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More Than Kin and King

Centralized Political Organization among the Late Classic Maya¹

by Arlen F. Chase
and Diane Z. Chase

Some scholars have consistently underestimated the centralization of Maya political organization, the complexity of Maya economics, road systems, and agriculture, and the size and territorial extent of a Maya state. The application of Aidan Southall's (1956) concept of the "segmentary state" to the Classic period (A.D. 250-950) Maya, currently in vogue, is merely the most recent denigration of ancient Mesoamerican accomplishments. There are any number of problems with this model. Perhaps the most basic criticism of the segmentary-state concept is that it distracts attention from process and variability. Fundamental to the segmentary state are segmentary lineages, the reality of which also has been called into question. An even broader critique of this model questions the utility of viewing segmentation as a key societal characteristic given the universal existence of segmentation as a structural principle in human societies (cf. Sahlins 1961). Finally, should one accept the model itself, the contradictory data on scale, hierarchy, and integration (see Blanton et al. 1981, de Montmollin 1989, Smith 1994) highlight its problematic nature.

According to Kuper (1982:88-89), the segmentary state may be viewed as an ingenious modification of lineage theory. The basic component of the segmentary

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state is the segmentary lineage (Southall 1956). Although no segmentary lineages had been reported in Mesoamerica until the recent research on the Quiché Maya (Fox 1987:4), many Maya archaeologists and epigraphers now see the segmentary state as having been ubiquitous among the pre-Columbian Maya (Ball 1993, 1994; Ball and Taschek 1991; Houston 1993; Dunning and Kowalski 1994). At the same time that some Mayanists have embraced the segmentary state, other anthropologists have called into question the very existence of segmentary lineages in other than a heuristic academic setting (Kuper 1982:92):

My view is that the lineage model, its predecessors and its analogs, have no value for anthropological analysis. Two reasons above all support this conclusion. First, the model does not represent folk models which actors anywhere have of their own societies. Secondly, there do not appear to be any societies in which vital political or economic activities are organized by a repetitive series of descent groups.

Kuper's comments are not as extreme as they might first appear but rather indicative of a growing body of critical and reflective literature concerned with ethnographic methodology and, in particular, the impact of the field-worker's identity on the creation of that ethnography (see Tedlock 1991:80). Work on the Maya and on peoples elsewhere in Mesoamerica suggests that, rather than societies' being based solely on lineage principles, non-kinship-based territorial units were also key building blocks (Farriss 1984:137, 163; Hassig 1985:94; Hill and Monaghan 1987:159; but see McAnany 1995 for an alternative lineage-based interpretation of Maya society).

Complicating the situation is the fact that numerous concepts have been bundled together within the framework of the segmentary state. Richard Fox (1977) first conjoined "regal-ritual" cities with the "segmentary state." Stephen Houston (1993:144) has explicitly linked the terms "segmentary state" and "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1977), noting that "if reduced to its essentials, the galactic polity is difficult to distinguish from Southall's segmentary state, since both emphasize similar features, including the ritual privileges and supremacy of the ruler." And Ball (1994:390) has recently lumped even more diverse theoretical constructs (Bloch 1961, Geertz 1980, Kirchhoff 1955, Tambiah 1977) by conjoining "regal-ritual" cities with "the 'segmentary state,' a general category also known as the 'theatre-state' or 'conical clan state' and encompassing such special subtypes as 'galactic polities' and 'feudal states.'" Even if the segmentary state were applicable to the Maya, the category lumps things together that are exceedingly diverse and variable (see Marcus 1995:4 for a similar critique).

Galactic polities (Demarest 1992a) are not equivalent to feudal states (Adams and Smith 1981), and, presumably, few supporters of any of these concepts would be comfortable interpreting these models as part and parcel of lineage-based conical clans. Each model has its own characteristics, some of which are directly contradictory. For example, the notion of the galactic polity was

derived from societies that do not exhibit "true lineages" (Bentley 1986:290). In contrast, lineages are assumed to be *the* important component of segmentary states (Fox 1988). A primary element in feudal societies is landownership, while segmentary states, theater states (Geertz 1980), and galactic polities are focused on ritual. Thus, if one looks beyond any superficial similarities and examines the structural bases of these various models, the differences are more significant than the similarities.

Galactic polities are suggested to exist in both Southeast Asia (Tambiah 1977) and the Maya area (Demarest 1992a), largely because of similarities in ritual, dynastic focus, and "pulsating patterns"; "the emphasis throughout is not on cultural detail, but on political structure and its basis in symbolic structure" (Houston 1993:143). Yet, the existence of galactic polities and "the pulsating character of Southeast Asian kingdoms" have been attributed "to structural constraints on royal power (low population density, inefficient taxation, dependence on foreign trade monopolies) and centrifugal pressures which inevitably gave rise to factionalism" (Bentley 1986:293). These combined structural constraints on royal power in Southeast Asia are *not*, however, in evidence among the Late Classic Maya polities with which we are familiar (see below). It is therefore very likely that the political structures in these two parts of the world were quite different, at least in specific instances. Carneiro (1992:185) further notes that any pulsating of polities was "commonplace and expectable." And, in the sense of temporal pulsation, galactic polities may even be incorporated into Marcus's (1993) "dynamic model" for Maya political organization and, indeed, within general anthropological theory relating to the consolidation of states into empires (Sinopoli 1994:162). For the Maya area, however, Marcus's (1993) dynamic model explicitly sees the waxing and waning that characterized all long-term states as a continuous long-term vacillation, or "pulsation," between a more centralized state and a less centralized chiefdom level of organization (see Skinner 1977 for a similar argument for China). Like segmentation (Sahlins 1961), however, pulsation as a quality or attribute is not enough in itself to justify typological definition.

The typological approach itself is undergoing considerable critique in archaeology (Feinman and Neitzel 1984; Plog and Upham 1983; Upham 1987, 1990; Yoffee 1993) and anthropology (see Goodenough 1970). In contrast, many Mesoamerican researchers are still attempting to fit their data to idealized types in an attempt to place the Maya within broader evolutionary theory. Unfortunately, however, Maya data generally are not being compared with the defined ideal type(s) to assess potential variation (see Stein 1994 and de Montmollin 1989 for examples of this process). Instead, regal-ritual cities and the segmentary state have been combined in an idealized theoretical entity (cf. R. Fox 1977, Sanders 1989, Ball and Taschek 1991, Fash 1991, Ball 1994) and reified to the point that some have seen the model as explaining and interpreting Maya culture itself: "in the

case of Late Classic Lowland Maya political organization and the segmentary-state concept we would appear to have attained that most sought-after of all goals in theoretical science, an explanatory model that works" (Ball 1993:15).

Yet, applications of the model to data are problematic and contradictory. Simple associations are difficult, and distinct orders of complexity are implied for the same data by different researchers; this is the case for the Maya as well as for other cultures. Vijayanagara, India, has been referred to as a segmentary state (Fritz 1986:46; Southall 1988), a galactic polity (Fritz, Michell, and Rao 1984:148), and an empire (Sinopoli 1994:162)—thus running the gamut from regal-ritual city to imperial capital. The Maya are cast as both a segmentary and a unitary state, with raucous support for both positions (Ball 1994; Marcus 1995:28). But when the Aztec empire—perhaps the most complex example of stratification in ancient Mesoamerica (see Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979)—can be classed as a "segmentary state" (Hayden 1994:199), the problems associated with such terminology are brought into sharp focus. If the Aztec were to be accepted as being a segmentary state, then there would be little use in trying to determine if Maya polities might have evolved beyond this idealized political form. We believe that the characterization of the Lowland Maya as a segmentary state obscures the complexity and potential variety of political organizations that once existed in this area.

Maya Cities and Polities: A Question of Scale

Applications of the segmentary-state model to the Classic-period Lowland Maya do not take into account an extensive body of archaeological, ethnographic, historical, and ethnohistorical information that establishes tremendous contemporary and temporal diversity within Maya culture. Lumping all forms of political organization into a single type, as is often done by those who use the segmentary-state model (see Fox 1987), is particularly problematic given established population differences in identified Classic-era Maya capital cities ranging from less than 10,000 to well over 100,000 (Culbert and Rice 1990, A. Chase and D. Chase 1994); the associated polities would have integrated proportionately larger populations. These data imply substantial synchronic and diachronic variety in the organization of associated Maya political units (D. Chase and A. Chase 1992:309–10; Marcus 1993).

Segmentary and unitary states have now become a dichotomy. Yet, Southall (1956) developed the concept of the segmentary state as an intermediate type for African societies that had earlier been subdivided into "stateless uncentralized" groups and "centralized state" groups (in a pre-Service [1962] era). His unitary states were "embedded in social matrices of greater population density and economic specialization, both correlates of more intensive cultivation and features which occur

more along a gradient towards organic solidarity," while the segmentary state was "somewhat decentralized," "less hierarchical," and less "bureaucratized" (Fox 1988:104, 110).

While the theoretical constructs are elegant, the on-the-ground reality of the societies for which such a proposed system functioned in Africa are telling. Presumed segmentary states in Africa were exceedingly small in areal extent. Spencer (1990:9–10, after Cohen and Schlegel 1968) notes that nonstate, chiefdom societies in Africa were much smaller than states and encompassed areal domains of less than 1,100 km²; indeed, the areal size of a "polity" in Africa could be correlated with its level of administrative and political development. This 1,100 km² figure can be viewed as being in accord with sizes inferred for other incipient states, such as those encountered in "peer-polity" models (Renfrew and Cherry 1986). "The early state module is a recurrent autonomous unit, regularly spaced, and of fairly uniform size," ca. 20–30 km in diameter, or ca. 1,500 km² in area (Houston 1993:145, after Renfrew 1982:282).

A key question, then, is how big Classic Maya polities were. Contrasting interpretations are based on both the epigraphic and the archaeological data. Thompson (1954:81) employed a city-state model for Lowland Maya society consisting of single centers of small territorial extent. Mathews (1991) similarly has argued that each Maya emblem glyph represents a specific polity and that the Classic Maya landscape was dotted with some 60–80 small, independent city-states. Interestingly, if one looks at the size of these proposed emblem-glyph polities (Mathews 1985; Marcus 1993:161), the populous and dominant Guatemalan site of Tikal would be associated with the smallest territorial unit, only 1,081 km², all the others would control well over 1,100 km². But do emblem glyphs define single territories?

Both epigraphers (Marcus 1976; 1993:157–63; Martin and Grube 1995) and archaeologists (Adams and Jones 1981; Culbert 1991:140–44; 1995) have provided alternative models which place the territorial and administrative extent of several Maya polities in the 7,932–21,095 km² range (Adams and Jones 1981) or even larger (Martin and Grube 1995). Polity size likely varied over time. Tikal may have controlled 21,095 km² of territory prior to A.D. 562, but after this date its territorial extent was somewhat less. Research at Caracol indicates that this site was independent of Tikal during the Late Classic; epigraphy suggests that it maintained 7,000–12,000 km² of territory from A.D. 631 to A.D. 680 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1991); archaeology points to no loss of scale following this date (in spite of a current lack of hieroglyphic data). In contrast to the use of emblem glyphs alone, combined archaeological and epigraphic data can be used to infer that typical Maya polities of the Late Classic era were on average approximately 8,000 km² in size and, presumably, contained a system of hierarchically ordered centers.

Like the larger polities, Lowland Maya centers of the Late Classic era varied substantially in their spatial extent, populations, and composition. Archaeological data

demonstrate that these sites were not vacant ceremonial centers. Unlike regal-ritual cities, which could not "maintain large urban populations or the power to organize and control such populations" (R. Fox 1977:54), large Maya cities were centers of population, power, trade, and administration (Chase, Chase, and Haviland 1990, but see Sanders and Webster 1988). Certain Maya "garden cities" contain evidence of substantial public works, often in the form of causeways or field systems.

During the Late Classic period several of the largest of these cities—such as Dzibilchaltun, Coba, Calakmul, Tikal, and Caracol—had populations ranging from over 40,000 to upwards of 150,000 individuals. Dzibilchaltun, Mexico, has had 19 km² of its settlement mapped, and the population estimated as residing at this site during its Classic-era height is 42,000 (Kurjack 1974:94). The major site of Coba, Mexico, included a population of between 42,870 and 62,652 within a 63-km² area (Kintz and Fletcher 1983:197–202). Calakmul, Mexico, contained 50,000 people within an area of 70 km² and controlled a polity of 8,000 km² (Fletcher et al. 1987:20; Folan et al. 1995:310). Tikal, Guatemala, minimally contained some 62,000 people within 120 km²; the city is estimated to have controlled a population in excess of 425,000 within a 25-km radius (1,963 km²; Culbert et al. 1990:117). The urban area of Caracol spread out over some 177 km² and contained between 115,000 and 150,000 people (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994:5). Its polity size and population were much larger; Caracol, in fact, directly incorporated the Guatemalan site of Naranjo (42 km distant) within its domain for at least 50 years (A. Chase and D. Chase 1996).

Given these large population figures for Classic-period urban centers, substantial administrative effort would have to have been expended not only within them but also within their larger polities. While population in and of itself may not be directly reflective of complexity, population thresholds have been correlated with ever-increasing scales of integration; high population numbers and densities are thought to necessitate more complex organization (Carneiro 1967; Johnson and Earle 1987:225, 246; Wenke 1990:294). Dense populations have great time depth in the Maya area. Komchen, Mexico, is estimated to have had a total population of 2,500–3,000 in a 2-km² area between 350 and 150 B.C. (Ringle and Andrews 1990:231). Thus, populous Maya sites cannot be viewed as either spatial or temporal aberrations. They are key elements in a hierarchy of settlements within the Lowland Maya political landscape that was characterized by substantial scale, complexity, and integration by the Classic period.

Caracol: Scale, Hierarchy, and Integration

The Belizean site of Caracol is an excellent vantage point from which to view the composition of a Maya polity. The site has been investigated by the Caracol Archaeological Project for over a decade (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987, n.d.; D. Chase and A. Chase 1994), and

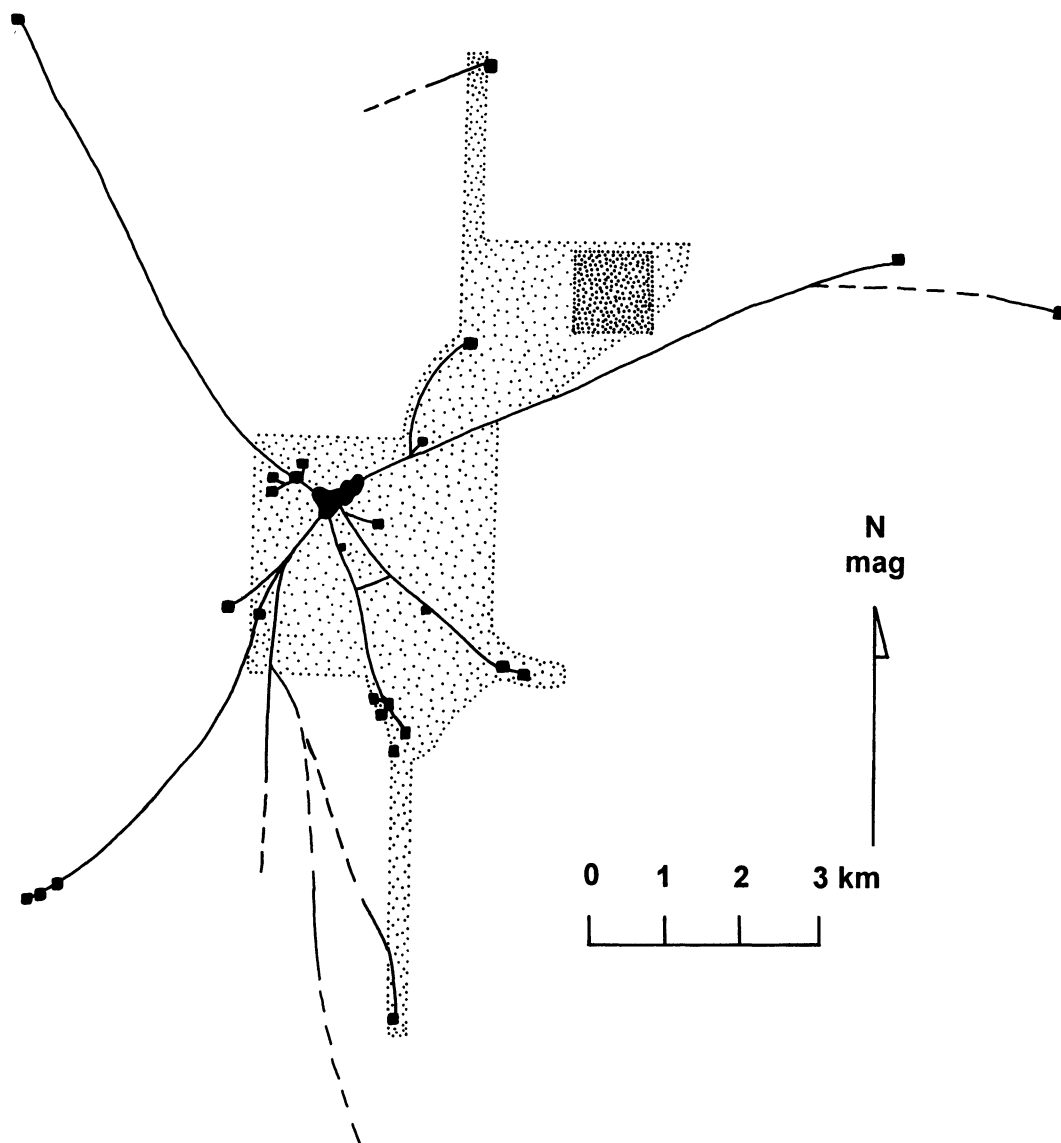


FIG. 1. Plan of Caracol, showing the location of ground-confirmed causeways. Blackened areas, epicenter and known causeway termini; lighter stipple, area mapped by transit; darker stipple, 1-km² area for which all of the settlement and most of the terraces have been recorded.

some 16 km² of it have been mapped, including detailed areas of agricultural terraces. Extensive horizontal exposures and areal investigations have been undertaken in conjunction with deep trenching. Approximately 100 nonepicentral plaza groups, including causeway termini, have been archaeologically investigated, producing a sizable database. Among the most significant aspects of Caracol are its nonresidential constructions, such as causeways and field systems, which allow a detailed view of the growth and maintenance of a large Maya polity.

Survey indicates that the *city* of Caracol encompassed minimally 177 km² and had a population of greater than 115,000 and probably over 150,000 at A.D. 675 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1994). Over 70 km of intrasite causeways

are known. These causeways measure between 3 and 12 m in width and radiate from the epicenter (fig. 1). Satellite imagery suggests that the site's road system continues beyond the city, extending to the northwest as well as to the southeast (fig. 2). These causeways reveal a dendritic transport system as well as a distinct "linked" settlement hierarchy with administrative and economic functions (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995).

As the city of Caracol exploded in size at the beginning of the Late Classic period, it expanded its causeway system. Causeways linked the epicenter directly to elite household groups, to large specially constructed plazas, and to preexisting centers engulfed by the city's urban sprawl. The previously independent centers of Cahal Pichik, Hatzcap Ceel, Retiro, Cohune, and Ceiba were

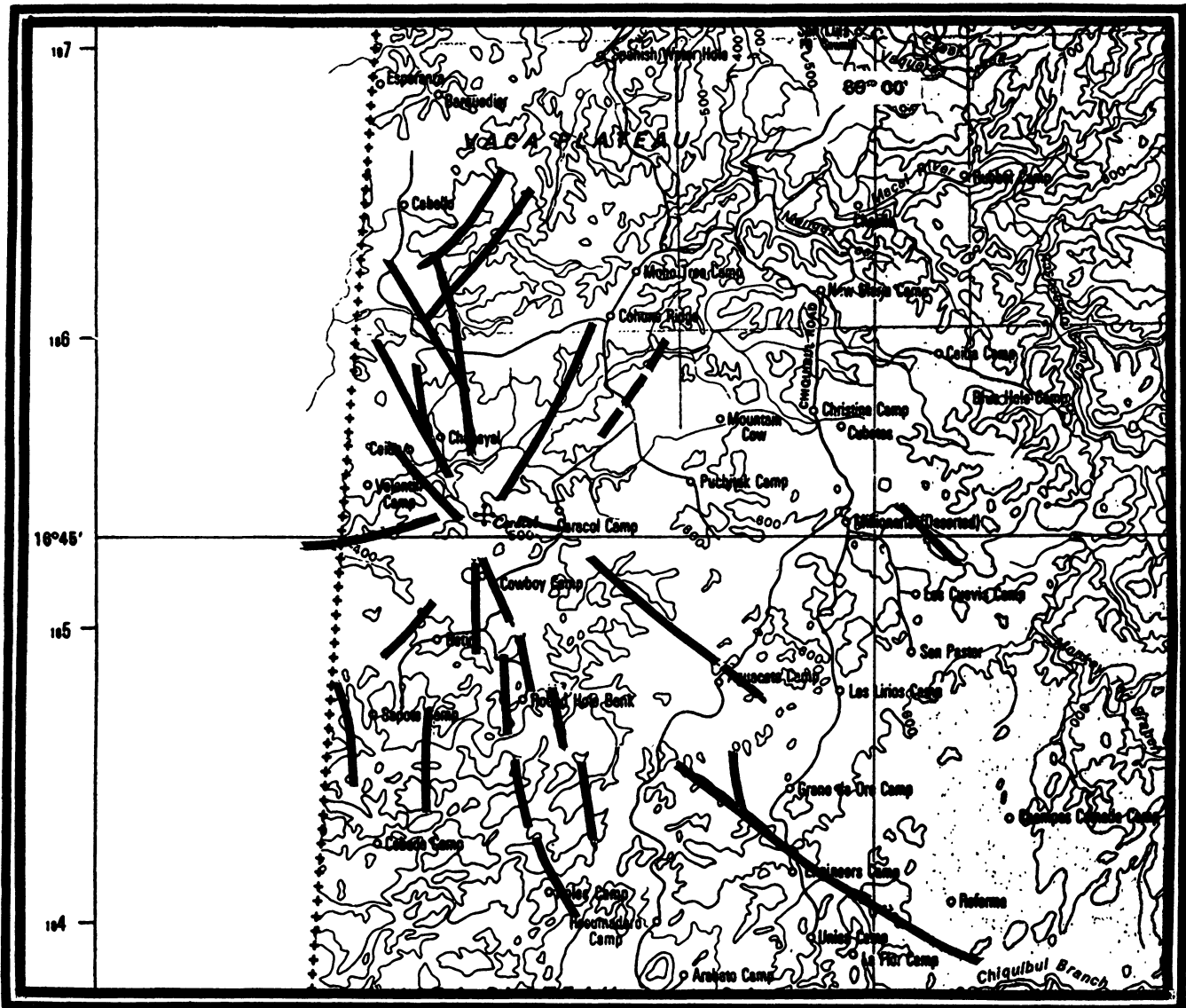


FIG. 2. Caracol causeways as derived from LANDSAT information (courtesy of Jim E. Rose, Dallas, Tex.). The western Cahal Pichik and Hatzcap Ceel Causeways (confirmed on the ground) are not in evidence in these data. Ground confirmation has been undertaken for only about one-third of the causeways shown. For comparative scale, Round Hole Bank is the locus of the termini shown toward the end of the south transect in figure 1. North is to the top of the map; the vertical distance represented is 34 km.

incorporated into the city, and plazas were built in them and in other previously unoccupied areas at the end of causeways connected with the epicenter. These "special-function" termini were characterized by plazas as big as those in the site epicenter but with distinctive configurations. Rather than being flanked by pyramids, they were surrounded by low structures and sometimes one or two raised elongated range buildings (fig. 3). Excavations within such termini have indicated a general absence of ritual and domestic items. The results of these excavations and the placement of these plazas within the urban matrix of Caracol suggest that their primary function was integrative. One or more elite do-

mestic groups, some with their own temple pyramids, are often nearby and linked to these termini by their own causeways. This vast causeway system served to bind the extensive settlement that made up Caracol into an integrated whole.

Most of the outlying area of Caracol exhibits extensive agricultural terracing and heavy population densities. In one sampled area 5 km from the epicenter, an estimated 972 people lived within a 1-km² area of dense terraces (fig. 4); this representative area is more than a kilometer beyond the specially constructed Puchituk Causeway terminus and well removed from the Cahal Pichik Causeway that passes to its south. The large-

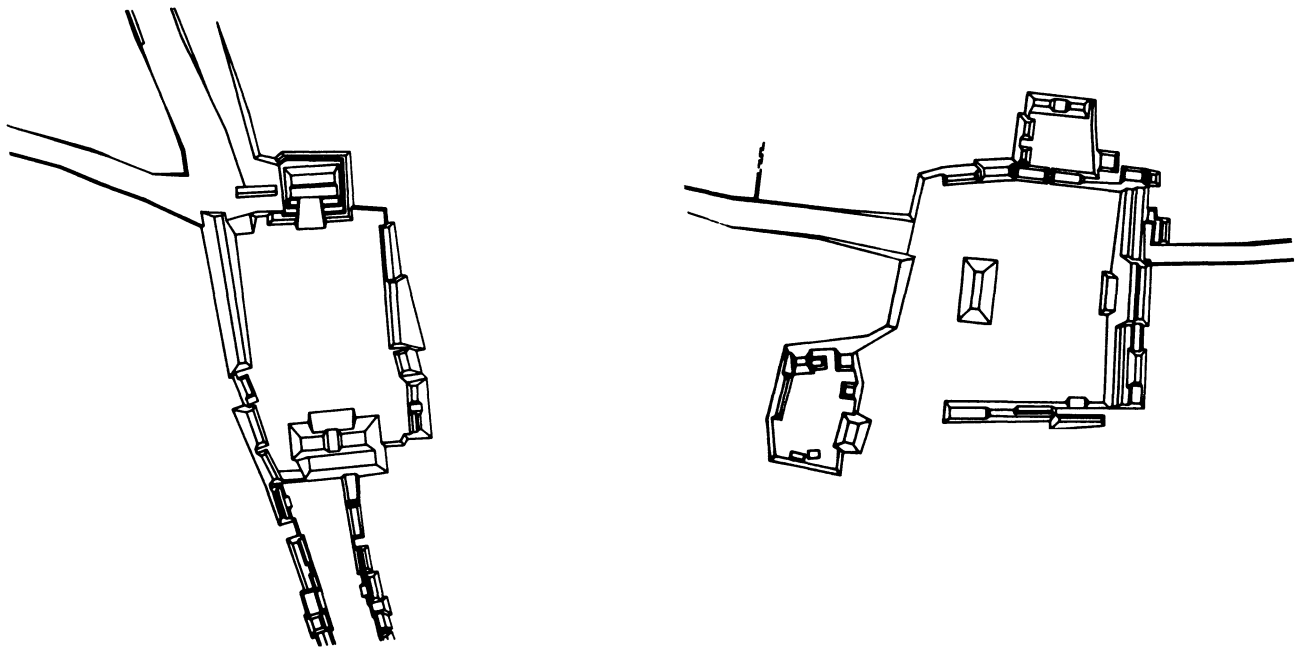


FIG. 3. *Specially constructed causeway termini. Left, Pajaro-Ramonal Plaza; right, Conchita Plaza, at the same scale.*

scale terrace systems mapped within this segment of Caracol are typical of the site as well as of regions well beyond what are believed to be the boundaries of the city (although areas outside the city limits presumably had lower population densities). These terrace systems, perhaps in conjunction with out-field farming, were able to support the huge contiguous populations found throughout the Caracol region. The regularity seen in the alignment and organization of the terraces, combined with the hierarchy of integrative or administrative plazas evident in the Caracol causeway system, may be taken as the often difficult-to-identify "direct archaeological evidence for state involvement in agricultural management" (Demarest 1992a:146).

Caracol's causeway system and outlying settlement show articulation both within the site and between Caracol and other centers. The organization of the Caracol polity shows evidence of a centralized hierarchy of administrative nodes that contradicts the redundancy and replication of administrative features in Maya centers of all levels that is presupposed by the segmentary-state model. Caracol's special-function causeway termini do not replicate Caracol's epicentral plazas, with their associated monuments, palaces, temples, and ballcourts. Nor do noncauseway-connected lower-tier sites like Caledonia (Awe 1985) replicate either Caracol's termini or epicenter. Caracol's causeway system provides evidence of both an administrative hierarchy of central places and an administered economy based on solar or dendritic principles (cf. Smith 1976, A. Chase and D. Chase 1995) into which was woven individual household specialization (Pope 1994) (the existence of economic specialization at a household level does not preclude hierarchy and functional heterogeneity).

Combined archaeological data and hieroglyphic history suggest an even more dynamic situation. The epigraphic data from Caracol demonstrate that dynastic rule was in place for over 500 years, with some 30 named rulers between A.D. 331 and A.D. 859 (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991, Houston 1987, Grube 1994). This hieroglyphic record tells of a defeat of Tikal in A.D. 562 and a war of incorporation relating to the Guatemalan site of Naranjo beginning in A.D. 626 and completed by A.D. 636, if not A.D. 631. In A.D. 680 Naranjo broke away from the sway of Caracol. Later texts name secondary administrators and bureaucrats (Chase, Grube, and Chase 1991). On the basis of these epigraphic data, the Caracol polity can be estimated as having controlled 7,000–12,000 km² at approximately A.D. 650 (A. Chase and D. Chase 1991). Archaeological data from the southeastern Peten (Laporte 1994), an area which would have also been incorporated within this polity, confirm Caracol's impact in this region from the 6th through the 9th century (A. Chase n.d.).

Other archaeological data from Caracol also demonstrate the site's complexity and integration. Most of Caracol's carved monuments are located in the site epicenter and, when viewed in terms of their texts and spatial matrix, are indicative of centralization. The hierarchy evident at the site can also be seen in other ways. As of 1995 approximately 100 tombs had been investigated at Caracol. Such tombs are widely distributed at the site and in its surrounding region (Awe 1985, A. Chase 1992, A. Chase and D. Chase 1996, Laporte 1994, Thompson 1931). The largest chambers occur within the site epicenter and are painted; intermediate-sized chambers occur throughout Caracol and the area of its termini; smaller chambers are recorded for Caracol's dependent

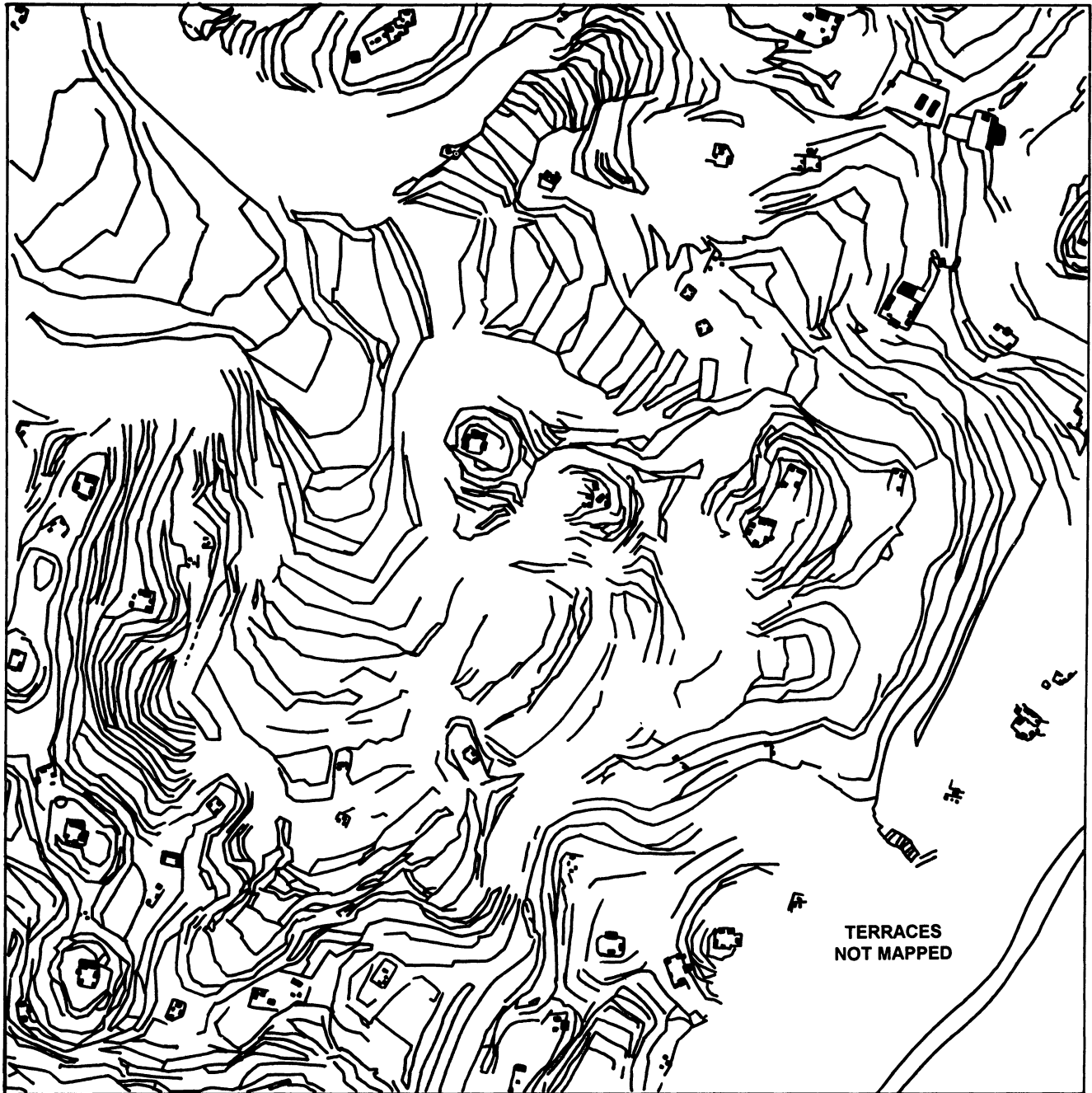


FIG. 4. A 1-km² area of outlying settlement and terraces (see fig. 1). Some 243 structures are located in this area, representing an estimated population of 972 at A.D. 675. The terraces were not recorded in the southeastern section of this 1 km²; the parallel lines here represent a modern road.

centers over a vast area outside of the site itself (A. Chase 1992:38; Laporte 1994). Significantly, the spatial distribution of these chambers and their volume reflect an already noted hierarchical ordering of sites.

Conclusion

Our attempts to view pre-Columbian Mesoamerican peoples have often homogenized, unstratified, and sim-

plified them. This has been done on an anthropological, a historical, and certainly an archaeological level. Cancian (1976:234) has pointed out that

since anthropologists seldom find the kind of clear strata and unambiguous groups described in ideal types, they usually conclude that they are working in an unstratified society, and emphasize the homogeneity of the population or the personal characteristics of economically and politically dominant individ-

uals. This implicit comparison with an ideal type obscures patterns of stratification in anthropological societies.

The Spaniards also simplified and homogenized the Lowland Maya, both physically through domination and ethnohistorically through their writings (Farriss 1984:165). A focus predominantly on Maya epigraphic history (cf. Schele and Freidel 1990) may also unintentionally have the same simplifying result. An emphasis on the epigraphic data relating to individual rulers permits a predisposition to anthropological models based on ideology and charismatic leaders (cf. Ball 1993:13; Demarest 1992a:157; Houston 1993); lack of hieroglyphic material may be misinterpreted as indicating

fragmentation and decline. A Western economic perspective based on capitalism has also cast ancient societies that did not participate in a market system economy as somewhat less than complex. It is our contention that this homogenization and simplification lead to a false view of ancient Lowland Maya society. We need to continue to combine all of the available data and to write and think about hierarchies, political economies, mechanisms of political control, and economic integration of specialized populations; only in this way can we define the diachronic and contemporary variation in ancient Maya sociopolitical organization. The Classic-period Maya maintained large, centralized, differentiated, and integrated polities based on far more than kinship and the ideological role of kings.