
1 SAMPLING AND TIMEFRAMES: CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROTOCLASSIC AND EARLY CLASSIC PERIODS AT CARACOL, BELIZE

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The era of transition between the Late Preclassic (300 B.C. – A.D. 250) and the Early Classic (A.D. 250-550) Periods is one which saw great change within ancient Maya society. This change is reflected in the ceramics of this transitional era. Ceramicists have had difficulty isolating distinct ceramic complexes within the transitional era and have instead tended to focus on specific stylistic markers (e.g., mamiform tetrapods) that were thought to be hallmarks for this transition. These stylistic markers became known as the “Protoclassic” and, while easily identified, they were never securely anchored within broader patterns of change. To this day the Protoclassic Period remains enigmatic within Maya archaeology. There are disagreements on whether or not the term should be used in Maya archaeology and, if used, how and to what the term should refer. Much of what has been used to identify the Protoclassic falls within the realm of ceramics and, thus, that data class will be the primary one utilized here. This paper first examines the history of and use of the term Protoclassic in Maya archaeology; it then uses data from Caracol, Belize to assess the relevance of the term both to Maya Studies and to interpretations of ancient Maya society.

Introduction

A solid chronology of the ancient Maya past is key to outlining the development of the ancient Maya. This chronology is continuously undergoing review and refinement in both the highlands and the lowlands using comparative analysis of individual site chronologies based on ceramics, stratigraphy, and radiocarbon dating. Perhaps the most difficult time to assess is the transition from the Preclassic to Classic Period – a time that is also of clear import in assessing the rise and development of Maya civilization. Among the issues relating to the transition from the Preclassic to Classic Periods in the Maya area are the relative paucity of excavated Protoclassic remains and preconceptions by researchers about both ceramics and this temporal era that are not grounded in contextual information.

In the highlands there remains disagreement over exactly how the sequences of the various early sites articulate with each other (e.g. Inomata et al. 2014; Love 2017). A large part of this disagreement resides in the nature of the data being used and in how researchers constitute phases and undertake ceramic analysis. While radiocarbon dating is useful in resolving some of these issues, it still needs to be anchored in high quality archaeological data (Bayliss 2015). The same chronological issues that are found in the Maya highlands also reverberate in the Maya lowlands and are

reflected in the kinds of samples that are used to build chronologies and phases and to model trade linkages.

Given the limited hieroglyphic record for the Protoclassic and Early Classic Periods in the Southern Maya lowlands, pottery has generally been used to determine temporal occupation and often these temporal interpretations are derived from a limited sample of archaeologically-recovered remains. While the total sample of primary deposits containing well-dated pottery samples has been increasing each year, Krejci and Culbert (1995: 104) correctly pointed out a quarter century ago that Preclassic and Early Classic contexts in the Southern Lowlands “provides a rather slim representation of small structure burials and caches” and are “far from a balanced sample.” They (1995: 114) further argued that “the beginning of the Early Classic does not mark a break in ritual patterns, but that the break occurs a century or so later” ... “in the mid-fourth and early fifth centuries” (see also Patino-Contreras 2016). In contrast to Krejci and Culbert’s (1995) assessment, the archaeological data from Caracol, Belize instead suggest a continuous development in ritual patterns through the Early Classic Period and indicate that these patterns were not limited to elite contexts, but were present among various levels of society. Thus, the archaeological data from Caracol, Belize not only provide a solid chronological sequence for this transition, but

they also significantly add to the contextually-collected sample, enabling better interpretations.

Although the ceramic modes that constituted the Protoclassic had a broad distribution (e.g., Pring 1977), most past assessments of the Protoclassic and Early Classic eras were often largely dependent on whole vessels from burials and tombs derived from limited excavation loci, sometimes only a single structure at any one site. Because the pottery vessels within these burials contained a variety of exotic ceramic forms and decorative modes that were not well-represented in the sherd material from general excavations, they were often viewed as being elite-related (e.g., Culbert 1977; Callaghan 2013: 311; Callaghan and Nievens des Estrada 2016:209-210) or ritual-specific (Reese-Taylor and Walker 2002:102), meaning that how they articulated with the rest of society was fairly unclear (see Lincoln 1985 for initial discussion of “Preclassic” ceramics in “Early Classic” contexts).

Protoclassic ceramics first had been organized as a category by George Vaillant (1927, 1935) in relation to what he referred to as the “Q Complex,” which was viewed as having origins in Central or South America and as comprising the introduction of polychrome, mammiform tetrapod feet on vessels, ring and annular bases, pot-stands, and spouted vessels into the Maya lowlands. The first published reference that recognized the early nature of these materials in the Maya area was in 1931 and related to four burials excavated in several residential groups in the Mountain Cow region of Caracol (Thompson 1931), although Gann (1918: Plate 13b) had previously published a complete mammiform tetrapod from Santa Rita Corozal in 1918. A year later, a large sample of Protoclassic and Early Classic transitional deposits, originally recovered by Merwin in 1912 in Structure B of Group II at Holmul, were published (Merwin and Vaillant 1932); because Merwin had died and Vaillant wrote up the final published report from notes, there were unresolved issues in the interpretation of these materials in terms of their dating, seriation, and meaning (e.g., Hammond 1984; Callagan 2013). An extensive deposit of ceramic vessels relating to this temporal era was also recovered at

Nohmul, Belize, unfortunately from a single building that was devoid of real context because of bulldozing (Anderson and Cook 1944) – and, again leading to questions of dating, seriation, and interpretation (Hammond 1984). An early tomb excavated at the Belizean site of Pomona added grist to the discussion (Kidder and Eckholm 1951). Gordon Willey’s excavations at Barton Ramie in the early 1950s recovered four Protoclassic burials and led to an interpretation of these ceramics as having resulted from a migration of peoples into the Southern lowlands from the Pacific Coast of El Salvador (Willey and Gifford 1961; Sharer and Gifford 1970), something now considered unlikely (Demarest and Sharer 1986).

In 1955 Robert Smith (1955: 22-23) segmented the Early Classic into three parts at Uaxactun based on the presence of specific vessel forms: a z-angle bowl for Tzakol 1; a basal-flanged bowl for Tzakol 2; and, a tripod cylinder for Tzakol 3; he had originally defined a Protoclassic phase called Matzanel (between Chicanel and Tzakol), based on Merwin and Vaillant’s [1932] Homul data, but after analysis decided that the Uaxactun ceramics did not support its existence (believing that it had just not been well-sampled in the Carnegie Institution excavations at the site). The University of Pennsylvania excavations at Tikal also did not recover a detailed sequence of these expected deposits (e.g. Culbert 1993), but such remains were recovered in subsequent excavations undertaken by Juan Pedro Laporte (1995; Laporte and Fialko 1987, 1995) in Tikal’s Lost World Complex. Ritual ceramics associated with Naj Tunich Cave in Guatemala also proved to be largely of Protoclassic and Early Classic date (Brady et al. 1998). Finally, several more recently excavated interments from various sites in northern Belize have provided significant ceramic associations (e.g., Guderjan et al. 2014; Houk and Valdez 2011; Houk et al. 2010; Kosakowsky et al. 2016; Sullivan and Valdez 2006); other materials have come from Nakum, Guatemala (Zralka et al. 2014).

These combined data continue to show that there are major issues in archaeological sampling for this temporal era. The history of the Early Classic Period in the Maya Southern lowlands is one of relatively small population

levels (see Culbert and Rice 1990), likely the result of the collapse of early Preclassic states in the northern Peten (Hansen 2015). While populations increased over time, there are far fewer primary deposits to recover when compared to the omnipresent Late Classic Period; additionally, many of these earlier deposits have been transposed and redeposited by later activities; thus, the smaller recovered samples have led to difficulties in characterizing the transition from the Late Preclassic into the Early Classic Period. Because of the longevity of the Caracol Archaeological Project (D. Chase and A. Chase 2015, 2017), however, a substantial sample of archaeological materials from 56 primary contexts have been collected from throughout the site. Caracol primary deposits are spatially widespread and cover the entire Late Preclassic through Early Classic Periods.

Caracol Sample

The Caracol Archaeological Project has recovered 19 caches (non-finger bowl), 38 burials, and 2 other contexts consisting of secondary refuse that contain either Protoclassic or Early Classic ceramics. In conjunction with Thompson's (1931) Mountain Cow materials, this sample permits a firm understanding of the site's Early Classic Period and the ceramic forms and modes that have traditionally been used to understand these temporal eras. These deposits may be dated to between A.D. 150 and A.D. 500 and reveal a fairly continuous ceramic development and one that appears not to be restricted to a single segment of Maya society.

On the earlier end of this sequence are two burials that date to approximately A.D. 150 that may be characterized as a Late Preclassic expression of the Protoclassic, following the division suggested by Brady et al. (1998). One of these Late Preclassic transitional deposits (S.D. C117B-5) contained the skeletal remains of a female interred in an Ix Chel diety costume (Rich 2003) accompanied by a wide variety of goods, including 2 pottery figurines (human whistle and armadillo), 32 ceramic vessels, and over 7000 shell and jadeite beads sewn onto a mantle fringed with dog teeth (A. Chase and D. Chase 2006). Stylistically, the vessels included within this interment included 4 incipient

polychrome bowls (2 with ring-bases), 2 tetrapod jars (one with Usulután-style decoration), 1 tetrapod bowl, 6 miniature vessels (2 with tetrapods), 1 large dish, 1 large jar, 15 labial-flanged bowls, and 2 resist composite-angle bowls (A. Chase and D. Chase 2006: fig.1). The composite angle bowls are similar to others known from Nohmul, Belize (Hammond 1984, vessel 17). The second Caracol deposit (S.D. C52A-1) comes from a chultun burial located approximately 3 km distant from the site epicenter; the chultun burial was associated with 6 vessels (A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.3). Two of these vessels were decorated with Usulután-style wavy-line decoration. One of these vessels had foreshortened mammiform tetrapod supports and a grooved-hook rim; one vessel had a labial flange; three were rounded-bottom bowls; and, the last was an elaborately incised deep bowl with its 4 tetrapod supports removed in antiquity. The rounded bowl form seen in this deposit continues into the Early Classic era and occurs in 3 later deposits that span the Early Classic Period (C14C/2; C14C/4; and C10A/1).

The early part of the Early Classic Period at Caracol is characterized by bowls or plates with large tetrapod feet and the appearance of orange-wares and true polychromes, as well as the persistence of Sierra Red slip on these new forms. Deposits containing these materials were initially found by Thompson (1931) in a vaulted tomb and in three chultuns during his excavations in the Mountain Cow part of the site. Vessels placed within one chultun interment included a Sierra Red mammiform tetrapod, a ring-base orange bowl with black pseudo-Usulután decoration on its interior, and a small decorated jar with a circumferential incision on its interior lip. The Cahal Cunil vaulted chamber 1 excavated by Thompson (1931) similarly contained 2 Sierra Red tetrapod bowls, 2 decorated jars with handles, a bowl with an annular base (similar to one from Holmul; Callaghan 2013: fig. 7a), a tetrapod red-slipped bowl containing the modeled image of a frog (see analogous vessel in Bonnafoux 2008: fig. 6.3e), and a miniature buff-color jar with incisions (similar to one illustrated in refuse of a similar date to the west of Caana; A. Chase and D. Chase 2016: fig. 106a). The presence of a Sierra Red mammiform tetrapod in an early

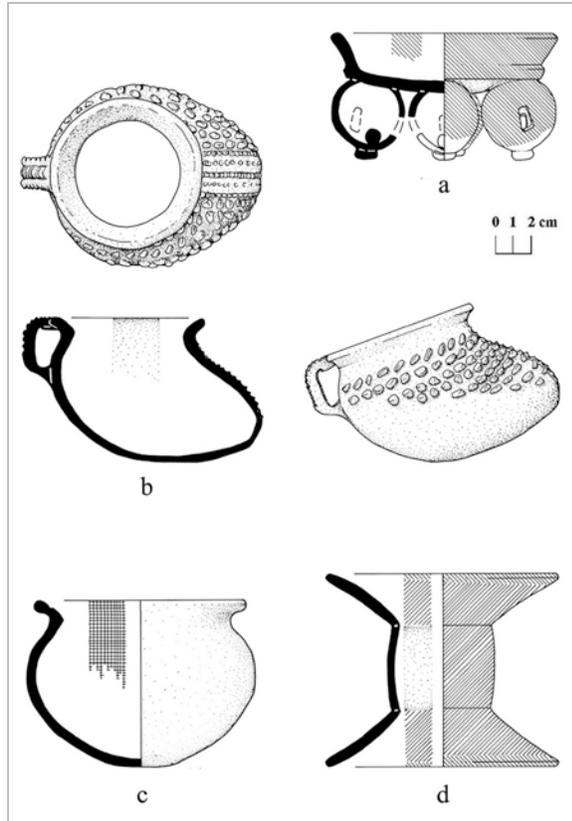


Figure 1. Associated vessels from a bedrock interment (S.D. C121C-5) in Caracol Structure F24: a. Sierra Red; b. probably Corriental Applied; c. possibly Xtabcab Incised; d. Guacamallo Red-on-Orange.

Early Classic burial also occurs in a residential group outside of the site epicenter (Figure 1), where this form is associated with an orange-slipped potstand, a shoe-pot (see Brady 1992), and a small jar with circumferential incision on its interior lip. A second chultun excavated by Thompson (1931) in the Mountain Cow region yielded an orange-ware polychrome tetrapod bowl, and orange-ware polychrome collared jar, and a potstand that was once stuccoed and painted. A third, and final, chultun in the Mountain Cow region also yielded a tetrapod orange-ware polychrome plate, a red-on-orange pot-stand, a large hemispherical orange-ware polychrome bowl, and a large decorated jar. Two other orange-ware polychrome tetrapods (both with feet removed) are known from Caracol deposits: one is from Tulaktuhebe (C14C/2), 3.5 km southeast of Caracol's epicenter, associated with a redware deep dish, both from a looted tomb; the second is associated with a handled and decorated jar with

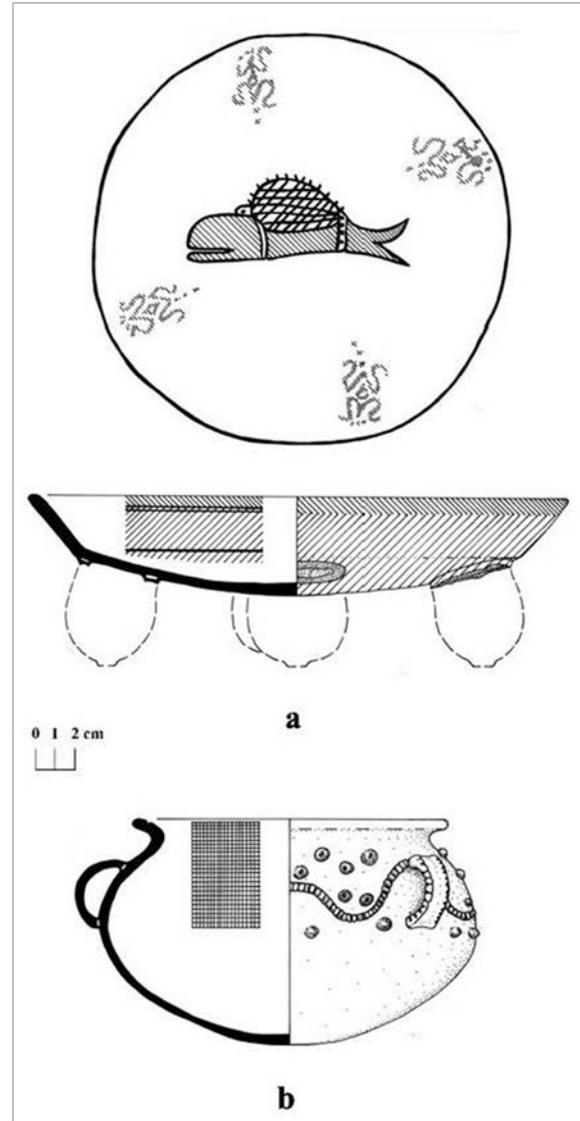


Figure 2. Associated vessels from a cache (S.D. C171C-1) located immediate south of a re-entered tomb in Caracol Structure B40: a. Ixcanrio Orange Polychrome; b. possibly Corriental Applied.

a circumferential lip groove and was recovered in association with a tomb in a residential group just southeast of Caracol's epicentral C Group (Figure 2).

Isolated burials that were likely associated with this earliest expression of the Early Classic have also been widely recovered at Caracol. A burial recovered in a plaza immediately west of Caana yielded a decorated handled jar with interior incised lip associated with a decorated collared bowl. A burial southwest of the Central Acropolis yielded a ring-base collared jar that is Ixcanrio Polychrome. One other form

associated with the earliest Early Classic at other sites in the Maya area includes z-angled vessels (see Smith 1955 for Uaxactun). For Caracol, this form has been recovered in a looted deposit at Tulakatuhebe as well as in a residential plaza 4 km northeast of the site epicenter (Figure 3); however, this form occurs in isolation and is not directly associated with any of the other vessel forms. A final burial from immediately west of Caana yielded an Actuncan Polychrome basal-flanged bowl in association with a polychrome pot-stand (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005a: fig.3c,d), transitional to the middle facet of the Early Classic at the site. Interestingly, while they are prevalent in deposits at Holmul (Callaghan 2013) and in northern Belize at sites like Nohmul and Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 2006), no chocolate pots have been found in any of the Protoclassic or Early Classic Caracol deposits; the only one known was recovered from a Late Preclassic chultun burial that precedes this temporal era (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011a: fig. 13a).

The appearance of polychrome basal-flanged bowls at Caracol appears to mark the next evolution of pottery sub-assemblages at the site. Basal-flanged bowls are present in a wide variety of contexts at the site, having been recovered in 19 burials. The Caracol sample also attests to the lack of overlap between polychrome basal-flanged bowls with tetrapod ceramic plates, something suspected but not demonstrated elsewhere. At both Homul (Callaghan 2013) and Nohmul (Hammond 1984), they are seriated as being later, but tetrapod hemispherical bowls can co-occur with basal-flanged bowls as documented in contexts at Uaxactun (Smith 1955: figs. 3e and 12s) and K'axob (Berry et al. 2004: 256-257). Yet, it is clear that the basal-flange bowl form dominates the middle of the Early Classic Period and is likely derived from the labial-flanged bowl form of the Late Preclassic Period. Sierra Red basal-flange bowls have been recovered in tombs at Chanchich (Sullivan and Valdez 2006) and Pomona (Kidder and Eckholm 1951) with tetrapod plates, but polychrome basal-flange bowls appear to supplant the tetrapod plate as part of the Caracol burial assemblage.

There are six burials in residential groups in which basal flange bowls constitute the only

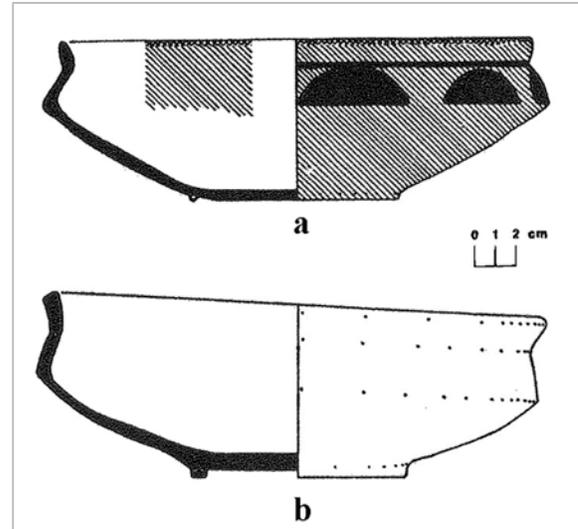


Figure 3. Caracol z-angle bowls from a looted tomb in Caracol Structure 8F8 (C14C/15) and from a plaza excavation associated with Caracol Structure 4T17 (C129C/2): a. probably Boleto Black-on-Orange; b. eroded Aguila Orange.

pottery vessel included. In other deposits basal-flange bowls co-occur with shoe-pots (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2005a: fig. 6) and in one a basal-flange bowl co-occurred with cylinder tripods (e.g., A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.4). They are also associated with hour-glass censers in several interments. Another vessel form that appears to be introduced at the same time as the basal-flange bowl is a spouted bowl or jar; this form has been recovered from 5 Early Classic interments.

The previously reported cremation from Caracol's Northeast Acropolis, believed to represent an individual from Teotihuacan (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011b), contained vessels that are transitional between the Late Preclassic and Early Classic Period as well as two nubbin-footed tripod vases that resemble one assigned to the earlier Protoclassic at Nohmul (Hammond 1984, vessel 14). Seven flaring rim bowls were also found in association with a basal flanged bowl and a spouted jar in a tomb in Structure D8 in the South Acropolis; three flaring rim bowls were in association with a basal-flanged bowl and two spouted bowls (one potentially lidded) from an infilled tomb west of Caana. The Northeast Acropolis cremation also contained 7 basal-flanged bowls (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011b: fig. 3), 4 of which portrayed a reclining,

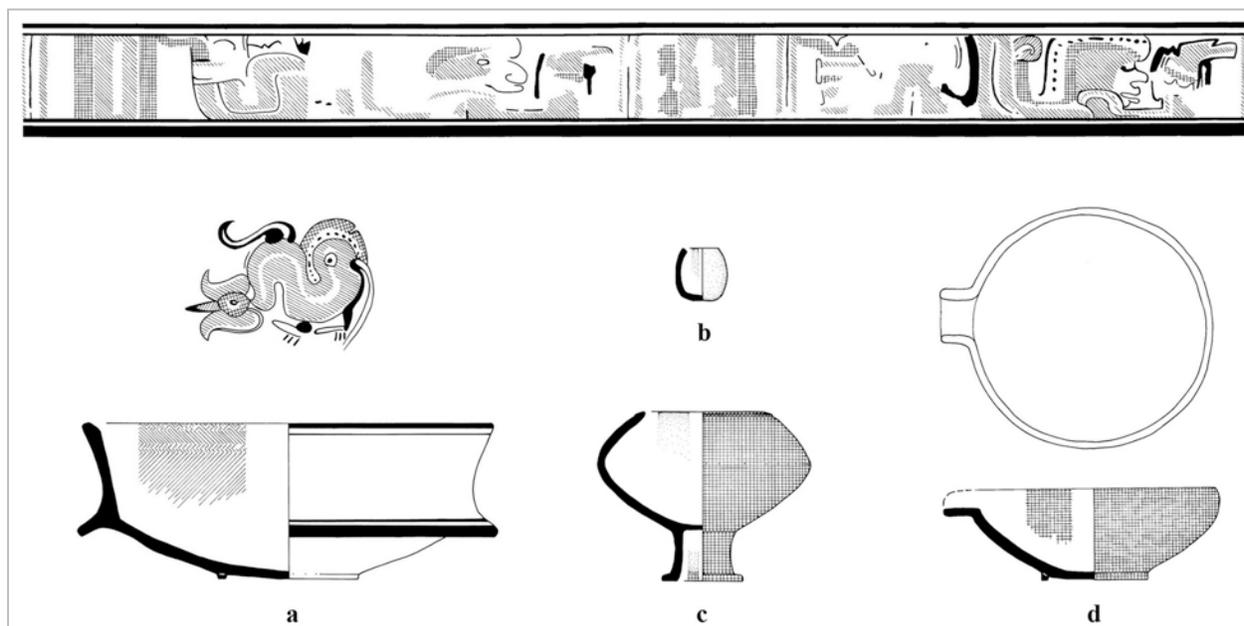


Figure 4. Associated vessels from a tomb (S.D. C181B-1) in Structure B33 in the Northeast Acropolis: a. Dos Arroyos Orange-Polychrome; b. undesignated; c., d. Pucte Brown.

possibly bound, individual on the bowl exterior. The imagery of this reclining figure is widespread, occurring on basal-flange bowls from other sites, such as Holmul (Callaghan 2013: fig. 22a), Uaxactun (Smith 1955: fig. 3e), Dos Hombres (Houk and Valdez 2011: fig. 4) and Bats'ub Cave (Prufer and Dunham 2009: fig. 4). At Caracol a similar basal-flanged vessel with a reclining individual occurs in a tomb in Structure A33 in the Northeast Acropolis in association with a miniature vessel, a spouted bowl, and a blackware goblet with a tubular base (Figure 4); this basal-flanged vessel contains an interior hummingbird image that is almost identical to one recovered at Bats'ub Cave (Prufer and Dunham 2009: fig. 4). The blackware goblet is similar to other ones recovered in Burial 177 at Tikal (Culbert 1993: fig. 37b1) and in Burial P2B-2 at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 2005: fig. 5); this form may derive from the combination of an incurved bowl on a pot-stand, as can be seen at both Holmul (Callaghan 2013: Fig. 24a), and at Nohmul (Hammond 1984, vessel 3). A residential tomb fleshes out some of the other vessel possibilities for the middle part of the Early Classic at Caracol; besides a miniature cup with face and a basal-flanged bowl, the tomb

(S.D. C95A-1; see A. Chase and D. Chase 2005a: fig. 4) also contained a large jar, a miniature jar with ring base, an inverted goblet with bird handle (similar to forms at Tikal [Laporte and Fialko 1995: fig. 30] and Holmul [Callaghan 2013: fig.24b]), and a tripod bowl with modeled peccary feet and three incised deity heads.

Of the nine known burials with tripod cylinders at Caracol, only one is associated with a basal-flange bowl (this same tomb also is associated with a spouted vessel; see A. Chase 1994: 167-169). Four of the burials with cylinder tripods occur in the epicenter of the site and the other five are associated with residential groups. Three different interments with cylinder tripods were recovered from an excavation into Structure C47, approximately 600 m south of the epicenter (A. Chase and D. Chase 2014). The earliest deposit was a tomb that contained a series of smaller artifacts (including a 16.4 cm long jadeite tube) and 8 ceramic vessels (Figure 5), 2 of which were cylinder tripods. Perhaps the most spectacular vessel in this residential tomb was a brown-ware bowl with 6 incised glyphic cartouches (A. Chase and D. Chase 2014: figs. 122a and 123). The glyphs are of an early style but may refer to an early form of a

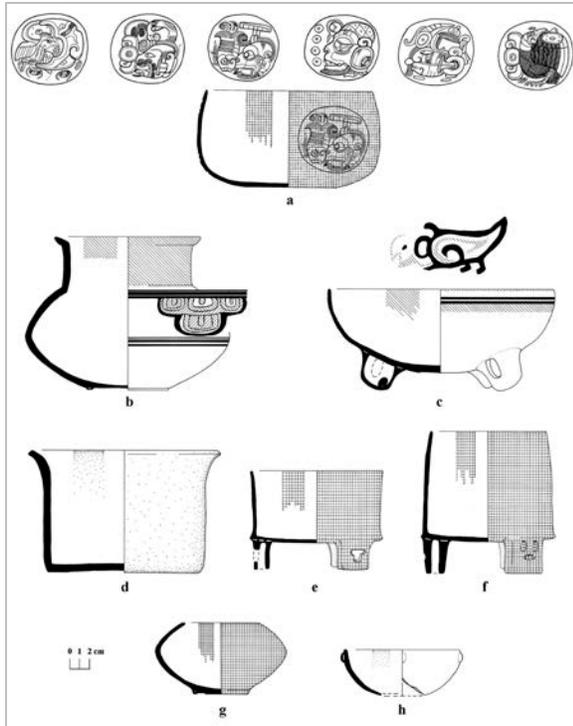


Figure 5. Associated vessels from a tomb (S.D. C203B-16) in Caracol Structure C47: a. Lucha Incised; b., c. Caldero Buff-Polychrome; d. Quintal Unslipped; e., f., g. Pucte Brown; h. possibly Candelario Applied.

primary standard sequence, iconographically signal creation mythology; they also appear to document the unknown site of “Bital” (see also A.Chase et al. 1991:10). Other vessels in this deposit included a polychrome jar, a tripod footed hemispherical bowl with a bird in its interior (similar in form and type to vessels in a tomb and an interment at Tikal; see Culbert 1993: figs. 29c-g and 32c), and a truncated black goblet. The tomb was also directly associated with a hidden Early Classic cache that contained a small lidded urn inside two lip-to-lip vessels; inside the urn were 2 shell Charlie Chaplins, 1 drilled flamingo-tongue shell, 3 beads (one each of shell, bone, and jadeite), and 2 jadeite chips. The second crypt in Structure C47 had clearly been re-entered, as indicated by the inclusion of 14 finger bowls in the fill of the burial, but contained 5 Early Classic vessels: 2 cylinder tripods, 1 basal-flanged bowl, 1 deep bowl, and 1 shoe-pot (Figure 6). An extensive caching deposit that included part of a large ceramic figurine among the finger bowls had been placed above the third Early Classic crypt, signaling a

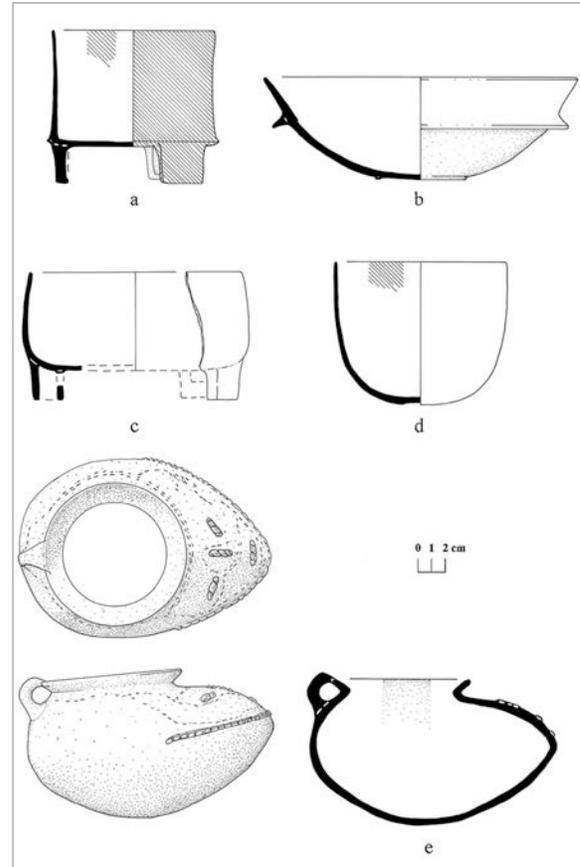


Figure 6. Associated vessels from a tomb (S.D. C203B-14) in Caracol Structure C47: a. Aguila Orange; b. eroded Dos Arroyos Orange-Polychrome; c. possibly Pucte Brown; d. eroded Saxche Orange-Polychrome; e. probably Corriental Applied.

re-entry here as well. This third Early Classic burial was associated with 1 cylinder tripod, 4 bowls, and 5 dishes; the upper portion of this infilled crypt had been used to place a Late Classic burial with two pottery vessels accompanied by 2 small cache pots. A very late polychrome lidded cylinder tripod with 3 bulbous feet was recovered in Structure B42 in a residential group in association with 5 polychrome bowls and 3 lateral flanged ring-base dishes (Figure 7; A. Chase and D. Chase 2005b: fig. 18); these materials are transitional into the Late Classic Period.

A large number of Early Classic caches have also been recovered both in the epicenter and in residential groups. This includes the one hidden in the tomb wall mentioned above; two other lidded urns of Early Classic date were recovered above this same residential tomb.

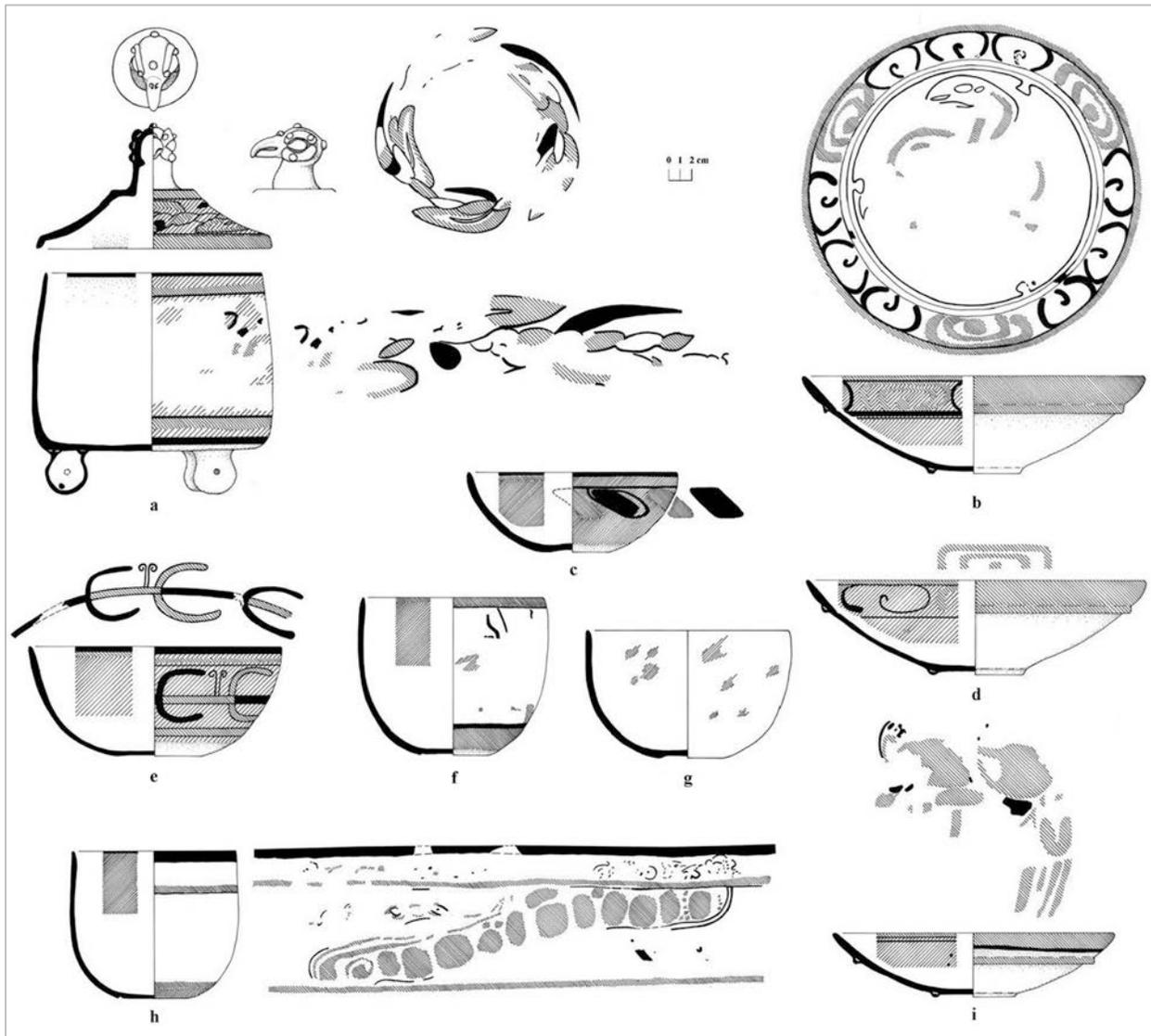


Figure 7. Associated vessels from a tomb (S.D. C171B-9) in Structure B42: a., c., e., f., g. Saxche Orange-Polychrome; b., d., i. Pajarito Orange-Polychrome; c. Veracal Orange.

Early Classic urns associated with Charlie Chaplin figures have been recovered from 3 widely spaced residential groups (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2006:44; Lomitola 2012) as well as from four different structures in the site epicenter (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2005a:31). It is suspected that an urn recovered in Tulakuhebe with a painted Principle Bird deity on its interior lid and a dead corn god on its interior base also dates to the Early Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: fig. 41a,b,c). Another Early Classic deposit from Structure D1 consisted of the burnt remains of 14 ceramic

vessels (10 large Aguila Orange flaring walled bowls and 4 polychrome ring-based dishes) in association with 2 limestone bars, 1 partial jadeite bead, 1 polished piece of jadeite, 16 obsidian lancets, and 25 obsidian blade fragments (A. Chase and D. Chase 2007: figs. 81-83). An even more spectacular cache consisted of an Early Classic tripod cylinder with a polychrome scene of 3 figures (figure with feather offerings; prisoner; warrior) on the cylinder and a polychrome lid with a deity-head handle (Figure 8); this vessel, excavated during the 2017 field season in Structure I28, had been

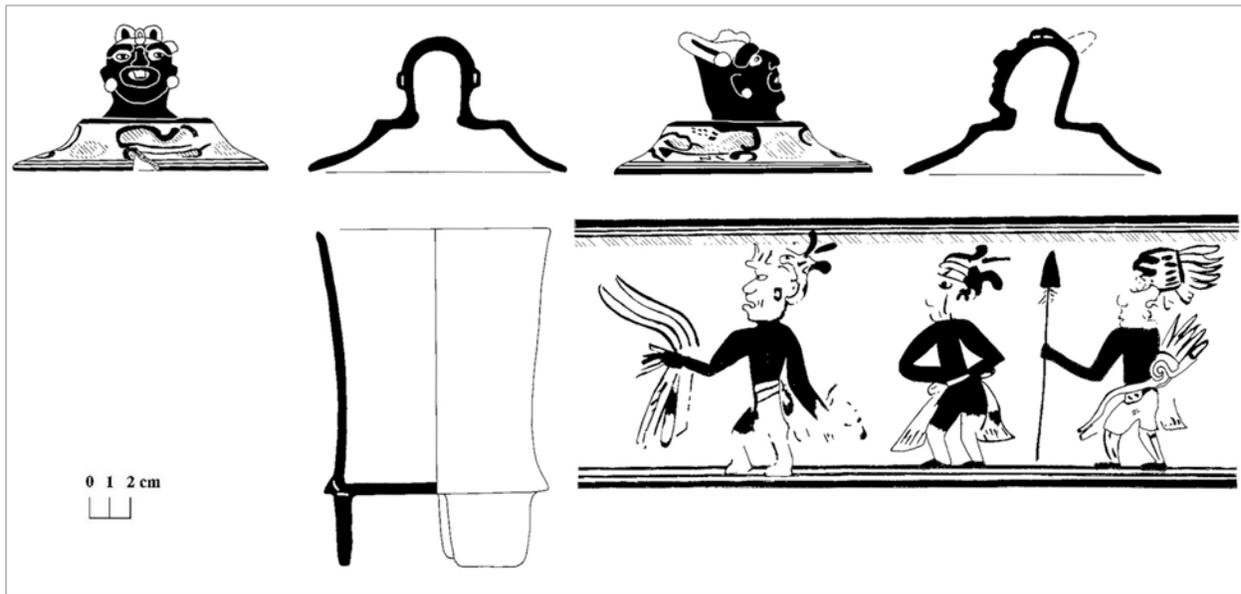


Figure 8. Early Classic cylinder tripod used as a cache vessel (S.D. C210B-3) in Structure I28: cylinder probably Dos Arroyos Orange-Polychrome; lid a polychrome variant of Positas Modeled.

re-purposed in the fill of a Late Classic construction.

Conclusion

Three inter-linked issues have hampered a full understanding of the Late Preclassic to Early Classic transition: the interpretation of exotic ceramic forms and decorations; preconceived temporal barriers; and, limited sampling. The exotic forms and decorative modes led to an early ceramic definition of the Q Complex, interpreted as a set of specific ceramic forms introduced to the Maya area from elsewhere (Vaillant 1924). The limited occurrences of this complex led to its association with Maya elite and an early consideration of these materials as being class-linked (e.g., Lincoln 1985), thus providing an easy explanation for why so few primary deposits have been excavated.

The Protoclassic was a time of great experimentation in ceramic forms, decorations, and slips that crossed perceived temporal boundaries. Because of limited contextualized and stratified deposits, materials found in secondary fill contexts were often pre-assigned to temporal associations, thus aggravating any attempt to better understand ceramic traditions. Although the Late Preclassic type Sierra Red was recognized as extending into the Early

Classic and orange-wares were recognized as existing in the Late Preclassic relatively early (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 1983; Ciudad Ruiz 1988:95; Graham 1986; Kosakowsky 1982: 34-35, 1987:82), the formal sorting of sherds from secondary fill contexts tended to reify the rigid boundary that was perceived between the Late Preclassic and the Early Classic Periods, as there was no way to be sure that the correct temporal frame was selected. Thus, specific ceramic forms were provided with inferred temporal meaning, regardless of context and associations.

The true transition from Late Preclassic to Early Classic was a palimpsest of ceramic forms and decorative modes. While there is some temporal faceting (Brady et al. 1998), it is largely a single temporal period with great fluidity in ceramic forms and decorations. New ceramic trends occur at the end of the Late Preclassic Period that become more codified in the early part of the Early Classic Period with the introduction of true polychrome and large mammiform tetrapod dishes, plates, and deep bowls. Sierra Red versions of these vessel forms also occur in the early part of the Early Classic Period. The middle part of the Early Classic Period is also characterized by a wide diversity of ceramic forms, but the prominent form is a basal-flanged bowl. What the data do suggest is

that mammiform tetrapod plates were replaced in burial contexts by basal-flanged bowls. Cylinder tripods characterize the latest part of the Early Classic Period, especially in monochrome slipped form. However, more elaborately decorated cylinder tripods appear earlier and are not restricted to the latest part of the Early Classic Period. Thus, the latter half of the Early Classic does not break with ritual traditions as was argued for by Krejci and Culbert (1995: 114).

The distribution of the Caracol Protoclassic and Early Classic ceramic forms indicates that these items were widely available to the inhabitants of the site and were not restricted in their distribution. However, there is a gradient in status and wealth that can be seen in the data. The Caracol "Late Preclassic" burial that contained 32 vessels is the richest known interment for this temporal era in the Southern Maya Lowlands (based on data in Krejci and Culbert 1995). The upper tomb in front of Structure A6 contained 26 vessels dating to the later part of the Early Classic Period, signaling the wealth of its occupant(s). Both of these interments indicate that the highest elite were likely associated with the Caracol epicenter. But, the presence of Protoclassic and Early Classic ceramics in special deposits throughout the site also suggests that these items were generally available to the rest of the population and not restricted in distribution. Significantly, residential groups that were occupied in the Early Classic Period continued to be utilized into the Late Classic Period and the mix of ceramics from interments placed during this later interface also evince a great fluidity in ceramic forms, similar to what occurred during the earlier conversion. Thus, the archaeological data from Caracol help to demystify the transition from the Late Preclassic through the Early Classic Periods.

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