

3. Elites and the Changing Organization of Classic Maya Society

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MUCH of what we know about the organization of Classic period Maya society derives from remains that are deemed elite. In spite of substantial "settlement pattern" work in the last three decades, it is the Maya elite that still provide the primary standard by which aspects of Classic society are judged. Epigraphic texts and iconographic scenes found on numerous carved stones and painted vessels provide data concerning the leading families—and, by extension, the elite—of the time. Large, well-built architecture is generally ascribed to this group of individuals, as are most items perceived to be of value. Yet not all aspects of Maya elites or the organization that they provided for their society are easily seen in the archaeological record; thus, the majority of our fleshed-out interpretations about the upper tier of the Classic Maya come from models that are taken from a variety of nonarchaeological sources. In fact, much of what we believe about Maya society does not come from data about the Maya at all, but rather from suppositions premised on the models being used. Thus, in order to understand the organization of Maya society and its elite, one first needs to identify the diverse models that are used to structure the archaeological remains. When this is done, it becomes clear that the archaeological data offer distinctive clues as to how such models should be structured or, rather, restructured.

Views of Classic Maya Social Organization

Models offered for the interpretation of Classic Maya society rely heavily on the social distinctions inferred by the use of the words "commoner" and "noble/elite." Yet, these two classes of people are not clearly seen in the archaeological record (Chase and Chase, introductory paper in this volume). In general, three different models of Classic Maya society have been offered. These versions of Maya society may be termed (1) egalitarian, (2) two-class, and (3) complex.

Based on modern-day ethnographic work, E. Z. Vogt (1961, 1969, 1983; Vogt and Cancian 1970) suggested that Classic Maya society was basically egalitarian, with rotating civic or ceremonial offices. Classic Maya were viewed as having dispersed populations and vacant ceremonial centers; important offices would have rotated among the different lineages much like

the modern-day cargo system found in Zinacantan and other contemporary Maya communities. Associated research (Willey 1956; Bullard 1960, 1964) in the Southern lowlands initially tended to suggest a potential archaeological fit with such a model. It is likely, however, that the modern system of rotating offices is largely the result of Spanish contact and influence on modern Maya community structure (Price 1974:461). With more recent archaeological work and the discovery of large populations in and around Classic period Maya centers (Haviland 1970; Rice and Puleston 1981:144-45), this model has been generally discredited. It should be noted, however, that D. A. Freidel (1981; see also Vogt 1983:105) has attempted a bond between some elements of the egalitarian and feudal models with the use of a "pilgrimage-fair" approach to Maya centers.

J. Eric Thompson (1942 [1927], 1966 [1954]) is largely responsible for the two-class model of Maya society that dominates present-day conceptions of Classic period Maya social structure. Thompson's (1931, 1942 [1927], 1966 [1954]; see also Becker 1979:11) dichotomy between "priest" and "peasant" to some degree has been directly replaced in modern parlance by "elite" and "commoner." His model presented a Maya site as being less than a city, something he first termed a "ceremonial center" (1931:334) and then equated with vacant "religious centers" (1942 [1927]:12-13); this conception of a Maya center has recently been revived by Gair Tourtellot (n.d.). Ethnohistory was utilized with Thompson's model to further develop a two-class society comprised of nobles and commoners with scant reference being also made to the existence of slaves. Ethnohistorical data are often called upon (Roys 1943, 1965; Folan et al. 1982; J. Marcus, this volume) to support this model despite the fact that the same ethnohistorical material can also be used to support a more complex model (D. Chase 1986:364, this volume) and despite the fact that much of this ethnohistory was recorded by people who did not understand Maya culture and may have had an ethnocentric bias. Thompson's "ceremonial center" and his conception of it proved an easy fit to Bishop Landa's proposed "concentric model" of a Maya center where the temples occupied the node of the town and were surrounded by the residences of important people or elites, with the commoners living on the peripheries (Tozzer 1941:62-64). Serious questions have been raised as to whether Landa's model of a Maya town was even based on the Maya, for he freely helped himself to data provided by other contact period writers who dealt with cultures further south in Central America (D. Chase 1986:362-63). Furthermore, Classic (Ashmore 1981c, 1988:160-61; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:57-58) and Late Postclassic (D. Chase 1986:366; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986a, 1986b:25, 1988:68-71) archaeological data do not tend to support this spatial conception of a Maya community.

More recently, the imputed two-class model has been utilized in projections of Maya society as being either nonstate or prestatelike and relatively

noncomplex. Support for this position is largely derived from analogies to societies outside of the New World. Under a feudal model, Classic period Maya elites are believed to have occupied the central architecture of a given site, surrounded by a huge mass of farming peasants (Adams and Smith 1981; but also see Webster 1985b). These small number of elites are also seen as having rotated among several sites and palaces (Adams and Smith 1981:343). Ethnographic analogy to African societies has also been used in conjunction with the two-class model to attempt to see the Maya as either a developed chiefdom or a "patron-client state" (Sanders 1981a:369). Joyce Marcus (1983c:472-73) has properly pointed to the problems involved with such approaches, noting that "one can find closer analogies to other Mesoamerican states than to . . . any model we could borrow from another hemisphere." Other models currently in vogue and based on the two-class construction of Maya society include the "segmentary state" model (Fox 1987, 1989; see conclusion, this volume) and the related concept of the Maya as having had "regal-ritual" cities (Sanders and Webster 1988).

The third model that has been applied to Classic Maya society was partly developed on the basis of the archaeological data, rather than from ethnography or ethnohistory; this model views the Maya as an urban and highly complex civilization (Haviland 1967, 1970, 1981; Adams 1970; Becker 1973; Folan et al. 1983; D. Chase, A. Chase and W. Haviland 1990). Based on archaeological assessments of wealth, some have also postulated the existence of an emerging middle class (Willey et al. 1965:5; Sabloff 1975a; Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983:226) and additionally point to inferences of occupational specialization, often within a regional frame of reference. The nature of this third model, however, is hotly contested by others who emphatically state that "there was no Maya 'middle class'" (J. Marcus 1983c:470; see also Webster 1985b) and who subsume any specialization within a rigidly structured two-class system; while some complexity is recognized, it is deemed the exclusive purview of the nobles—seen as the elite—and their retainers—seen as the specialists—who are believed to have made up a maximum of 10 percent of Maya society, as compared to simpler commoners, who constituted the other 90 percent (Webster 1985b:385). Contrary to this view, the Caracol data—portions of which are presented below—fully support the complexity implied in the third model; these data point to the existence of more than two components of Maya society and effectively negate the use of any dualistic division of Maya society into a very small group of nobility-elite consumers and a very large group of commoner-peasantry nonconsumers.

A large part of the problem in modeling Classic period Maya society lies squarely in the archaeological realm and in the way that Maya sites and regions are researched. Either the archaeological data are difficult to interpret or, more likely, insufficient data are recovered that are pertinent to problems concerning social and political organization. Most Maya sites are

huge sprawling metropolises. While many of their structures are visible as mounded buildings, many others were not mounded and lie under the level jungle floor; they are difficult to see archaeologically because of the nature of their perishable construction. Thus, the lowest segment of Maya society is likely to go largely undetected (cf. D. Chase 1990 and A. Chase 1990). Even if all mounded structures are recorded for a specific site, such information is difficult to interpret when extensive excavations are lacking, as William Haviland (1982:428-29) has repeatedly pointed out. Because archaeology in such Maya centers takes a lot of time and is also a costly enterprise, only a small number of visible constructions are ever sampled. Often such sampling involves only a small excavation to determine temporal information; data based on such probes are not conducive to being used for social interpretations (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1990). Even if a large number of years are spent working on any one site, the recovered sample is often still minuscule and plagued by unknowns. Often our models are neither confirmed nor disproved by the archaeological data themselves. It is, in fact, unusual when archaeological data may be used even to point to problems in the existing models, much less to derive models of prehistoric social organization. Thus, many of our models actually have little, if any, basis in archaeologically derived information.

Rather than decry the nature of Maya archaeological data, however, attempts can be made to use archaeologically recovered information to make some statements concerning social differentiation in Classic period society. In particular, it is possible to place certain archaeologically recovered interments at the upper end of the social spectrum. When such burials and their included items are compared with other interments from the same sites and throughout the Southern Maya lowlands, other differences and similarities can be discerned in a given burial population. When the distribution of luxury items and the distribution of burial types with architectural groups are examined, it is possible to gain some idea of how Maya sites and regions were organized and integrated over space and particularly of the ways in which segments of Maya populations were spatially located.

The following discussion utilizes interments from the site of Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1987b, 1989, in press; S. Jaeger 1991) as the primary data base and supplements this information with Classic period data from Tayasal (A. Chase 1979, 1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1990) and Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase 1986, 1988, 1990, 1991; D. Chase and A. Chase 1981, 1986b, 1988, 1989). While none of these sites have been utilized in traditional arguments over the nature of Classic Maya society, each of them provides data relevant to our view of its organization. This analysis suggests a complicated social division and spatial distribution of the Classic Maya and demonstrates the utility of investigating single sites and their associated regions in an intensive way. The great diversity in the kinds of remains that may be recovered over the span of a long-term project also permits more

control over the social variables of a given Maya society both for a single site and for other sites within its region. This, in turn, allows comparative statements to be made that can facilitate either the rejection or the refinement of the previously defined models.

The Identification of the Maya Elite: The Ruler

The imputed rulers of Classic Maya society are fairly easy to recognize in death because their tombs often contain many of the symbols that are associated with the named and titled individuals found on carved stone monuments. Although rulers alone did not represent the totality of the Maya elite, it is often difficult to ascribe many others to such a category. L. Schele and M. E. Miller (1986:67) have reviewed the costumes and imagery that are associated with personages appearing on Classic stone monuments. They conclude that the rulers could be clothed in three costumes. One of these was for daily wear; concerning this set of clothes, Schele and Miller (1986:67) note that "surprisingly, the king's hipcloth was often simpler than those worn by people of lesser rank . . . often made simply of white cotton." However, two other costumes are in evidence for the rulers; these are termed their "ritual" and "war" costumes, which "used exotic materials from distant regions" and included "ornate and weighty headdresses, masks, capes of complex design, large belts, ornate loincloths, skirts of jaguar pelt, ornamented backracks, high-backed sandals, leg straps, and jade and shell jewelry" (Schele and Miller 1986:67).

While the histories of Maya dynasties are well known from stelae and altars, few interments of rulers have ever been archaeologically recovered (cf. M. Coe 1988). The excavated sample of these elite includes: two rulers from Palenque (Chacaal I [Schele 1986]; Pacal [Ruz 1954b, 1973, 1977]), possibly ten rulers from Tikal (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:124-31, table 6; Laporte and Fialko 1987; W. Coe 1990), and perhaps several from Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979, 1982a). While all of the potential rulers from this sample are known for some degree of opulence in their interment, most of their burials have not yet seen full publication or discussion. Thus, the associated markers of rulership that have been recovered archaeologically with the burials of known rulers are difficult to cull from the literature.

During the final 1985 season at Santa Rita Corozal, the Early Classic burial of a ruler (fig. 3.1) was recovered on axis to Structure 7—the largest and presumably the most important Classic period building at the site (D. Chase and A. Chase 1986b:11-12, 1988:31-35). This interment provides an excellent starting point for a discussion of the ruling elite. The skeletal remains of a male were placed in a huge tomb; the chamber measured 4.25 m by 1.5 m by just over 2 m in height. The objects that were recovered with this individual make it clear that he was of the highest status. As with most rulers, he was buried with textual material. Although no carved stone monuments occur at Santa Rita Corozal that might contain his name, a

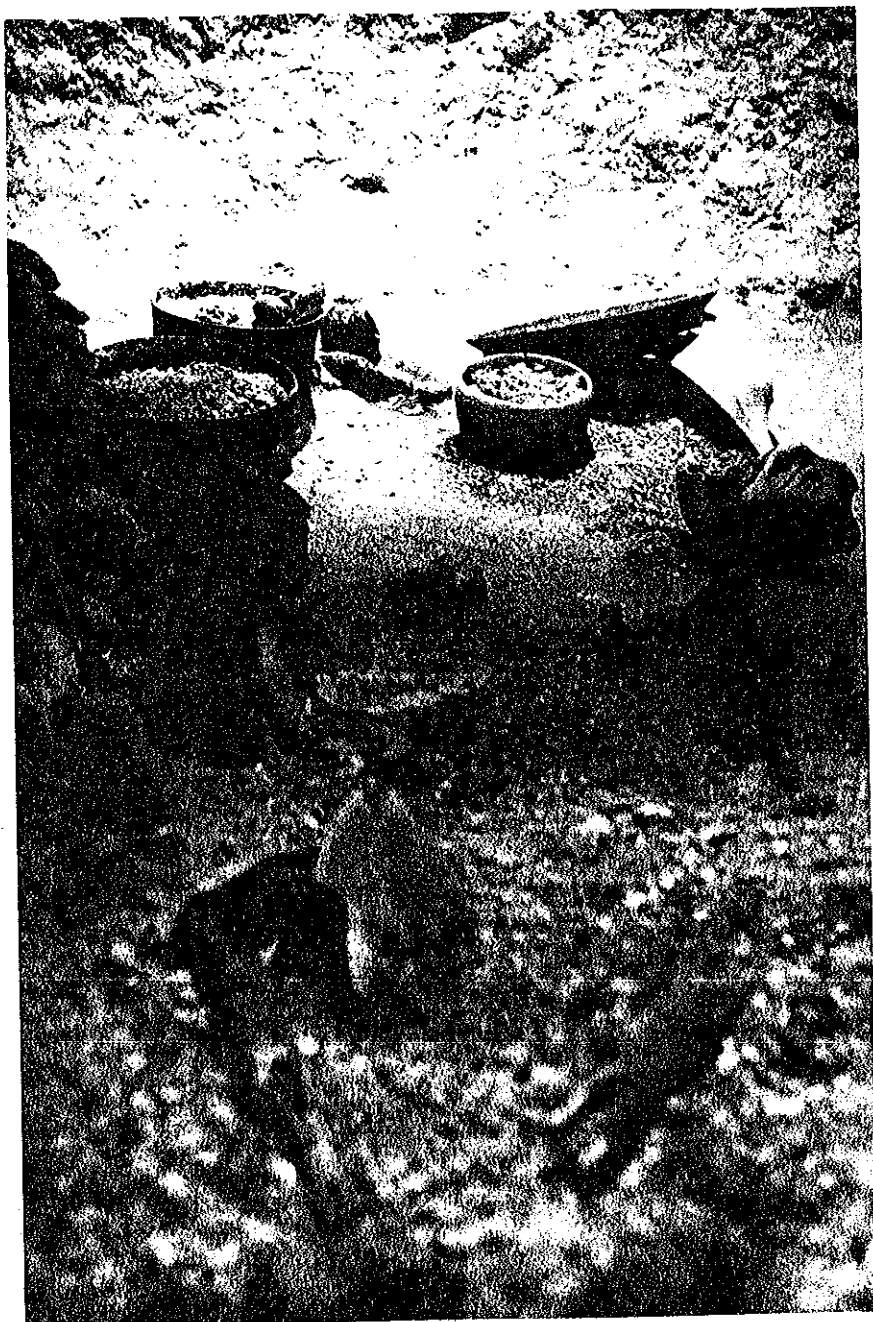


Fig. 3.1. An Early Classic interment from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7-3rd.

cache above his tomb provides hieroglyphs that we have loosely translated as "Great Scrolled Skull [*Yax Toh Pol*]"; this same text associates this name with other titles including *Mah-kin-ah*, a title usually indicative of rulership. A very decomposed codex was placed above his head and parts of him were covered with cinnabar. He was buried with eight ceramic vessels, including two cylinder tripods and one stone bowl. While I do not attribute magical abilities or underworld connotations to the nine vessels in the chamber, it is significant that stone vessels tend to occur only with burials of elite individuals, although not necessarily of ruling status (witness Chikin Tikal—Orrego n.d.; see also A. Chase in preparation). The limestone vessel that accompanied Great Scrolled Skull was carved with glyphic material (identifying it as a cacao vessel) and two portraits of God N, suggesting the theme of rebirth.

Great Scrolled Skull was also accompanied by a sizable amount of jade ornamentation, including a set of shell-backed pyrite and jadeite mosaic earflares and a jadeite pendant, as well as several hundred perforated flamingo-tongue shells, and a *Spondylus* shell that had been partially plastered and inlaid with cut shell. A large cowrie shell, which was an important status marker at Santa Rita Corozal during the Early Classic period, was placed inside the limestone bowl. A large composite blue-jadeite pendant resembling a bird was in his right chest area. Three large perforated jadeite tinklers of the kind usually seen on belt ornamentations of individuals on stone monuments were to his west. A 3/4 lifesize jadeite mask was set over the limestone bowl. A mosaic hematite mirror was also placed in the tomb along with three large *Turbinella marginata* shells, the body of a bird, two turtlesHELLS (possibly representative of his bacab status), and three wooden disks covered with stucco and painted with figures in Teotihuacan style. Three cinnabar-tipped spearpoints rested in his pelvis area and covered a stingray spine; such spines are often found in important Maya burials of the Classic period (D. Chase 1991). Even more impressive was the huge chert bar placed over his right side; this was at one time presumably the middle element of a ceremonial bar and, when used, was partially wrapped in matting that ended in elaborately styled serpent heads similar to those so often portrayed in stone monuments.

Thus, this one burial included almost every conceivable marker of rulership (see below), far more than would have been found in the burials of interior rulers such as that of Burial 116 at Tikal, the burial of Ruler A or Ah Cacao (W. Coe 1990:604-09). The number of elite markers in this chamber may have been due to the wish of the ruler to publicize his esteemed status, perhaps because he occupied one of the edges of the Maya area. Santa Rita Corozal's positioning at a crucial trade node (D. Chase and A. Chase 1989) may have also meant that he had his choice of whichever foreign items he wished before they were sent into the interior.

The uppermost elite are fairly easy to identify—in spite of the fact that it is rather unusual that a match can be made between a burial and textual information contained in carved stone monuments; their remains tend to be distinctive because of both location and contents. Rulers can be identified primarily by the markers associated with their interments in conjunction with the special locations of such interments. Significantly, however, no one marker identifies a ruler; a combination of markers must exist for the appropriate identification to be made. Such markers include codex remains, cinnabar, mirrors, stone vessels, jadeite jewelry, jadeite earflares, jadeite masks, jadeite pendants, jadeite or stone tinklers, ceremonial bars, certain rare shells, textual materials, and perhaps stingray spines. However, as discussed below, interment in a tomb, in and of itself, does not necessarily identify one as being of the highest elite status.

The Elite and the “Middle Men” of Caracol

In their *Lexicon for Maya Architecture*, meant to be applicable to the whole Maya area, H. S. Loten and D. M. Pendergast (1984:9) have defined a “tomb” as “an elite interment.” While once considered fairly easy to determine who was and was not elite based solely on the presence of this one characteristic, archaeological work at Caracol has shown that tombs are not the sole province of the elite (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:56-57, 75). Should such chambers be representative solely of elite burials, then an estimated 60 to 80 percent of the architectural groups at Caracol—based on patterns established for the site settlement area—would have been used by those accorded elite status; obviously, this one-to-one correspondence does not hold. Partially because of the general association of tombs with those of elite status elsewhere in the Maya area and partially because of the distribution of certain other material items at Caracol, we have been concerned with identifying markers of rulership and/or status and have ultimately postulated the existence—based on the archaeological record—of a segment of the Classic period Maya population that is neither elite nor commoner and may be equivalent to the ethnohistorically recorded Maya term *azmen uinic* or “middle man” (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988:75; D. Chase, this volume; see also A. Chase, N. Grube, and D. Chase 1991 and Jaeger 1991).

Thus far, more than 1600 structures have been mapped at Caracol, representing perhaps 25 percent of the total to be mapped in the core area (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:72-73). Reconnaissance of unmapped areas has demonstrated (cf. Healy et al. 1983:408-09) that the density of Late Classic occupation at Caracol (Chase, Chase and Haviland 1990:502) was greater than that postulated for Tikal (Culbert et al. 1990). The causeway system at Caracol served to integrate this large population with both agricultural systems that abut the epicenter of the site and causeway termini which, for the most part, were special function plaza areas (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:52-53). Tombs occur in plaza groups throughout the site of Caracol

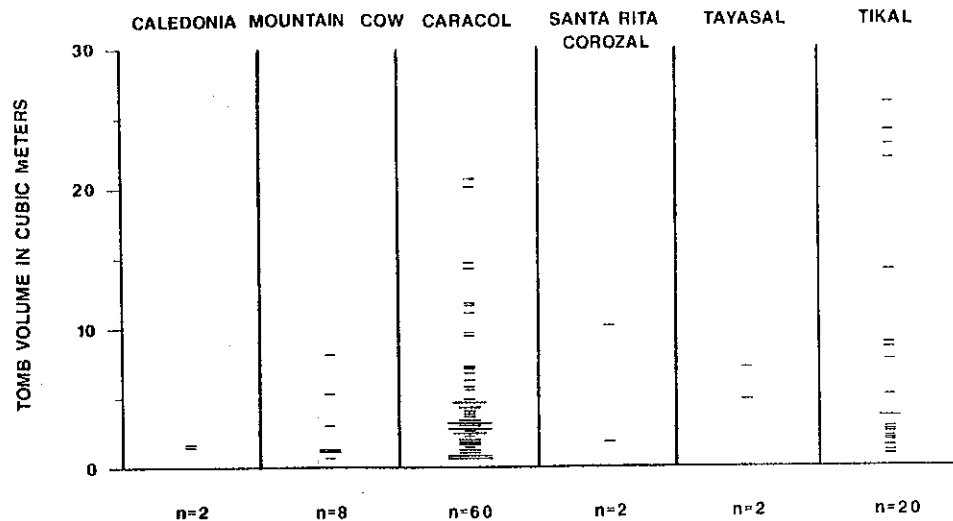
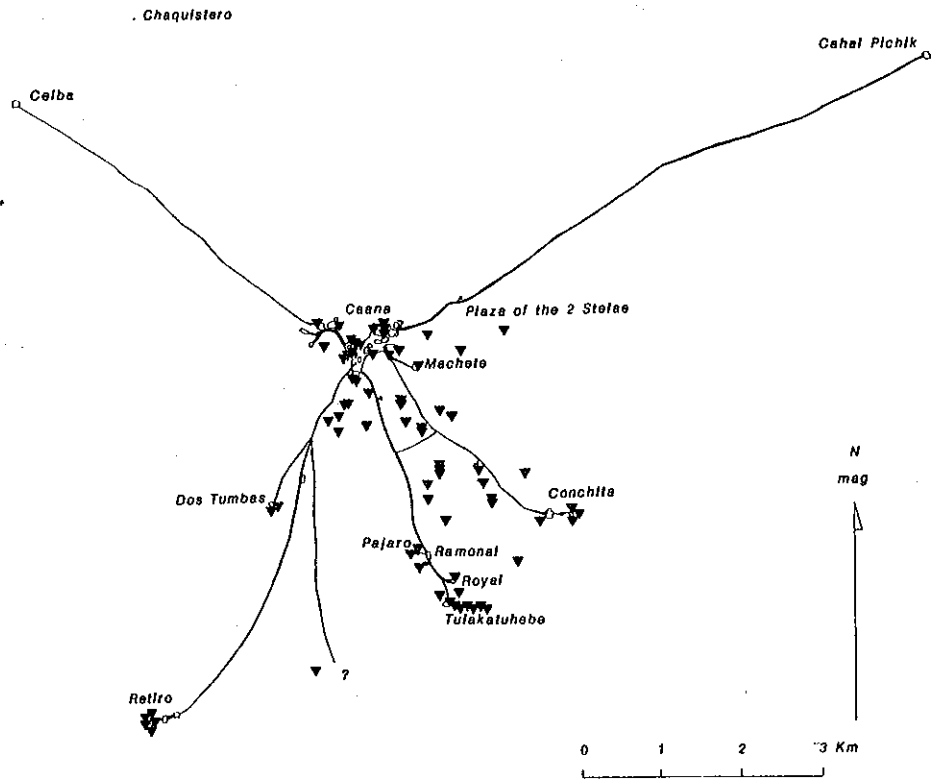


Fig. 3.2. Volumetric data for Caracol tombs relative to those within the region (Mountain Cow and Caledonia) and those at Santa Rita Corozal, Tayasal, and Tikal (cf. J. P. Laporte and V. Fialko 1987 and W. R. Coe 1990:917, table 156).

and do not appear to be specifically correlated with the size or elaborateness of architecture; some of these are not associated with or on axis to raised constructions, but are rather directly set or built into the plaza itself. Likewise, the size of the tombs is not directly correlated with distance from the epicenter.

Data have been collected at Caracol relating to 60 tombs; the volumetric measurements of these are shown in figure 3.2. Other tombs are known ($n=13$), but have been neither measured nor excavated. Further work at the site will no doubt increase this sample substantially. Figure 3.3 demonstrates that the distribution of these tombs ($n=73$) is not limited to the site epicenter or the causeway termini. The Caracol tombs contain a diverse array of occupants and objects (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase in press a). Elaborate goods are frequently found in small tombs far from the site epicenter while multiple individuals are found in tombs within both the epicenter and the core. The number of individuals present in any tomb ranges from 1 to 24. Higher-status individuals found in the epicenter are usually the sole occupants of a tomb; yet, multiple individuals also occupy large epicentral tombs, and single individuals occupy large and small tombs outside the epicenter. However, epicentral as opposed to core location for a tomb does not immediately indicate status. With the possible exception of written texts, the mere presence or absence of tombs or specific objects does not appear to provide a simple correlation with status at Caracol.

Glyphic texts accompany five tombs that have been documented at Caracol. While four of these texts occur in the epicenter, one of the texts occurs



CARACOL, BELIZE

Fig. 3.3. The site of Caracol and its road system; each inverted triangle represents a known tomb.

in a smaller tomb occupied by a single individual in an eastern building at the end of one of Caracol's nine causeways. Interestingly, none of the deciphered dates or names of the individuals in the five tombs with painted texts are recorded on any of the stone monuments—and the most important interment in terms of size and location thus far recovered at Caracol is the tomb of a woman. One of these tombs with texts, however, contains an individual who is accompanied by a Caracol Glyph—indicating that the use of emblem glyphs is not restricted to rulers during the Late Classic era. None of the tombs contain clear markers of rulership, such as those seen at Santa Rita Corozal, Palenque, or Tikal. Based on the associated items within the five tombs and the content of the hieroglyphic inscriptions themselves, it is doubtful that any of Caracol's rulers have thus far been archaeologically recovered. Without doubt, however, all of the tombs associated with hieroglyphic texts may be assigned to Caracol's elite. Besides their direct association with Maya writing systems—usually the purview of the

upper echelons of Maya society (Adams 1970)—the very location of such interments in spatially important constructions at the site lends support to such an interpretation, as do certain of the accompanying objects.

The other fifty-five investigated tombs are not dealt with so easily. Location and simple discussions of contents provide no clear correlations. The volume of some outlying tombs in the core of Caracol rivals the epicentral tombs; interestingly, some of these are in no way directly linked to or associated with Caracol's causeways. Similarly, some high status, or at least wealthy, chamber interments—as defined by the inclusion of luxury items—clearly occur outside of the site's epicenter and in groups of little architectural distinction. However, tomb volume itself may serve as the best single indicator of status—especially when considered in conjunction with provenience and material associations. A review of tomb sizes in conjunction with associated features and objects suggests that, while the elite may have clustered in the epicenter and in the areas about the causeway termini, they were also located in other areas of the core. The presumedly common households at the lowest end of the spectrum are residential groups of relatively small size with no tombs. By far the largest number of tombs occur in outlying groups in the core of Caracol; tomb sizes within this group vary extensively. Given the large number of tombs, they cannot all be elite; yet some special status seems denoted. Thus, it would appear that the existence of a middle group is suggested by the data, with tomb use being limited to these elite and middle groups. Certain outlying elite or middle groups are located in close proximity to agricultural terraces—suggesting that the individuals occupying such groups were overseers of the fields. Irrespective of other considerations or associations, however, a tomb volume of over 7 sq m per person probably indicates elite status at Caracol.

Not all individuals within a residential group were interred equally. The majority of intensively excavated groups have uncovered differences in burial types (tomb, crypt, cist). These treatments may reflect a variety of differences. Some are separated chronologically and may reflect the fates of family members over time. Contemporary diversity, however, may suggest social variability due to age, sex, office, or achievements—and may include accumulation of wealth. The use of these indicators reflects social position not only at Caracol proper, but also within its greater polity. In general, the internal spatial volume of the tombs in Caracol proper is larger than that found in other sites within the Caracol region (cf. fig. 3.2), suggesting that tomb volume may also be used to measure social position within the overall Caracol polity.

The variability in the archaeological patterns recovered at Caracol does not accord well with models of Maya social organization that adhere to a two-class system. Clearly the elites were not restricted to the site epicenter, nor were the commoners the only ones living in the site core and, presumably, the site mantle (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:51-54 for a defini-

tion of settlement terms for Caracol). The complexity of the recovered remains also suggests the existence not only of a central dynasty, but also of administrative bureaucrats who were necessary to keep the extensive terraced fields of Caracol operational and presumably may have occupied the fields that they managed. The site layout and the distribution of the archaeological remains also argue against the occurrence of any egalitarian society. When the Caracol data are combined with those for outlying settlements, the complexity of the situation becomes clear and tiers within the administrative and social system are clearly evident.

The Late Classic Maya Polity: Elites over Space

Caracol is one of several "primate sites" in the Southern lowlands; because of this, certain of the archaeological distributions seen at the site may be expected. For instance, given its primate status, one could easily predict that it would have been occupied by a high percentage of high status individuals. However, neither the actual number of well-to-do individuals at Caracol nor the existence of what appears to be a middle level of society was expected. The other unexpected item was the distribution of these elite and middle level groups at the site, for they are not limited to the site epicenter. It is clear from spatial distributions of plaza groups and terraced fields at Caracol that many of these people were located in areas that suggest an immediate relationship with the agricultural fields. The simplistic model of a nonfarming elite and a farming peasantry is contradicted by the Caracol data.

The question that must be asked is: how representative is the Caracol realm of other Maya polities? Is it in the mainstream or on one end of a continuum of cultural variation? Archaeology in the Maya area has tended to be site-specific in interpreting Maya social and political relationships; to some extent, this focus has been fostered by the stress placed on the epigraphy of each site because the hieroglyphic texts are often very site-specific. The organizational models that have been used in the Maya area have also tended to ignore variability among sites or to adhere to preformulated models. Such models often homogenize the distinctions and variability among sites and their regions, usually being premised on the analysis of equal units. Thus, Maya sites and regions theoretically begin to resemble each other, leading to incorrect conclusions about the nature of Maya polities and their trajectories.

Examples of such problems are seen at several scalar levels. At a higher synthetic level, the problem is evident in the presentation of Maya political units as geographical areas based solely on the possession of an emblem glyph. P. Mathews' (1985) division of the central Maya area into territorial realms is premised only on one class of data and does not even take into account epigraphic interpretations of political relationships such as the domination of one named emblem site by another (cf. Yaxchilan and

Bonampak or Piedras Negras). Yet Mathews' heuristic divisions of Southern lowland Maya space have been provided with a reality all their own through interpretations concerning a supposed "balkanization" of Maya political units over time (Dunham 1988, based on Willey 1974). The use of such a balkanization model implies the early existence and subsequent breakup of a single large polity or a series of large polities; such a supposition does not reflect what we know about the archaeological record of most Classic period sites. Proponents of the balkanization or fragmentation model ignore the fact that over time empty space is largely being occupied and filled in by a burgeoning Maya population; no societal breakup is required (see also Escobedo A. 1991:72-74 for a critique of this model). S. D. Houston (1987:97) has in fact demonstrated that Maya polity size remains rather constant over time and "provides little evidence of progressive political compaction or of great differences in the size of Classic polities."

It should also not be surprising that there may be variability in the organization of Maya sites either by region or by polity. Thus, at Caracol and Tikal—another primate center—there might be a mixing of social statuses within the core of the site even though this pattern cannot be projected for certain other lowland sites (see Arnold and Ford 1980 and Ford and Arnold 1982:437, but see Folan et al. 1982 and Haviland 1982). The situation at Caracol does not easily accommodate a model that calls for Maya society to be composed only of elites and commoners. If one insists on the use of a two-class model, then one could argue, at least from Caracol's standpoint, that Maya society contained an almost even balance of commoners and elites—something that is inconsistent with the general usage of the term "elite" and that is unlikely even as an extreme end of a continuum. Alternatively (following Folan et al. 1982), one could argue that the entire core of the site was largely composed of elites and that nonelites lived further out in the mantle; however, again, the number of people that would have to be classified as elite, conservatively estimated at greater than 40,000 people for the immediate Caracol core, is inconsistent with the definition of the term.

Based on the archaeological distribution of both architectural groups and tombs at Caracol, we infer that the archaeology dictates the existence of a sizeable group of people in between the hereditary elite and the true commoners or peasants. These individuals may be similar to the *azmen uinic* or "middle men" described for the historic Maya. While at some sites such a group may have been small or perhaps even nonexistent, at others—such as Caracol—the group was quite large. It seems likely that such "middle men" would be concentrated at primate centers, for at second-level Classic period sites such as Tayasal or Classic period Santa Rita Corozal, the dichotomy between the rulers and the ruled is much easier to see.

If we tend to conceptualize the Maya as a series of city-state-like polities, it is important to conceptualize their associated sites within an interrelated and potentially varied framework. Classic period polities did exist, but sites

erecting stone monuments and carving glyphic records were not all of the same level of independence. Caracol dominated other sites within its sphere of influence. This can be seen epigraphically, ceramically, and architecturally. Within the Caracol sphere other sites—such as La Rejolla and those in the Mountain Cow area—were loci of stela erection. The La Rejolla and the Mountain Cow sites are located from 8.5 to 11 km from Caracol's epicenter, on the edge of that site's mantle (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:53). The dependence of the La Rejolla center on Caracol is recorded in its hieroglyphic record (Houston 1987:92, 98). These dependent relationships are defined in other ways as well. At least one of the Mountain Cow sites—Cahal Pichik—is joined with Caracol by a causeway. The hierarchy among sites may also be seen in the recovered remains. Excavations by J. Eric Thompson (1931) in the Mountain Cow region revealed a large number of high-status burials in this region, as seen in the size and number of tombs recovered in his early excavations and also to some degree in the contents of these chambers. The size (fig. 3.3) and contents of the eight chambers excavated by Thompson are consistent with a distribution of similar tombs in the Caracol core, as is the size of the associated architectural groups. The Mountain Cow tombs, however, are not as large as those at the end of the upper Caracol spectrum, and none is associated with painted texts. One smaller tomb contained a red-painted dot on its central capstone (Thompson 1931:290), a feature sometimes associated with elite burials at Tikal (Triak 1963:8) and similar to a high-status burial at Tayasal that had a specially imported red-sandstone slab used as a capstone (A. Chase 1983:402). These data suggest the existence of a structured status hierarchy that can also be seen even further afield within the Caracol polity. Some 16 km away from the Caracol epicenter—within the Caracol sphere—is the site of Caledonia (Awe 1985). While the site is small, it contains impressive architecture and even a ballcourt. Ceramically, it possesses a straightforward Caracol assemblage. Interestingly, from the standpoint of this consideration, the interments associated with Caledonia's more impressive architecture (fig. 3.3) fall on the lower end of the tomb volumes recorded for the Caracol core. Thus, given a concern with reviewing variation, it is possible not only to see some differences among sites within a single polity, but also to identify—based on architecture, burials, and texts—the probable tiers in the social and administrative system within a given region.

Classic Maya Elites Over Time: Changing Relationships

That the nature and role of the elite changed over time within the polities of the Southern Maya lowlands is likewise to be expected. During the Early Classic period, it would appear that a sizeable gulf existed between the elite and the rest of Maya society. Most elaborate burials and residences were likely to be found in central locales. Besides being reflected in the settle-

ment data, this dichotomy can be seen in Early Classic burial data at such sites as Uaxactun, Tikal, Tayasal, Caracol, and Santa Rita Corozal. The Early Classic elite tended to be buried in chambers in prominent locations and to have been accompanied in death with far more luxury items and embellishment than in other contemporary interments. At Santa Rita Corozal, such burial patterning is clearly in evidence. The Early Classic high-status interments were all associated with central architecture and were accompanied by several elaborately painted or unusual vessels as well as with jadeite jewelry and special shells; other interments that can be assigned to this same era were fairly simple and were generally accompanied by a single vessel and/or, perhaps, a single jadeite bead. The gradations and blurring of labor investment in burials that is seen during the Late Classic period is not present. The "middle men" must not have been as prominent a factor during the Early Classic as they were during the Late Classic period. While the status of men would appear to have been higher than that of women—presumably because of the offices that they occupied and, perhaps, because of warfare—women were nonetheless interred in tombs placed in prominent locations during the Early Classic period at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1986:8-12), Uaxactun (A. Smith 1950:88), Tikal (Laporte and Fialko 1987:141-46; Orrego n.d. for Chikin Tikal), and Rio Azul (F. Saul and J. Saul, personal communication, 1989). Women continued to maintain their prominent political status during the Late Classic, as may be seen at both Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1963, 1970) and Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:27, 60). At Caracol, it is clear that women also played a major role in problems of succession relating to rule at the onset of the Late Classic period.

Based on the spatial distribution of the Maya elite—as seen in their burials—and the larger number of small Early Classic sites that have yielded elaborate interments, the Early Classic polities may have been both smaller in total area and more numerous than the polities of the Late Classic. More local dynastic lines were probably directly competing for power during the Early Classic, not all of them using permanent epigraphic records. During the Late Classic, it would appear that the number of these competitive dynasties became smaller as polities grew in overall size and subsumed once-independent elites within the frameworks of larger systems.

The Late Classic period witnessed the consolidation of power among a few select sites. Tikal and Caracol were two of these centers. Within the Tikal region, sites such as El Encanto, Navahuelal, Uolantun, and Chikin Tikal were probably subsumed within Greater Tikal and their once powerful and semi-independent elites became directly subservient to the elites of Tikal proper. In the Caracol region, Hatzcap Ceel and Cahal Pichik in the Mountain Cow area, both important and presumably independent centers during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic eras, were subsumed within the Caracol sphere by the onset of the Late Classic. Cahal Pichik was directly

linked to the Caracol epicenter by a long causeway, implying its inclusion into the site proper. To the southwest of Caracol, a similar fate can be documented for the Retiro terminus (fig. 3.2). Sites to the northwest of Caracol were similarly included in Greater Caracol. While Caracol proper encompassed an area at least 6 km distant to the northwest of the epicenter, the site's dominance can also be seen in sites 11 km distant; Caballo exhibits a single Giant Ahau altar—a Caracol hallmark—and the monuments of La Rejolla explicitly document a subservient relationship of its lords to the Caracol ruler around 9.12.0.0.0 (A.D. 672).

Warfare also apparently increased dramatically in scale during the Late Classic period, and its nature began to change (D. Chase and A. Chase n.d.). While records of warfare are understandably spotty during the Early Classic given the paucity of texts, the picture that one gains of that era is of a single site striving to gain dominion over sites in its immediate region. During the Late Classic, these larger and more powerful survivors went after each other. Caracol Altar 21 records the defeat of Tikal by Caracol in 9.6.8.4.2 (A.D. 562), an event that had extremely traumatic effects at the latter site for over a century (A. Chase 1991). Caracol also records its conquest of Naranjo in 9.9.18.16.3 (A.D. 631)—both at Naranjo and on its own Stela 3—perhaps the reason for Naranjo's need to establish a new dynasty through a Dos Pilas female in 9.12.10.5.12 (A.D. 682). The lintels of Temple IV at Tikal record the conquests by Tikal Ruler B of Yaxha in 9.15.12.2.3 (A.D. 743) and of an unknown site (perhaps Motul de San José) in rapid succession 172 days later in 9.15.12.11.13 (A.D. 744). At Caracol, the rulers of three sites are simultaneously shown as being taken in 9.18.10.0.0 (A.D. 800) by the Caracol ruler and his sublords (A. Chase, N. Grube, and D. Chase 1991).

Thus, it can be documented that major Late Classic Maya centers were adding to or consolidating their polities, possibly attempting to gain control of larger and larger regions, either directly or through alliances. Presumably associated with such activities was the growth of a group of Maya with increased access to what had been previously thought of as solely elite items. By the end of the Late Classic, this middle level of society adopted many of the trappings once only associated with the elite. At Caracol, this is seen not only in the widespread adoption of tombs as places of burial, but also in the widespread use of special ceremonial ceramic cache vessels in many of the outlying living groups during Late Classic times (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase in press a). Such specialized vessels were generally restricted to site epicenters elsewhere in the Maya area; their use in most Caracol households may have been a result of the widespread prosperity seen at the site—most likely due to its successes in warfare during the Late Classic era. At least by Terminal Classic times, several of these nonepicentral household groups were even erecting their own stone monuments, some of them

carved and naming people other than the current ruler (cf. A. Chase, N. Grube, and D. Chase 1991).

For archaeological reasons noted above, it is highly unlikely that we are only witnessing the increasing size of the Maya elite "class" at Caracol—as some have argued for other sites (Lowe 1985:188). At Caracol Early Classic tombs only occur in the site epicenter or in important architectural groups some distance (2 to 6 km) from the epicenter. During the Late Classic, tombs occur in the majority of the mapped plaza groups and are not restricted to the site epicenter or other important architectural loci, as they were during the Early Classic era. Luxury items are also found with greater frequency in outlying tombs of the Late Classic. There may also be a tendency for Caracol's epicentral Late Classic elite not to be buried with the elaborately fashioned and polychrome pottery vessels that are found in outlying chambers. When the tomb data are combined with the widespread caching of specially-made ceramic vessels throughout the outlying settlement area of Caracol, it becomes clear that a sizable number of individuals and families at the site had access to items that are typically found in restricted distributions at other sites.

If Caracol can be used as any kind of guide, what appears to happen to Maya elites over the span of the Classic era is a decrease in their overall distance from the rest of the Maya community. Rulers may still be spectacularly buried in huge chambers and with the appropriate markers, but the rest of the Maya elite become blurred with individuals who formed an increasingly large Maya middle group.

The tendency for the elites to become less distinct from the rest of Maya society over time can ultimately be seen at the site of Tikal. It has been suggested that Tikal Burial 77 contains the remains of the latest known Tikal ruler documented on Stela 11 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:130), in spite of the fact that its occupant may have been female (Coggins 1975:586). Whether or not the individual in Burial 77 was female, it is an elite and possibly royal interment based on the accompanying jadeite objects, *Spondylus* shell, cinnabar covering, and overburden of flint and obsidian chips. Importantly, C. C. Coggins (1975:586, 591) has noted that the pottery from this burial falls squarely into the typical Late Classic burial assemblage found at Tikal and has also noted that "none of the Imix-related burials from residential groups is very different from Burial 77 in ceramic form or style." While she places Burial 77 as between 9.17.0.0.0 (A.D. 771) and 9.17.10.0.0 (A.D. 780) rather than the post-10.2.0.0.0 (post-A.D. 869) placement needed if Burial 77 did indeed contain the remains of Tikal's last ruler, other Terminal Classic elite interments at Tikal were also notable for their "poverty" (Coggins 1975:591). Rather than arguing, as Coggins (1975:591) does, for a population decrease at Tikal associated with fewer elite burials and the manufacture of fewer elite ceramics after 9.18.0.0.0 (A.D. 790), it is possible to view the social dynamics of the Terminal Classic

as the outcome of a long-term process that occurred during the course of the Late Classic era. Through this process, not only did the gulf between elites and the rest of Maya society substantially lessen over time, but Maya society was also characterized by the accompanying growth of a middle level of individuals and families, as can be seen through analysis of settlement patterns (Arnold and Ford 1980; Ford and Arnold 1982). William Haviland's (1967:322, this volume, fig. 4.1) data on skeletal stature at Tikal can similarly be used to argue for a reduction in the dissimilarity between the elite and the less elite during the Late Classic.

Implications for the Maya Collapse

The model for Maya society that has been offered in this paper is one that is directly at odds with much of the traditional literature on the subject. Yet there is a growing body of archaeological data that support this reconstruction. In particular, the existence of a distinct Maya mid-level group is evident in the archaeological record of Caracol. And, while it may be easier to discern such a pattern at Caracol because of its fallen and open tombs in combination with the easily visible agricultural field system, it is unlikely that Caracol was a completely isolated case among the Classic polities of the Southern lowlands.

This reconstruction also affects our general understanding of the evolution of Classic Maya society in the Southern lowlands, particularly in relation to the development and change of its social and political systems. To some extent, it may be argued that the increasing amount of warfare seen in the Late Classic Southern lowlands may be directly linked to the rise of a Maya middle level of society, possibly similar to the historic *azmen uinic*. As warfare was extended to larger and larger arenas during the final era of the Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase in press b), this middle level of society could have gained considerable influence. Individuals other than rulers are named with regard to taking captives in the carved monuments of this time. The possibilities for changing relationships in Maya society could only have been heightened by warfare that may have expanded during the Terminal Classic era beyond neighboring polities and even have been carried on far outside of the Maya area at sites such as Cacaxtla and Xochicalco in the Mexican highlands. Such postulated events and relationships also have implications for interpretations relating to the Maya collapse.

The most generally accepted model for the Maya collapse in the Southern lowlands is premised on a two-class society. The model, as articulated by J. Eric Thompson (1966 [1954], 1970) and paraphrased by J. W. Lowe (1985:70), saw the collapse as "caused by (1) a growing gulf between the commoners and the aristocratic elite, (2) the increased demands of a growing elite class, and (3) perhaps ideological invasion of religious ideas from outside the Maya lowlands undermining the position of the elite." Such a model has to some degree been embraced not only by Lowe (1985), but also

by R. J. Sharer (1977) and G. R. Willey and D. B. Shimkin (1973). Yet, with the possible exception of the last tenet (see A. Chase 1985c and D. Chase and A. Chase n.d.), there is little to recommend such a model in the archaeological record.

Recently, D. L. Webster (1985b) and E. M. Abrams (1987) have been able to demonstrate that there would have been little stress on Maya society from elite demands during the Late Classic period at Copan. Their data may probably be extended to other parts of the Maya realm. Given the data presented here, I would argue that there is also little to suggest that there was an increasing gulf between the elite and the rest of Maya society during the Late Classic; rather, the elite and the rest of Maya society in the Southern lowlands, at least at Caracol, and probably at Tikal, were growing more similar over time. If this picture accurately describes the situation during the Late Classic in the Southern lowlands, then the way in which the Maya collapse has been cast is in need of serious revision. The postulated ideological changes relating to the Maya collapse loom large, for by the Terminal Classic era a large and semiwealthy group of people would have existed within the Southern Maya lowlands who were not members of the formal elite establishment, but who were key to the functioning of that establishment. An examination of the nature, composition, and changes within this middle group may provide clues to the events that caused not only the Maya collapse but also overall evolution and cultural shifts in Maya civilization.

Conclusion

Identifying elites below the level of the ruler is extremely difficult archaeologically. However, the archaeological data can provide us with information concerning social divisions that are present in any given society. For the Maya site of Caracol, Belize, a minimum of three social groups can be inferred. The mechanisms for the way such groups came into being can also be derived from the warfare that is documented in the site's hieroglyphic texts. Successful warfare—especially over important neighbors such as Tikal—creates prosperity. Indeed, such prosperity can be seen in the widespread nature of tombs and ritual complexes at Caracol—to which many of the site's inhabitants had access. The large numbers of people who had access to high-status items at Caracol indicates that a simple two-class dichotomy of nobles and commoners cannot explain the archaeological situation there.

The detailed information from Caracol has also yielded an objective means for measuring status—tomb volume—both within Caracol proper and for the Caracol region in general. These data further suggest that, in order to model the social and political organization of Classic Maya society over time and space, we need to look intensively at regions, variability, and change. A single-site focus may not be able to identify regional diversity,

but—on the other hand—this diversity may also be missed if the central site for a given region is not extensively investigated. To understand the structure of Classic Maya society, a comparative approach is needed that looks at a series of sites in any one polity. For, while one site may appear to have two social groups in a cursory analysis, placement of the same data into a more regional perspective may show that it has only two of three or more groups that are differentially distributed throughout a given polity. Each region or polity should also not be expected to exhibit the same structural patterns. The archaeological definition of these structures will be difficult. And, although research in the Maya area is hard-pressed to address such problems, we should expect to uncover great complexity and even greater diversity in the case of the Maya.

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