

Postclassic Temporal and Spatial Frames for the Lowland Maya: A Background

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Temporally, the Maya Postclassic period begins with the "Maya collapse" at approximately 10.3.0.0.0. in Maya long count notation and ends during the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries with the arrival of the Spaniards. The date for the beginning of the Postclassic period is dependent upon a correlation of the Maya and Christian calendars. Although the generally accepted 11.16.0.0.0. correlation would place the collapse at A.D. 889, other correlations alter this date and the length of the Postclassic period by intervals of 256 years. Attempts to place the Maya calendar into an absolute time frame related to the Gregorian calendar have focused on native chronicles (Brinton 1881; Nicholson 1955; Thompson 1937; Vaillant 1935; Wauchope 1947), the Books of *Chilam Balam* (Brinton 1882; Morley 1911; Roys 1933 [1976], 1960; Valentini 1880; Weitzel 1931), and scientific methods such as radiocarbon dating (Satterthwaite 1956; Satterthwaite and Ralph 1960; Stuckenrath, Coe, and Ralph 1966; Satterthwaite and Coe 1968). In addition to the 11.16.0.0.0. (Thompson 1927, 1937) correlation, the principal proposed correlations include the 11.3.0.0.0. (Escalona Ramos 1940; Vaillant 1935; Thompson 1941a, 1941b; Wauchope 1947; A. Chase n.d.) and the 12.9.0.0.0. (Spinden 1924; Andrews IV 1965a, 1965b). Unfortunately, no one correlation fits all the data and, as has been pointed out in the past by Satterthwaite (1956), Deevey, Gralenski, and Hoffren (1959), Kirchoff (1950), and more recently Kubler (1976) and A. Chase (n.d.), the correlation question has not yet been settled. That the Spaniards did not penetrate all of the Maya area at the same date adds further confusion to the picture. The general lack of early historic trade items in the archaeological record and the elusive nature of contact sites make it difficult to fix the end of the Postclassic period temporally.

Dating within the Postclassic period is further complicated by a number of factors: (1) lack of monuments with long count dates as in

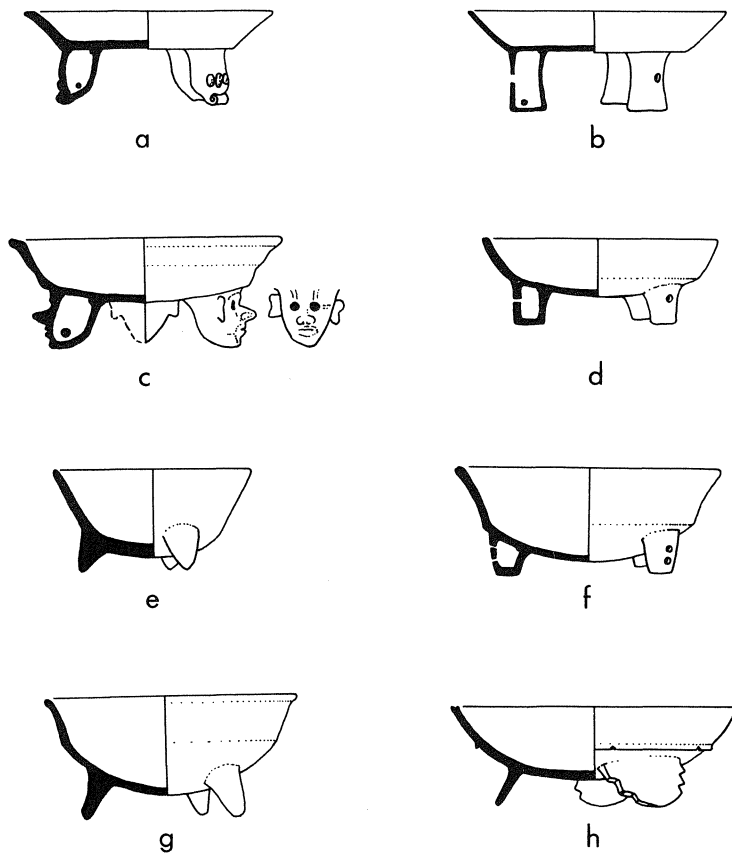


Fig. 1. Redware bowl forms of the Postclassic Maya lowlands (diameter of "a" is approximately 22 centimeters; all other vessels are drawn to the same scale)

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|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. Augustine Red (Peten) | e. Mama Red (Mayapan) |
| b. Paxcaman Red (Peten) | f. Payil Red (Tulum) |
| c. Undesignated Type (Lamanai) | g. Rita Red (Santa Rita) |
| d. Topoxte Red (Topoxte) | h. U Fine Orange (Atasta) |

the Classic period; (2) the scarcity of deeply stratified Postclassic deposits, and until recently, (3) the small sample of Postclassic sites excavated. Because of these problems, Postclassic Maya archaeology is frequently dependent upon ceramic analysis to provide the relative dating of excavated materials. In the past, this dating was limited both by the small number of excavated samples and by a seriation of sherds without much contextual data. The increase in excavated Postclassic samples has now allowed for a broader understanding of Postclassic ceramics. There are, however, almost as many different ceramic sequences and types (fig. 1) as there are excavated sites, thus making wider interpretations difficult. While recognizing these limitations, it is useful to relate the various sequences and areas to each other in an effort to gain a temporal overview of the lowland Maya Postclassic.

Yucatan

The Yucatec sequence (fig. 2), which serves as the foundation for most current work on the Northern lowland Postclassic, was formulated by R. E. Smith (1971) and builds on the earlier work of Andrews IV (1943: 74–79) and Brainerd (1958). As developed by Smith, the sequence had several unstated assumptions. The chronology was primarily derived from Roys' (1933, 1976) interpretation of the ethnohistoric Books of *Chilam Balam* and appears to subsume their linear seriation by Morley (Morley and Brainerd 1956; Pollock et al. 1962). Smith may also have followed an unstated assumption that ceramic complexes generally had a "life-span" of approximately 200 years. Following earlier interpretations of the *Chilam Balams*, Smith accepted that the occupation of the Puuc area was earlier than that of Chichen Itza, which was in turn earlier than that of Mayapan. Mayapan and the Tases ceramic phase were both viewed, on the basis of interpretation of information in the native chronicles, as ending promptly at A.D. 1450. Smith (1971: 4) noted that "no possible stratigraphy was found for the pottery earlier than the Hocaba ceramic complex of the Middle Postclassic Period" at Mayapan and that "without stratigraphy there resulted a confusing mass of sherds which of necessity had to be classified typologically in an effort to determine which types were associated with each of the different periods." The limited archaeological stratigraphy present at Mayapan led Smith (1971: 4) to incorporate the prevalent linear paradigm for the interpretation of Yucatec history (Roys 1962) into the formal Postclassic ceramic sequence for the site. The Cozumel sequence (Connor 1975: 115; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a: 3), as now defined, ap-

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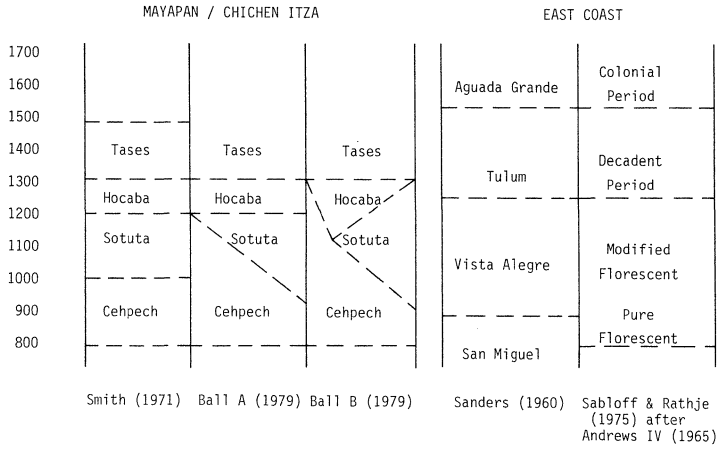


Fig. 2. Various schemes for ceramic complexes of the Postclassic Yucatan Peninsula.

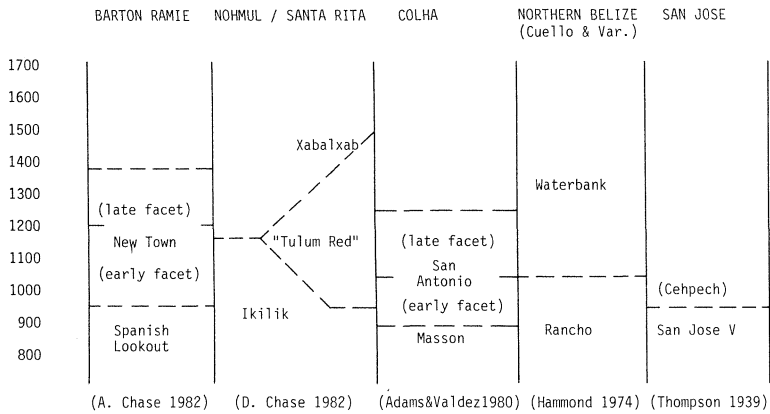


Fig. 3. Various schemes for ceramic complexes of Postclassic Northern Belize.

parently accepts Smith's (1971) presentation of this time period and conjoins it with Sanders' (1960) east coast sequence.

Recently, however, Ball (1979a, 1979b) has argued that this original sequence is not correct, especially in regard to the linear arrangement of Cehpech (Puuc sites), Sotuta (Chichen Itza), and Hocaba (Mayapan) in the 1971 R. E. Smith arrangement. The basic argument, as presented by Ball (1979a, 1979b), is that Maya ceramicists have been confusing spatial variation with temporal change. Ball suggests two alternate schemes: partial overlap of the sequences or complete overlap of the sequences. Three chronological schemes are, therefore, now proposed for northern Yucatan. The first can be defined as "sequential" or "linear" and was propounded by Smith. In the second, or "partial overlap" scheme, Sotuta and Cehpech are seen as overlapping and prior to the Hocaba ceramic complex. In the third "total overlap" scheme, Cehpech, Sotuta, and Hocaba are at least partially coeval. This last scheme finds some confirmatory evidence in northern Belize (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982; D. Chase 1982b). Ball's complete overlap scheme also necessitates a review of the applicability of the 11.3.0.0.0. correlation to Maya chronology as it suggests that the temporal dimension allowed for the Postclassic period needs to be foreshortened (see A. Chase n.d.).

Belize

Barton Ramie (Gifford 1965, 1976) was the first site in Belize to generate a recognized Postclassic ceramic sequence (fig. 3). Gifford (1965: 384) viewed the Postclassic ceramics recovered there as having little, if any, relationship to the Classic material which preceded it and as being a relatively short term phenomenon restricted to the earlier part of the Postclassic period. The formal definition of this sequence (Sharer and Chase 1976), however, delineated an early and a late facet of the New Town phase, the whole of which was thought to be representative of continuous occupation of the Cayo District of Belize. The Augustine ceramic group (fig. 1a) was placed in the earlier facet and the Paxcaman ceramic group (fig. 1b) in the later facet. The well-represented Daylight ceramic group is still not securely placed in either facet although it was suspected to belong to the earlier facet. The Daylight Orange ceramics may in fact be derivative from the Late to Terminal Classic Taak ceramic group of northern Belize (D. Chase 1982b). Daylight Orange finewares, which did not occur at Barton Ramie, may be present at Lamanai (fig. 1c; A. Chase personal observation). Recent review of the New Town phase has suggested that the late facet extends no further than the Middle

Postclassic at Barton Ramie (P. Rice 1979: 80–81; A. Chase 1982) while the New Town ceramic sphere has a Late Postclassic manifestation at the site of Tayasal in the Peten of Guatemala (A. Chase 1979, 1982, 1983, 1984).

Thompson (1939), in his early excavation of San Jose, found little that he ascribed to a Postclassic horizon although he did postulate that Cehpech-related (Yucatec) material was later than his San Jose V complex. Excavations at Nohmul (D. Chase 1982a, 1982b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1982), however, produced a Yucatec-inspired architectural assemblage and, more importantly, yielded a single-unit refuse deposit containing a mixture of San Jose V, Cehpech, Sotuta, and Hocaba-related material, indicating some temporal overlap between these complexes (or, at a minimum, problems in their original definition). Other excavations at Nohmul have suggested that Terminal Classic materials were possibly directly overlain and continuous with Tulum Red ware materials (Hammond 1974: 184–185) although more recent analysis has clouded this point (Hammond 1977a: 57–58).

Tulum Red ware (fig. 1f) has long been suspected as belonging to the later part of the Postclassic period in the Northern lowlands. This suggestion was first formulated by Andrews IV (1943: 74–79), who combined Mayapan and Tulum into a single period which he dated as lasting from about A.D. 1350–1450. Lothrop (1952: 6) took umbrage at this dating and, while accepting that the two redwares belonged to a single period, argued that this period “began earlier, at least at Tulum where there were three or more different and successive architectural periods, two or more successive styles of frescos, multiple coatings of plaster, repairs to sagging roofs and crumbling walls, and other evidence of long occupation.” Lothrop’s (1952: 6) revised dating of the “Mayapan–Tulum Period” was from A.D. 1204 to 1450; this period was preceded by a “Tula–Toltec Period” (A.D. 987 to 1204) and followed by a “Mixteca–Santa Rita Period” (A.D. 1450 to 1550). Recent excavations at both Colha (Hester 1979; Hester, Eaton, and Shafer 1980) and Santa Rita (D. Chase 1981, 1982a, 1984, n.d.) would suggest that Tulum Red ware makes an even earlier appearance in northern Belize, as it is present at Colha during the early part of the Postclassic (Adams and Valdez 1980) and at Santa Rita by the middle part of the Postclassic (A. Chase and D. Chase 1981; A. Chase n.d.). It should be noted additionally that the paste for Late–Terminal Classic Kik Red ware is extremely similar to that of Tulum Red ware (D. Chase, personal observation). It may in fact be that Tulum Red ware originated in Belize, but this cannot yet be determined with certainty because of dating problems. Pen-

dergast (1981a, 1981b), however, has suggested on stratigraphic and chronological grounds (radiocarbon dating) that the Mayapan style Postclassic redwares and censers, common in northern Yucatan (fig. 1e), may have had their origin in Belize.

Investigations at Santa Rita have uncovered both Terminal Classic and Late Postclassic materials. Although Late Postclassic deposits directly overlay a Terminal Classic deposit in one case, no absolute indication of continuities between the two ceramic complexes has been recovered at the site. A Late Postclassic Rita ceramic group (fig. 1g) has been established for Santa Rita (D. Chase 1982a, 1984). Although sharing modal similarities with Tulum, Mayapan, and to some extent Topoxte (fig. 1d), it appears to be completely distinct and possibly later than the Tulum Red as illustrated by Sanders (1960). Tulum Red and modeled effigy incensarios are found in construction fill at Santa Rita, overlain by primary Rita Red ceramic deposits; this would imply that the Rita material, which is most similar to Tases complex materials at Mayapan, postdates Tulum-related ceramics in northern Belize (at least at Santa Rita Corozal). The ceramic stratigraphy between Tulum-related and Mayapan-related redwares is not as clear at Lamanai. As at Santa Rita, however, it is difficult to establish at Lamanai just how late these redware traditions continued in Northern Belize. A long occupation is certain (see Pendergast 1977).

Peten

The Postclassic period in the central Peten is just as complex as elsewhere (fig. 4). Early, Middle, and Late Postclassic periods have been identified for Tayasal (A. Chase 1982, 1983, 1984, n.d.). Presently, there is a general consensus that the Paxcaman ceramic group (fig. 1b) is one of the most long-lived in the Peten although its absolute cessation date is still unknown. It probably was in existence in some form through the seventeenth century. Some plainware material (Chilo Unslipped), which may be even later, has been recognized in the Tayasal-Paxcaman zone (A. Chase 1979: 101) and in the Macanche area (P. Rice n.d.a, n.d.b; D. Rice and P. Rice 1981). Topoxte (fig. 1d) is another ceramic group which appears in the east-central Peten and which is not firmly placed in time. Bullard (1973: 229, 231) believed that it dated to the Middle Postclassic. P. Rice (1979, n.d.a) has suggested that it first appeared in the Early Postclassic and continued through the Late Postclassic period. On the basis of data from the Lake Peten area, it would appear to be largely contemporaneous with late Paxcaman Red ceramics (A. Chase 1979, 1983,

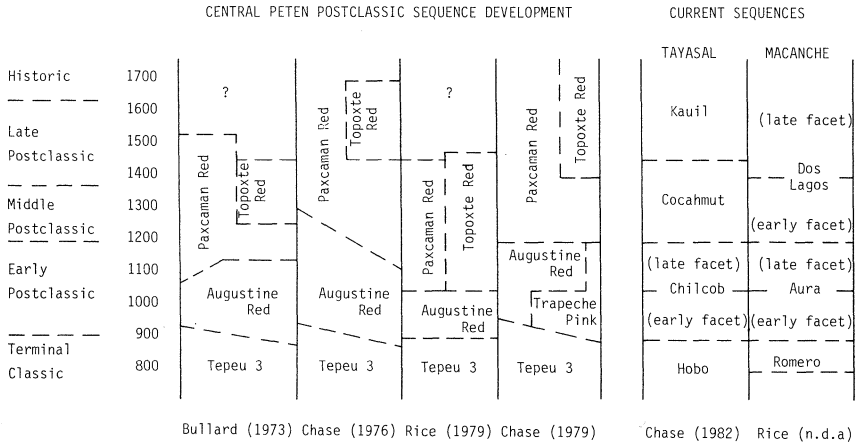


Fig. 4. Various schemes for ceramic complexes of Postclassic central Peten.

1984, this volume). Again, its date of cessation is not known. While P. Rice (1979; G. Jones, Rice, and Rice 1981) argued that the group was largely indigenous, A. Chase (1976, 1979, 1982) has suggested that the group was intrusive to the region and representative of the "Itza."

On the basis of the Tayasal data, the Augustine ceramic group (fig. 1a), defined at Barton Ramie (Sharer and Chase 1976: 291-294), can be placed stratigraphically earlier than Paxcaman. A possible transitional Terminal Classic-Postclassic group, the Trapeche Pink ceramic group, has also been defined (A. Chase 1979: 104-115). At Tayasal this group appears to be ancestral to the Paxcaman group. P. Rice (n.d.a, n.d.b) has reported new varieties of this group from Macanche, where it begins in the Early Postclassic and continues through the Late Postclassic. It would appear that at least some of the Macanche Trapeche Pink is probably later than that at Tayasal and may exhibit some linkage to the San Joaquin Buff group at Mayapan. The Topoxte group also contains a late dichrome with red and cream decoration (Chompoxte Red-on-Cream) that has possible Yucatec parallels (P. Rice 1979: 40; n.d.a). The ceramic censer "typology" for the central Peten is nebulous although variants of Chen Mul Modeled censerware do exist in this region. P. Rice (1979: 50-56; n.d.b) has designated new effigy censer types, Idolos Modeled and Patojo Modeled, for the censer materials in the eastern lakes region; the censer material from the central Lake Peten area differs

from that to the east and has been included within the types Nohpek Unslipped or Puxteal Modeled (A. Chase 1983, 1984).

A Tentative Overview

Through increased excavation and contextual analysis of ceramics and artifacts, Postclassic Maya archaeology is beginning to comprehend the variability in ceramic remains as well as overcome the recognized temporal-spatial problems. Reanalysis of the sequence and time depth for Northern Yucatan (Ball 1979a, 1979b) together with the implications of Yucatec influence in Terminal Classic northern Belize (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982) imply that the presently accepted Maya-Christian calendrical correlation should not be taken for granted. In fact, the new data suggest that the 11.3.0.0.0 correlation (A. Chase n.d.) may be more applicable than once was thought, as it would lessen the time gap between the Classic and Late Postclassic and probably more accurately reflect the recovered stratigraphic relationships.

Interpretation of the Postclassic Maya is now advancing toward a model of intensive and extensive regional variation. This accords well with ethnohistoric accounts of distinct Late Postclassic territorial units (Roys 1957; D. Chase n.d.) as well as historically derived divisions (Thompson 1977; G. Jones 1982). At least five broad, but distinct, regions can be recognized archaeologically for the Postclassic (fig. 5). The borders of the defined archaeological regions vary somewhat over time, but in general are fairly cohesive. Similar regional subdivisions proposed for the southern lowlands of the colonial period (G. Jones 1982: 279) may be viewed as deriving from Late Postclassic forerunners, yet the time depth involved is unclear. Surely, the broad lumping of categories into a single widespread "Chan Maya" territorial and cultural unit, temporally extended back to the Classic-Postclassic period transition (Thompson 1977: 3, 40-41), does not find confirmation in the extant archaeological diversity.

REGION I

The westernmost archaeological region can be characterized as *The Western Campeche Postclassic Tradition* and is paralleled by Jones' (1982: 279-280) Putun Acalan region of the colonial period. Archaeologically, it is visible in the works of Andrews IV (1943) and Ruz (1969) and, while exhibiting ties to the Maya lowlands, also reflects events occurring to its west. This region plays an important role in both the Early and Late Postclassic periods and acts as a boundary or sieve for much of the rest of the Maya realm. The Early and

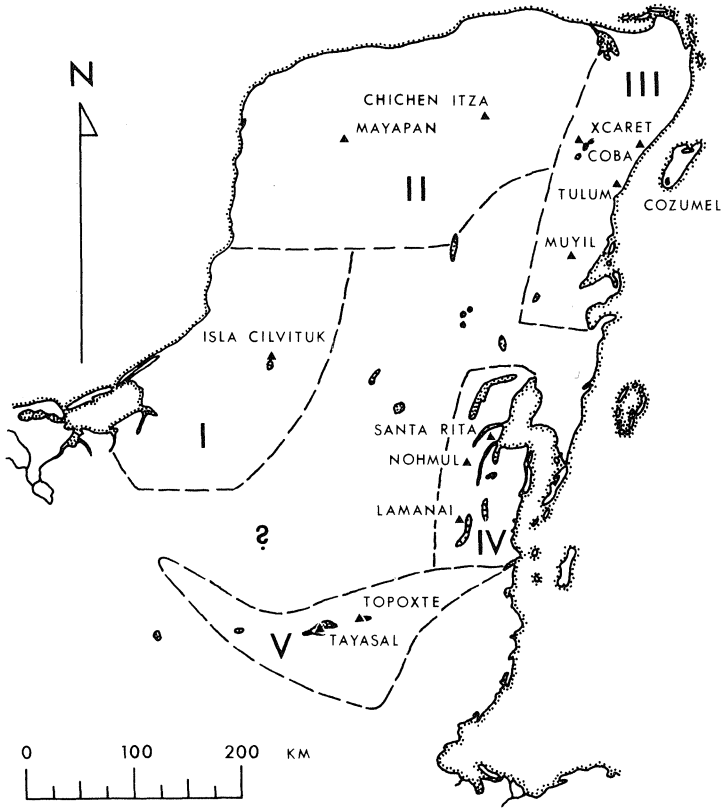


Fig. 5. The lowland Maya Postclassic: tentative regional subdivisions:

- I. Western Campeche Postclassic Tradition
- II. Northern Plains Postclassic Tradition
- III. Eastern Yucatec Postclassic Tradition
- IV. Northern Belize Postclassic Tradition
- V. Central Peten Postclassic Tradition

Late Postclassic ceramics (Ruz 1969) of the region are characterized by a mixture of Postclassic traits and by the extensive use of fine paste wares (fig. 1h), many of which occur as trade items in other parts of the Southern lowlands. The Late Postclassic for Region I may be characterized by the island site of Isla Civiltuk (Andrews IV 1943), noted for its buildings with beam and mortar roofs, a characteristic also found on the east coast of Yucatan.

REGION II

The Northern Plains Postclassic Tradition refers primarily to Tases-equivalent and possibly Hocaba material, which may be dated to the Middle and Late Postclassic periods. During this time the League of Mayapan bound the larger part of this area together in a Postclassic manifestation amply documented architecturally by Pollock and others (1962) and ceramically by Brainerd (1958) and R. E. Smith (1971). The Northern Plains Postclassic Tradition also binds together a melange of complexes which had existed previously in the area during the Early Postclassic (Ball 1979a, 1979b). The earlier part of the Postclassic period in the Northern Plains may be architecturally typified by the somewhat anomalous site of Chichen Itza (Ruppert 1935, 1952; Morris, Charlot, and Morris 1931; Bolles 1977; Lincoln n.d.). Although Chichen Itza evinces close ties to the indigenous architectural traditions which occur in the Puuc (Pollock 1981) and elsewhere in the Yucatan (Lincoln n.d.), the site also sports foreign (and probably introduced) architectural plans such as the patio-quad (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982).

REGION III

The Eastern Yucatec Postclassic Tradition is largely contemporary with that of its Late Postclassic western neighbor, yet differs stylistically in its ceramics and architecture (Lothrop 1924; Sanders 1960; Andrews IV and Andrews 1975; Sabloff and Rathje 1975a; Miller 1982) from the interior area. It is possible that this tradition slightly predates that of the latter part of the Northern Plains. In general, the amount of architectural construction crowded along the east coast north of the Xcalac Peninsula is representative of a large population.

REGION IV

The Northern Belize Postclassic Tradition (Pendergast 1967, 1981a, 1981b, 1981c; Sidrys 1976; Pring 1976; D. Chase 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, n.d.) presents perhaps the most complex area of all the regions. Several temporally different manifestations are evident in this area and it is possible that the origins for the northern redwares (possibly Mayapan and probably Tulum) lie in Belize (Pendergast 1981a, 1981c). Data pertaining to the Early Postclassic indicate the existence of at least three regional traditions (Adams and Valdez 1980; A. Chase n.d.; Pendergast n.d.a), ultimately influenced by what may be interpreted as an outpost of Chichen Itza at Nohmul (D. Chase and A. Chase 1982). The late manifestation of this tradi-

tion, as evident at Santa Rita (D. Chase 1981, 1982a, 1984, n.d.), evinces ties to both Regions II and III, but is independent of both. On a slightly later temporal horizon and on the basis of colonial period data, G. Jones (1982: 282–285) has also segregated this area into a distinct unit called the “Belize Missions subregion.”

REGION V

The Postclassic material culture of the southernmost region has previously been included under the label *The Central Peten Postclassic Tradition* (Bullard 1973; Sharer and Chase 1976). On the basis of an array of disparate data, Thompson (1977: 3) attempted to include the entire colonially known Southern lowland area into a single “Chan Maya region”; he (1977: 36–41) also argued that there was cultural continuity for this group back into the Classic period. It would appear, however, that neither archaeological nor ethnohistoric data support this suggestion. In fact, G. Jones (1982) has subdivided Thompson’s area into three separate subregions for the colonial era. The first of these three subdivisions, the “Belize Missions subregion,” found at least a partial identity with the Northern Belize Postclassic Tradition defined for Region IV. The region included here within the Central Peten Postclassic Tradition is similar in areal extent to the “Central Lakes subregion” defined by Jones (1982: 280–281) for the colonial period. Jones’ (1982: 285) third division, the “Cehach subregion,” has no known archaeological parallels, and it may be that this area was largely unoccupied prior to the advent of the Spaniards (or at least their associated diseases) in the Maya lowlands (cf. Ball, this volume).

The region of the Southern lowlands manifesting the Central Peten Postclassic Tradition shows much unity throughout its boundaries during the Early and Middle Postclassic periods. The earlier part of the Postclassic in the Southern lowlands is primarily represented by the appearance of the Augustine and Trapeche ceramic groups, while the Middle Postclassic is typified by the widespread occurrence of the Paxcaman ceramic group. There is more variability during the Late Postclassic with the trade and assimilation of the Topoxte group (P. Rice 1979, n.d.a) into the indigenous complexes of the Belize valley and central Peten (A. Chase 1982). Striking architectural remains, which include features similar to those of the Late Postclassic Northern lowlands (Bullard 1970: 273–276, 304), exist on Topoxte Island in Lake Yaxha. These Yucatec-like architectural assemblages extend from Lake Yaxha on the east as far west as Lake Salpeten, but do not occur on the Tayasal peninsula and have not

been noted from the Lake Peten area or farther west around Lake Sacpuy. Besides the research done by Cowgill (1963) and Bullard (1970, 1973) on the Peten Postclassic, other work has been undertaken in an attempt to derive an understanding of the region and the recovered data have provoked a vibrant discussion (A. Chase 1976, 1979, 1982, 1983; P. Rice 1979; G. Jones, Rice, and Rice 1981).

Summary

On the basis of the present state of archaeological knowledge, five regions have been identified in a tentative spatial breakdown of the wider lowland Postclassic area. Undoubtedly, further research will refine these subdivisions. Many of the similarities visible between the various regions may be credited to an "international style of the Late Postclassic" (Robertson 1970). In spite of the superficial gloss created by this style, there is significant diversity in Postclassic material culture, primarily along regional lines. This is not surprising given the ethnohistoric descriptions of distinct Late Postclassic polities. Recent analysis of the variability evident among regions and sites within the Postclassic Maya area does not, for the most part, suggest significant temporal or sequential change within specific locales, but rather spatial variation between locales caused by situational and flexible cultural boundaries imposed by the Postclassic Maya themselves. In past research, such spatial variation has often been mistaken for temporal differences.

The areal diversity evident within the Postclassic lowlands dictates that local Postclassic sequences be established before wider processual interpretations can be made. The simple determination of spatial and temporal differences within a single Postclassic site is, in itself, a difficult task due to the prevalence of non-stratified remains for this period; determination of variability between regions is only compounded by the lack of serious work undertaken until recently on Postclassic sites. While spatial boundaries may be affected by trade, warfare, and alliance, they also appear to be correlated archaeologically with certain regional capitals. By identifying and excavating such foci, a definition of both temporal and spatial variation within the Postclassic archaeological record may be achieved. With continued excavation and comparisons, it should become possible to distinguish between temporal and spatial distinctions within the wider Postclassic record. This would allow for the archaeological identification of ethnohistorically known Late Postclassic territories, a definition of the relationships between these re-

gions, and the application of the direct historic approach to Postclassic Maya archaeology to determine the processes behind, first, the Postclassic-to-Historic transition and, second, the Classic-to-Postclassic transition. It is research along these lines that should allow for more exact delineation of lowland Maya Postclassic spatial and temporal frames.