CONTEXTUALIZING THE COLLAPSE HEGEMONY AND TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMICS FROM CARACOL, BELIZE

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The Terminal Classic Period in the Maya area is poorly understood. Not only is it the time when the Maya collapse occurs but the archaeological remains that can be associated with this temporal era are not uniformly distributed in the archaeological record within and among sites. Analysis of these patterned distributions is critical to interpretations of the Terminal Classic Maya. This paper uses archaeological data that have been collected during 18 years of research at Caracol, Belize, to demonstrate patterned distributions of Terminal Classic ceramics in the archaeological record that suggest that distinct ceramic subcomplexes were used by different socioeconomic groups at the site at the time of the collapse. Because this pottery bears some resemblance to that found at other sites of Terminal Classic date, their spatial and temporal distribution also can be used to comment tentatively on broader patterns in the southern Maya lowlands. When viewed from this regional perspective, the Caracol material suggests an alternative model for understanding the social, economic, and political activities of the Terminal Classic period in this region. The Terminal Classic disjunction in ceramic distributions within and between sites has been traditionally associated with groups of people that have been cast alternatively as "squatters" or "invaders." Analysis of the Terminal Classic ceramic distribution at Caracol instead suggests that these materials are correlated with status distinctions and may be reflective of elite incorporation within a broader sociopolitical unit after the cessation of stone monument erection.

PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF TERMINAL CLASSIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

Terminal Classic remains are not uniformly found in the archaeological record. This statement is true on a variety of levels. Carved monuments are not present at every Maya site. In fact, many sites, some of which survived the Maya collapse, never had stelae and altars (e.g. Barton Ramie; Willey et al. 1965); some continued without the use of monuments (e.g. Caracol and Lamanai; A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; Pendergast 1986) and, some of the latest carved monuments are quite different from those that comprise the standards for the Late Classic Period (e.g. Ucanal; Laporte and Mejia 2002). Similarly, specific ceramic markers, such as Fine Orange vessels (Smith 1958), that are traditionally assigned to the Terminal Classic and later eras do not occur at all Maya sites. Different trade networks also meant that different parts of the Maya area had varying access to certain items. This is clearly seen in the distribution of Plumbate (Shepherd 1948) and Nicoya Polychrome (Diehl et al. 1974) pottery, both long-distance pottery imports that are not uniformly found in the Maya or Mesoamerican areas. Plumbate is relatively common at a few Maya sites: Quirigua and Copan on the southern fringe of the southern lowlands; Tayasal in Lake Peten-Itza; and Chichen Itza far to the north. Nicoya Polychrome occurs on the fringe of the southern lowlands and in central Mexico. Both markers can be dated archaeologically to the Terminal Classic Period, but the differential distributions of these two kinds of ceramic trade wares has led to debate over their broader temporal placement as either "Terminal Classic" or "Postclassic" (e.g., Braswell 1992:140-141; A. Chase 1986:110-117). Similarly, there are varied distributions of Terminal Classic ceramics within sites and questions concerning their continuity with earlier ceramic remains. Different researchers have therefore, reached variant interpretations of the spatial and temporal meanings of Terminal Classic ceramics. At Seibal, the differential distribution of ceramics has been related to ethnic affinity (Sabloff 1973, 1975; Tourtellot 1988, 1990). At Caracol the differential distribution of ceramics has been linked to considerations of status (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). Webster (2002:326) has argued that analyses of Copan's latest ceramics have led to interpretations of an overly rapid depopulation at Copan because of problems in controlling the temporal dimension.

While carved stone monuments, with their associated long (and short) count dates, can be placed into the Terminal Classic era, these beautiful stones actually contain little in the way of hieroglyphic texts that directly inform us about any changes relative to the Maya collapse. Most texts continue to present fairly standard dynastic records. However, because of their associated calendric dates, these stones have been used to help model the collapse, at least temporally. Much of what we think we know about the collapse is based on stone monuments; in fact, the decline of sites and regions has been directly correlated with the cessation of stela erection (e.g. Lowe 1985). Yet, archaeological data indicate that some sites, such as Caracol, Belize, and Copan, Honduras, were occupied for upwards of half a century – or much longer - beyond their last dated monument (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996, 2003; Webster 2002; Webster et al. 2000); at other sites, such as

Lamanai, Belize, life continued unabated into the Postclassic era (Pendergast 1986).

There have also been problems in the identification of the ceramic content of the latest archaeological phases at many Classic Maya sites (Adams 1971:8; A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). At Uaxactun, where the basic sequencing for the southern lowlands was established, the latest ceramic phase, Tepeu 3, "was determined by subtracting all recognized earlier types from the vast surface accumulations" (Smith 1955:13). More recent ceramic analysis in the southern lowlands has not significantly modified Smith's initial work, largely because of the difficulty in isolating pure Terminal Classic ceramic deposits (Sabloff 1973:114). While pottery may be commonly found in association with burials, *de facto* refuse in association with building floors is relatively uncommon. And, in some cases where *de facto* refuse has been identified on the floors of buildings, such as at Aguateca (Inomata 1997; Inomata and Stiver 1998), the materials are actually relatively early ("around A.D. 800" – Inomata and Triadan 2000:59) and relate more to Late Classic ceramic complexes than to truly Terminal Classic ones. Thus, the Terminal Classic has become an analytical construct predicated on ceramic cross-dating, on the identification of particular non-local kinds of sherds or vessels, and on the subtraction of recognized earlier sherd types from surface or fill contexts.

Even if the ceramic markers for the Terminal Classic Period are agreed upon, both the actual dating of phases and the content of ceramic complexes associated with such periods of time constitute sources of disagreement for researchers using different dating methods or analytic techniques. Perhaps the best example of this problem may be seen in terms of "Coner" ceramics at Copan, Honduras. The Coner ceramic complex at Copan spans the Late Classic era, up to and including the site's collapse (Webster and Freter 1990:69, 81); 95% of all areas tested yielded evidence of Coner occupation (Webster et al. 2000:84). While Copan researchers agree that this material includes the latest ceramics at the site, there are spirited disagreements over the temporal position of this material – specifically over how late the Coner complex continues - based largely on arguments over the application of obsidian hydration dating to the Copan data (Braswell 1992; Webster and Freter 1990; Webster et al. 1993, 2000:144-152) and secondarily over ceramic analysis based on sherds (recovered in test-pitting operations - Webster et al. 2000:84) as opposed to *de facto* vessel assemblages (recovered in areal clearing; ca. 90 whole or reconstructable vessels came from 9N-8 rooms – Hendon 1987). While the ceramic content of Coner includes Plumbate and Modelled-carved types (Braswell 1992:140-141; Longyear 1952; Webster and Freter 1990:79), subcomplexes have not been defined at this point in time. Furthermore, the divergent possible temporal positions of the Coner Phase result in drastically variant interpretations of the Terminal Classic period at Copan.

Apart from strictly temporal problems relating to ceramic placement and longevity, other problems arise in the explanation of the Classic Maya "demise." Numerous models exist for the collapse and there was likely no single cause for the abandonment of all Classic Maya centres (Sharer 1994:340-349; Webster 2002:327). Of the models that have been developed to describe the Classic Maya collapse, however, those that have used ceramics as their primary evidence have tended to zero in on specific markers and to then further use these markers to focus either on external factors, conquest, and foreign influence, or on internal factors related to political upheaval, revolt, and warfare. To some extent these interpretations have also been conditioned by past excavation strategies that focused on stripping large epicentral stone buildings in conjunction with limited plaza and structural testing of outlying household settlement. Although deriving from different contextual situations, the ceramics that were produced through such excavations were treated as equivalent analytical units and it was presumed that all ceramic types had an equal probability of appearing in all excavated contexts at a given site.

Because easily identifiable Terminal Classic ceramic markers have tended to be found in association with palaces and epicentral constructions, but not with outlying residential groups, these markers have been associated with groups of people alternatively called "invaders" and "squatters." When contextual considerations are included in the mix, however, an entirely different interpretation may be posited from the extant data in which the differential distribution of Terminal Classic ceramic markers may be correlated with status distinctions and to the possible "hegemonic" political incorporation of at least parts of the southern lowlands. Before examining the Caracol data in more depth, however, it is useful to review how Terminal Classic pottery has been used in relation to the identification of groups of people and the Classic Maya collapse.

TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMICS AND INVASION

The latest ceramic assemblages at many sites in the southern lowlands were believed to have either resulted from or been conditioned by an invasion at the end of the Classic era. This assumption was predicated on the belief that several of the Terminal Classic ceramic markers had their origin in the Gulf Coast area of Mexico. In particular, Fine Orange ceramics were thought to have originated in the Gulf of Mexico region (Bishop and Rands 1982; Rands et al. 1982) and their appearance in the southern lowlands was believed to have been correlated with an associated population incursion (Thompson 1970; Sabloff and Willey 1967). Iconographic representations on both Fine Orange pottery and stone monuments have been used to support the invasion model (Adams 1973, Graham 1973, Sabloff 1973) and, in fact, both the iconography and the vessels themselves have been attributed to foreign invaders or marauding armies (Adams 1977). Detailed ceramic work, however, has shown that at least some of the Fine Orange ceramic markers were of a local Usumacinta origin (Bishop 1994; Rands et al. 1982; see also Foias and Bishop, this volume). While clearly significant, the implications of this data have not been fully explored in terms of concomitant social practices that would have led

to the local production of what is essentially foreign portraiture.

The invasion model largely derives from archaeological work undertaken by G. Willey's (1973, 1990) two projects at the sites of Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal in Guatemala. To some extent it built upon Thompson's (1970) ethnohistoric reconstruction of the Putun Maya and their postulated movement in the Maya southern lowlands. This initial model called for an invasion of the southern lowlands by people from the Mexican Gulf Coast. These Putun Maya were believed to have established a capital at Seibal from which they either directly or indirectly effected the Classic Maya collapse (Ball 1974; Sabloff and Willey 1967, but see Binford 1968). Under this model, any diagnostic Terminal Classic ceramic markers found in the southern lowlands or late iconographic traits found in other media were believed to have derived from this small group of individuals. In addition, the burials of this foreign population were thought to be in archaeological evidence at Seibal (Tourtellot 1990).

In a variant on the invasion model, Chichen Itza, rather than the Gulf Coast Putun, plays a direct role in the Maya collapse. Some researchers (e.g. Sharer 1994:386-387) have equated the Putun Maya with the site of Chichen Itza. Regardless of this identity, within this variant of the invasion model, political squabbles in the northern lowlands between the western Puuc region, Coba, and Chichen Itza (e.g., Andrews and Robles 1985; A. Chase and D. Chase 1992) came to be viewed as being either directly or indirectly exported into the southern lowlands with disastrous results (A. Chase 1985; D. Chase and A. Chase 1982; Kowalski 1989; Proskouriakoff 1950). An even earlier version of this model argued for the forcible removal of the southern lowlands population to the northern lowlands (Cowgill 1964).

TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMICS AND SQUATTERS

Analyses of Terminal Classic artifactual materials found in association with disintegrating stone buildings in the centres of major sites have also led to the postulation that the last occupants at many Classic era centres were squatters. This assumption was derived both from the archaeological association of Terminal Classic ceramic markers with large stone structures and from the belief (and portrayal in the literature) that much of these late pottery markers only represented crudely devolved domestic ware. The general absence of Terminal Classic ceramic markers in outlying residential locations was taken to mean that these squatter palace populations represented either the disoriented remnants of a once great civilization or opportunistic individuals attempting to loot the abandoned sites. Importantly, rather than looking to outside invaders, this view attributed the widely recognized Terminal Classic ceramic markers to "commoners" who were indigent squatters in Classic era stone palaces. The model was explicitly applied to Tikal, Guatemala, based both on the distribution of Terminal Classic ceramics (Culbert 1973) and on the occurrence of massive garbage deposits inside palace buildings (Harrison 1999).

The idea that "squatters" were the last occupants of epicentral palaces indirectly derived from Thompson's (1954) idea of a peasant revolt against the elite as well as from the earlier Piedras Negras work by Satterthwaite (1936, 1937) that discovered defaced monuments and smashed thrones on the steps of temples. The Terminal Classic materials were viewed as resulting from a drastically declining society; remnant commoner populations lived in once great stone buildings, even as these buildings collapsed and trash built up around them. Importantly, the well-known Terminal Classic ceramic markers of the southern lowlands were not considered to be elite fine wares within this model, but rather unrefined copies of bygone Classic era polychromes. It was believed that Terminal Classic ceramic markers did not occur in outlying residential settlement because these areas had already been depopulated. Like the invasion model, the squatters' model called for the overthrow and loss of local elites, a point common to most collapse models (e.g. Culbert 1988; Sharer 1977; Willey and Shimkin 1973). However, unlike the invasion model, the focus of change was seen as largely being internal as opposed to external.

TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMICS FROM CARACOL, BELIZE

Archaeological data from Caracol, Belize suggests an alternative understanding of the Terminal Classic ceramic situation in the southern lowlands. First, the recognizable Terminal Classic ceramics associated with Caracol's epicentral palaces were elite wares; and, second, these ceramics were part of a still fully functioning social system. Contextual analysis of *in situ* on-floor *de facto* ceramic refuse both in the site epicentre and in the outlying residential settlement demonstrates that recognizable Terminal Classic ceramic markers were status-linked (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). Mimicking the Tikal distribution (e.g. Culbert 1973), such vessels are primarily in evidence in Caracol's downtown stone palaces and only rarely appear in the site's core residential settlement. However, in Caracol's epicentral palaces these ceramic materials do not represent massive garbage accumulations, as at Tikal (Harrison 1999:48), but rather appear in contexts that are interpreted as representing the rapid abandonment of elite residential structures within a still fully functioning society (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). Importantly, the Terminal Classic fine wares on the floors of Caracol's epicentral buildings co-occur with other household and ritual vessels, such as flanged effigy censers and incurved platters that are also found on the floors of non-epicentral residences. And, in some cases, stratigraphic relationships and varietals distinctions can be used to establish temporal sub-divisions for certain ceramic types (such as for Pantano Impressed) that are lumped together as "Terminal Classic" at other sites (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). Thus, it also is possible to show both time-depth and contemporaneity between the epicentral *de facto* materials and the outlying residential ceramic materials at Caracol – in spite of the relative difficulty in

defining a distinct Terminal Classic ceramic complex (i.e., one defined in terms of traditional Terminal Classic ceramic markers) outside of the site epicentre. These data may have applicability beyond the site of Caracol.

THE CARACOL CERAMIC SAMPLE

The Caracol ceramic sample has been gathered over the course of 20 field seasons. During these 20 years, some 107 outlying residential groups have been tested by a variety of excavation techniques (Figure 1) and many of the site's epicentral buildings and palaces (comprising 6 additional residential complexes) have been areally exposed (Figure 2). As a result of this work, some 255 burials have been excavated. Approximately 58% of these burials contained associated ceramic vessels (D. Chase 1998:15). Cached pottery containers were also discovered in approximately two-thirds of the investigated residential groups (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998; 2001:Fig. 7). Significant amounts of on-floor pottery have been recovered from epicentral buildings and residential excavations (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003; D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). All told, approximately 2,500 reconstructable vessels have been recovered from *in situ* deposits at Caracol. These contextually derived vessels form the backbone of the Caracol ceramic sample (A. Chase 1994).

Because of the extensive archaeological research that has been undertaken at Caracol, Terminal Classic contexts can be identified both stratigraphically and analytically. Almost all on-floor contexts at the site are of this date (e.g. Figure 3 and A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11). Unsealed caches of Terminal Classic date have been recovered, as have burials from this era. Significantly, however, none of the Caracol burials stratigraphically assigned to the time period are associated with the traditional Terminal Classic diagnostics of Pabellon or Sahcaba Modeled-carved types. Nor do Tinaja Red footed bowls occur in burials, even though they are well represented in the on-floor palace debris. Interestingly, three epicentral burials that are of Terminal Classic date contain polychrome cylinders (see Figure 4 here and Figure 13 in A. Chase and D. Chase 2001). Thus, the burial subcomplex at Caracol appears to be distinctive and locally continuous. The most recognizable samples of ceramics of Terminal Classic date, however, are the *in situ* on-floor assemblages that occur in the epicentral stone palaces.

TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMICS AT CARACOL: INDICATIONS OF FUNCTION AND STATUS

The floors of Caracol's epicentral buildings contain over 220 reconstructable vessels (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001, 2003). Differences occur in materials found on the floors of temples as opposed to palaces. Specifically, flanged cylindrical effigy censers (Pedregal Modeled) are associated with Caracol's epicentral temples, but not directly with its palaces (unless the temples occur within a palace compound, as on the summit of Caana). In addition, while cooking vessels occur on the floor of Structure A6 (a temple), they are not found in association with epicentral palaces. The absence of cooking vessels in or outside of the 94 palace rooms so far excavated at Caracol is striking, especially when compared to the Aguateca data, where palace rooms are seen as having been the locus of food processing, based both on the presence of manos and metates and on the presence of round-bottom Encanto Striated cooking vessels (Triadan 2000:49-51). Manos and metates are also not generally associated with Caracol's palaces (a single borked metate was recovered in Caana's northeast palace quad). Storage vessels occur in only six of the excavated Caracol palace rooms; and, only two of these rooms - both in Caana's northeast palace quad - contain a large number of storage vessels. Thus, the Aguateca and Caracol palace ceramics (and artefacts) are quite different in overall content and function. Rather than being focused towards food processing (Triadan 2000) or craft production (Inomata and Triadan 2000), the Caracol palaces are instead characterized by a serving vessel subcomplex, presumably because food preparation took place elsewhere (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001). The fact that no evidence for actual cooking or food preparation was recovered from any of Caracol's epicentral palaces accords well with the presumed elite use of these stone buildings for combined administrative and residential purposes. The extensive distribution of serving vessels and the occasional water and storage containers are consistent with the use of these buildings by the upper stratum of Caracol's society and also accord with the separate area for food preparation (off to the southeast) noted for Tikal's Central Acropolis (Harrison 1999 and personal communication, 2000). As fine wares are fairly uniform among Caracol's palaces and are only found as a unit, or subcomplex, within the site epicentre, this palace ceramic subcomplex can reasonably be associated with high status.

The high status Terminal Classic ceramic subcomplex identified at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003) is an amalgam of the epicentral on-floor materials. For the most part, the smaller fine wares represent portable imported ceramic materials while the larger (and heavier) serving platters and water jars represent local pottery. In no one case do all of the kinds of ceramics co-occur, although linkages exist among all the palace sets. In fact, the distribution of the various types permits other functional interpretations to be made. For instance, 12 black tripod plates and 4 deep bowls or cups – all presumably used for serving food and drink - occur in one palace suite on the summit of Caana. In another case various small jars, ollas, and cups occur in the back room of a range structure (B4) while fine ware bowls and cylinders are broken in the front (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000:Fig. 2) – presumably indicating differential use of the rooms.

In general, Caracol's high status Terminal Classic ceramic subcomplex is characterized by the presence of incurved-rim tripod bowls (Tinaja Red [Figure 5]; San Julio Modeled [Figure 3a]) and tripod cylinders that have diagonal incision or fluting, often combined with raised ridges (Cohune Composite [Figure 6]). Incised cups (Cohune Composite [Figure 3c]) or small deep bowls (Cameron Incised[1] [v. unsp.; A. Chase and D. Chase

[1] Or alternatively "Camaron Incised," following the Spanish spelling.

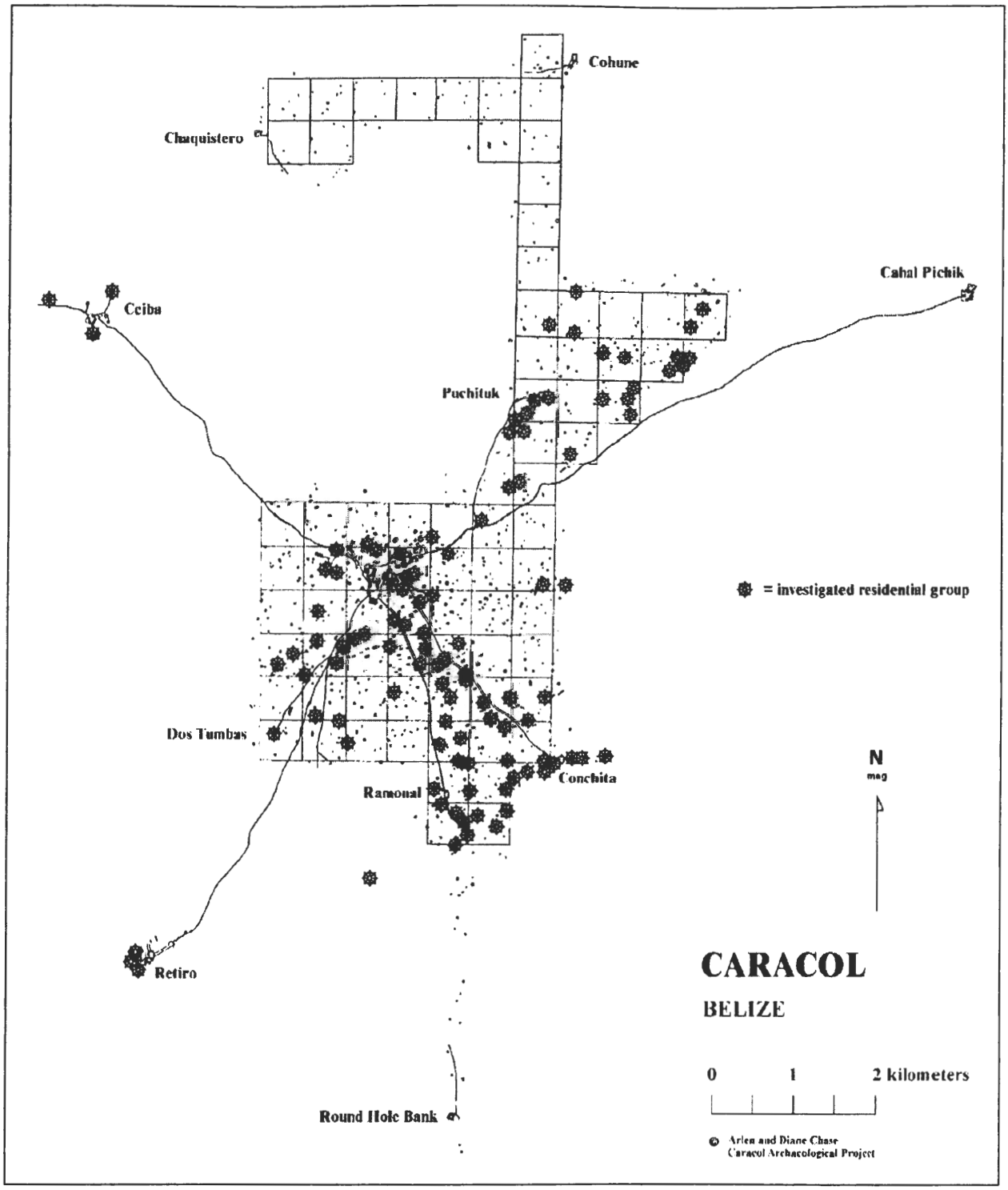

Figure 1. Map of Caracol, Belize showing the distribution of outlying residential groups that have been archaeologically investigated; excavated epicentral palace complexes, investigated termini, and causeway tests not marked.

2003:Fig. 7e]) also occur in several deposits, as do collared bowls (Conchita Incised [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7k]) and larger incurved and decorated-rim bowls (Pantano Impressed [Figure 3g and 3h] and Rosa Punctated [Figure 7]). Fine Orange vessels (including Pabellon Modeled-carved [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7n], Altar Orange [A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11g], Cedro Gadrooned, Trapiche Incised [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7i], and Champan Red-on-Orange) have been recovered in five different epicentral locales. Modeled-carved ceramics (Pabellon Modeled-carved [Figure 3e]; Sahcaba Modeled-carved [Figure 8]; Holtun Modeled-carved [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7d]; Torro Gouged-incised) - usually tripod cylinders, pedestal-base vases, or bowls - also occur in association with four epicentral buildings. Molcajetes (Cameron Incised [Figure 3b]; Trapiche Incised [A. Chase

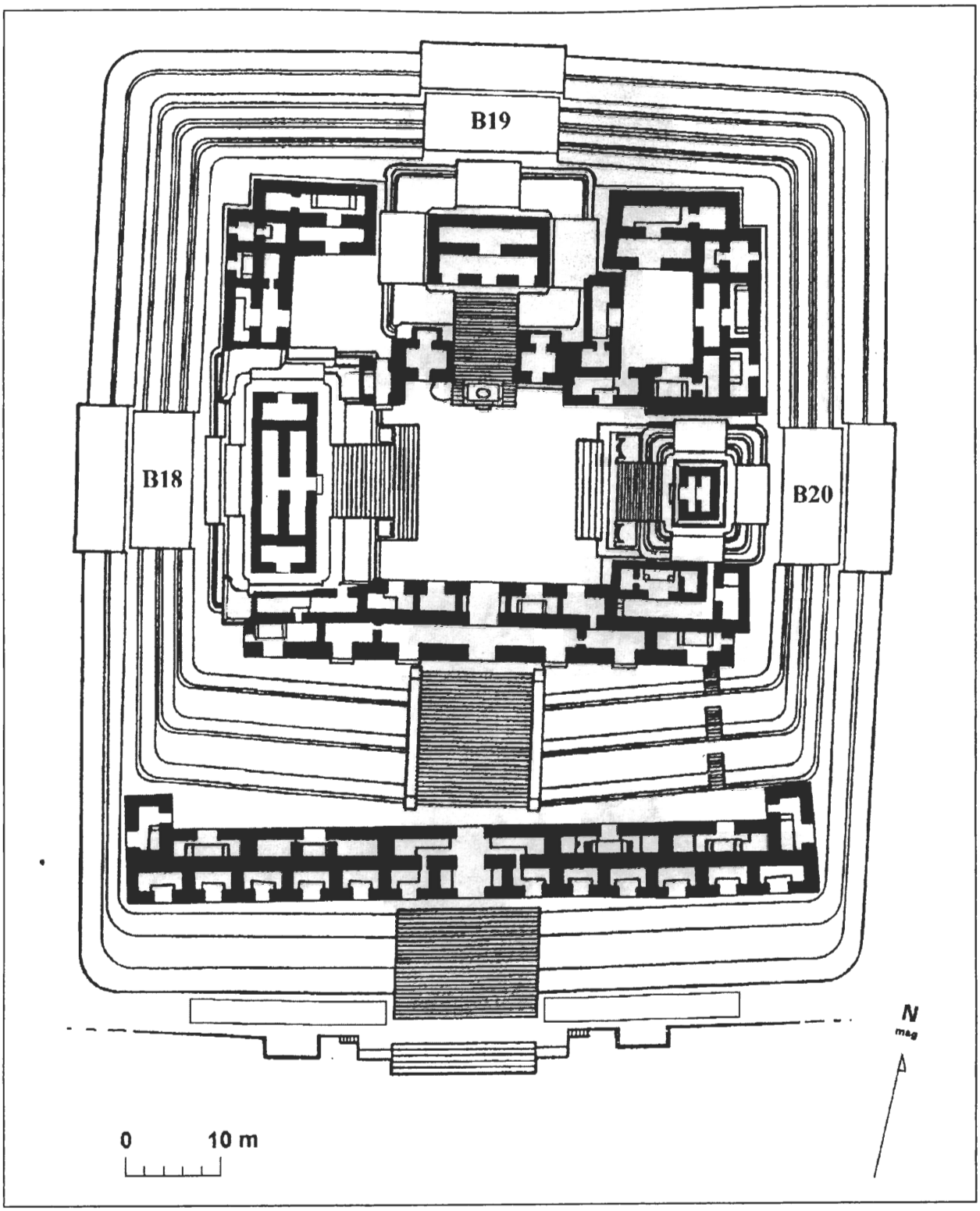

Figure 2. Plan of Caana, an epicentral palace complex. The floors of various rooms within the excavated compound were associated with de facto refuse.

and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7i]), not known from any residential groups, occur in 3 different epicentral palaces. Both monochrome black (Infierno Black [Figure 9; see also A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11b&c]) and monochrome red (Martin's Incised [A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11o]; McRae Impressed [A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11e]) tripod plates occur on some palace floors. Broad bowls or platters (Tinaja Red and Valentin Unslipped [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 6, Fig. 7s]), ollas (Valentin Unslipped; Figure 3m [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7p]), and water jars (Tinaja Red; Pantano Impressed [v. unsp.; Figure 3f; see also A. Chase 1994:Fig. 13.11f]) are also scattered throughout the

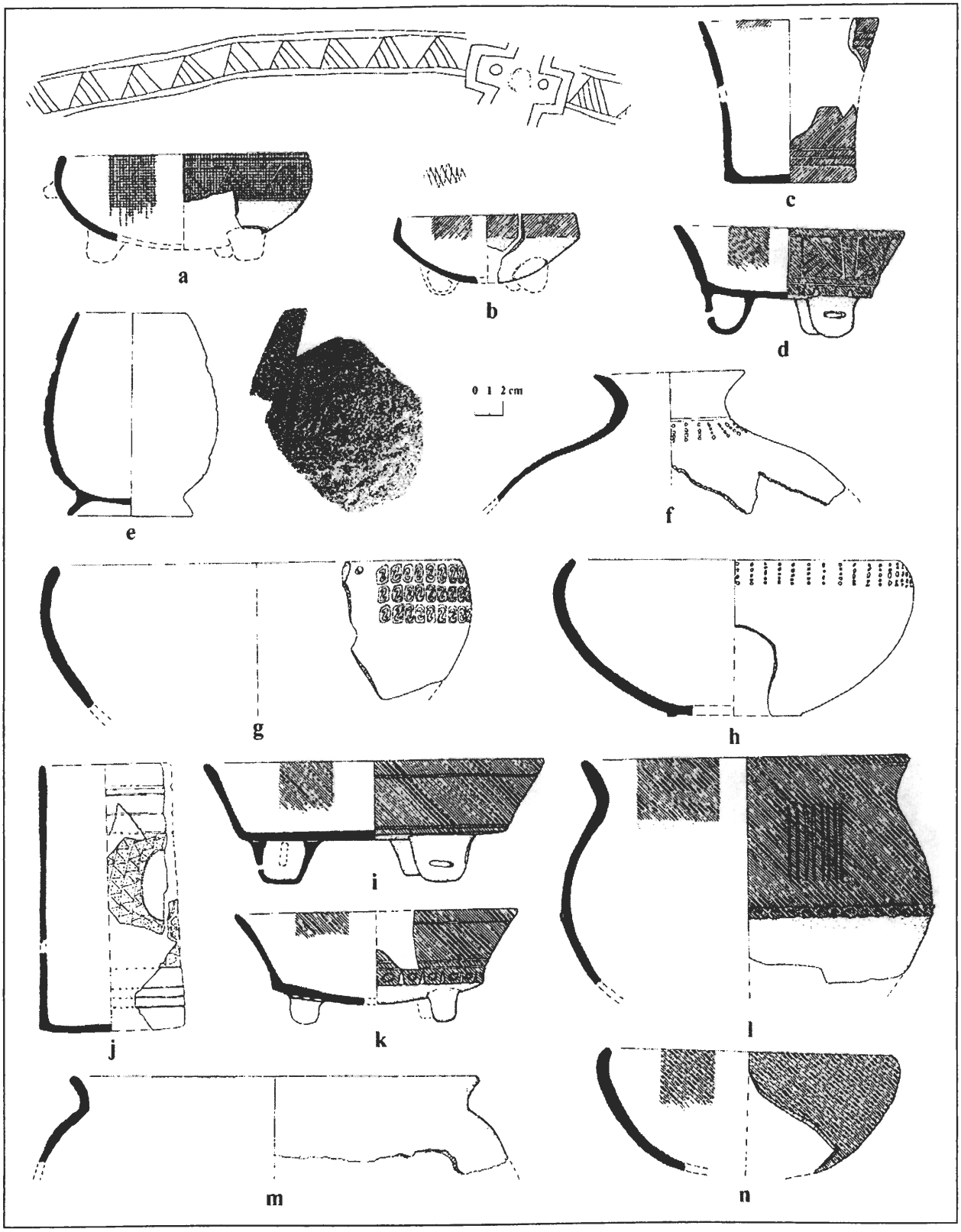

Figure 3. Terminal Classic Pottery from Caracol. a) San Julio Modeled; b) Cameron Incised: Unspecified Variety; c, d) Cameron Incised; e) Pabellon Modeled-carved; f, h) Pantano Impressed: unspecified variety; g) Pantano Impressed (crack-lace); i,k) Platon Punctated Incised; j) Azucar Impressed; l) Sombrero Appliqué; m) Valentin Unslipped; n) Tinaja Red.

epicentral deposits. More specialized vessels found intermixed in these palace deposits include large black cylindrical barrels (Bambonal Plano-relief [A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 7j), an oversized drum (Monterey Modeled), and 3-prong burners (Monterey Modeled [Figure 10]). While all of these items co-occur in the

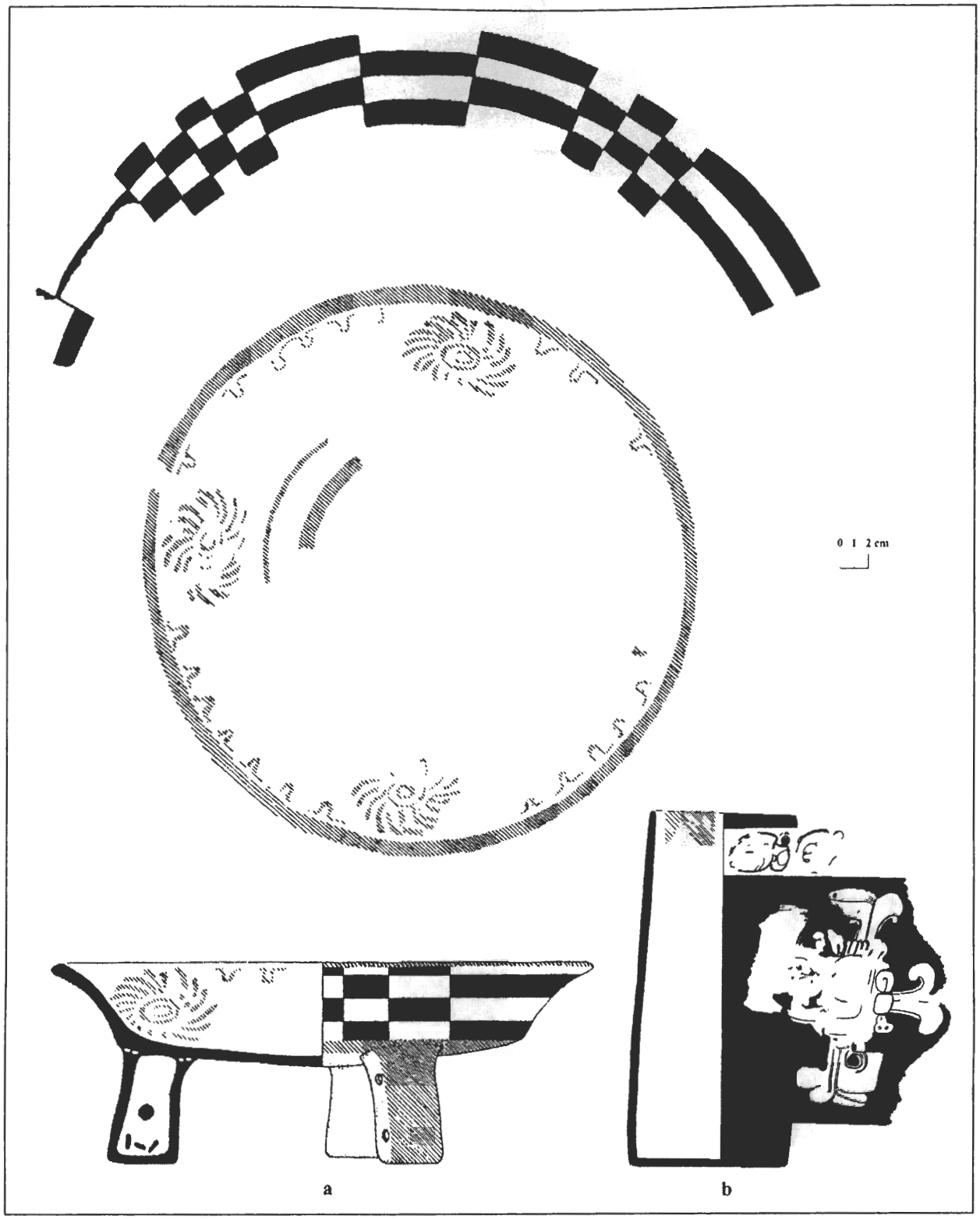

Figure 4. Zacatel Polychrome vessels from a Terminal Classic Burial in the Structure B64 palace complex.

epicentral palaces, with the possible exception of flanged *incensarios* (Figure 11) they are relatively uncommon in outlying residential groups.

Although continuing in use in outlying residential groups, polychrome ceramics are strikingly absent from the epicentral on-floor palace materials. This traditional kind of decorative pottery appears not to have been part of the publicly displayed serving ware used in Caracol's palaces in the late 9th century. Polychrome ceramics, however, were used in late epicentral burials (Figure 4) and, in one case, were cached with a Tinaja Red incurved-rim, footed

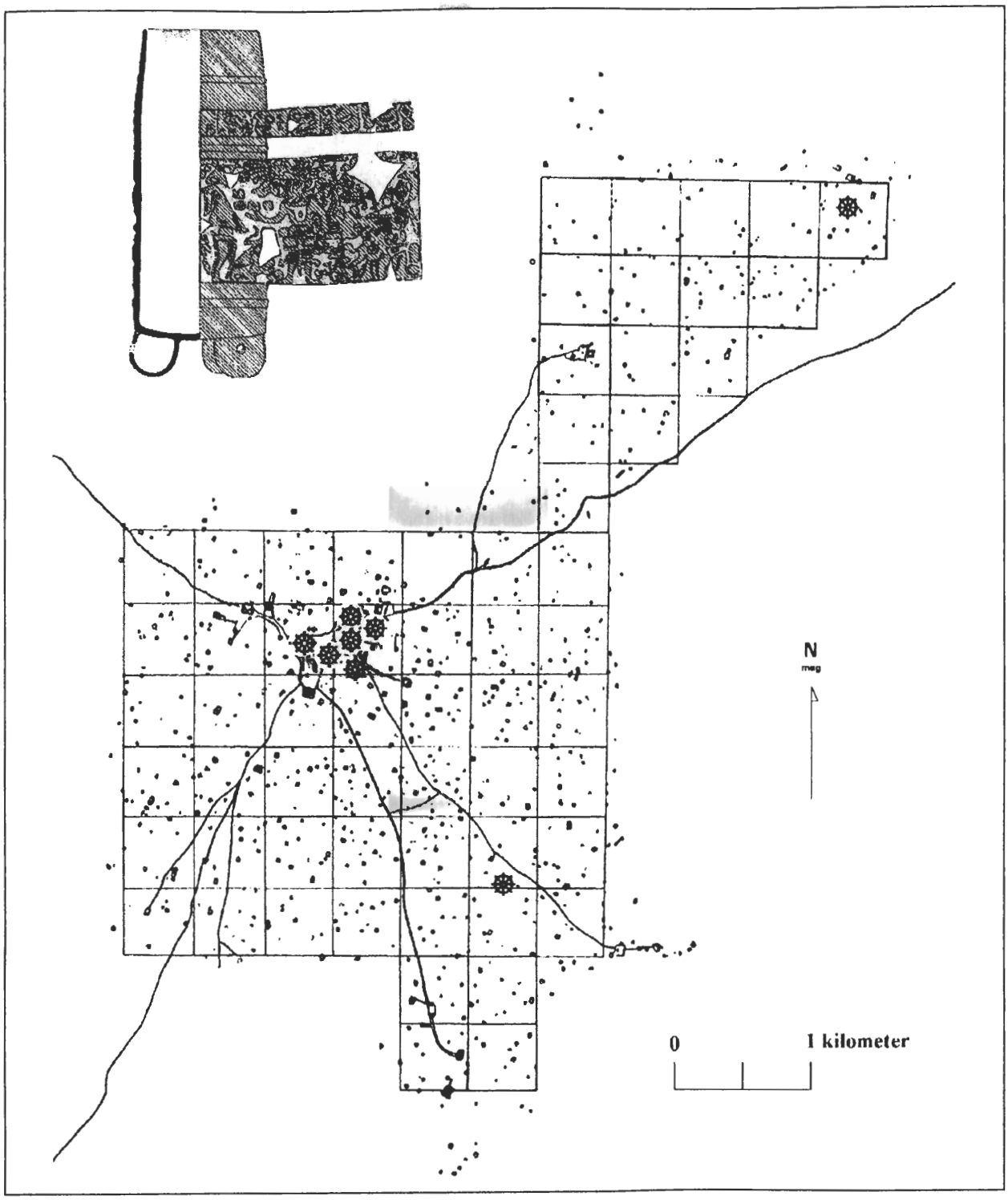

Figure 5. Distribution of Modeled-carved ceramics at Caracol, Belize. Sahcaba Modeled-carved vessel shown comes from Caana: its scene is widely distributed in Belize (Graham et al. 1980).

bowl as one of the last ritual acts associated with Structure B19 (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003:Fig. 2). Thus, they had not disappeared from the Terminal Classic ceramic repertoire. Although used for more private ritual in the epicentre and as serving wares in the outlying settlement, polychrome ceramics appear to have been replaced by monochrome foreign wares and Belize red ware in Caracol's late palaces.

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTIONS OF TERMINAL CLASSIC CERAMIC MARKERS

At Caracol, then, Terminal Classic ceramic markers that are generally recognized throughout the southern lowlands form part of a status-linked subcomplex. Only isolated pieces occur in the outlying core residential settlement. No Fine Orange vessels or sherds are known from the non-

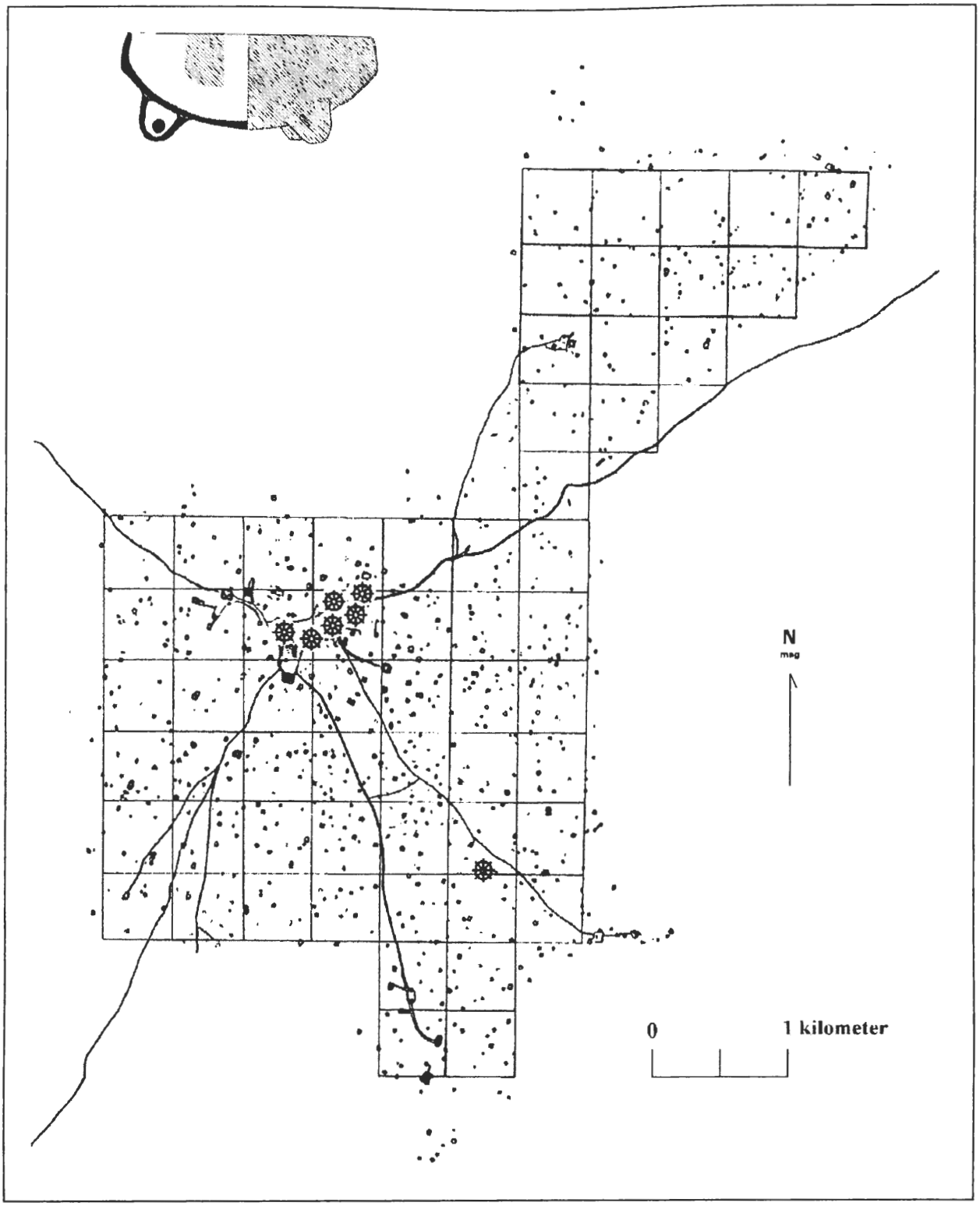

Figure 6. Distribution of Tinaja Red tripod bowls at Caracol, Belize. Vessel shown comes from Structure 25 in the epicentral Barrio palace complex.

epicentral settlement investigations. While reconstructable vessels occur in the epicentre, modeled-carved pottery is very rare in the outlying settlement; sherds occur in only 3 outlying residential groups, 2 of which are quite distant from the epicentre (Figure 8). Only one outlying residential group yielded sherds from a Tinaja Red footed bowl (Figure 5). Two residential groups near the epicentre have yielded an incurved rim decorated bowl (Figure 7). Burials in three groups located far from the epicentre have produced footed and fluted or modeled cylinders (Figure 6); at least two of these groups are not of high status. Black tripod plates are found in the epicentre on floors and in a

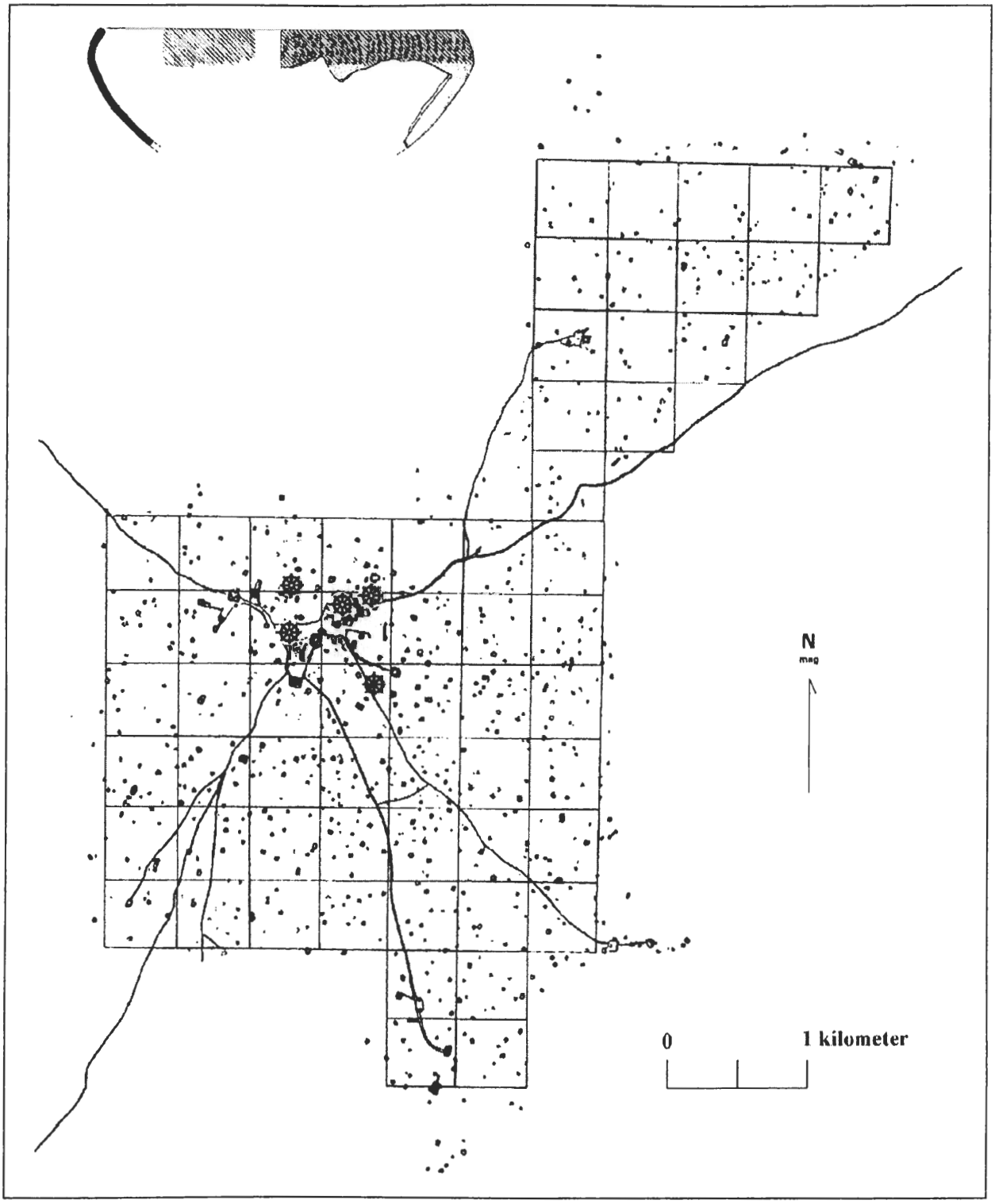

Figure 7. Distribution of Pantano Impressed and Rosa Punctated bowls at Caracol, Belize. Rosa Punctated vessel shown comes from the epicentral structure B64 palace compound.

burial; they are also located in burials in five groups outside the epicentre (Figure 9). Three-prong burners are found in the epicentre as well as in four outlying residential groups (Figure 10); one of these is associated with a burial. Reconstructable effigy censers (*incensarios*) of Terminal Classic date are found in the epicentre and in six outlying residential groups (Figure 11).

While the various kinds of ceramics co-occur in the myriad on-floor epicentral deposits, there are only two instances of these items co-occurring with each other in the outlying settlement. Modeled-carved ceramics and 3-prong burners are both found in two outlying residential groups; one group is 5 kilometres distant from the epicentre and the second is immediately adjacent to the site epicentre. With

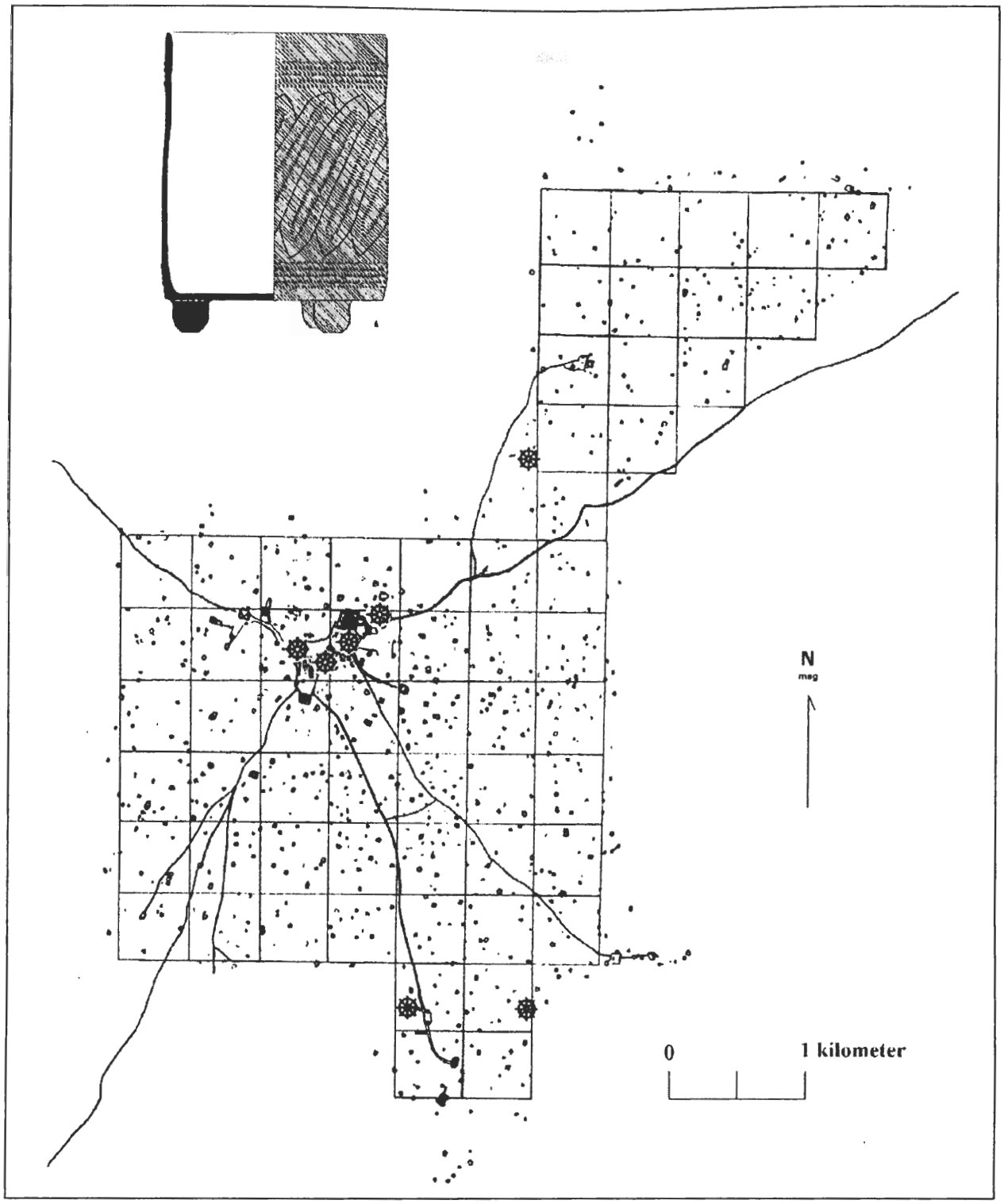

Figure 8. Distribution of Terminal Classic decorated and footed tripod cylinders at Caracol, Belize. Cohune Composite vessel shown comes from the Central Acropolis.

the exception of these two groups, all of the other examples of the epicentral Terminal Classic ceramic subcomplex in outlying groups are represented by only single vessels or, in some cases, solitary sherds. While none of the Terminal Classic ceramic markers are common in Caracol's residential settlement, each kind appears in a few contexts. Because a large number of residential groups have been tested at Caracol by a combination of excavation methodologies, it is possible to show that a wide range of Terminal Classic markers is, in fact, represented in the outlying settlement area, but in limited quantities. When the spatial distribution of all the recognizable Terminal Classic markers is taken into account, however, it becomes clear that these ceramics were in circulation, albeit

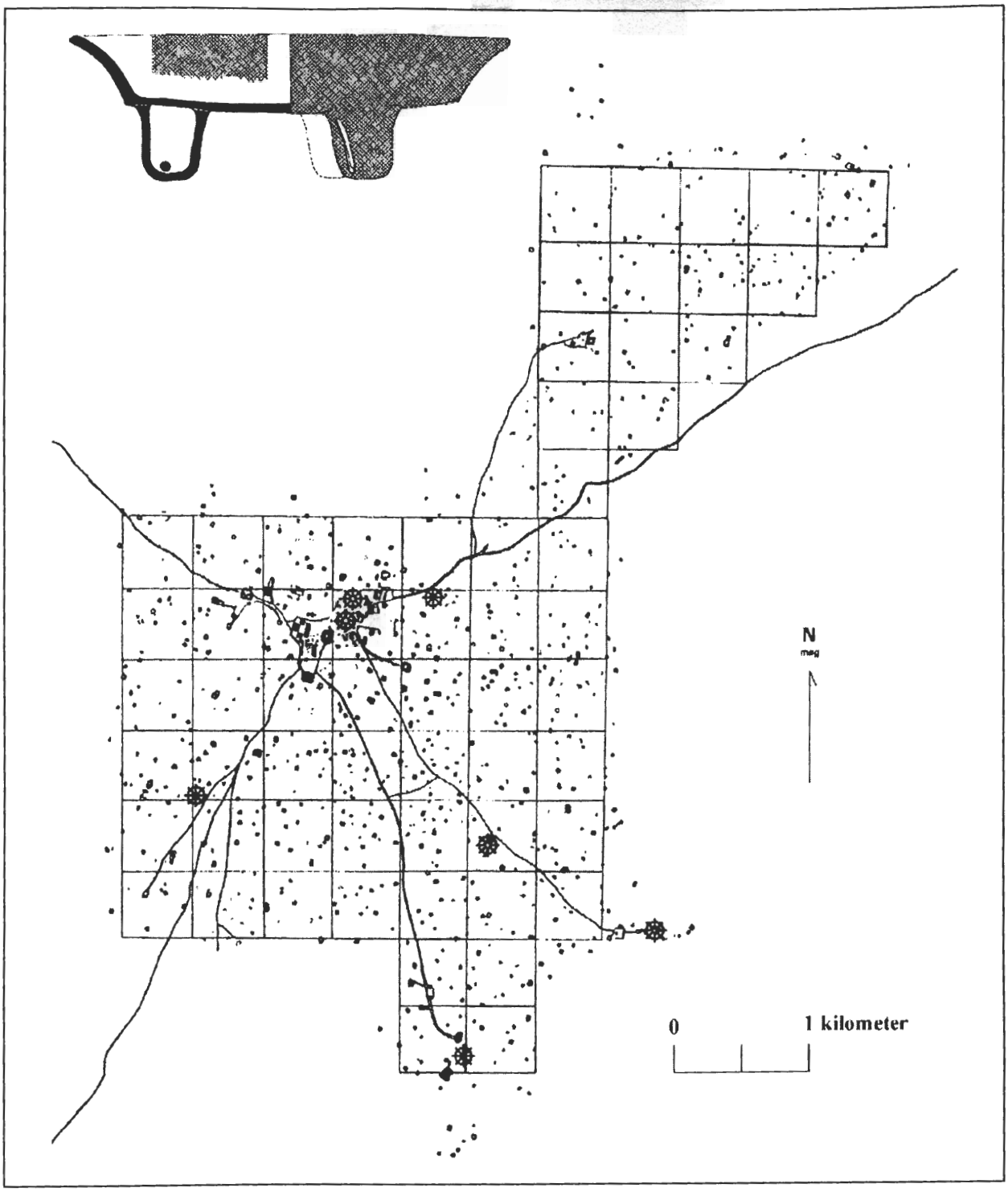

Figure 9. Distribution of black tripod plates at Caracol, Belize. Infierno Black vessel shown comes from de facto refuse on Caana.

minimally, among the populations living in the site's outlying residential groups.

Taken as a whole, Caracol's Terminal Classic ceramic assemblage is found widely scattered in the outlying residential settlement, albeit in smaller quantities than in the site epicentre. Of the vessel kinds considered here, 24 of 107 outlying groups that were tested contained either sherds or vessels from this subcomplex. Other outlying groups contain jars, platters, and ollas that may also be coeval. Thus, at a minimum, 25% of Caracol's residential groups – and probably significantly more – were occupied at the time of the epicentral collapse.

The implications of the contextual analysis are substantial. First, individuals occupying the palaces were elite and not

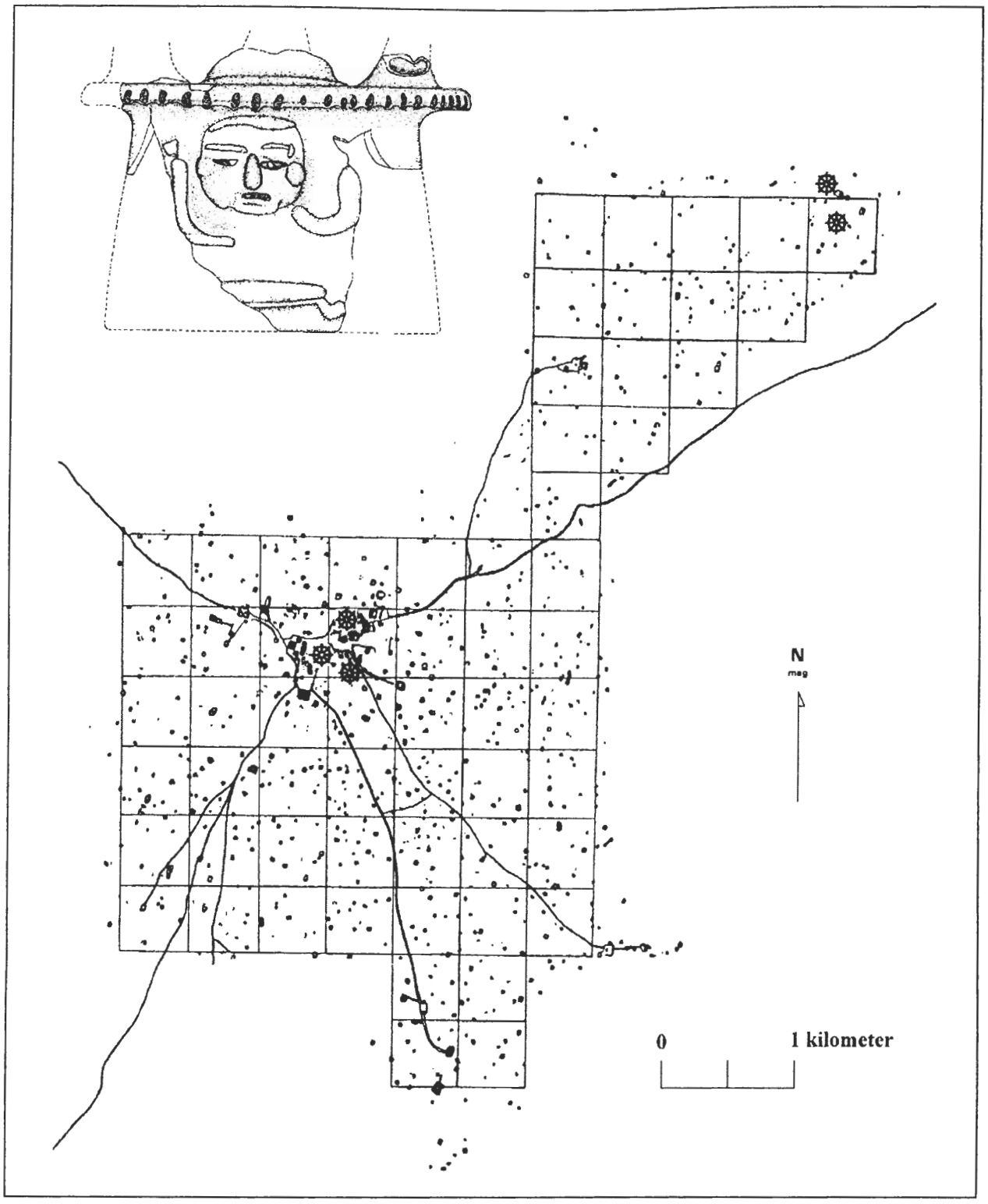

Figure 10. Distribution of three-prong burners at Caracol, Belize. Monterey Modeled vessel shown comes from a burial within an outlying residencial group.

squatters; they were living in the palaces while the site was still functional and growing. Second, residential units outside the epicentre continued to be occupied throughout the Terminal Classic period, but this settlement is difficult to identify if one looks only for typical Terminal Classic markers. Third, the existence of more typical local burial items, including late polychrome cylinders, in epicentral interments suggests continuity in the site's elite rather than their membership in any invading population.

Thus, the archaeological data from Caracol indicate that easily recognizable Terminal Classic ceramic markers

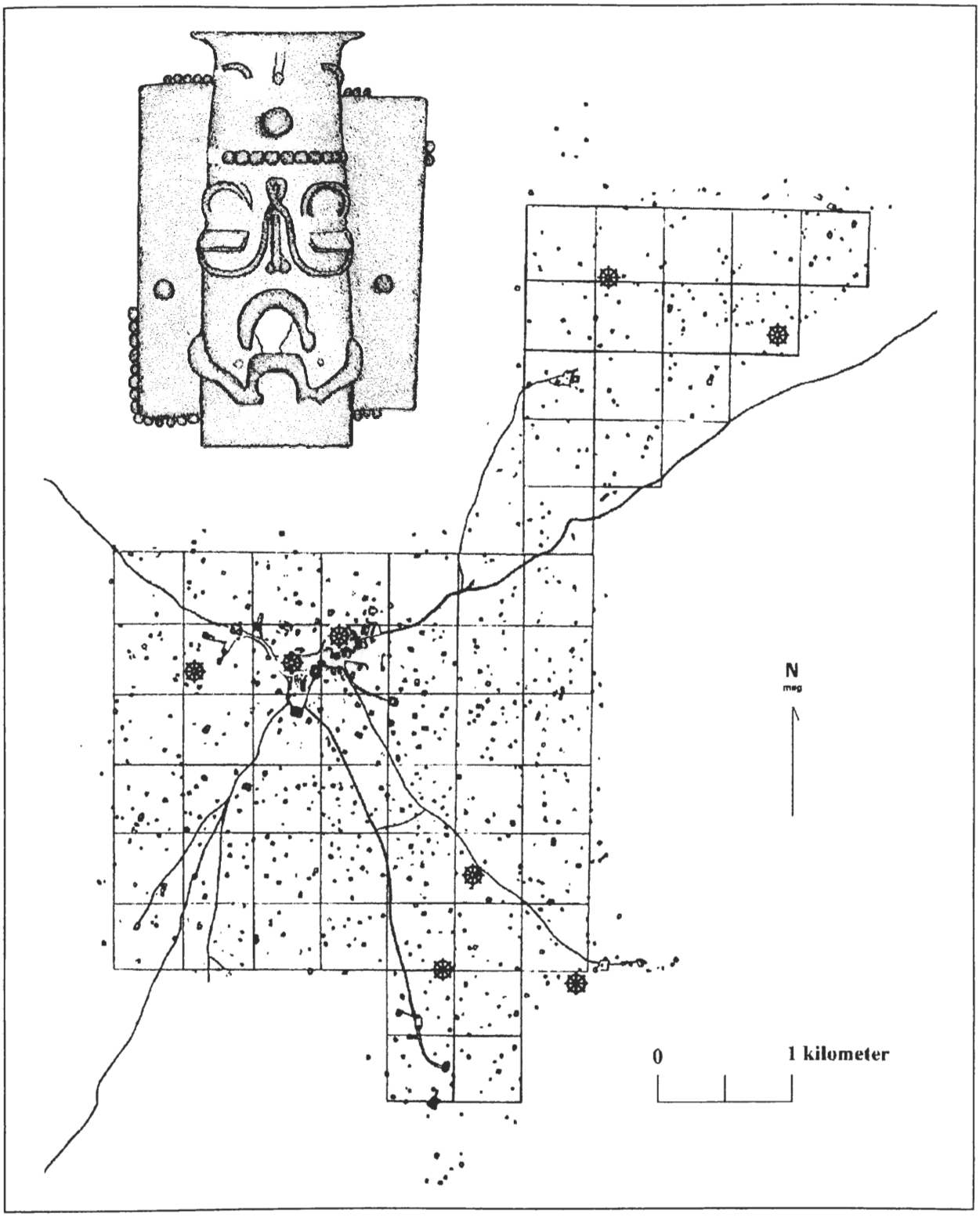

Figure 11. Distribution of flanged cylindrical effigy incensarios at Caracol, Belize. Pedregal Modeled incensario shown is missing its ring base and an associated lid; it comes from an outlying residential group.

were in day-to-day use in elite contexts, but were only sporadically employed for more traditional non-elite activities. Ritual ceramics, such as incense burners, however, maintained local continuity and were similar throughout the site. Ninth-century Caracol continued to be a successful city, but one in which there was a clear gap between the elite and other members of society. This was a time of increased stratification and external contacts. This split is very different from the social unification that is evident in the preceding Late Classic era at Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996; D. Chase 1998) and may well have been a factor in the ultimate collapse of the city.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CARACOL'S CERAMICS TELL US ABOUT THE COLLAPSE

The archaeological reconstruction of Caracol in the Terminal Classic, is one of a fully functioning community. The trash collection system was in place until after A.D. 890 (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). New building projects were being undertaken. And, as at Tikal (Harrison 1999), external trade was still ongoing. The stela cult, however, had ceased almost a half-century before the Caracol epicentre was finally abandoned. Thus, attempts to understand the Maya collapse at Caracol (and at many other Maya sites) by reference to monuments and hieroglyphic texts alone are inappropriate.

Caracol's pottery in particular helps us to understand the final socioeconomic situation at the site. The identification of a status-linked serving ware subcomplex in the downtown palaces reflects the hierarchical nature of Caracol's final population. Either imported ceramics or local copies of these imported ceramics characterize much of this epicentral subcomplex. The presence of foreign (non-local) fine wares in almost every palace that yielded *de facto* refuse indicates that the epicentral elite were full participants in broader trade or, alternatively, political networks. True Fine Orange pottery represents approximately 3.6% of the recovered total vessels from epicentral palaces. In contrast to the floor materials, local ceramics continued in use for ritual or private purposes (a dichotomy that is not in evidence at Caracol earlier). For instance, Terminal Classic burials – even those in the epicentre – included only local ceramics (including polychromes). Thus, the use of foreign fine wares for public display as serving wares in the epicentral palaces of Caracol suggests to us that the final elite ties to the outside world were political in nature.

The distribution of isolated parts of this subcomplex throughout the site's settlement system also strongly suggests a split between epicentre and outlying core populations. Only elite individuals occupied caracol's epicentral palaces. Non-elite support staff may have worked in the palaces, but they did not live in them or attached to them. It appears that high status Caracolenos had an affinity for and access to foreign fine wares, while other social segments at Caracol maintained a focus on more traditional vessels.

Importantly, this and other excavation data (such as small artefacts, faunal remains, and stable isotope studies of human bone [A. Chase and D. Chase 2001]) can be used to suggest that the site's final elite occupied the epicentral palaces, were well fed, and enjoyed access to a great many external trade items. The status-linked nature of Terminal Classic epicentral elite pottery not only suggests hierarchy, but also indicates wider ties. While epicenteral Terminal Classic burials maintain the use of more traditional ceramics and while the *incensarios* used in the temples are also in the local tradition, the vessels displayed in the palaces were for the most part of external origin or copied styles found elsewhere in the southern lowlands. This very public display of non-traditional and non-local fine wares in elite residences and audience halls would be appropriate for a local elite who had been incorporated into a broader pan-Maya political hegemony. Like the later Aztec hegemony, this pan-Maya hegemony likely would not have been focused on territorial integration, but rather upon hegemonic control with economic integration in areas of political expansion. The Aztecs and Incas provided subjugated lords with "gifts" of clothing and other items (such as ceramics) with the understanding that they would display them (e.g. Bauer 1992; Hassig 1998). By doing so, these subjugated lords would publicly show the symbols of their incorporation into a broader sociopolitical system. We believe that the ceramic distributions at Caracol could fit such a political model and that some of these fine wares, such as the modeled-carved Pabellon and Sahcaba pottery, can be considered to be "imperial ceramics" (e.g. West 2003:182-183).

Who might have headed such a hegemony remains an open question. A possible hieroglyphic reference to this hegemonic leadership may be found on Seibal Stela 8 with its enigmatic reference to a *K'ul Puh Ahau* ("Holy Cattail-Reed Lord"), a visitor to Seibal who was in a position of authority relative to that site's ruler (Schele and Mathews 1998:192-193). *Puh* is viewed as being related to the mythical Tollan (Schele and Mathews 1998:39-40); such a place would have been a logical origin for any hegemony. Just where the *Puh* referenced was located cannot yet be determined, but the archaeological data can provide possible clues. Hegemonic empires can either insert colonists in a given area or leave an area under local control (Hassig 1988); thus, different archaeological signatures may be apparent. Intriguingly, the archaeological data from Seibal (where several burials contain widespread Terminal Classic pottery markers and where new iconographic styles were introduced in the stone monuments) could be used to argue for the presence of such colonists; in contrast, the archaeological data from a more remote area like Caracol can be used to argue for the maintenance of more local control. Whether colonists or local control, however, the local pottery traditions continued largely unchanged in the domestic realm at both sites. It is instead through contextually evaluating ceramics in the burial, ritual, and serving subcomplexes at these sites that some understanding can be garnered about the changes the Maya world was undergoing just prior to the collapse. Importantly, the real answer to questions concerning the full nature of the Terminal Classic sociopolitical order will not be found in the relatively incomplete hieroglyphic record, but rather through future archaeological excavation.

The Caracol evidence has relevance for the re-interpretation of other Terminal Classic remains recovered in the southern lowlands. In contrast to the immediately preceding Late Classic era, there was widespread sharing of foreign iconography, ceramic tradewares, and other long-distance trade items during the Terminal Classic Period among sites. Common Terminal Classic iconographic motifs such as the presence of two or more individuals facing each other in alliance or consultation occurs on pottery and monuments and also may be symbolic of a broader political hegemony (A. Chase et al. 1991). At Caracol the vast majority of these kinds of materials occurs in the elite realm rather than within the other levels of a still functioning society. The existence of the same kinds of

serving wares in similar palace contexts is documented throughout the southern lowlands (A. Chase and D. Chase 2003). Thus, the distinct pottery distributions found in Terminal Classic Caracol may not be as unique as they seem. Rather than simply reflecting over-active trade networks, the occurrence of virtually identical iconographic scenes and vessels in strikingly similar contexts at a large number of Maya sites during the Terminal Classic period also may be reflective of more widespread social and political unity.

The contextual ceramic data from Caracol can be viewed, therefore, as suggestive of both the unity and the division among the Terminal Classic lowland Maya. While there appears to have been a degree of unity in material remains associated with the Maya elite – regardless of location - nevertheless, there could also be clear distinctions in material well being among the Maya within a single city. At least at Caracol, these two opposing factors – unity and division - may well have played a role in the abandonment of the city at the end of the 9th century. During this time, the site's almost uniform Late Classic identity appears to have separated into "haves" and "have-nots." The elites were well-fed and well-established members of a pan-Maya network, but this material well being does not appear to have extended to the outlying population. To refine our views of the social, political, and economic situation of the Terminal Classic Maya world, we need to better model the combined forces of unity and division suggested within the archaeological data from sites like Caracol.

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