983); one must therefore wonder if it was a simple matter to move from one status or role to another, as is indicated by the use of the word "class." The intermediate group of people defined archaeologically by their possession of luxury or high status material remains could be characterized—in keeping with the Western use of the term "elite"—by a similarly materialistic label such as "bourgeoisie." However, in order to avoid the other connotations of this term, perhaps a rough translation of the more neutral Maya term *azmen uinic* or "middle men" might better be employed. No matter which term is used, the important point is that this group existed.

While the elite may have controlled "political administration, formal religious activities, architectural planning and direction, and leadership in warfare" (Adams 1970:490), they were aided by a larger number of nonelite individuals who had various degrees of access to the trappings accorded the formal elite. It is these individuals—the "middle men" using the correlated Maya term—who appear to have constituted a sizable percentage of certain Mesoamerican societies. Whatever the term—"bourgeoisie" or "middle men"—such a distinction is directly reflective of an archaeologically based model that does not emphasize a simple two-group system in Mesoamerica.

A question also remains as to the relationships between the various groups in Mesoamerican society and the system(s) of production and distribution. Occupational specialization is generally assumed for all Mesoameri-

can civilizations (Adams 1970; Becker 1973; Blanton et al. 1981:36-39); explicit description of Aztec merchandise (Berdan 1986) suggests this specialization was extensive. Attempts have been made to reconstruct prehistoric economic systems (Isaac 1986a; McAnany and Isaac 1989). For the Maya, R. E. W. Adams (1970:490) has suggested that there must have been armorers, costume makers, sculptors, scribes, accountants, and musicians and entertainers, as well as stone-cutters and masons. M. Becker (1973) has suggested that there must have been dentists, woodcarvers, stucco-workers, and monument carvers. To this list we would add artists, priests, and architects as well as warriors, police, and adjudicators. Little evidence has actually been recovered that shows other than "potters" (Fry and Cox 1974) and "knappers" (Shafer and Hester 1983, 1986). Epigraphic work indicates specializations in vessel painting (Stuart 1988; Houston, Stuart, and Taube 1988) as well as monument carving and plaster working (N. Grube, personal communication, 1990). Such specialists also appeared to be mobile, traveling from site to site within a single political area (Stuart 1988; N. Grube, personal communication, 1990). Merchants along with many of these specialists probably were individuals of intermediate status or "middle men," individuals with varying degrees of access to elite items, even if lacking a noble birthright.

In spite of the widely known arguments for occupational specialization, there are those who would see Maya society, in particular, as composed of less than 10 percent consumers and at least 90 percent producers. But consumers and producers of what? Some suggest that the Maya were not commercialized, that there was little in the way of crop production for anything beyond the local area, and that there is little actual evidence of craft specialization, particularly as compared with the Mexican highland areas (Webster 1985b). While the identification of occupational specialization is in fact a problem, as noted above, there are sites that indicate the specialization of entire communities (such as lithics at Colha—Shafer and Hester 1983, 1986; or food items in the Hondo Valley and Candelaria Flood Plain—Siemens 1978:124, 1982:216-7; Turner 1978:181; Turner and Harrison 1983:252-3) as well as ethnohistoric indications of commerce, trade, and specialization (Roys 1943:46-56) demonstrating that production often did involve wider areas or markets. In addition, ethnohistoric notations of markets (Tozzer 1941:96), provisional monetary units (Tozzer 1941:94; Roys 1943:52), and terms for various specialized laborers (Martínez Hernández 1929:74-111; Roys 1943:46), imply that there probably were more complicated systems of production and distribution than can yet be reconstructed from archaeological evidence.

The actual identification of elites, "middle men," and commoners can be accommodated using traditional archaeological data, but with a bit more rigor than has sometimes been used in the past. Energy expenditure in burial preparation, house and platform construction, access to basic re-

sources, and the movement of luxury goods can be used to help identify status distinctions. However, there must be realization that differences uncovered may reflect, but not solely equate with, elite status. Michael Smith (1987b) demonstrates the difficulty in making simple correlations between household wealth and status because of a large number of complicating factors such as family size, developmental cycle, and the occupation of household members. There is no universal agreement among researchers and data bases when it comes to such considerations (if they are recognized). Even a consideration of energy expenditure (cf. Sidrys 1976, Tournellot 1988b) in relation to goods and constructions may not be indicative of elite use or restrictions. The elite themselves may represent the apex of labor investment in interments; alternatively, their burials may be identifiable by their placement in key locations at the site and written indications of relationships or positions of power. At the site of Tikal, H. Moholy-Nagy et al. (1984:116) notes that, although "obsidian from different sources was preferred for different types of artifacts," source distance was not a factor in utilitarian as opposed to ceremonial function, citing the fact that green obsidian (central Mexico) blades and points were commonly found in general excavations and utilitarian contexts while most eccentric obsidians found in ceremonial contexts were of gray obsidian from highland Guatemala sources. Indeed, the very association of obsidian with elite usage has been questioned for the end of the Late Classic period in the central Peten of Guatemala based on its ubiquitous appearance in most contexts (P. Rice et al. 1985:601). Greater effort must also be expended in identifying symbols of elite authority as opposed to luxury items.

One further series of relationships also needs to be taken into account: the connections among the peoples of the various sites and regions within Mesoamerica. There are obvious differences in material remains among sites (see, for example, Ashmore and Sharer 1978:17 for Quirigua). Sites are most often assumed to fit into hierarchies (Hammond 1975; Marcus 1976a; Adams 1981; Adams and Jones 1981; Blanton et al. 1981:30-32; Harrison 1981; but see also Haviland 1981) with "central places" filling the majority of administrative, economic, and religious functions and middle- or lower-order places serving subsidiary and sometimes specialized functions. The implications for elites are clear—it is expected that the ranking of nobility may exist not only at a single site, but among sites within a region. Presumably this should be indicated in distinctions in burial data as well as in the evidence of architecture (Price 1978) and ritual activity (D. Chase 1985b, 1986, 1988), with the apex representations of each data set being located in the highest-order center. Importantly, such a hierarchical model may reflect economic specialization, as borne out in both archaeological and ethnohistoric data. If specialization is likely to exist primarily at the subsidiary centers (see, for example, Shafer and Hester 1986:163), then one might not expect these workshops and activity areas in abundance within

the central places themselves—thus, the potential problem in identifying division of labor and workshops in Classic period Maya archaeology.

Traditionally, highland Mesoamerica has always been viewed as having a more highly stratified social organization than that inferred for the lowland Maya area (Sanders 1981a:369); yet, it is debatable whether or not this is in fact the case. The elites in highland regions of Mesoamerica are seen as being easily identified, often associated with particular building forms (Blanton 1978:30); the topic of elites in the Maya area raises more discussion and little agreement. In part, much of the divergence of thought between the two areas may be due to differing research methods and techniques (D. Chase 1985c). Many of the highland syntheses (Blanton 1978; Sanders et al. 1979—but not all, see parts of Flannery and Marcus 1983a) are based on traditions of surface reconnaissance without associated large-scale excavation, a situation that more easily permits sweeping statements and generalizations—especially given the smaller body of potentially conflicting data provided when excavation is not undertaken. In the Maya area extensive excavation and mapping have almost always been conjoined; such a research design often leads to interpretational problems of grand schemes that have been suggested based on surface analysis alone (see, for instance, Haviland 1981). That general statements of cultural evolution, or agreements about such development, are rare in the Maya area is partially due to the extremely rich and varied data base that exists in the Maya lowlands. Others, however, would argue that the disagreement over an understanding of Maya society is due to archaeologists being overly concerned with the elite to the detriment of any investigation of the peasant lifestyle (Rathje 1983). We would note, however, that this criticism is misguided. Without firm knowledge of the Maya elite, the individuals responsible for setting the tenor of lifestyle and the belief systems found throughout the Maya social order, one has little chance of understanding the rest of Maya society; the same holds true for the rest of Mesoamerica (see Blanton et al. 1981:249-250). More studies identifying and indicating relationships among the various levels of Mesoamerican societies are needed.

Concluding Statements

From this discussion it should be apparent that a number of difficulties remain with regard to the archaeological identification of elites in Mesoamerica. There is a distinct divergence between the theoretical definition of elites and their archaeological identification. Identifying the skeletal or residential remains of the powerful in society is not an archaeological absolute—for power, while often associated with material wealth, is not automatically correlated with specific kinds and numbers of items or a particular house plan; these correlations are inferred and neither direct nor absolute. Even the identification of rulers is often a problematic and controversial task.

The relationships that exist within and between social organizations in the various parts of Mesoamerica are also somewhat unclear. The traditional interpretations based on ethnohistory point in all areas to the existence of two basic classes of people—nobles and commoners. Most archaeologists would see the ruling elite in both the lowlands and the highlands as being less than 5 percent of the population, but the ways in which such a percentage is derived vary dramatically from one site or researcher to another. Sometimes the distinction is made solely on the numbers of elaborate vs. nonelaborate residences; in other cases, the percentage is derived from available sleeping space in "palaces;" in some instances, figures are derived on the basis of the presence of specific burial goods. Yet, regardless of the part of Mesoamerica under examination, the reconstruction of its Precolumbian society is incomplete. If elite houses are posited as being identified, one generally lacks an elite burial sample; if rulers have been identified in a burial sample, it is often not known where they resided. The establishment of a percentage of elite in any society based solely on a single attribute, whether house size or burial items, is likely to be misleading (see also Haviland 1982:429 and Sabloff 1983:419-420)—unless those variables have been considered in broader contexts and carefully cross-checked with other data.

Settlement archaeology, as developed in the Maya area by G. R. Willey et al. (1965), was defined to include all of the inhabitants of a particular area regardless of their social status. As operationalized, however, settlement pattern studies often have focused on commoners to the exclusion of other members of society. Even from its earliest manifestation, settlement pattern archaeology in the Maya area was examining a complex network of social relationships without defining how this cacophony of people fit into an overall site or regional organization (see Willey 1956:779; W. Coe 1966). A study of any one group will be incomplete without the placement of that group in a wider social context. We would further argue that, if one wishes to investigate the lower segment of Maya society, extensive vacant terrain excavation must be undertaken in order to identify house pads that leave very little in the way of material remains (see Kurjack 1974:29; Folan et al. 1982:435; Tourtellot 1983:44; and D. Chase 1990). As in other areas of Mesoamerica (such as the Valley of Mexico and Oaxaca), Maya settlement archaeology has illustrated how a specific site epicenter, composed of monumental civic architecture, fits into a wider habitation pattern (Kurjack 1974 for Dzibilchaltun; Webster 1985a for Copan; Ashmore 1981b for Quirigua; Tourtellot 1982, 1988b for Seibal; Haviland 1963, 1970 and Puleston 1983 for Tikal; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b for Caracol). Yet, by accomplishing this, new questions have appropriately been raised that point to problems in our older models. These questions relate directly to the role of elites in Maya society and, more importantly, to how their centers were

organized and functioned within a larger context—problems of obvious interest to all Mesoamericanists.

There is a need to resolve the difference of opinion as to where the elite and “middle men” lived—in the center itself, elsewhere in the core, or distributed throughout the site. Such considerations are directly related to other aspects of the social, political, and economic institutions of a group as well as to the level of complexity achieved by a particular society. Archaeologists themselves also vary in their adherence to a strict two-class model of society; part of this internal disagreement may stem from distinctive research strategies. Some argue for the presence of a relatively large group of intermediate-status individuals; others apparently find enough distinction in the use of the terms “noble” and “commoner.” Our own work suggests that a middle-ground group—perhaps even a “bourgeoisie”—is a material reality regardless of the political truth of the sixteenth century historians. Ancient Mesoamerica may have professed an ideal or even heuristic two-tier system; but, in most cases, there must have been other principles involved that affected the economic and material well-being of many members of its society.

Monumental architecture has been associated with elites, and centrally located monuments have been seen as representative of the ruling elite in their glorification of divine kings (J. Marcus 1974b; L. Schele and M. Miller 1986). While such a focus serves to reinforce the distinctiveness of the elite, it does little to reflect the actual mechanizations of Mesoamerican society. The elite may be seen as a “prime mover” in the development of society and also as an important force in the integration and organization of society. Regardless of how they are conceived, elites are difficult to identify archaeologically, and one is left with an array of questions. How does one view Mesoamerican society and how complex is it? Are there administrative buildings in the site core? Do palaces represent elite residences, administrative buildings, schools, storage facilities, or a combination of these functions? If there are markets (W. Coe 1967:73) and market economies (Fry 1979) at such sites as Tikal, what are the implications of this for the organization of a Mesoamerican site?

There is still a long way to go before archaeologists can adequately model ancient Mesoamerican society. We need more studies on who the elite were, where they lived, what they ate, and what they owned. And, just as importantly, we also need to know how these data relate to other contemporary social groups and how, or whether, the social system changed over time. Delineation of the complexity of Mesoamerican social organization is critical to our assessments of its political organization. Identification of the economic system is key not only for assessing the political order, but also for interpreting models of change. For how can one assess the impact of elite demands on the population if we can't ascertain who they were, where they lived, and how they and their imputed demands related to the rest of Mesoamerican society?

Notes

1. This paper is essentially the same version that was circulated to all volume participants in 1987. It has been left largely intact as a number of the volume's participants make reference to it. Even though little changed, we believe that the substantive message remains as valid now as it was then.