

9-1-1996

## A Mighty Maya Nation: How Caracol Built an Empire by Cultivating Its Middle Class

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### Repository Citation

Chase, A. F., Chase, D. Z. (1996). A Mighty Maya Nation: How Caracol Built an Empire by Cultivating Its Middle Class. *Archaeology*, 49(5), 66-72.

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Source: *Archaeology*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (September/October 1996), pp. 66-72

Published by: Archaeological Institute of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41771189>

Accessed: 09-02-2017 21:22 UTC

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*Palaces and temples grace a massive platform known as Caana, or "Sky House," which rises 142 feet above the forest floor. Facing page, the Maya glyph for Caracol.*

# A MIGHTY MAYA NATION

*How Caracol built an empire by  
cultivating its “middle class”*



By the close of the seventh century A.D. the Lowland Maya settlement of Caracol had become one of the most populous cities in the Precolumbian world. The 65-square-mile metropolis was home to more than 120,000 people whose stone and thatch dwellings stood amid lush gardens on terraced hillsides and valleys. At the northern edge of a high plateau, three large plazas surrounded by pyramids, palaces, administrative buildings, and ballcourts formed the heart of the city, from which paved roads extended to distant suburbs. Caracol had grown from a modest town to a bustling city in the span of a century (ca. A.D. 550–650). Its people enjoyed a prosperity unparalleled in the Mesoamerican world. Military victories over rival cities, such as Tikal, Naranjo, and Ucanal, had assured political preeminence over some 4,500 square miles of territory. What led to Caracol's rapid development and unique place in Maya history? More than a decade of excavation by our team from the University of Central Florida has yielded some surprising answers.

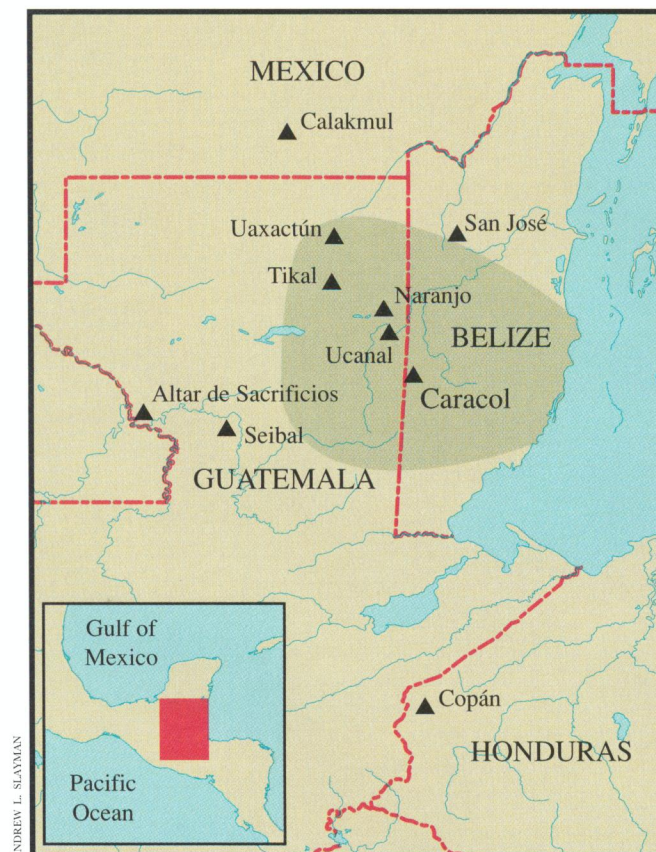
Caracol is located in the remote rain forest of the Cayo District of western Belize. Discovered in 1937 by a laborer in search of timber, it attracted the attention of Linton Satterthwaite of the University of Pennsylvania, who in the 1950s drew and photographed most of the site's carved stelae and altars and produced a site plan depicting 78 structures. A. Hamilton Anderson, the first archaeological commissioner of Belize, excavated three tombs as part of the University of Pennsylvania project and undertook two additional short seasons of excavation in the mid-1950s. In 1980 a terrace system was briefly studied by Paul Healy of Trent University in Ontario.

BY ARLEN F. CHASE AND DIANE Z. CHASE

At the start of our work in 1983 we expected to find a mid-sized Classic Maya city typical of the Southern Lowlands, where major monuments and buildings would be concentrated in the heart of the city, beyond which would lie only scattered settlement. Three years into the project we realized that Caracol was quite different from other Lowland Maya cities. We knew there were more than 78 structures; what we had not expected was a settlement so large and dense that our mapping teams would have difficulty finding the site's outer limits. Unlike Tikal and Calakmul, Caracol had been laid out on a radial plan much like Paris or Washington, D.C. Luxury goods, such as jadeite pendants, eccentrically shaped obsidian objects, and exotic shells, that are confined to the ceremonial precincts of other sites, were found throughout the city. Vaulted masonry tombs, traditionally believed to have been reserved for royalty, were discovered not only in temples and pyramids, but also in humble residential units. Clearly some sort of social policy had been at work here that was unique in the Maya world.

We know from excavations on the outskirts of Caracol that a few scattered hamlets had been established there by ca. 900 B.C. For nearly a millennium the population remained relatively stable. By the first century A.D. monumental architecture was under construction, indicating that the site's elite had the ability to mobilize labor and resources. The Temple of the Wooden Lintel on the eastern side of one of Caracol's main plazas achieved its final form around A.D. 70. Deposits found in the core of this building contained jadeite, shells from the Pacific, and cinnabar, attesting participation in an extensive trade network. By the second century A.D. Caracol had built its most impressive edifice, which we named Caana, Maya for "Sky House," a massive platform atop which temples, palaces, and other buildings were erected. Adjacent to it stood the plastered pyramids and shrines of the Eastern Acropolis, where a woman who had died ca. A.D. 150 was buried. In her grave were 34 pottery vessels and a mantle made of more than 7,000 shell and jadeite beads and fringed with cowrie shells and tapir teeth, indicating the prosperity enjoyed by some of Caracol's early inhabitants.

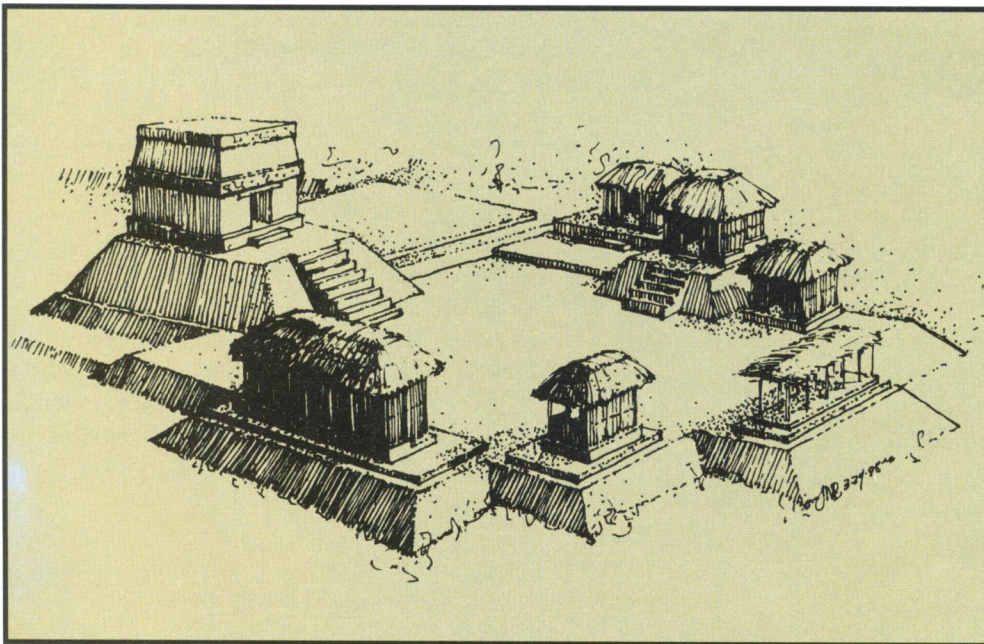
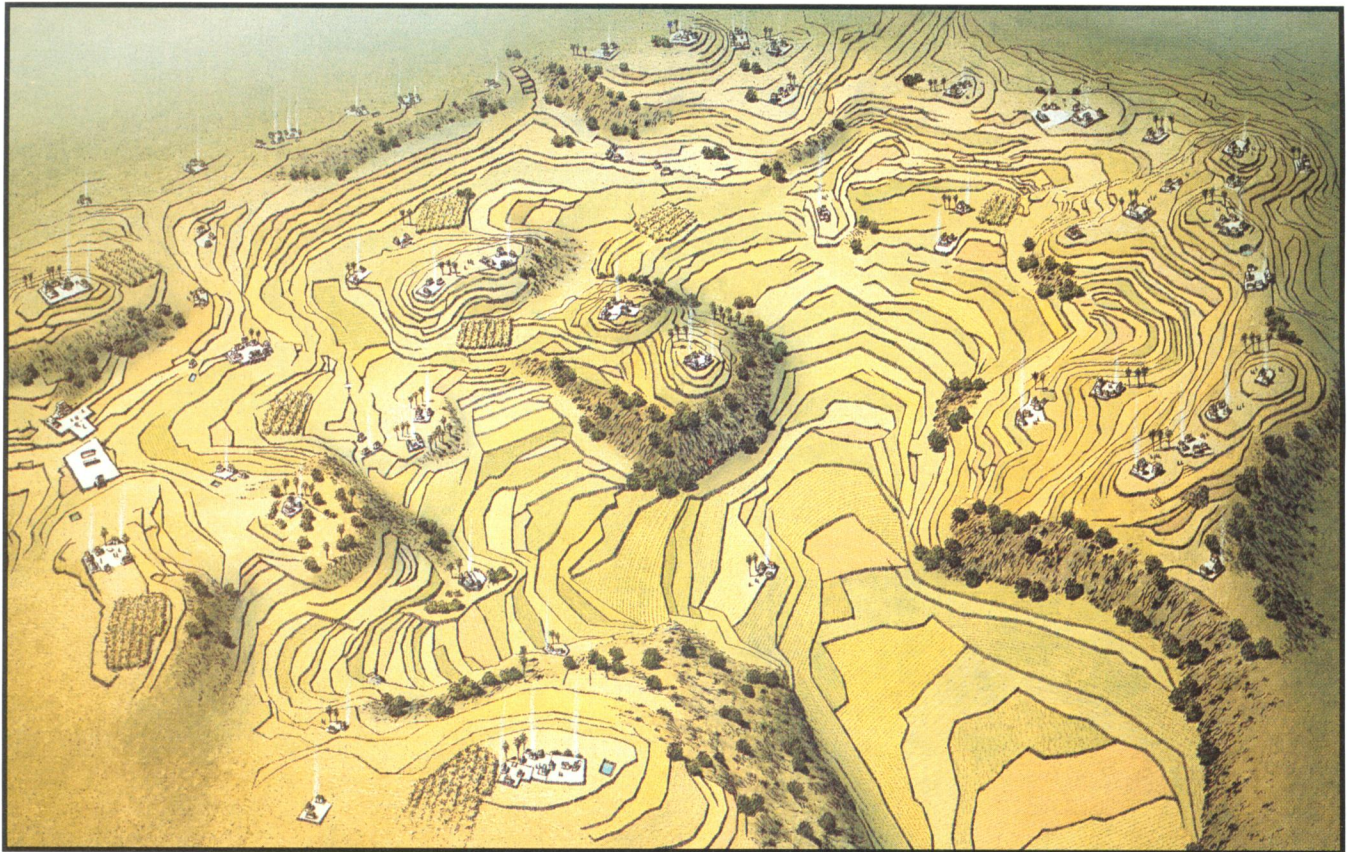
During the next four centuries Caracol grew steadily in size and population. Outlying settlements such as Cahal Pichik and Hatzcap Ceel, five and six miles away, were annexed and eventually incorporated into the expanding city. Construction continued in the central plazas, where even more high-status burials—in front of the Temple of the Wooden Lintel, in the Southern Acropolis, and on the summit of Caana—suggest the site was becoming increasingly prosperous and extending its trade contacts. The placement of yet other tombs in small household shrines suggests that ordinary citizens were beginning to take part in ritual activities normally reserved for the elite, a social development that would accelerate with the passage of time, setting the stage for Caracol's Late Classic success.



*Shaded area of map shows region controlled by Caracol at its height in the mid-seventh century A.D.*

According to hieroglyphic inscriptions found on an earlier structure within Caana, on several carved stone monuments, and on a building stairway at Naranjo 25 miles to the northwest, the city embarked on military campaigns throughout the Southern Lowlands in the mid-sixth century. The inscriptions tell us that Caracol defeated Tikal, one of the region's most powerful cities, in A.D. 562, during the reign of Yahaw Te K'inich (Lord Water), and then consolidated its political position by defeating Naranjo and, presumably, a host of minor centers under the king's son K'an II. Naranjo was annexed in A.D. 631, possibly to have better control over tribute coming from Tikal. Naranjo and Caracol may even have been connected by a long causeway, parts of which have been detected on Landsat photographs. Strategic alliances were also formed with the ruling families of several key cities, most notably Calakmul to the north. By the mid-seventh century Caracol had become the seat of a small empire, collecting tribute from many of its former rivals and their allies.

In the century following the victory over Tikal, Caracol's population swelled from some 19,000 to more than 120,000—nearly double the maximum estimated population for either Tikal or Calakmul. Even four to five miles from the city center, as many as 2,500 people inhabited each square mile, a population density unparalleled in the ancient Maya world. To maximize the land's agricultural potential, thousands of miles of stone terraces were built and hundreds of reservoirs created.



**Agricultural terraces and residential units dominate the landscape in artist's reconstruction, above, of outlying settlement at Caracol. At left, a household shrine and dwellings surround a central courtyard, or plazuela, a residential plan common throughout Caracol.**



Authors Diane and Arlen Chase excavate a sixth-century painted royal tomb atop Caana, Caracol's massive central platform.



This 4.2-inch-tall jadeite mask and other artifacts were found in a Preclassic deposit dated to the first century A.D.

The city also embarked on a massive building program that included expansion and refurbishment of many principal monuments, including Caana and the Central, Eastern, and Southern acropolises, as well as the construction of a road system linking the city center to outlying areas. As Caracol grew, it absorbed many settlements, sometimes converting their plazas and temples into administrative centers. In some cases new centers were established in previously unoccupied areas, stimulating the development of new residential zones for the site's burgeoning population. The new settlements were connected to the core of the city by additional roads, facilitating the management and economic integration of the area. The road system also permitted rapid mobilization of Caracol's army, whose victories provided tribute labor to expand the city and strengthen its resource base.

Residential areas at Caracol consisted of *plazuela* units—groups of variously sized dwellings generally built on the north, south, and west sides of a central courtyard or small plaza. These units may have been occupied by members of extended families. Many courtyards had squarish structures on their eastern sides that served as shrines and family mausoleums. These ranged from simple wood-and-thatch structures on small platforms to masonry edifices atop pyramids. Inside both platforms and pyramids were vaulted tombs, many containing the remains of more than one individual, along with poly-



TOM IVEY

Several people were buried with pottery vessels in a mid-seventh-century grave found in a suburban plazuela group.

chrome ceramic vessels, shell accessories, and ceramic incense burners used in rites venerating the dead.

Residential units with eastern shrines are found throughout the Southern Lowlands, but not as often as at Caracol, where they make up about 60 percent of all dwelling groups recorded to date. Distances between units vary from 150 to 450 feet, depending on the location of terraced fields and the steepness of the terrain. Conspicuously absent in Caracol's outlying settlement areas are housing units grouped around connecting plazas, a common residential feature at Tikal and Copán. The absence of such units may reflect tight control over town planning.

While differences in material culture and life-styles surely separated the upper and lower levels of Maya society, the gap between them seems to have been substantially bridged at Caracol. The distribution of vaulted masonry tombs and the presence of luxury items in the simplest residential units suggest that the people here were somehow sharing the wealth. Moreover, as the Late Classic period progressed more and more of the site's inhabitants appear to have enjoyed the "good life." Any gap in quality of life that may have existed between elites and commoners rapidly closed as a sizeable "middle class" developed. Nowhere is this more evident than in Caracol's mortuary practices. We have excavated 213 burials at the site, 86 of which were in vaulted masonry chambers, many in the eastern shrines of the *plazuela*



CARACOL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Remains of an individual with jadeite-inlaid teeth were found in a nonelite burial one-half mile from the city center.

units. Most of these chambers have passages allowing reentry to bury additional family members, to remove bone relics of ancestors, or to perform funerary rituals. Some tombs were emptied and reused. The newly dead were sometimes placed on wooden palettes. The bundled bones of ancestors would also be put in the chambers with offerings of shell, jadeite, and pottery. Incense was burned in front of the shrines, where offerings, including specially made ceramic vessels containing human fingers amputated in rituals, would be deposited.

Aspects of Caracol's burial practices are unlike those known from other Maya sites. The placement of more than one person in a single grave is relatively common at Caracol, occurring in 42 percent of its Late Classic burials. At Tikal less than two percent of Late Classic burials contain the remains of more than one person; the practice is even less common at other Southern Lowland sites. The widespread distribution of masonry tombs and their occurrence in *plazuela* units of all sizes attests their importance to the population. Though more are sure to be found as the investigation of the site progresses, the number of vaulted tombs encountered to date, some 120, already far exceeds the number found at Tikal, where only 23 have been discovered, most dating to the Early Classic period.

At Caracol we have found eight Late Classic tombs with texts on red-painted stucco panels and red-painted capstones. These texts, providing either the date of the

chamber's consecration or the date of an individual's death, are usually associated with Caracol's royalty. Inscriptions alone, however, do not necessarily suggest elite status since texts are found on a variety of artifacts from nonelite burials.

One of the more telling indicators of Caracol's shared wealth is the frequency of inlaid dentition, a cosmetic modification interpreted elsewhere as signifying high social status. Only a few individuals with teeth inlaid either with jadeite or hematite are found at most Maya sites. At Caracol we have studied the remains of more than 50 people with inlaid teeth, nearly all of which date to the Late Classic period. This is more than twice the number of such individuals found at the Southern Lowland sites of Tikal, Seibal, San José, Uaxactún, and Altar de Sacrificios combined. People with inlaid teeth were buried throughout Caracol in both elaborate tombs and simple graves, suggesting that all levels of society had access to this cosmetic practice.

Ceramic incense burners and specially made ceramic cache vessels, considered elite items at many Maya sites, also seem to have been widely used at Caracol. Incense burners are found throughout the city and in a greater variety of contexts than at other Maya sites. We have found complete incense burners on the stairways of residential groups and in seven tombs, all dating between ca. A.D. 450 and 700. This contrasts with Tikal, where incense burners are largely found in association with the site's central plaza. Ritual offerings traditionally associated with elite ceremonial structures at other Maya sites are found in nearly all of Caracol's *plazuela* units, often buried in the courtyard areas in front of the eastern shrines. Many of these deposits date from ca. A.D. 550 to 700 and form a major part of the ritual paraphernalia associated with Caracol's veneration of the dead. The most common ritual deposits consist of small bowls placed rim-to-rim and found either empty or containing the bones of human fingers, from both adults and children. We believe that fingers were removed from the living as part of funeral rituals and in rites venerating the dead. In most cases only one digit was removed. One such cache, however, contained

bones from 22 fingers in a single set of bowls. Virtually every excavated *plazuela* unit contained at least one cache of this type.

In Late Classic *plazuela* groups we have found more than 50 large, lidded urns, most with modeled or painted faces. A dozen such urns contained obsidian carved in exotic shapes; others held pyrite mirrors, *Spondylus* shells, and pieces of malachite. Caches in pottery vessels with faces and those with finger bones were also found in the Central and the Eastern acropolises, indicating that high-status residents of Caracol were sharing in society-wide rituals.

Caracol's rapid development was surely related to its social policies, presumably initiated prior to its known military conquests. To manage people effectively, the city's leaders encouraged a form of social cohesion that stressed the development of a distinctive identity rooted in ritual activity and bolstered by prosperity. This system worked for more than three centuries. Then, after A.D. 800, the people began to abandon the policies that had integrated them. Luxury items are found only in palaces, suggesting that the rich and powerful kept such goods to themselves. Simultaneously, outlying populations discontinued common ritual practices. About A.D. 895 much of the core of Caracol was burned, by whom we do not know. The Late Classic investment in road and field systems, however, continued to benefit residents of the outlying areas. For another 150 years they farmed the fields much as they always had and made occasional offerings in the abandoned central buildings. By A.D. 1100 Caracol's social identity was gone, and all vestiges of the once mighty nation

had been engulfed by the rain forest. ■

ARLEN F. CHASE and DIANE Z. CHASE, professors in the department of sociology and anthropology at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, have been directing excavations at Caracol since 1985. Project funding has been provided by the Dart Foundation, the Government of Belize, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, the Institute of Maya Studies, the National Science Foundation, the University of Central Florida, the United States Agency for International Development, and donations to the University of Central Florida Foundation, Inc.



This pottery vessel, or face cache, was found in a residential unit on the outskirts of Caracol.



A sixth-century A.D. incense burner was discovered in a tomb located in a small *plazuela* unit.