

Maya Veneration of the Dead at Caracol, Belize

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The Classic Period Maya treated their dead in a variety of ways, interring them in an array of locations throughout any one site and in a multitude of differing poses and graves with a diverse assemblage of goods. It has proven difficult for archaeologists to make much sense out of the miscellany of burials that have been recovered from the Maya area. Yet, simple patterns relating to burial goods have been discerned and defined at a number of sites; for example, at Tikal it is customary to include three vessels, one of which has been "killed," with the interment of a Late Classic male (Haviland et al. 1985:149). Attempts have been made to relate many of these patterns to social organization and the status and role of the once living individual: the inclusion of one or more stingray spines in a burial has been interpreted as being indicative of elite status (Coe 1988:225-227); the presence of complete *Spondylus* shells in burials is seen as being only a royal prerogative (Coe 1988:233-234; Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992). However, no cohesive picture of the Maya treatment of the dead has emerged from all the excavated data.

Many investigators have noted some degree of association between large architectural assemblages and important Maya dead (see specifically, Coe 1956, 1988). Entire sites, such as Palenque (A. Miller 1974b:45-46), have been suggested as being no more than gigantic necropoli or literally "cities of the dead." Researchers have suggested that at some sites, such as Copán (cf. Webster 1985), important Maya dead were brought in from the surrounding periphery and buried in lineage houses in the site epicenter. Interpretive schemes such as these generally posit the epicentral groups and buildings of any given site as the focus for Maya ritual activity related to the veneration of dead ancestors.

At Caracol, Belize, however, it is evident that ritual activities related to the veneration of the dead were carried out with an equal vengeance both within and outside the site epicenter.¹ By comparing and contrasting these data with that from the rest of the Maya realm, it becomes possible to define a very specific Classic Period "cult of the dead" that was operative in the Southern Lowland Maya area.

Architectural Relations of the Classic Maya Dead

Part of this "cult of the dead" was recognized almost two decades ago at the site of Tikal, Guatemala. At Tikal, Becker (1971, 1982) defined a host of "plaza plans" which he felt typified the kinds of architectural groups found at the site. He archaeologically tested one kind of plaza plan, which he termed Tikal's "Plaza Plan 2." Plaza Plan 2 is characterized by an eastern focus, that is to say, the eastern side of the group is dominated by a small, squarish construction which some have referred to as "temples" or "shrines." Slightly over 14 percent of the Tikal structure groups fit within a Plaza Plan 2 designation (Becker 1982:120). Becker (1971) reported finding a large number of burials in the eastern constructions of Plaza Plan 2 groups at Tikal.

Based on our own work at the sites of Tayasal and Cenote, we were able to demonstrate that elsewhere in the Petén Plaza Plan 2 arrangements appeared towards the end of the Early Classic period and continued to play a major role in Classic period site arrangements continuing through the Terminal Classic period (A. Chase 1983, 1985:37-38). At the peninsular site of Tayasal, just north of Flores, Guatemala, the Plaza Plan 2 arrangement forms an integral part of that site's epicenter (A. Chase 1983:1305). The earliest one, dating to the end of the Early Classic period, lay to the east of an earlier "E Group" or astronomical arrangement of buildings. Following the construction of Tayasal's formal acropolis to the north of this E Group, three successive Plaza Plan 2 arrangements were placed to its east; the three span the Late Classic era. Conjoining the Tikal and the Tayasal data, it is evident that the group arrangement termed Plaza Plan 2 was extremely important to members of Late Classic society. In fact, the main acropolis at Tikal mimics a Plaza Plan 2 group with Tikal Temple 1, containing Burial 116 of the Late Classic ruler Hasaw Ka'an K'awil, being the eastern shrine building.

It is at Caracol, however, that the full meaning of the Plaza Plan 2 building arrangement, hereafter referred to as an "eastern shrine group" (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:54-Type 1) becomes evident. Mapping at Caracol from 1985 through the present revealed an astonishing num-

ber of eastern shrine groups; in the completely mapped area between the Conchita and Pajaro-Ramonal causeways, more than 60 percent of the groups conform with Tikal's Plaza Plan 2 definition and exhibit some sort of eastern focus. Investigations at Caracol showed that the majority of eastern structures at the site contain at least one formal tomb. Excavation also demonstrated that other burials, usually non-tomb, are generally placed immediately west of such structures, and that a host of specialized cache vessels are usually found in the plazas in front of such buildings or, occasionally, within the buildings themselves.

All this has led us to think of Classic period Maya society as one which had a heavy focus on the veneration of the dead, not only among the elite but also at most other levels of Maya society. It is discernible from the Caracol data that most of its population shared in similar rituals and burial practices. The use of a "tomb" was not restricted to Caracol's elite nor was the use of "elite" items associated solely with tomb interments.

Exactly how much of the picture gained from the Caracol data may be directly applied to other parts of the Maya area is not known. It may certainly be used to interpret the data collected for the southeastern part of the Petén by Laporte, Torres, and Hermes (1989) where tombs also appear to be relatively common. Based on a review of the Tikal and Tayasal data, it is in fact suspected that Caracol and its surrounding region are only emphasizing activities that were utilized throughout the majority of the Southern Lowlands. These rites, however, were not pan-Maya in nature. The Northern Lowlands from Calakmul (Fletcher et al. 1987) north do not appear to have conducted the same activities in the same frequency. Nor do the extreme Southern Lowlands precisely fit the Petén-Belize picture. Leventhal (1983:70, 73) has already commented on the relative paucity of eastern shrine groups at both Seibal and Copán. Isolated examples of these groups do occur in this region, specifically at Quiriguá (Becker 1972), but not in the same frequency found elsewhere in the Southern Lowlands. Yet, such groups do occur outside the Petén associated with many of the same patterns found in the heartland. Thus, the Southern Lowland Maya do indeed seem to be bound together by a socially widespread pattern of Classic period veneration of the dead with a specific focus on the direction east.

The emphasis on the direction east for the veneration of the dead that appears at Caracol and other Southern Lowland sites is likely inspired by shared cosmological beliefs. East is associated with the rising sun and, in Maya thought, with the rebirth of the sun after its nightly passage through the Underworld (cf. A. Miller 1982:85). This is explicitly seen iconographically at Caracol in the association between the eastern buildings and incensarios which depict the nighttime jaguar aspects of the sun god (fig. 1). In the Caracol epicenter, this death-related imagery is resplendent on the central stair balk of the eastern Structure B20-2nd where a 3 m high mask portrayed the skeletal underworld sun. This construction housed a number of tombs, and the mask itself had the remains of a human body placed

within its mouth (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:23-24). Thus, the placements of burials and tombs in eastern structures surely relates to the Maya belief in the afterlife and rebirth.

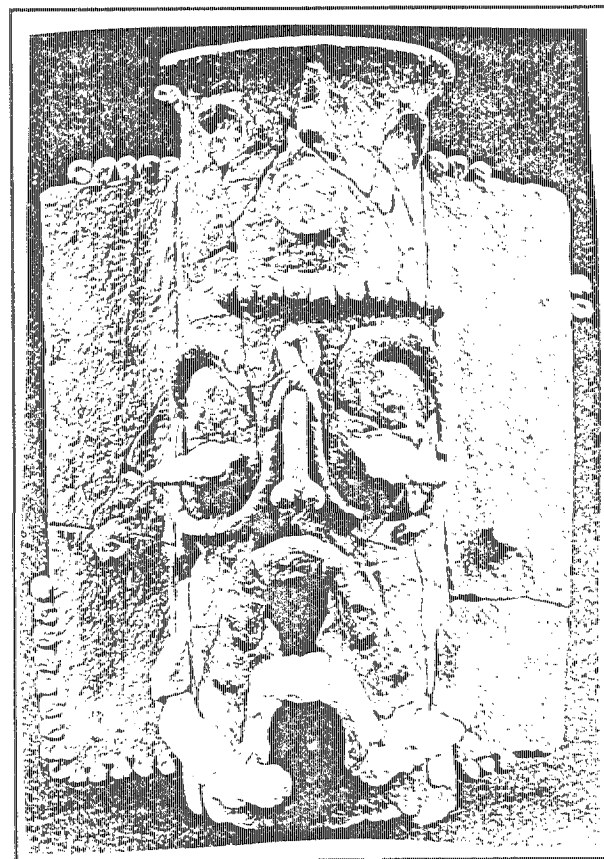


Fig. 1 An incensario recovered in association with the stairs of eastern Structure 4N2. The censer is missing its base, which was knocked off before its deposition; part of its lid (not shown here) was also placed with it. As is, it measures 32.8 cm in height. Photograph by Richard Spencer.

Burials, Tombs, and *Chultuns*

The Maya focus on the direction east for burial does not mean that all Maya were interred on this side of a building group. At Caracol, and at other sites, human remains are found in most other buildings and parts of groups; this is true of both the epicenter and core (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:51-54 for explanation of these terms). It is apparent, however, from the number, placement, and associated contents of burials at Caracol that the direction east was the favored location for interring important Maya dead, especially outside the site epicenter. Not everyone was entitled to the "choice location" in or in front of the eastern building. However, burial in a non-east direction did not necessarily imply the lack of a tomb. Tombs occur in several non-east buildings at Caracol in both epicentral and non-epicentral locations.

A burial typology for Caracol was presented elsewhere (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:56-57). This typology includes four kinds of burial: simple interments or bodies placed directly into fill; cists, or specially dug graves having no formal walls or roofs; crypts, or graves with formal walls and formal roofs; and finally tombs, or formally constructed chambers in which an excavator can move freely about. All four kinds of interments are found associated with eastern buildings at Caracol. Often, more than one type

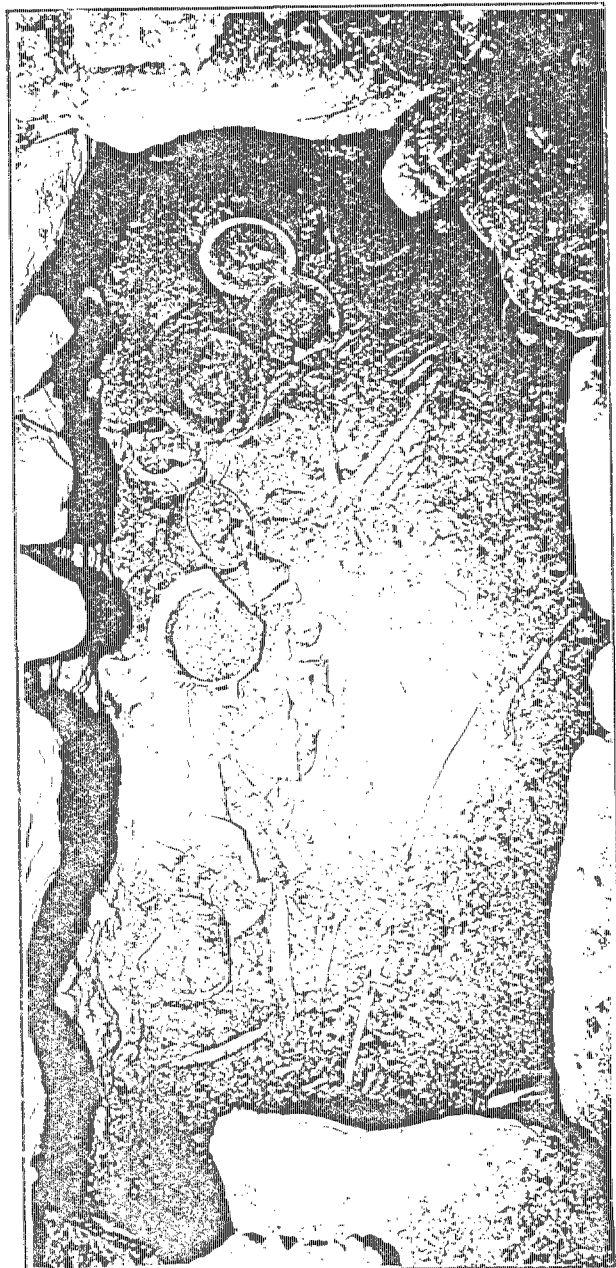


Fig. 2 A tomb from within Str. 3D-3 after clearing excavations; the view is through its collapsed vault. Chamber measures 1.25 m in width by 1.87 m in length; it was 1.22 m in height.

is found in a single eastern construction. Thus, the simple fact that one is buried in an eastern building does not in and of itself condition the kind of grave one gets. Males and females are also found interred in eastern buildings, although more males are found than females. Thus, no simple sex correlation can be established with such interments. Infants and children are also found in eastern buildings, although rarely in tombs. And finally, many of the burials found on the eastern side of a group contain several individuals. In fact, most of the tombs outside the Caracol epicenter contain more than one person's remains.

All this brings us to a consideration of tombs (fig. 2). What is a tomb and what was its function in Maya society? Traditionally, tombs were associated with elite burials (cf. Loten and Pendergast 1983:14). Yet the presence of a tomb in almost every structural group at Caracol negates this commonly held belief (A. Chase 1992). Differences can be seen among the tombs at Caracol, and it may be that these factors correlate with social categories. Some tombs are larger, more finely built, and plastered on their interiors; these tend to hold single individuals and are usually found in the epicenter. Yet, smaller, non-plastered tombs are also found in the epicenter, and plastered, finely built tombs are found throughout the Caracol core. Again, there is no simple association of the data. Only one potential correlation emerged from the excavation data: tombs holding single individuals are usually the most prestigiously placed and, therefore, presumably of the highest status. Still, tombs occur in too large a number at Caracol to be easily dismissed. Perhaps, in fact, they can be utilized to tell us something about the more generalized treatment of the Maya dead.

The larger portion of the fifty-four excavated tombs at Caracol have entranceways;¹ many of these were found open or collapsed during survey and reconnaissance. All these entranceways open to the outside of a given structure. Excavation showed that many Caracol tombs were conscientiously built into the core of eastern buildings at the time of their construction; examples of this phenomenon are found both in the Caracol epicenter (cf. Structure B20-2nd with three pre-built tombs) and the core (cf. Structures 2E20 or 2F7). The implication of these data is that the individual who was to be placed in the chamber had not yet died at the time of construction.

However, outside the epicenter, many of the tombs contain more than a single individual, and some chambers are found to be completely empty. Many individuals were placed in a single tomb as part of the same burial effort (minimally, seven in Str. 8F8 and nine in Str. O4) and are found in a variety of poses. Usually, however, only one or two individuals are fully articulated and extended, while the others are flexed and semi-articulated. There are also instances when not all the skeletal material is present, implying that some of the tombs were reentered upon occasion and that some of the bodies placed in tombs may have been placed elsewhere for a while after the individual died before being bundled and interred. Thus, given the variation in articulation and completeness, tombs must have been

reopened on occasion for the addition of new occupants, and existing occupants were often removed (sometimes incompletely) and placed elsewhere. The newly-placed individuals were both recently and distantly deceased.

That variations on this theme in fact happened can be seen clearly at Caracol Str. F2 where a well-constructed and plastered tomb with a roof entranceway in the rear of a west building was reentered on more than one occasion, presumably with previously "reduced" material. It is unclear who the first inhabitant of the tomb may have been. The chamber's floor and, presumably, its occupant or occupants were dug through at some point during the Late Classic era. Following this, layer upon layer of bone, jadeite, and broken pottery vessels were dumped into the chamber through the entryway. Based on burning lenses, successive events are indicated. Some of the partial pottery vessels predate the Late Classic use of this chamber by well over a century, suggesting that they may have been interred elsewhere before deposition in Str. F2. Excavation of this deposit recovered a minimum of twenty-five individuals. The presence of only partially articulated remains indicates that none of the individuals placed after the original tomb disturbance were primary interments.

Tombs were also utilized as non-final resting places. The entranceways into most of these chambers assured multiple entries to the tombs prior to their being sealed into any given building. Some, however, were never sealed but rather were left open. While this allowed for the addition of new occupants, it also provided easier access for their removal. At Caracol, tombs with entrances that were open when found contained a range of remains, from completely articulated interments (cf. Str. 3D-3) to no remains or goods at all (cf. Str. M42); some open chambers yielded only fragmentary skeletal material and/or partial vessels upon excavation (cf. Str. N9), suggesting the possibility of incomplete removal of the burial(s). Based on the number of empty tombs that have been found and the temporal assessments of their construction long before the abandonment of the given group, the working assumption may be made that some tombs were used temporarily for burial, and that the contents were then removed and placed elsewhere. It is possible that these chambers were meant to be utilized as a final resting place only at certain times or upon the death of specific individuals.

The Classic period Maya tomb at Caracol was seemingly available to almost all socioeconomic groups at the site for at least limited use. Only certain individuals, however, were entitled to an eternity of rest in such chambers and frequently these individuals were accompanied by one or more secondary interments. The manner of deposition of these secondary interments suggests disturbance or non-primary placement, rather than sacrifice. Other individuals were buried in simple interments, cists, or crypts in the same east building containing the tomb, but usually only after the tomb was occupied by its selected inhabitant.

All these data have relevance to interpretations of Maya society and the use of a Maya building group. The eastern building of almost any group at Caracol, and likely at many

other sites, was seemingly dedicated to the dead. While one could theoretically be buried in any given structure of a group, at Caracol the eastern construction was usually the one most associated with the Maya concept of death, thus having the most archaeologically visible expression of veneration of the dead. The widespread censers and cache vessels associated with such buildings, and discussed in the following section, bear this out. Presumably the most "important" individuals of the family(-ies) occupying any given group were able to be buried in this building. However, it is possible that dead from the associated group may have undergone certain rites either in the tomb or in the building that surmounted the given mound and then were interred elsewhere (not necessarily associated with the group). Thus, each structure group had its own "funeral home" or "charnel house" incorporated into the social and daily fabric of Maya life.²

Surprisingly, a consideration of *chultuns* may help to explain why the idea of "tomb" is expressed so vividly at Caracol. For the over 4 sq km area thus far mapped at Caracol, only six *chultuns* have been recorded. As at any site, more probably exist, but these likely are sealed under later constructions. Yet, it is clear that *chultuns* are a comparative rarity at Caracol. Of the six recorded *chultuns*, five were dug during 1989 and 1990, primarily by Clarrisa Hunter of Ball State University. One was empty, and four held burials; a seventh *chultun* was encountered which was sealed by later constructions in a test pit and also contained an interment. Where ceramics were found with the burials in these *chultuns*, they dated to Protoclassic and Early Classic times.

At Caracol, there is no clear evidence for ancient Maya activity other than burials being associated with *chultuns*. Other *chultuns* dug in the neighboring area of Mountain Cow by Thompson (1931) in the 1920s yielded a similar association of *chultuns* and early interments; most of his dated to the Preclassic and Protoclassic periods. We believe that a tentative association may be made between *chultuns* and tombs at Caracol, and that, by extension, *chultuns* may help to aid in discerning patterns in Maya burial practices.

Presently, the earliest tombs at Caracol are found in the site epicenter and date to the Early Classic period.³ All known *chultuns* in the Caracol core date either to or, more usually, before this era. It may therefore be suggested that the *chultuns* in the Caracol area represented the forerunners of the omnipresent Late Classic period tomb. Like the Late Classic Caracol tombs, the *chultuns* may have provided a permanent construction in which to house at least certain Maya dead prior to the Late Classic period. Furthermore, variation in articulations, completeness, and presence or absence of skeletal remains and pottery vessels in *chultuns* is similar to that found in the later tombs, suggesting the probability of multiple reentry as well as the possibility of temporary placement and ultimate removal of individuals. *Chultuns* at other sites and in other regions may also have been utilized predominantly for the dead, possibly as "staging areas" as in the case of certain tombs at Caracol. Thus, the large number of *chultuns* at a site like Tikal (197 in the

central 9 sq km, cf. Carr and Hazard 1961:11) relative to the small number of tombs (sixteen from 1956-1971, cf. Welsh 1988:22) might be explained as a retention of a Preclassic-Protoclassic pattern into the Late Classic period in which such chambers were used to house, at least temporarily, Maya dead. That the use of *chultuns* for the dead may have persisted into the Late Classic era at Tikal could explain the non-dominance of the eastern shrine group at that site. Differences between the treatment of the dead at Caracol and Tikal, and specifically the more abundant nature of tombs at Caracol, may have resulted from Caracol's defeat of that site at the onset of the Late Classic period resulting in a long era of relative prosperity at Caracol as opposed to a "hiatus" at Tikal.

Offerings to the Dead

The association of tombs, burials, and eastern buildings throughout the core of Caracol comprises only part of the total package of the Maya veneration of the dead. Also directly associated with this "cult of the dead" are special cache vessels, obsidian eccentrics, stalactites, and flanged incensarios portraying the jaguar sun of the night. The recovered incensarios are associated directly with the steps of eastern buildings either placed beneath a step or smashed on top of a step. The portrayals of the underworld guise of the sun in association with an eastern building has obvious connections with the theme of rebirth. Other underworld associations with eastern buildings are found in the caching of stalactites from caves either in front of or within certain eastern buildings at Caracol. Perhaps most significant, however, is the association of special pottery cache vessels with eastern structures. These exhibit a variety of forms, and change in these forms is visible over time. For the most part, these caches were placed in the plaza area directly in front of the eastern building. Sometimes, however, they are located within the buildings beneath the stairs and, on rare occasions, are also included as offerings in tombs or above other kinds of interments.

Most cache vessels are unslipped, paired, and set lip-to-lip (see D. Chase 1988), but isolated vessels also are encountered quite frequently. The earliest noted forms at Caracol are flaring walled dishes, smaller than, though clearly derivative from, Aguila Orange cache vessels. It is interesting to note that Aguila Orange vessels at other sites throughout the Southern Lowlands are often found containing a severed human head. At Caracol, no skulls have been found within any caches thus far recovered. Many lip-to-lip, smaller, flared cups, however, have held the severed remains of human fingers. And a wide array of non-epicentral Late Classic cache vessels were formed into representations of human heads; rather than the physical offering of one, a modeled copy may have served the purpose (fig. 3). Deposits of modeled head caches are frequent in the settlement that lies on either side of the Caracol Conchita Causeway (Jaeger 1991), but are also found in residential groups throughout the site.

It may be proffered that the human head had certain powers that were important either directly to the dead or, at

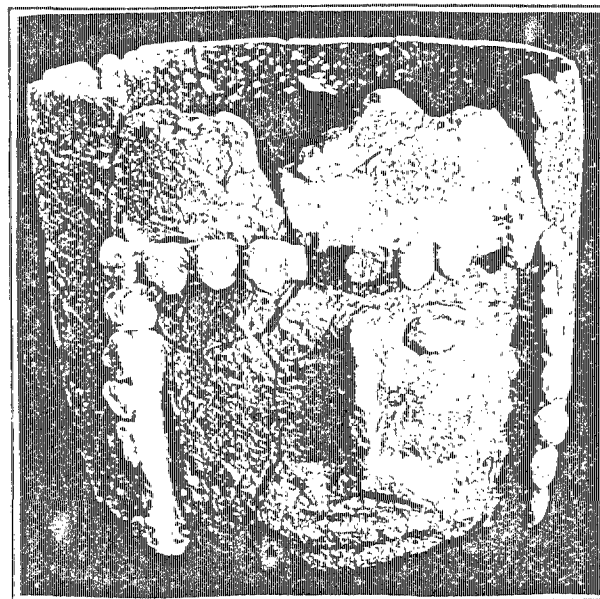


Fig. 3 Modeled cache vessel in the form of a face from Str. 2E28; a lid was not found with this container. Vessel is 11.5 cm in height. Photograph by Richard Spencer.

least, symbolically to them and their relationship to the living who placed the offering. If one recalls, in the *Popul Vuh* the spittle from a severed human head succeeded in getting a female pregnant (Recinos 1950:118-119), thus indicating life and rebirth after death. The eastern position of such "head" caches may also be correlated with a similar concept of rebirth. Thus, iconographically, the physical portrayal of an offering container in the form of a human head may serve to reinforce the existence of the soul or life after death and the ability of the dead to influence the living. Supporting this interpretation is the Aztec notion of the head as being the conduit for the soul of a given individual (Coe 1988:223).

These interpretations, however, must also be viewed in conjunction with a wider consideration of all caches at Caracol. In the major architectural complexes that occur both in the site epicenter and in earlier, presumably civic, non-epicentral foci, the caches are different than those that appear in association with eastern buildings throughout the site. Barrel-shaped caches appear in these larger civic constructions. Unlike the head caches that must have held primarily perishable objects, the majority of the barrel caches contained a host of more permanent items (along with perishable goods); these materials served to emphasize the Classic period Maya world view and its directionality (D. Chase 1988). In one case, death and rebirth are graphically painted in the bottom and lid of a barrel-shaped container, taking the form of the dead corn god and a winged Itzamná (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:46-48, fig. 41b-c). While such overt cosmological symbolism is usually lacking in the head and finger caches found in domestic groups throughout Caracol, certain of these deposits must surely have mimic-

ked the function of the civically-deposited barrel caches for, in several cases, sets of obsidian eccentrics were recovered within or in front of eastern buildings in domestic groups (usually in association with head cache vessels). However, unlike the epicentral caches in which the objects (no eccentrics) are placed inside the vessel, the obsidian eccentrics are placed exteriorly to the associated vessel(s).

The obsidian eccentrics obviously had cosmological significance to the Maya. By placing them about a cache vessel, however, the Maya served to incorporate that vessel directly into the cosmological order defined by the symbolic eccentrics. The exterior placement of such pieces in the caches associated with domestic groups differs from epicentral caches in which the vessels contain a representation of that order within their interiors. These differences between residential and civic cache patterns at Caracol may, perhaps, be equally reflective of the organization of that society. In the residential groups, the family unit may have attempted to define the dead relative to the wider universe; in the civic architecture found in the epicenter, the deposits (rites or ceremonies) likely transcended the family and encompassed the whole community. This relationship can be applied equally to caches and human burials. For in the epicenter, important burials and caches are not limited to the east side of any architectural assemblage. Thus, epicentral burials and caches appear to have represented the entire community symbolically with the body or cache positioned relative to the universe defined by the city's architectural forms.

Dwarfs at Caracol

The emphasis on activities pertaining to death and burial found at Caracol and the suspected entry and reentry of the site's tombs are reflected in the iconography of the site as well. Caracol has an extended sequence of dwarfs appearing on its monuments from 9.8.0.0.0 (St. 1) well into the Late Classic period until at least 9.18.10.0.0 (St. 11), one of the longest and most extensive corpora of such figures. Even earlier than the stelae is the portrayal of a hunchbacked dwarf on a carved stone bowl from a tomb in Str. B20 dating to 9.7.3.12.15 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:21, fig. 15).

Many objects of Maya art depict smallish figures which have been interpreted as dwarfs. In fact, the Classic period Maya elite are portrayed to some degree as having a fetish with these miniature individuals. Some feel that their widespread portrayal on stelae indicates that the Maya elite, due to inbreeding, may have had a tendency to produce offspring who were dwarfs, or that the occurrence of a dwarf in a population was such an important matter that it was repeatedly shown in the subsequent iconography, even arguing that dwarfs may have been selectively culled from the outlying population and raised in a special environment (V. Miller 1985:150). Whatever the actual case, given their widespread portrayal on monuments, dwarfs were held in some kind of special stature by the Classic period Maya. On this latter point, most archaeologists and art historians concur, but little actual agreement has been reached as to the precise function that dwarfs held in Classic period society.

Based on archaeological and iconographic data from Caracol, however, it may be posited that, at least symbolically, dwarfs served Classic Maya society as a sort of sacred caste of morticians who were responsible not only for ensuring the passage of the Maya elite through the Underworld after death, but also for the orderly passage of rule through the physical transfer of certain symbols of power between the dead and living ruler. In effect, it would seem that they served as "middlemen" or agents between the Maya Underworld and the world of the living.

The position that dwarfs held for the Maya may be examined from several standpoints, all of which provide some clues as to how dwarfs functioned in Classic period Lowland Maya society. Only by combining the ethnographic, archaeological, and iconographic clues, however, can a focus of this activity be derived. It should be noted at the outset that the roles or functions that dwarfs served for the Classic Maya surely varied throughout the large territory. Yet, examination of the data makes it clear that their function in the Southern Lowlands was quite similar throughout the area and related to their role as intermediaries with or to the Maya Underworld.

Ethnographically, dwarfs are associated with the earth and the Maya Underworld (V. Miller 1985:143); however, dwarfs are distinguished from the dead of the Underworld, even though both inhabit the same domain (Laughlin 1969:175). Thompson (1970a:347) noted that dwarfs were responsible for the passage of the sun through the Underworld during the night. This suggests that dwarfs were viewed as individuals who could inhabit both the realm of the living and the dead. Given their small size, dwarfs may also be linked with the *alux* of Yucatec fame: small spirits or goblins who do dastardly deeds. The Postclassic *incensarios* so often found in the Northern Lowlands that bear miniature representations of the complete human form are sometimes believed to be frozen incarnations of these "little people" (Redfield and Villas Rojas 1934:120).

The ethnographic record, therefore, suggests that dwarfs are, first, associated with the Underworld and apparently have free access to this realm and, second, that dwarfs or "little people" have supernatural characteristics and are not to be trifled with by everyday citizens. Both these conclusions possibly may be applied to dwarfs of the Classic period, especially given the iconographic position of dwarfs in Maya art.

Iconographically, dwarfs at Caracol are shown presenting "incense bags" or, more usually, symbols of office or rulership, specifically the manikin scepter, to rulers. Schele and Miller (1986:49) note that God K or GII, "forms the scepter that appears on many different official occasions, including accession, and is profoundly associated with sacrifice, in particular, with self-inflicted bloodletting." Accession and self-inflicted bloodletting are intricately tied to the rites of rulership, occasioning the manikin scepter to be referred to as the "icon of rulership and bloodletting" (Schele and Miller 1986:73). Thus, the association between the dwarf and the manikin scepter is not simply fortuitous.

In presenting the manikin scepter to a new ruler, it may be postulated that the dwarf has at least symbolically retrieved the symbol of power from the Underworld and the dead ruler.

Dwarfs at Caracol also appear in two scenes of what may be termed "contrastive sets." The first and simpler is the pairing of a ruler and a dwarf. Here, the dwarf is transferring a symbol of power from the world of the dead (to which

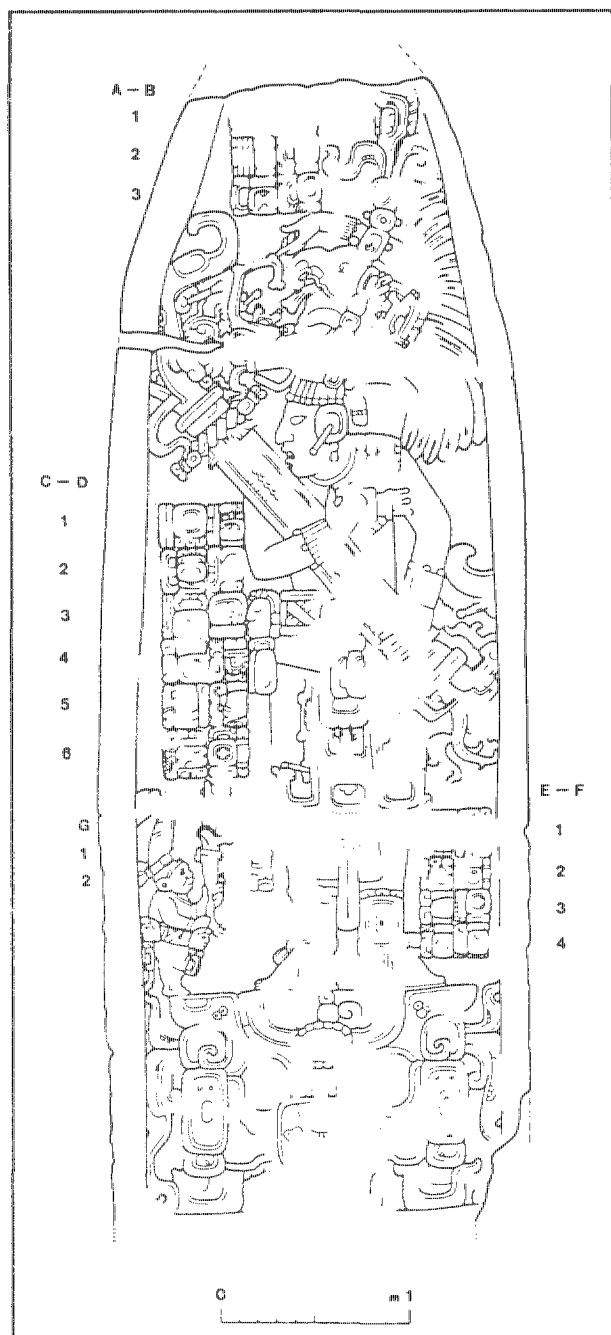


Fig. 4 Caracol St. II, dating to 9.18.10.0.0, which portrays a dwarf presenting a manikin scepter to the Caracol ruler. Drawing and inking by Stephen Houston.

he has entry) to the world of the living, as represented by the ruler (fig. 4). A second contrastive set found at Caracol involves a scene in which the main figure is flanked by both a dwarf and a captive. Here the meaning is slightly more complex. It may be presumed that the captive is shortly to be put to death, i.e., the captive is about to pass into the Underworld (as a blood sacrifice) and not return. The dwarf on the other hand passes into the Underworld and returns to the world of humans. Thus, the dwarf and the captive in and of themselves form a paired opposition with regard to the Underworld. A third example of a contrastive set involving a dwarf, not found at Caracol, has been briefly noted by V. Miller (1985:151), although some difference is taken with her interpretation of this scene as representative of dynastic symbols and relationships between Tikal, Dos Pilas, and El Perú. In this third set, the ruler is flanked by both a dwarf and a mythical water bird. In such scenes (cf. Dos Pilas Stela 25) the water bird serves to amplify the role of the dwarf; much like the dwarf, the water bird can dive into the Underworld (i.e., water; cf. D. Chase and A. Chase 1989) and return.

The physical remains of dwarfs are only rarely encountered archaeologically. At Tikal, a single burial (Burial 24) is interpreted to be that of a dwarf. Interestingly, it is a tomb whose occupant is accorded elite status (cf. Coggins 1975:382-383); significantly, Coggins (1975:371) suggests a possible southeast Caracol connection for this individual (see also A. Chase and D. Chase 1987:61). It is only after this burial, sometime immediately prior to 9.13.0.0.0 (A.D. 690), that dwarf imagery appears in the "public" art of Tikal (and then only for a period of about fifty years). At Caracol, there is no clear physical evidence for the existence of a dwarf, although fused vertebrae, possibly from a hunchback, were recovered from the Str. F2 tomb.

Yet, assuming that dwarfs actually existed in Classic Maya society and assuming that their underworld connections were as described, inferential data may be garnered for their utility in the form of tomb entrances and architectural doors that are too small to admit a normal-sized human. One tomb entranceway on record at Caracol is only 53 cm in height by 26 cm in width; a door at epicentral Caana measures 85 cm in height by 43 cm in width. In such cases, either children or very little people were the only individuals to have easy access to the associated chambers or rooms. Given the gravity of a mortuary situation, it is most likely that "little people," with their defined access to the Underworld, would have been entrusted with the task of laying out the corpse and goods that were to aid in the journey beyond. Whatever the case, the presence of extremely small doors and entranceways at Caracol may be seen as at least symbolic of the role of dwarfs in Maya society. Importantly, these doorways are distributed throughout both the core and epicenter of the site.

Conclusions

The Maya of Caracol were extremely concerned with their dead. While there was always a wide array of possible methods and locations for placement of the dead, certain constants can be viewed throughout the site. Eastern struc-

tures were the favored funereal constructions for the majority of Caracol society, and most living groups at the site contained structures which served largely mortuary purposes. Many of these buildings contained tombs which were meant to be accessed and then reaccessed. At Caracol, it appears that *chultuns* served as temporal forerunners for the many tombs found at the site. Evidence from both *chultuns* and tombs also indicates that placement within such chambers was not always either immediate or permanent. By the Late Classic era, all levels of Caracol society participated in this "cult of the dead" and had access to the paraphernalia that accompanied this veneration. The direct association of both caches and incensarios with interments in eastern locations indicates their intertwined function in this cult throughout Caracol.

Some slight conceptual differences exist between the epicenter and core of Caracol relative to interments. While most deposits were placed in association with what appear to have been family shrines or charnel houses, in the core these deposits more often attempted to define themselves as part of the larger cosmological order, and by extension placing the family unit within the larger whole. While epicentral deposits of both caches and burials followed the same general patterns seen throughout the rest of Caracol, they also could be placed in non-eastern, publically-oriented buildings. Whether in an eastern building or not, however, these central deposits generally differed from those in the core in that some served broader purposes, many being political statements and definitions or reaffirmations of the cosmic order for the entire community. That the core and epicenter were tied together in the same cult may be inferred from the range of deposits and their contents that occur throughout the site as well as in the shared use of formal tombs reflect-

ing similar cosmological beliefs. In fact, the small entranceways that characterize most Caracol tombs in the core and epicenter probably indicate a common belief in the symbolic intervention of dwarfs.

It is suspected that the Caracol interment data are simply elaborated versions of patterns found at other sites within the Southern Lowlands. Perhaps the site's preeminence in the Southern Lowlands during the transition from the Early to Late Classic periods (from A.D. 560 through 690) allowed for the full expression and predominance at Caracol of what was probably an extremely widespread pattern of intensive and extensive veneration of the Maya dead. From a Caracol perspective, it is evident that this "cult of the dead" was infused into almost all aspects of Maya life at all levels of its society.

Notes

1. Funding for the Caracol Project was provided by private donors, the University of Central Florida, the Institute of Maya Studies (Miami), the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, U.S.A.I.D., and the Government of Belize. Student dissertation funding was also provided by the National Science Foundation.
2. This paper represents the total after the 1989 field season. As of the end of the 1993 field season, information has been gathered from seventy-four tombs, and the location of nine more tombs is known.
3. A modern Maya ethnographic example of "double-burial" processing has been noted for Hoctun, Yucatán, by Peter Harrison; here the dead are interred in one locus for approximately a year and then dug up and reburied elsewhere.
4. Thompson (1931:290-294), however, recovered two "Protoclassic" tombs at Cahal Cunil, just beyond the Caracol Cahal Pichik causeway terminus. Thus, it can be expected that "tombs" of this date eventually also will be found in Caracol proper.

**SEVENTH PALENQUE
ROUND TABLE**

1989

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