

# The Organization and Composition of Classic Lowland Maya Society: The View from Caracol, Belize

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Although Classic Maya society has been studied for many years, its reconstruction is still undergoing revision. Interpretations of Maya society are linked primarily to two bodies of historical data (the Colonial era documents and the Maya hieroglyphic record) and to archaeology. A broad understanding of the Classic Maya hieroglyphic record has been attained within the last twenty years (cf. Schele and Freidel 1990, Tate 1992, and Houston 1993). But because the translation of these texts and their implications for Classic era social organization are still subject to controversy (cf. Culbert 1991 and Chase and Chase 1992), it is the Colonial era documents that are usually referenced for historical interpretations of past Maya life (cf. Marcus 1992a, 1993, but see D. Chase 1992). While it may be argued that archaeology maintains the most prominent role in Maya studies, archaeological remains have only infrequently served as a primary data base with regard to attaining a definition of ancient Maya social organization (cf. Kurjack 1974 and Chase and Chase 1988). Until there are more contextually focused archaeological studies of social organization in single sites or regions, the synthetic literature on the ancient Maya will continue to overemphasize ethnohistorically-derived models of social organization.

The prominent model that has been applied to Classic Maya society, as derived from ethnohistoric materials, tends to stress a series of dichotomous situations, the most prominent one centered on the idea of a two-class system that is comprised of a small elite anchored in a vast sea of commoners. Under

this model the elite are generally seen as living in the site epicenter and the rest of the population—consisting of an undifferentiated body of peasants—are seen as living in dispersed households outside the site center. Only the elite are viewed as having access to variously defined prestige items and goods. Only the peasants undertook farming—outside the site's residential areas. But how accurate is this picture? The ethnohistoric material was primarily recorded by individuals who were not members of New World cultures. Much of this literature consists of Westernized descriptions of poorly understood non-Western rituals and customs—rituals and customs that were recorded only following the use of torture (cf. Tedlock 1993), or that had already been changed (cf. Pohl 1981) as a result of diseases or forced resettlement (cf. Farriss 1984). To take the ethnohistoric material at face value, then, is in our estimation a mistake. Like any other body of data, it needs to be evaluated for context and content.

Similarly, Maya epigraphic history provides only a partial picture of the past situation. Marcus (1992b) is correct to emphasize the political (and thereby potentially manipulatable) nature of such writing. Not all Maya sites have texts and, for those sites that do, texts for the most part deal only with a partial history of what is currently interpreted to be a ruling dynasty. From such Maya texts we can develop king lists describing who begot whom and by whom (cf. Schele and Freidel 1990). We can infer some information relative to patrilineality in ancient Maya society (Hopkins 1988; Haviland 1977, but see Fox and Justeson

1986). We can talk about warfare, marriage, and visitation among individuals from various sites (Schele and Mathews 1991). But only infrequently can we find information about intra-site organization (cf. Fash 1991). Only rarely is there evidence for broader political organization uniting a series of sites (cf. Houston 1993). And, most unfortunately, there are no records of economic transactions. The focus of Maya hieroglyphic texts is instead ego-specific and often serves to emphasize the importance of a given individual or his ancestry (cf. Schele and Freidel 1990 and Marcus 1992b).

By far the largest class of data pertaining to Classic Period Maya society and its organization is that garnered from archaeology. Archaeological information exists from various geographic areas and from epicentral and non-epicentral settlement. Data on housing and burials have been gathered for a wide segment of Maya society. There has been long-term collection and publication of contextually defined archaeological data from sites such as Tikal (Coe 1990; Haviland et al. 1990; Puleston 1983), Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979, 1982, 1990a), and Seibal (Tourtellot 1988). Now the results of this modern archaeological research are being built upon and tested by current projects at Caracol (A. Chase 1992; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a), Copan (Fash 1991), and Dos Pilas (Demarest 1993; Houston 1993) that methodologically conjoin new epigraphic breakthroughs with archaeological research. Yet, these data too have their limitations. Because of the grandiose nature of most Classic Maya construction and the limited nature of archaeological funding, only a small amount of any site is usually sampled. How representative then is a given archaeological sample? And, has ample information been appropriately collected to definitively describe Maya society at any one site? Because the answer to the latter question is usually *no*, even Maya archaeologists have relied heavily on ethnohistoric materials for social reconstructions.

The long-term combined research into archaeology and epigraphy at Caracol has been instrumental in permitting an exploration of the social composition of that site. The picture that has been gained has implications for wider interpretations of the Maya.

### **Caracol**

Mapping at Caracol commenced in 1983 and has continued sporadically to the present under the auspices of the current Caracol Archaeological Project (A. Chase 1988). The original recording of the epicentral portion of the site was undertaken by Linton Satterthwaite from 1950 through 1953 and registered a total of 78 structures (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1983). Based on this limited work and number of structures, the site was incorrectly entered into the archaeological literature as a relatively small second-level site, presumably subject to Tikal (see specifically George Brainerd's 1956 rewrite of Sylvanus Morley's *The Ancient Maya* [1946]; the secondary status of the site was again reasserted in the 1983 rewrite of the same tome [Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer 1983]). Until the work of David Pendergast and Norman Hammond, in fact, all of Belize was seen as a backwater area for Maya civilization (cf. Rice 1974). The precociousness and importance of Belizean remains throughout Maya prehistory is now established (Hammond 1991; Pendergast 1990b). With the work of the current project at Caracol (A. Chase 1991, 1992; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1987b, 1989) it has also become clear that Caracol, as one of the largest centers in the entire Maya lowlands, set the tenor for much of the Classic Period.

To date some 2000 structures have been recorded at Caracol and over 45 kilometers of internal site road systems are known. Density projections suggest that at AD. 650, the 88 square kilometer area around the Caracol epicenter contained minimally 36,000 occupied structures for a density of almost 409 structures per square kilometer (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1991; see also Healy et al. 1983 for a

comparable, and independently derived, calculation). This indicates a potential site population of over 150,000 people.

### The Archaeological Data

Besides the high population figure, the preliminary settlement work at Caracol has yielded other data which have relevance to the social composition of the site:

1) Causeways at Caracol form practical transportation and communication routes; they were not used solely for pilgrimage. Causeways do not only connect ritual areas or elite groups; there are also *vias* connecting smaller households directly to the causeway. Thus, the causeways themselves were a means of integration for the people of Caracol.

2) Major Caracol causeway termini are of three architectural kinds: elite domestic groups (Machete, Dos Tumbas, Northwest area, and possibly Round Hole Bank); special function groups that are neither domestic nor ritual in focus (Conchita, Pajaro-Ramonal, Retiro—the latter imposed on the causeway route before the originally pre-existing site was formally reached); and multi-foci termini, combining the domestic and special function group aspects, that were once pre-existing sites engulfed by an ever-expanding Caracol (cf. Cahal Pichik, Cohune, and Ceiba). The nature and layout of the causeways and their associated termini implies civic planning, reinforces the notion of an urban integrated Caracol settlement, and conforms with the notion of causeways as practical transportation and communication routes.

3) There is widespread use and construction at Caracol of agricultural terraces everywhere domestic groups are not located at the site. And domestic groups are found integrated into the carefully laid out terrace systems (cf. Healy et al. 1983). Agricultural fields are, thus, a prominent feature of the Caracol core and were probably utilized for specialized crops as well as basic staples. In this sense, Caracol forms a true “garden city” with extensive agriculture present within an urban area.

The large number of terraces within Caracol and its surrounding areas undoubtedly correlates with the large population evident at the site.

4) At Caracol, there is widespread distribution of a series of artifactual items that have traditionally been thought of as being of limited distribution (i.e., only to the elite of a given site) or as correlating solely with the center of a Maya site. These distributions suggest that increased prosperity and unity occurred at Caracol following AD. 550 and support the notion of a rising “middle class” (cf. A. Chase 1992).

East-focused residential groups make up about 70% of the known groups that occur throughout the site (fig. 1). There are indications that the east building functioned as a mausoleum in each domestic group (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994). Tombs occur in approximately 95% of the investigated east-focused groups. Thus, tombs occur in too high a frequency to be correlated only with the ruling level of Maya society. Caches, both paired vessels containing finger bones and lidded ceramic urns with modelled faces on them (fig. 2), occur in most residential groups at the site. Censerware is also often found associated with these residential groups—smashed on the front steps of buildings or from within rooms. Also, similar iconography is found throughout the site. Polychrome vessels, especially figural vessels, are generally recovered in non-tomb, non-elite contexts in the Late Classic Period at Caracol. This wreaks havoc with traditional views of polychromes as limited distribution elite items.

5) Although there are no absolute correlations of artifact distributions with status at Caracol, certain artifact associations are clearly significant. While jadeite is not universal at Caracol, beads and pendants are found as frequently in residential groups as they are in the site epicenter. Jadeite earflares, however, appear to be a mark of the highest status in Caracol society and are limited to interments in the epicenter. Pyrite mirrors are also seemingly

restricted to epicentral contexts. Shell jewelry occurs throughout the site and in all kinds of contexts; shell earflares are widely distributed. Obsidian lancets are widely distributed; stingray spines are more likely to occur in the epicenter, but do occur in residential areas as well. Inlaid teeth with jadeite and pyrite decoration are also widely distributed, but, importantly, individuals in the prominent epicentral interments exhibit this prerogative. Carved bone is widely distributed, as are spindle whorls, which are frequently found in Caracol interments.

Thus, some items hint at individual status. However, in attempting to correlate artifactual items and status indications, three addi-

tional problems immediately emerge. First, there is a problem of variation in a single locale or building; one can have cist and crypt burials in the same building that houses a tomb and there may be variation in potential status markers. For example, inlaid teeth may be found in a cist burial, but not associated with any of the individuals placed in a tomb in the same building. There is also a problem in determining whether an interment reflects a sacrifice or not. And, finally, there is a problem of identifying temporal variation in the recovered data. All of this muddies the water and makes simple correlations extremely difficult.

In spite of all the above variables and problems, two broad conclusions can be drawn

**Table 1. Maya Prehistory and Caracol**

DATE	EVENTS
<b>1200 B.C.-250 A.D.</b>	<b>Preclassic</b>
ca. 300 B.C.	Earliest known habitation at Caracol.
ca. A.D. 70	Structure A6-1st, "Temple of the Wooden Lintel," constructed; full Maya ritual complex present at Caracol.
<b>A.D. 250-900</b>	<b>Classic</b>
A.D. 331	Caracol Royal dynasty officially founded.
ca. A.D. 480	Elite tomb placed in Structure D16.
A.D. 531	Accession of Lord Water's predecessor.
A.D. 537	Use of initial tomb in Structure B20-3rd.
A.D. 553	Accession of Caracol Ruler Lord Water.
A.D. 556	'Axe-Event' involving Tikal.
A.D. 562	'Star-War' defeat of Tikal by Caracol.
A.D. 575	Birth of Smoke Ahau.
A.D. 577	One of three tombs in Structure B20-2nd used.
A.D. 577 or 582	Front tomb in Structure A34 initially consecrated.
A.D. 588	Birth of Caracol Ruler Kan II.
A.D. 599	Accession of Caracol Lord Smoke Ahau.
A.D. 614	Tomb in Structure L3-2nd covered.
A.D. 618	Accession of Kan II.
A.D. 626-636	Naranjo wars; major expansion of Caracol follows.
A.D. 634	Woman's tomb in Structure B19-2nd closed.
A.D. 658	Accession of Caracol Ruler Smoke Skull; Death of Kan II.
ca. A.D. 690	Final use of front tomb in Structure A34.
A.D. 696	Tomb in Structure A3-1st covered.
A.D. 702	Capture of Tikal lord noted on Stela 21.
A.D. 800	Capture of 3 prisoners, including Ucanal lord, by Caracol Ruler Hok K'awil, his father, or his underlings.
A.D. 859	Last recorded date at Caracol on Stela 10.
<b>A.D. 900-1500</b>	<b>Postclassic</b>
ca. A.D. 1050-1100	Last use of Caracol Structure A6; Caracol totally abandoned.



*Fig. 1 Caracol Structure A38 during stabilization. One of two eastern buildings in the Central Acropolis, this building contained a tomb within its stairbalk and supported a perishable structure with internal masonry benches.*

from the Caracol archaeological data. First, these data do not support the presence of two distinct levels of Maya society, but rather indicate the presence of a large middle level. And, second, these data support the suggestion of cohesion at all societal levels in basic ritual patterns.

### **The Epigraphic Data**

While the epigraphic data itself does not speak directly on the social composition of Caracol, the distribution, dating, and location of textual materials does to some extent.

The majority of the Caracol texts are found on carved stone monuments. Most of these monuments are associated with the Caracol epicenter. The monuments provide information on at least 29 “kings” with a founding date for the Caracol dynasty in A.D. 331. They also provide information on a series of other events relative to these rulers (Table 1). While most of the carved stone texts occur in the epicenter,

there are several that do not and these provide some information of relevance to interpreting the site’s social order. A Katun 7 Ahau altar occurs in an elaborate house group (Chaquistero) 5 kilometers northwest of the epicenter towards the northern margin of the site. This monument is attributable to the katun in which the Caracol-Tikal conflict of A.D. 556 and 562 occurred and suggests that such monuments were not the sole purview of the epicentral elite (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1989 for an archaeological consideration of epigraphic statements of war). Significantly, however, no other textual material occurs on the altar and there is no accompanying stela. Rather, one may suspect that someone important in this early conflict was rewarded with this piece of sculpture.

Carved sculpture does, however, become associated with some outlying groups at Caracol during the Terminal Classic era. This is particularly seen in the Plaza of the Two Stelae



*Fig. 2 Typical Caracol cache vessels of the Late Classic era. The lip-to-lip bowls are referred to as “finger bowls” because of their usual contents. The larger urn-like “face cache” with adjacent lid is found throughout the Caracol settlement area. Photograph by Richard Spencer.*



*Fig. 3 Reconstruction of the lower painted tomb in Caracol Structure A34 located in the Central Acropolis. The rear wall text presumably referred to the death of the primary occupant portrayed, while a capstone text referred to the much earlier consecration of the chamber itself. Painting by Barbara Stahl.*

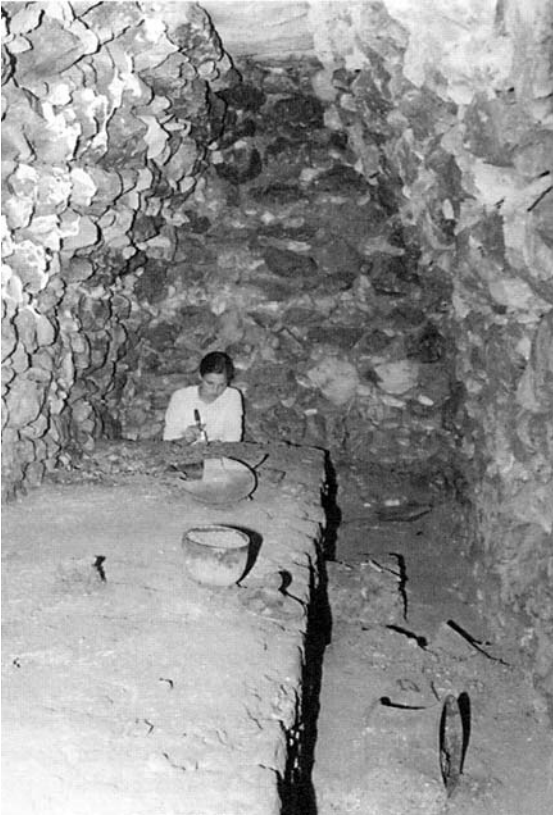


*Fig. 4 Detail of in situ Early Classic vessels (monkey-head lid on basal-flanged bowl, cylinder tripods, and bowls) in the Caracol Structure D16 tomb from the South Acropolis.*

which also has a small 9.19.0.0.0 monument showing two bound prisoners and which names a person in its main text who is associated with the Caracol emblem but who is not the ruler (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). Other non-rulers are also named in the late Caracol texts. This is suggestive of a phenomenon, also noted for Copan (Fash 1991), in which more individuals have access to previously restricted items such as carved stone monuments and titles towards the end of the Classic era.

Plain stone monuments also enjoy a wide distribution at Caracol, occurring in scattered house groups as well as being associated with two of the site’s causeway termini (Cahal Pichik, Retiro). Both of the causeway termini exhibiting plain monuments were previously independent sites that were engulfed in the course of Caracol’s urban expansion. In another case, a special function hilltop group that has four plain stelae and one plain altar, a kilometer south of the Retiro terminus, may function as a boundary marker for the Caracol metropolis.

While other extensive texts are known from the upper facades of many of Caracol’s epicentral buildings, portable texts are rare at Caracol although they do occur. One such text names the owner of a stone mace as being Caracol’s ruler Kan II. Others are most often found carved on bone or painted on pottery. Such texts are not limited to the site epicenter. They are also sometimes recovered in locations



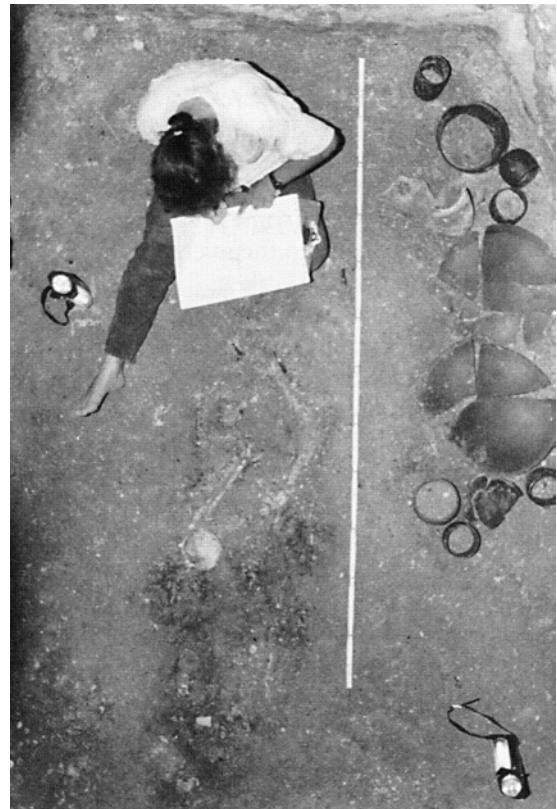
*Fig. 5 Excavation of the tomb within Caracol Structure A7. The bench is perforated by a series of formally constructed, cross-cutting vents; one extends completely through the bench on a north-south axis, while three others bisect this central vent on east-west axes running from the front of the bench to the rear wall of the tomb.*

that are not considered to be “elite” (such as a simple burial placed within the floor fill of a plaza and not on axis to a structure). This is perhaps suggestive of an expanded literacy in Caracol society.

Given the importance of writing to the epicentral Maya of Caracol, it is of archaeological good fortune that they expanded this medium to their tombs. Out of 176 burials dug so far at Caracol, 74 have been in tombs. And of the 74 tombs investigated, eight have been painted (fig. 3). Of these eight chambers, six have yielded legible dates (in Structures A3, A34, B19, B20[2], and L3). These dates span a period of time running from A.D. 537 to A.D. 693. While six of these tombs correlate with the most important epicentral buildings at Caracol, two of the tombs occur in high status residen-

tial groups outside the epicenter proper.

The painted tomb texts occur in two forms. The first form is as a text on a red-painted capstone (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a:15,43). These texts function to dedicate the covering of the tomb itself, whether or not a body was present. Since 60% of Caracol tombs had entranceways for re-entry, it is clear that the chamber itself was considered to be of importance—an inference that gains support in capstone texts that refer to the closing or dedication of the chamber and not the buried individual (cf. Structure A34 lower tomb). The second kind of text found in Caracol tombs is a rear-wall text (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a:20-30). These texts (in Structures A34, B19, and B20[3]) generally contain a full Long Count date which is believed to refer to the death date of the individual interred in the chamber (cf. those at



*Fig. 6 Telescoped view of the southern part of the Structure B20-3rd tomb floor showing the badly decayed remnants of its single occupant and part of the funerary assemblage. A painted wall text dates this tomb to A.D. 537. Extended stick tape is two meters in length.*

Tikal and Rio Azul). For the most part painted texts occur with tombs containing the remains of single individuals (in Structures A3, B19, B20, and L3).

In spite of the obvious importance of painted tombs, at least two of the excavated ones were re-entered and the original chamber contents were destroyed. This occurred in chambers found in Structure L3 at the end of the Machete causeway and in Structure A34 in the Central Acropolis (which, unlike the L3 chamber, then had new occupants placed within its confines).

The presence of texts, however, in and of themselves does not mean that tombs without texts are not of importance. Tombs from epicentral Structures D16 (fig. 4) and A7 (fig. 5) had no texts, but contained the multiple interments of high status individuals based on the chamber contents. Interestingly, both of these chambers may be assigned to a temporally earlier horizon than the presently known Caracol painted tomb complex. It is also of significance that none of the six dated chambers at Caracol can be directly related to individuals found on the carved stone monuments. This is especially surprising given the location of some of these chambers and is especially relevant to one excavated in Structure B20 during the 1993 field season.

Caracol has a very strong east structure focus in the majority of its dispersed residential groups. Without doubt, the most important east building at the site is Structure B20. During the 1993 field season, an intact fourth tomb was recovered in the bowels of this Caana pyramid (fig. 6). This tomb encompassed 19 cubic meters of space and is the earliest of the four tombs known from Structure B20. It was associated with the earliest known version of the B20 pyramid and, according to current archaeological interpretations (cf. Becker 1972, 1991), should represent the founding ancestor for the version of Caana that is now visible. Thus, given the location and context of the chamber, it should be male and, given the importance of eastern pyramids at Caracol, it

should be the resting place of a king.

While the contents and size of the chamber were appropriate for someone of a kingly stature, the accompanying death text of 9.5.3.1.3 precludes such an identification because Caracol Ruler II is securely in place at 9.4.16.13.3 and Caracol Ruler III, Lord Water of Tikal fame, does not accede until 9.5.19.1.12. The skeleton of the individual (especially the skull and pelvis) was in extremely poor condition, but the tomb layout and contents are more suggestive of a female than a male occupant. If the text had not been present, we would have surely identified the single individual in this chamber as a ruler, much as we initially did with the textless Structure D16 tomb found during the 1992 field season.

Even though a series of elaborate tombs are known from Caracol, none of those with hieroglyphic texts match the dates for epigraphically known rulers at the site. Most of the more elaborate chambers occupy prominent locations and exhibit suitably elaborate contents to have facilitated a kingly identification had texts not been present. Thus, the Caracol data show that it is clearly harder to identify the tomb of a ruler than anyone would have previously thought. Caracol's epigraphic data conclusively demonstrate that appropriate location, contents, and large chamber do not a ruler make. A definite problem exists if one cannot securely identify the top-level (i.e. ruler) archaeologically when talking about social organization.

## Conclusions

Long term research at Caracol, combining both archaeology and epigraphy, has provided a large body of data from which to reconstruct Classic Maya social organization. This reconstruction, however, does not fit the traditional dichotomous view of the Maya.

The two-class model of Maya society derived from ethnohistory and vehemently defended by some Mesoamericanists (Marcus 1992a) does not describe Caracol, at least not



Caracol after the Early Classic Period. Regardless of what they are called—"wealthy commoners," "secondary elite," or "middle class"—there is very clear evidence for the existence of a distinct and large middle status group (A. Chase 1992; Jaeger 1991) that may have comprised up to two-thirds of Late Classic Caracol society. The general level of prosperity found at Caracol is not surprising given the site's history of successful warfare and its position as an important urban capital of the Classic Period.

Subsistence activities at Caracol do not correlate solely with peasants farming in an outlying sustaining area. Fields are located just outside the epicenter and throughout the site core. There is variation in household size in the field areas and tombs occur in groups found in these fields. It is possible that some middle status level households may contain the overseers of the agricultural field systems.

Regardless of the location or the size of a particular residential group at Caracol, there are basic shared cultural and ritual items, such as: (1) an emphasis on east-focus groups containing an eastern shrine associated with burial of the dead; (2) the presence of at least one tomb in each eastern shrine and evidence that there was often multiple entry and more than one individual in any given chamber; and (3) a consistent cache pattern consisting of effigy faces and lip-to-lip vessels containing the remains of human fingers. While these patterns may be more elaborate in some locations than in others, the basic pattern and individual artifacts are the same, indicating a shared religious focus by most levels of Caracol society.

The lack of an epicenter-core split in material culture at Caracol (cf. A. Chase and D. Chase 1994) may be a reflection of increased prosperity at the site during the Late Classic Period. It also may be related to Caracol's causeways, for these roadways served as an important link in the maintenance of this urban area. They were useful in transportation and communication among the various parts of this extensive site.

Work at Caracol also provides a cautionary note against the simple identification of elaborate tombs as being those of rulers. At Caracol the combination of epigraphy and archaeology indicates that there were a number of individuals besides the ruler that could be given elaborate treatment in death. These other individuals are not indicated in the contemporaneous carved stone hieroglyphic record.

Thus, the archaeological and epigraphic data from Caracol are themselves representative of the complexity that characterized Classic Maya society at this site and, presumably, at others. While there was surely variation in the way that different sites and their people were composed and organized, the data from Caracol makes it abundantly clear that the Classic Maya were not a simple society. The city of Caracol exhibits a number of factors that mirror its complexity: a careful balance between a large number of people and the agricultural lands necessary to support them; the thoughtful siting of both reservoirs and special-function architectural areas throughout the expansive site; and, the planned integration of the whole through an extensive road system. The very nature of the site's layout and the sheer mass of architectural and terraced constructions found at Caracol are further indicative of a once extensive bureaucracy. Thus, the epigraphic and archaeological data from Caracol are important in that they unequivocally contradict many of the basic tenets found in the ethnohistorically-based models currently used to interpret Maya society.

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