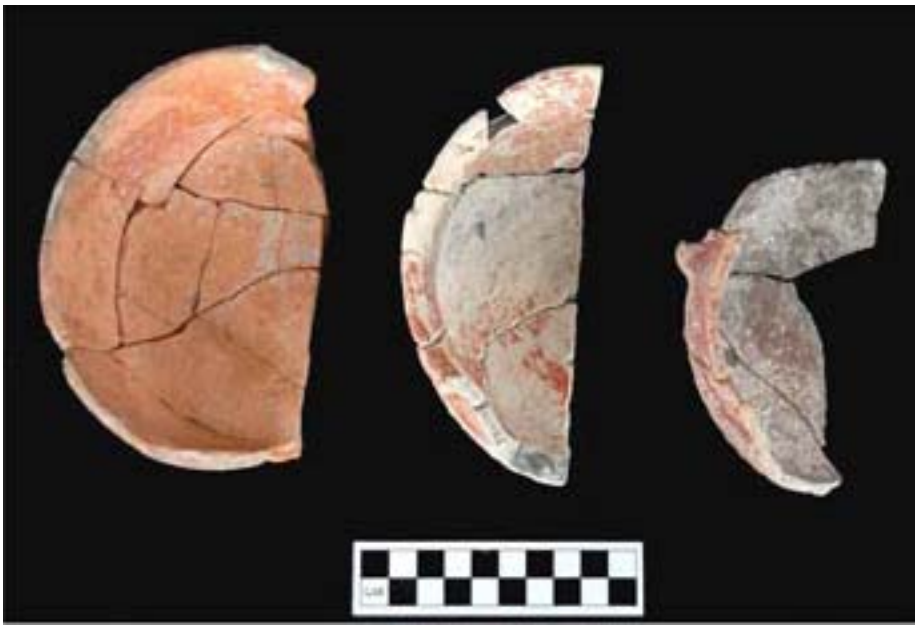
Ritual Ceramic Use in the Early and Middle Preclassic at the sites of Blackman Eddy and Cahal Pech, Belize



Research Year: 2003
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Abstract

The analysis of two distinct ceramic assemblages from Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy sheds light on the ritual use of ceramics by the Preclassic Maya and has implications for the rise of complexity. A subset of the earliest ceramics found within the Maya Lowlands (Cunil/Kanocha Complexes) was incised with ideologically related symbols that were part of the greater pan-Mesoamerican symbol system. The incised motifs were found on serving vessels which suggests that the display of these symbols was meant to be seen by participants in communal gatherings such as ritual feasts. The emphasis on the display of these early symbolic motifs diminishes towards the end of the Cunil/Kanocha Phase which corresponds with some of the earliest signs of social differences in the archaeological record. This trend may suggest that hierarchical social relations were becoming naturalized within Maya ideology and no longer needed to be emphasized through symbolic motifs carved on ritual ceramic vessels. Through time and repeated use within special ceremonies, the function of the ritual vessel itself changes from container/medium of display to vehicle/implement of power. These instruments of power were integral in rituals used by elites during the Middle Preclassic and later to reinforce and legitimize uneven social relationships. This is seen through the importance of ceramic vessels within dedicatory caches and burials throughout the history of the Maya.

Resumen

El análisis de dos ensamblajes de material cerámica procedentes de los sitios de Cahal Pech y Blackman Eddy, Belice, ha proporcionado nuevos datos relevantes a la utilización ritual de vasijas cerámicas por los Mayas durante el Preclásico, más contribuye a nuestro entendimiento de la evolución de la complejidad social en la civilización Maya. Un subconjunto de los complejos cerámicos más antiguos en las Tierras Bajas Mayas (los complejos Cunil y Kanocha) se distingue por la presencia de diseños incisos en el engobe que representan símbolos ideológicos, los cuales forman parte del sistema Preclásica de símbolos pan-Mesoamericanos. Estos motivos se encuentran en vasijas que tenían la función de presentar y servir comida, hecho que sugiere que dichos símbolos se hicieron para participantes que realizaban reuniones públicas como banquetes festivos y rituales. El uso de estos símbolos se disminuye significativamente hacia el fin de las fases Cunil y Kanocha, al mismo tiempo que se surgen las primeras evidencias arqueológicas de diferenciación social, correspondencia que sugiere que relaciones sociales de jerarquía se estaban naturalizando tanto que ya no se requerían ser subrayado por el uso de potentes símbolos grabados en vasijas rituales. Con el tiempo y por su uso continuo y repetido en contextos rituales, la función de estas vasijas había cambiado de recipiente y medio para la exhibición de símbolos para ser vehículos sagrados y instrumentos de poder en si mismos, los cuales jugaban un rol clave en los ritos

que los élites del Preclásico Medio y de los períodos siguientes celebraban con el motivo de reforzar y legitimizar relaciones sociales de desigualdad, hecho que se confirma por la importancia que tenían vasijas cerámicas en depósitos dedicatorios y entierros por lo que restaba de la historia precolombina de la civilización Maya.

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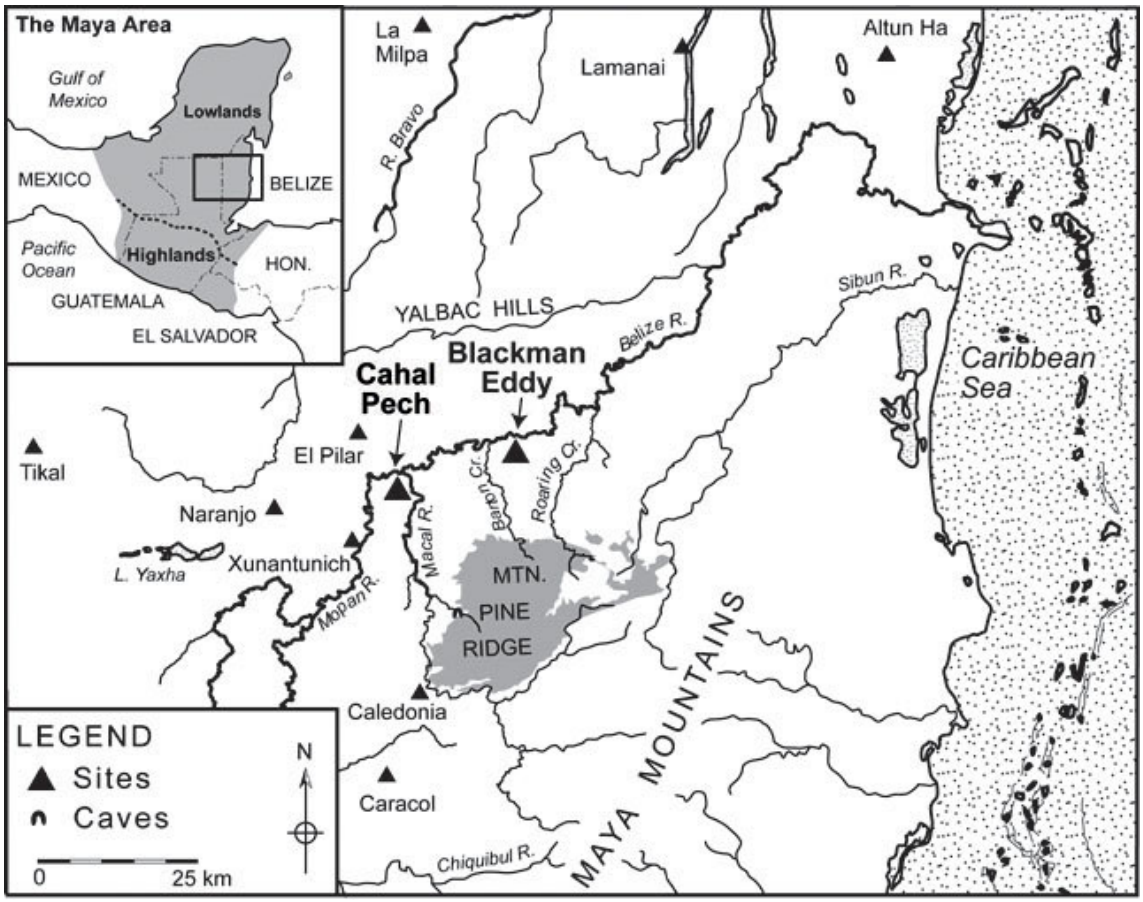

Figure 1. Belize Valley Map showing the location of Blackman Eddy and Cahal Pech.

The Final Report

This report addresses the role of ritual ceramic use in the rise of complexity. Understanding the types of rituals celebrated in public settings is crucial for understanding the rise of complexity, as ritual serves as the point of articulation between religion and the rise of complexity, particularly the utilization and manipulation of religious ideology by nascent elites to ensure the acceptance of new social conventions which support a hierarchical social system (Awe 1994; Brown and Awe 2007). In order to understand the social mechanisms or pathways which laid the foundation for the transformation to a hierarchical social system, we must examine the relationship between the material implements of power, including ceramic vessels and public architecture, and the rituals involving them. Investigations at Blackman Eddy and Cahal Pech provide the richest data sets for understanding the earliest roots of this process in the Maya Lowlands, going back to the terminal Early Preclassic Cunil/Kanocha ceramic complexes beginning by at least 1000 BC. I would argue that the use and meaning of some of these material implements of power, specifically pottery vessels, have their origins in the terminal Early Preclassic, when Maya society was egalitarian (Brown 2007). A subset of the early pottery from the Belize Valley was incised with important symbolic motifs that tied the early communities to a pan-Mesoamerican symbol system. Elsewhere in Mesoamerica, these symbols were used by elites to set themselves apart as special and therefore, legitimize hierarchical social relations.

This report examines two distinct ceramic assemblages from the sites of Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy with an emphasis on elucidating how these ceramics were used in early rituals within these Preclassic communities. Background information pertaining to both sites will be briefly presented to place the ceramic study in context. The two assemblages complement each other nicely. The assemblage from Cahal Pech is from the lowest levels of a deep stratified excavation unit and is ideal for charting the changes in ceramic types and forms through time. Also of importance, iconographic analysis of the ceramic assemblage reveals several motifs that appear to be widespread in the Belize River Valley during the Early Preclassic. Although this assemblage derives from secondary context in architectural fill and cannot shed much light on the ancient activities in which the vessels were used, I would suggest that these incised ceramic motifs on serving vessels were meant to be appreciated during food consumption, like feasting.

The ceramic assemblage from Blackman Eddy, on the other hand, is a problematic deposit that is a primary context originally thought to date to the terminal Early Preclassic based on the location of this deposit within the excavations. A detailed analysis of the ceramic material coupled with new radiometric dates demonstrate that this deposit dates to the late Middle Preclassic and was associated with the construction of a Middle Preclassic platform. The combined analysis of ceramic vessel forms, associated material

culture, and faunal material suggests that this deposit derives from ritual feasting activities.

The role of ritual feasting in the rise of complexity has been addressed by numerous scholars including Clark and Blake (1994), Hayden (2001), and Dietler (2001) (Dietler and Hayden 2001) and will only be briefly addressed in this report. I would like to emphasize the intimate nature of small-scale feasts like those that most likely took place within early Maya communities. The communal character of these feasts allowed participants to both contribute to and participate in these early rituals, which in turn helped constitute the community. The commensal quality of these ceremonies reflects in part the fact that there were few if any social institutions of inequality in these early communities. In spite of this, the host of a ritual feast created obligations of reciprocity with his or her participants, which over time could have lead to unequal social relationships.

A host could emphasize the sacred component in their ceremonies by displaying powerful symbols. As mentioned above, important ideological symbols were incised on some of the early Cunil/Kanocha serving vessels, and the messages would have been shared amongst the ritual participants. Incising vessels with symbols such as the kan cross makes the vessel sacred (Awe 1994). For example the kan cross represents the four corners of the universe and the world tree that bridges the underworld, the earth, and the sky (Freidel *et al.* 1993). Placing this iconography on a ceramic vessel symbolically transforms this medium into a portal, and in turn, emphasizes the importance of this material implement and therefore the importance of the person who owns/displays/shares this object.

The ceramic vessels like those used in feasts themselves can be seen as having symbolic meaning as well. This is true not only of those incised with symbols, but even plain serving vessels within a ritual context are ideologically charged objects (Brown and Awe 2007). Ceramic bowls (with or without incised symbols) were employed as containers for sacred foods, fluids, and materials which were used as offerings to the gods. Through the ritual use of these containers, the vessels became sanctified. This is apparent, as vessels would become an important component in most consecration caches, many of which replicate the cosmos (Brown and Awe 2007). Layered cosmograms of this sort begin as early as the Middle Preclassic in the Maya Lowlands. A Middle Preclassic cache at the site of Cival illustrates this theme on a grand scale (Bauer 2005). However, this theme can be represented in very simple offerings. For example, at Blackman Eddy during the early Middle Preclassic, one of the bowls used in a feasting event was intentionally placed above nine chert flakes, representing the nine layers of the underworld (Brown 2007). This cosmogram was created within the context of a communal event.

In order to understand how changes in ritual activities relate to the establishment of social hierarchies, we must examine the archaeological data in a diachronic fashion, beginning with the terminal Early Preclassic. The ceramic study funded

by FAMSI provides a foundation on which to examine ritual ceramic use through time and sheds light on some interesting issues.

Furthermore, some important observations arise from the comparison of these two assemblages, specifically regarding methodological challenges to identifying ceramics from the terminal Early Preclassic Cunil and Kanocha phases. The analysis has revealed a late Middle Preclassic ceramic variety (ash-tempered Joventud Red) which has striking similarities in paste and slip to a diagnostic Cunil/Kanocha type (Uck Red). Despite these similarities, however, the forms are quite different. Thus, body sherds are easily misidentified, which in turn, may cause chronological assessments to be inaccurate unless they are based on a thorough analysis of an entire assemblage.

Recent archaeological investigations at the sites of Blackman Eddy and Cahal Pech have revealed extensive Early and Middle Preclassic occupation within the Belize River Valley beginning around 1100 BC (Figure 1, shown above). Excavations at these two sites have revealed some of the earliest architecture, features, and material culture found to date within the Maya Lowlands. Both Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy exhibit a similar architectural sequence with an initial Early Preclassic occupation located directly on bedrock overlain by low plaster and masonry platforms of increasing size (Awe 1992; Brown 2003; Garber et. al 2004).

The early ceramic assemblages from both sites are similar and are technologically advanced indicating a superior knowledge of ceramic technology. The Cunil complex at Cahal Pech (dated radiometrically to around 1000-850 BC [Awe 1992]) and Kanocha complex from Blackman Eddy (dated radiometrically to around 1100-850 BC) consist of both utilitarian wares and a special ritual sub-assemblage of ash tempered, slipped serving vessels, often incised with ideologically related motifs (Brown 2007). As Jaime J. Awe (1992, 1994), David Cheetham (1998, 2005) and others (Brown and Awe 2007) have discussed, the motifs present within the assemblage include, the kan cross, the cleft, lightning, and a motif that has been interpreted as a stylized avian-serpent motif. These motifs indicate that the early Maya shared in a pan-Mesoamerican symbol system.

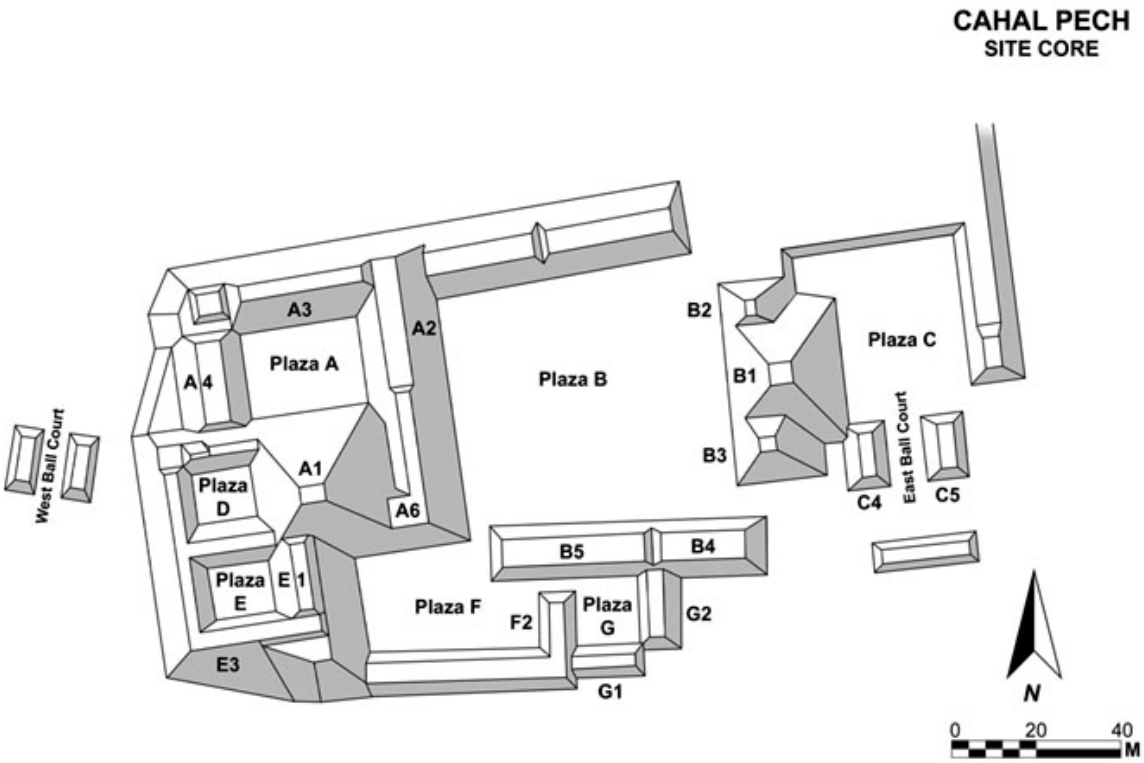

Figure 2. Map of the Cahal Pech Site Core (Courtesy of Jaime J. Awe).

The site of Cahal Pech is a medium-sized ceremonial center located on a hill overlooking the modern town of San Ignacio (Figure 2, shown above). Investigations in the 1980s and 1990s directed by Jaime J. Awe and Paul Healy focused on locating and excavating Preclassic remains for the site (Awe 1992; Healy *et al.* 2004). They recovered stratified deposits dating to the terminal Early Preclassic, which was designated the Cunil complex and described by Jaime J. Awe in his dissertation (Awe 1992). More recent excavations by both James F. Garber and Jaime J. Awe have added to this impressive dataset (Garber *et al.* 2005).

The first sample of Cunil material was recovered in summit test pit excavations into Structure B-4 at Cahal Pech. Cunil ceramics were found in association with a sequence of capping floors that appeared to be the remains of superimposed platform structures (Awe 1992; Cheetham 2005; Healy *et al.* 2004; Powis and Cheetham 2007). Three more test pits have been excavated since the original excavations, significantly increasing the size of the Cunil assemblage. The stratified nature of the excavations and the volume of early ceramics which was retrieved from these investigations make this the foremost dataset dating to this early time period (Brown and Awe 2007).

The ceramic sample examined in this study was from a test pit excavated in 2002 by the Tourism Development Project. This test pit, designated Unit 7, was

placed on the summit of Structure B-4 and excavated to bedrock. Fourteen stratigraphic levels were uncovered spanning from the terminal Early Preclassic to the Terminal Classic. The five lowermost levels will be discussed in this report, as these date to the terminal Early Preclassic Cunil phase (Levels 11-14) and the transition to the early Middle Preclassic Kanluk phase (Level 10). These levels were separated by tamped marl floor surfaces that presumably represent the remains of superimposed surfaces related to early structures. The ceramic material was found in the construction fill beneath these surfaces, which consisted of a grayish/brown clay matrix that may have been wet-laid.

The ceramic material from the earliest levels contained ceramic types previously defined by Awe (1992) and Cheetham (2007) based on materials recovered in the earlier Structure B-4 excavations as well as several plaza test pits. Refinement of the Cunil ceramic complex has been recently conducted by this author, Lauren Sullivan and Jaime J. Awe using the materials from the more recent test pits in Structure B-4 and complementary excavations in other parts of Cahal Pech which have more than doubled the previously existing sample of Cunil sherds. This collaborative effort has produced detailed descriptions of these early ceramics and will be presented in a forthcoming publication. The much larger sample size now available has allowed for a fuller appreciation of the variability of form, paste, and surface decoration of several Cunil types, which resulted in the reorganization and refinement of the ceramic type designations.

It is interesting to note that the analysis of the larger Cunil assemblage through this collaborative effort has resulted in fewer types and forms than has been recently proposed by Cheetham (2007) and in fact reflects more of the original ceramic assessment presented by Awe (1992) in his dissertation. As is often the case, a larger sample size shows variability within ceramic types and allows for a better understanding of vessels forms. Another reason that fewer forms are present in the revised Cunil complex may be the result of the sample previously used to define the complex. Earlier analyses included ceramics recovered from the lowest levels of several test pits in Plaza B, which were inferred to be from pure Cunil levels. However, more extensive trenching excavations in Plaza B by James F. Garber and Jaime J. Awe have demonstrated that those were most likely not pure Cunil levels, and thus some of the material used to define Cunil forms and types may be later ceramic material (James F. Garber personal communication 2007). The misidentification of the early ceramics is understandable given the similarities between some Cunil ceramics and later Jenney Creek/Kanluk ceramics. As described in more detail below, these similarities are only now being documented, and they have likely led to the misidentification of Cunil-phase materials at other sites as well.

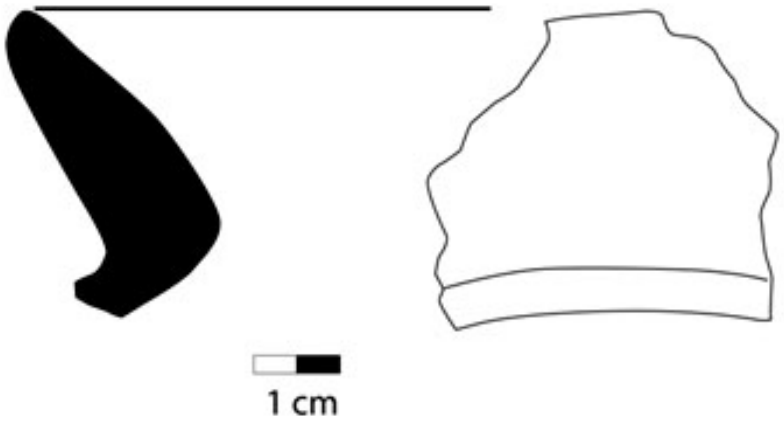

Figure 3. Rim Profile Drawing of Sikiya Group Jar.

The Cunil and Kanocha ceramic assemblages consist of both utilitarian wares and a special ritual sub-assemblage of ash tempered, slipped serving vessels, often incised with ideologically related motifs (Brown 2007). Cheetham (2007) has defined two wares within the Cunil complex, the Belize Valley Coarse Ware and the Belize Valley Dull Ware. Most of the utilitarian wares fall within the Sikiya Group, defined by Awe (1992), in the Belize Valley Coarse Ware. Sikiya Group types are predominately unslipped, some with clear burnishing, but there are several varieties that bear a slip or wash. Vessel forms include restricted necked jars with outflaring rims (Figure 3, shown above), tecomates and incurving bowls. Awe (1992) suggests that the Sikiya Group was the precursor to the Jocote Group that was common in the Kanluk and early facet Jenney Creek phases, an interpretation supported by the analysis of this assemblage. Although the filleting surface decoration that is common on Jocote Orange-Brown is almost absent in the Cunil levels within Unit 7, there is one exception from Level 13. This example exhibited a straight fillet design with a nubbin handle. Another Sikiya sherd from Level 13 has a lozenge-shaped appliqué design, suggesting that potters were experimenting with different decoration techniques.

Especially relevant to this study and the understanding of ritual ceramic use is the relatively high frequency of Cunil serving vessels, some of which were decorated with incised motifs. These can be placed within Cheetham's Belize Valley Dull Ware (2007). Cunil and Kanocha serving vessel forms include incurving bowls, slightly outflaring deep bowls, and shallow dishes/plates with wide everted rims. Slip colors that appear to dominate the early ash tempered ceramics include red, red/orange, cream, tan/olive, and possibly black (although black sherds may be the result of fire clouding or burned red examples).

Post-slip incising can be seen on several types including Uck Red and Chitam Zoned Incised. Post-slip incising is characteristic of Cunil and Kanocha ceramic surface decoration, and both gouge incising and fine line incising are present. It is worthy of note that all Cunil ash tempered slipped vessels were serving

vessels, indicating the importance of decorating vessels used in displaying and serving food items, such as those used in early feasts.

Pre-slip incising appears to be absent within the Cunil and Kanocha ceramics as it is not present in the earliest levels at Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy, appearing for the first time in the Kanluk (Cahal Pech) and early facet Jenney Creek (Blackman Eddy) phases. Within the study assemblage from Unit 7, the first example of pre-slip incising occurs within Level 10, a level that has a ceramic assemblage suggestive of a transition between the Cunil and Kanluk phases. This suggests that there were four superimposed building surfaces dating to the Cunil phase, which is consistent with Awe's (1992:207) initial study.

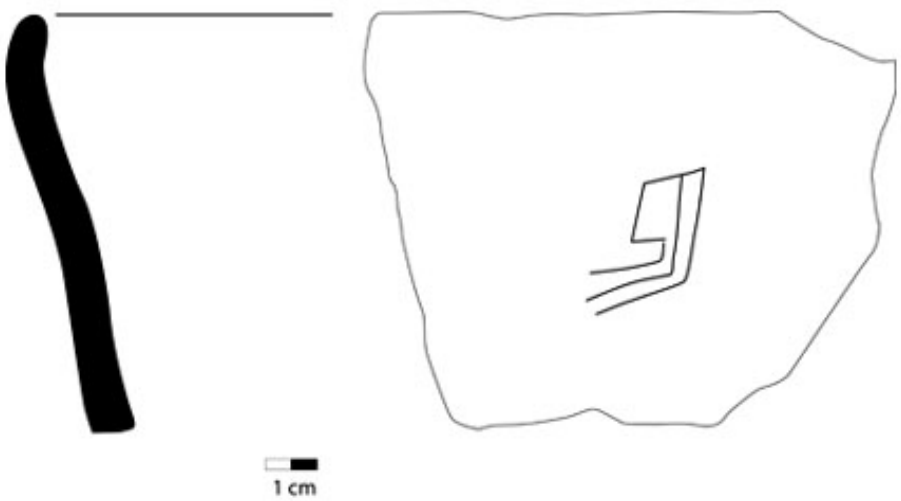

Figure 4. Uck Red: Uck Variety Sherd with Graffiti.

Although the sample was small, twenty-six post-slip incised sherds were recovered from the Cunil levels within Unit 7. Several of these sherds may be from the same vessel. All designs conform to the previously described motifs found within the Cunil complex (Awe 1992, 1994; Brown and Awe 2007; Cheetham 1998, 2005, 2007). One Uck Red: Uck Variety sherd from Level 14 exhibits post-slip graffiti that appears to be a stylized version of the flame brow motif (Figure 4, shown above). Three examples of the stylized avian-serpent motif are seen within the assemblage, although the motifs are incomplete due to the small sherd size (Figure 5 and Figure 6, shown below). One burned example of Chitam Zoned Incised has a lightning motif on the interior surface (Figure 7, shown below). Several sherds from an incomplete Uck Red: Uck Variety incurving bowl exhibit post-slip incising on the interior surface, but unfortunately not enough was present for an understanding of the iconography.

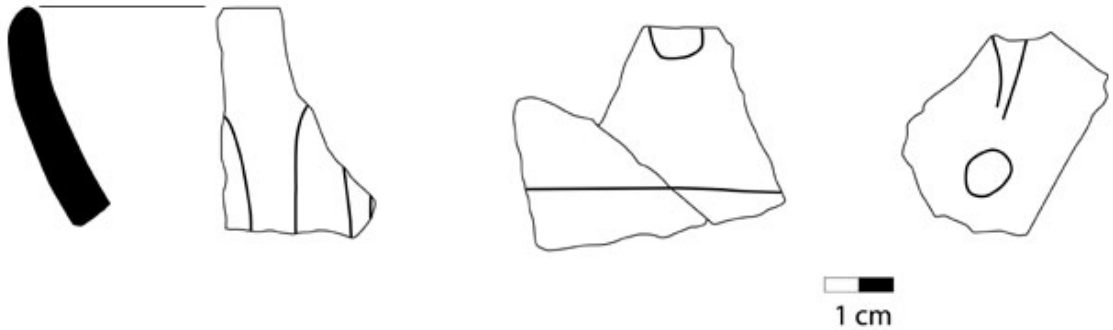

Figure 5. Three Chitam Zoned Incised Sherds exhibiting Stylized Avian Serpent Motif.

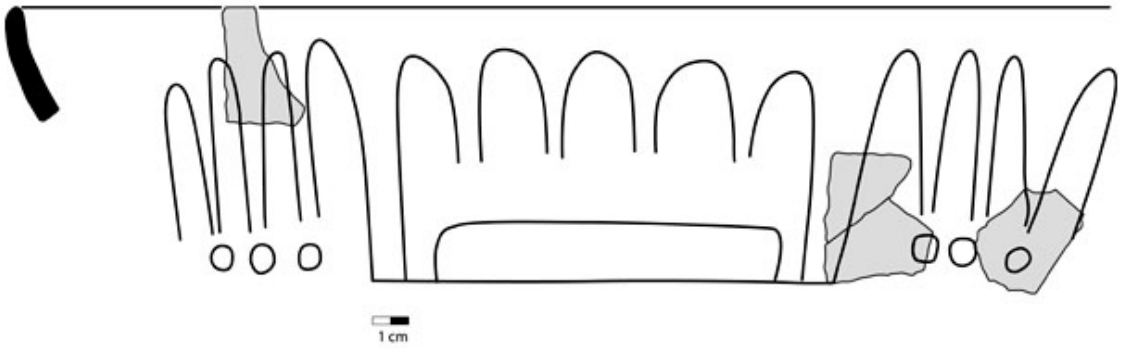

Figure 6. Chitam Zoned Incised Sherds Superimposed on Stylized Avian Serpent Motif (Avian Serpent Motif adapted from Cheetham 2007).

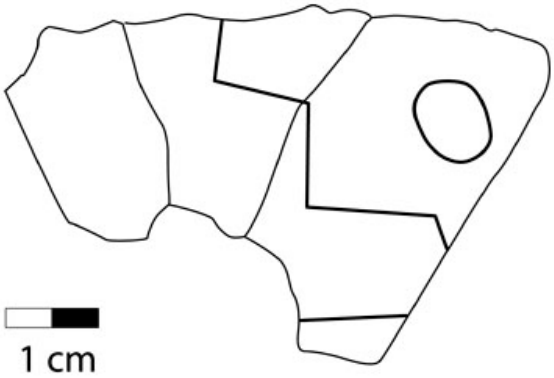

Figure 7. Chitam Zoned Incised Sherd with Lightening Motif.

Despite the fact that the iconography on the ceramic sherds within the Unit 7 assemblage is fragmentary, the presence of this symbolic expression is clearly significant. The display of these ideologically related motifs on serving vessels illustrates the importance of ritual ceramic use within early Maya communities. It

is notable that these symbols were placed on the earliest ceramics known to date within the Maya Lowlands, as it suggests that early rituals conducted by the Maya emphasized ideological concepts found in the pan-Mesoamerican Symbol System. Elsewhere in Mesoamerica, these symbols were used to legitimize hierarchically organized social relationships. In the Belize Valley, these symbols were used within the context of what most would accept is an egalitarian social structure. Furthermore, it is interesting that the display of these motifs tapers off considerably after the Cunil/Kanocha phases, when the first signs of social differences appear in the archaeological record.

Ritual use of special ceramic vessels, however, continues to be seen throughout later time periods. I would argue that the ritual use of ceramic vessels incised with symbolic expressions during Cunil/Kanocha times transformed the vessels themselves into symbols. Vessels become symbolic of portals transporting objects, special foods, fluids, and ancestors to the other world. The iconographic program of an Early Classic monumental mask on Blackman Eddy Structure B1-2nd illustrates this theme nicely. The stucco façade displays a head, presumably of the maize god, emerging from a ceramic bowl as he is resurrected from the underworld (Brown and Garber 2005b; Garber *et al.* 2004b). Similar iconographic themes are seen elsewhere in the Maya lowlands, most notably on Pakal's sarcophagus lid from the site of Palenque.

Recent investigations at Cahal Pech have uncovered two archaeological deposits that reiterate this theme. A Late Preclassic cache found in Structure B-4 by the Belize Valley Reconnaissance Project in 2006 represents a layered cosmogram, with the central component being a human head placed in a large ceramic bowl (Brown and Awe 2007). This head is likely that of an important ancestor, while at the same time represents the severed head of the maize god. Excavations in Plaza B by the Belize Valley Archaeology Project encountered a Middle Preclassic burial in which the individual's head was placed inside a ceramic bowl (Garber *et al.* 2007). The symbolism related to death and rebirth is evident within both this cache and burial, and the ceramic vessels functioned as the portal from which the ancestor emerged and was resurrected.

As discussed above, excavations at Blackman Eddy directed by James F. Garber, encountered terminal Early Preclassic ceramic material as well, which was designated the Kanocha phase. Although the Kanocha ceramic assemblage is considerably smaller than the Cunil assemblage, it shares many of the formal attributes and types. The Blackman Eddy data set is important because of the nature of the excavations conducted at the site (Figure 8, shown below). Due to unfortunate bulldozing, Structure B1 was partially destroyed (Garber *et al.* 2004a). The Belize Valley Archaeology Project excavated the remainder of the structure almost completely, revealing thirteen superimposed construction phases with numerous subphases (Brown 2003; Garber *et al.* 2004a) (Figure 9, shown below). This unique situation allowed the nearly full exposure of these phases, thus permitting a detailed examination of changes in architecture through time, spanning from approximately 1100 BC to AD 800. Bedrock

features were found beneath the buildings, including a collapsed double-chamber chultun and a number of postholes which date to the Kanocha phase and some that date to the early facet Jenney Creek phase (Brown 2003; Brown and Garber 2005a; Garber *et al.* 2004a). The Kanocha ceramics from Blackman Eddy have been briefly discussed elsewhere (Brown 2003; Brown and Garber 2005a, 2005b; Garber *et al.* 2004a) and will not be addressed in detail within this report.

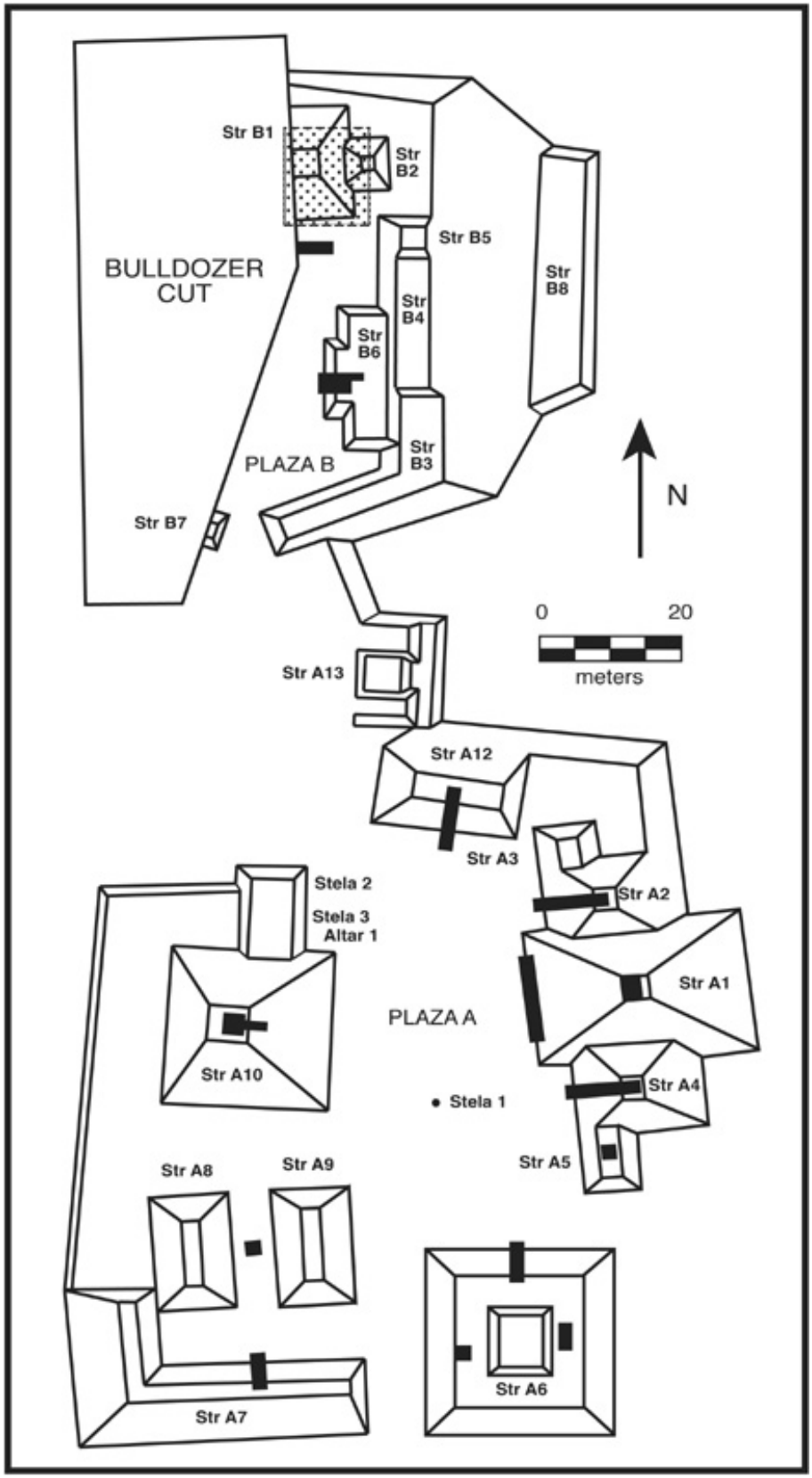

Figure 8. Map of the Blackman Eddy Site Core.

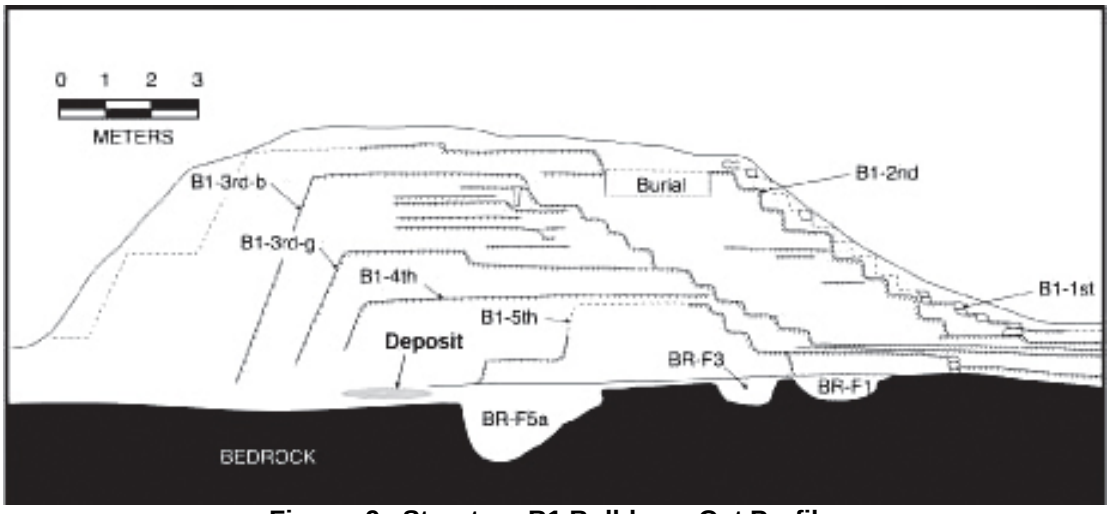

Figure 9. Structure B1 Bulldozer Cut Profile.

The ceramic assemblage examined in this study comes from a single problematic deposit excavated in 2002 and 2003 that was originally thought to date to the terminal Early Preclassic. This interpretation was based on the location of the deposit within the excavation sequence, lying directly above a floor surface (Structure B1-13th) that lies just above bedrock and the high frequency of ash tempered sherds in the deposit. A more detailed analysis of the ceramic material, however, found that it included sherds from the Jocote and Savana Groups and forms that suggested that the deposit was actually later in date (transition between early and late facet Jenney Creek). Radiometric dates confirmed this interpretation. Two AMS dates were run using FAMSI Funding, returning dates of 2400+/-40 BP and 2380+/- 40 BP (Table 1).

Table 1. Radiocarbon Dates from Problematic Deposit (possible feasting deposit).

Provenience	**Phase**	**Beta #**	**Conventional Radiocarbon age**	**Calibrated 1 sigma BC**	**Calibrated 2 sigma BC**
Blackman Eddy, Structure B1 Op. 20i-9	Early Facet Jenney Creek/ Late Facet Jenney Creek	229800	2400 +/- 40 BP	520-400	740-690 and 660-640 and 550-390
Blackman Eddy, Structure B1 Op. 20i-8	Early Facet Jenney Creek/ Late Facet Jenney Creek	229801	2380 +/- 40 BP	490-460 and 420-400	720-700 and 540-390

The later date for this deposit is not inconsistent with Structure B1's stratigraphic sequence. As mentioned, it overlaid a hard plaster floor surface, designated Structure B1-13th, that was approximately 3 meters in diameter and appears to be the remains of a special function building dating to the early Middle Preclassic (Brown 2007). Structure B1-13th was no longer in use at the time of the placement of this deposit, as the ceramic material overlaid both the floor and associated postholes of the building. This deposit was capped by fill associated with the construction of Structure B1-5th. Structure B1-5th was an in-line triadic platform consisting of an elevated central platform flanked to the east and west by two-tiered platforms (Figure 10, shown below). Unfortunately the bulldozer destroyed most of the central and western platforms. The deposit was spread over several square meters beginning under the north side of Structure B1-5th, extending to the north. A section of the deposit remains unexcavated and will hopefully be investigated in the future.

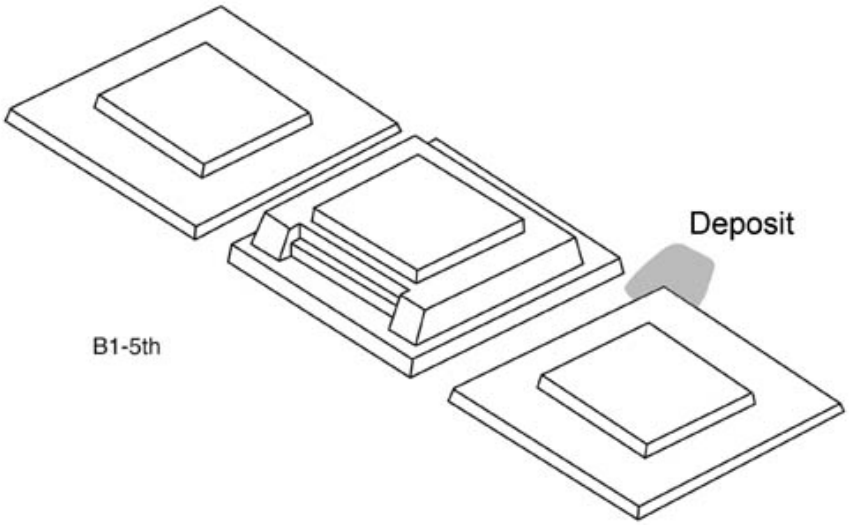

Figure 10. Isometric Drawing of Structure B1-5th Showing Placement of Problematic Deposit.

I have interpreted the problematic deposit as feasting debris (Brown 2003), based upon a detailed contextual analysis. This deposit consisted of a dense concentration of broken ceramic material associated with faunal remains, carbon, and exotics such as marine shell and obsidian. Ten partial vessels were recovered, all of which were serving vessels. As mentioned previously, one of the vessels, a Savana Orange: Rejolla Variety bowl (Figure 11, shown below), was placed above 9 chert flakes, a number that seems unlikely to be coincidence and most likely represents the nine layers of the underworld. This simple cosmological offering reinforces the ritual nature of this deposit. The partial vessels included a chocolate pot (Reforma Incised: Mucnal Variety) (Figure 12,

shown below), three Savana Orange bowls, a Savana Orange stirrup spout (Figure 13, shown below), an ash tempered Joventud Red bowl, a Jocote Orange-Brown jar, and two unusual red slipped ash tempered bowls (Figure 14 and Figure 15, shown below). Both of the red slipped ash tempered bowls are slipped part way down the exterior to right above a horizontal finger punctuate surface design. One of the vessels appears to be a new type within the Savana Group (Figure 14, below), while the other has more affinities to the Joventud Group (Figure 16, shown below) and most likely represents a new type as well. Numerous other sherd refits were discovered within the assemblage and several other whole or partial vessels are expected to be within the unexcavated portion of this deposit.

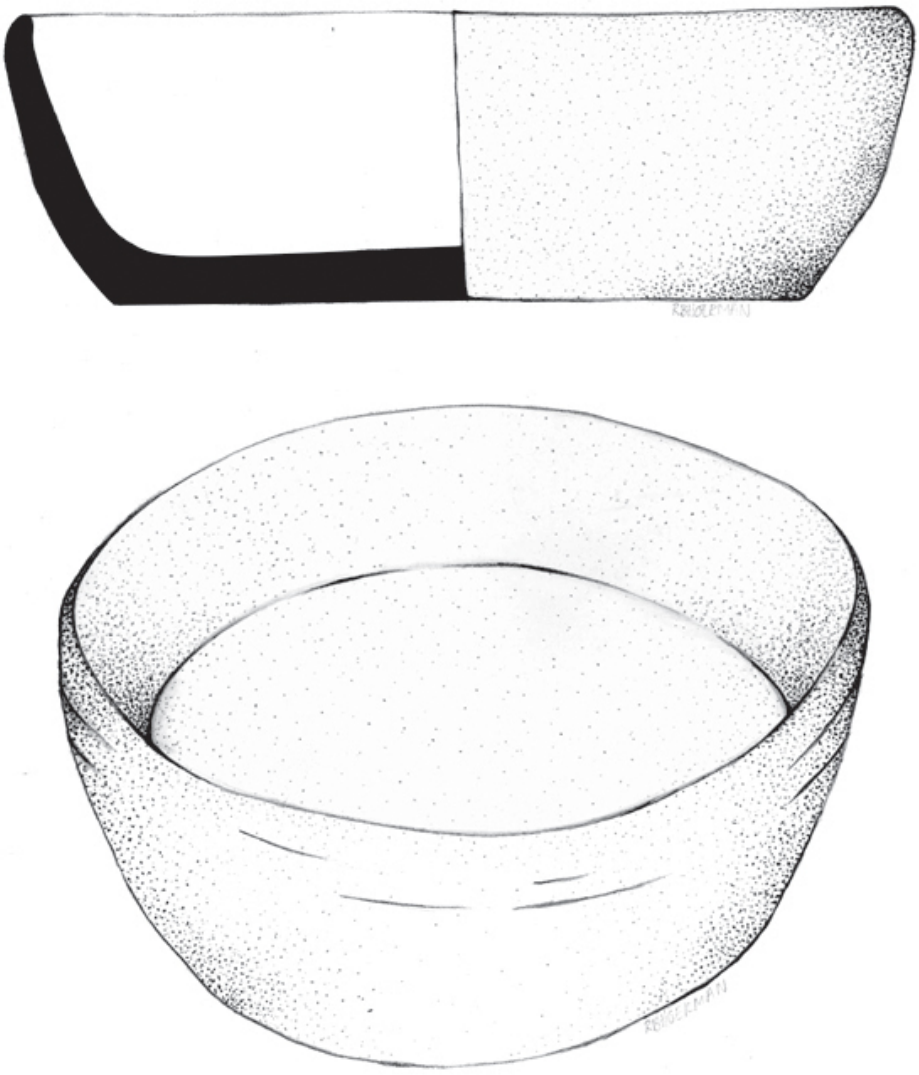

Figure 11. Reconstruction Drawing of Savana Orange Bowl (Illustrated by Rachel Hoerman).

Figure 12. Photograph of Partial Reforma Incised: Mucnal Variety Chocolate Pot.

Figure 13. Photograph of Partial Savana Orange Stirrup Spout.

Figure 14. Photograph of Ash Tempered Bowl (Savana Group).

Figure 15. Photograph of Ash Tempered Bowl (Joventud Group).

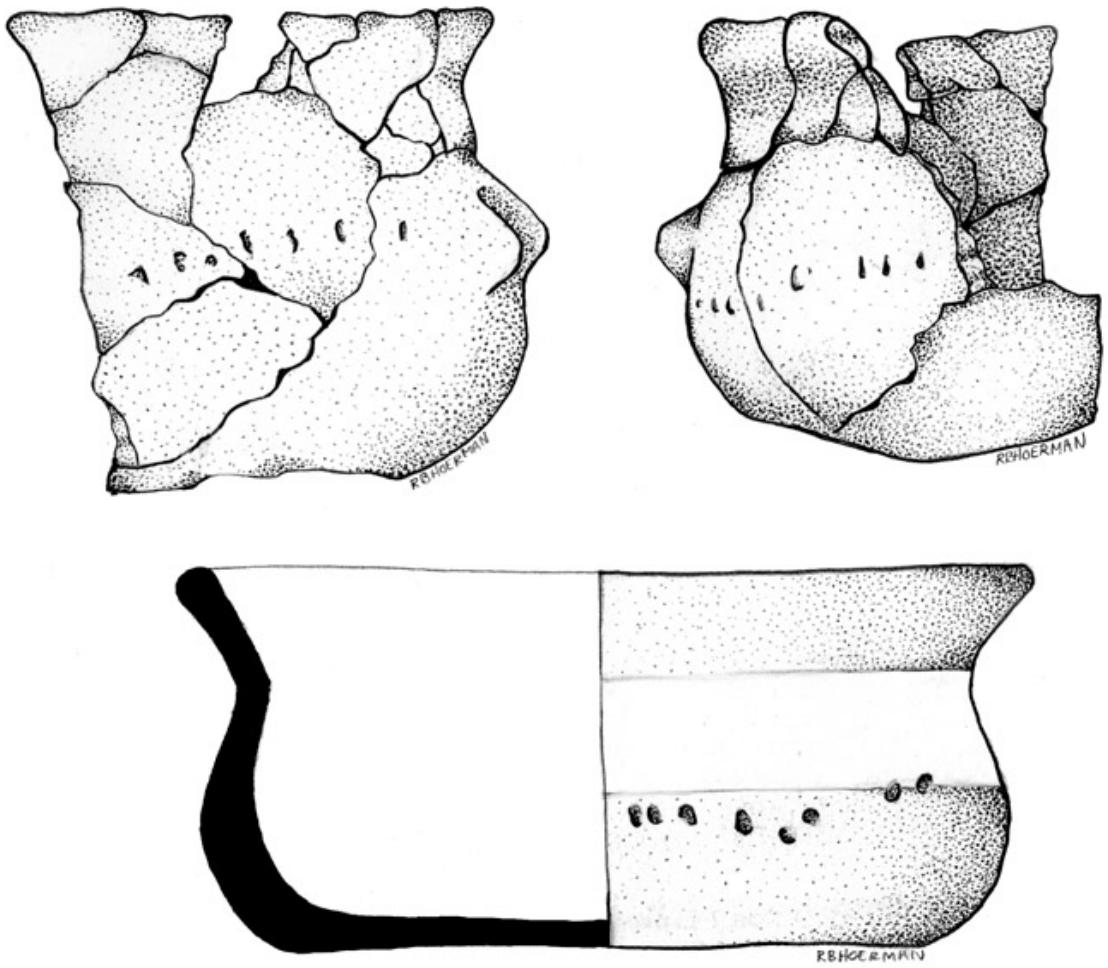

Figure 16. Drawing Showing Side-View and Profile of Ash Tempered Bowl (Joventud Group) (Illustrated by Rachel Hoerman).

The prevalence of serving vessels suggests that this deposit is the product of a feasting event, but one cannot conclusively document feasting using ceramics alone. In this case, the interpretation is also supported by the remains of the foods that were consumed. One of the vessels contained charred material on the interior that is being analyzed for phytoliths, and phytolith samples were also taken from the stirrup spout in order to determine what type of beverage was served in this unusual vessel form. These results will be forthcoming. Analysis of the faunal material by Carolyn Freiwald demonstrated a surprising diversity of animal species. The faunal analysis examined over 200 bone fragments from a wide variety of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish (Freiwald 2007). The assemblage contained at least 17 individual animals, including one white tail deer and one brocket deer, one rabbit, one agouti, one opossum, three birds, one amphibian, one turtle, one reptile, one crab, and three types of fish. Numerous *jute* and freshwater muscle specimens were also found scattered throughout the deposit. Many of these species were desired food animals by the ancient Maya,

and the surprising diversity might be the result of a communal gathering in which participants were obligated to contribute something to the feast itself, in essence a “pot luck” style gathering. One large mammal bone fragment appears to have been burned, and cut marks on three large mammal bones further suggest food preparation.

One interesting pattern is the presence of immature animals. The white tail and brocket deer were yearlings or younger, as demonstrated by the immature teeth and unfused long bones, and many of the medium-sized mammal bones had unfused epiphyses (Freiwald 2007). This may indicate a preference for younger animals for feasting, although this possibility needs to be examined by more systematic comparison of faunal assemblages from typical middens with those from feasting deposits.

As mentioned above, the Cunil/Kanocha symbolic expression seen on earlier serving vessels diminishes within the Jenney Creek ceramic complex, but it is clear that vessels were still symbolically charged objects. Several of the vessels encountered within the deposit were halves or quarters. The cut line on several of the vessels is so regular that it suggests they were intentionally halved by a string saw (Figure 17, shown below). The intentional splitting of ceramic vessels into halves or quarters may be related to the notion of partitioning the universe, an event that was recreated or reenacted every time the four corner posts were set for a new building, whether a simple house or a community temple. This deposit is covered by the fill of Structure B1-5th, and it is quite likely that it represents the remains of a feast that was meant to celebrate the initiation of the construction of that platform. It is plausible that the vessels were ritually broken as part of this event in order to evoke the partitioning of the universe. The remains were then left in place as an offering to the gods, essentially consecrating the building.

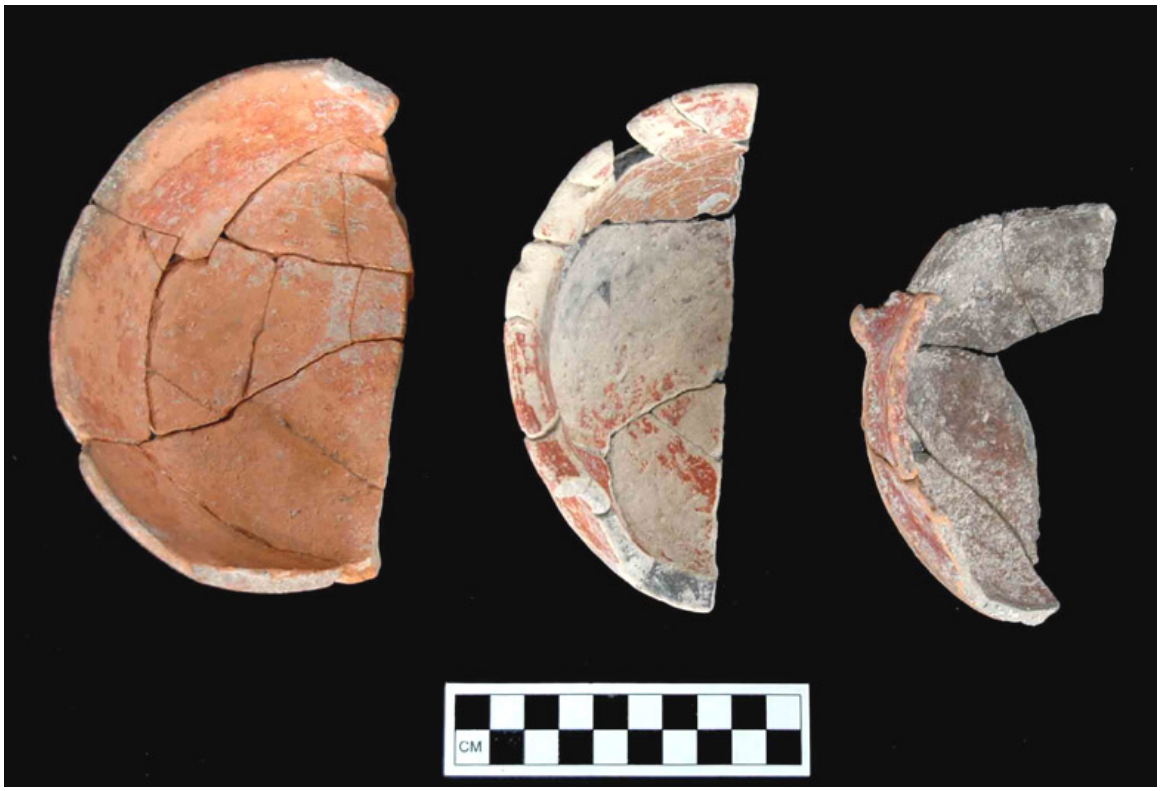

Figure 17. Overview Photograph of Three Halved Bowls from Problematic Deposit.

Formal caches of whole vessels and objects deposited in the fill of public structures were conspicuously absent at Blackman Eddy during the Middle Preclassic (Brown 2003), but there are several deposits like this one that consist of large numbers of broken vessels and exotic artifacts. I have argued elsewhere that feasting followed by then ritual breakage of vessels used in those feasts served as a communal dedication, and that it was a precursor to more formal restrictive caching (Brown 2007).

One of these other deposits also contained several halved and quartered vessels. This deposit was also associated with Structure B1-5th, but it was placed directly on the platform itself. It most likely relates to the construction of the subsequent platform, Structure B1-4th (Figure 9, shown above). This deposit also covered several square meters and consisted of faunal material, whole and partial serving vessels, including a stirrup spouted bowl, a Jocote Orange-Brown jar, and a Joventud Red plate.

The analyses of the ceramic assemblages from Cahal Pech and Blackman Eddy lead to two important conclusions. The first conclusion is one that should lead us to be cautious in our identification of Cunil and Kanocha phase ceramics in the Belize Valley and adjacent regions. Ash tempered redwares have been widely regarded as the hallmark of the Cunil phase. But as has been discussed above, there is a late Middle Preclassic ceramic variety that has strong similarities in

paste and slip to the diagnostic Cunil/Kanocha type, Uck Red. This is an ash tempered, red slipped variety in the Joventud Group that has not been previously documented and is as yet unnamed. A second possible Joventud type with ash temper (Figure 18, shown below) has also been recognized as well. The detailed analysis conducted with FAMSI support allowed for the identification of this variety and possible new type in primary late Middle Preclassic deposits and the documentation of differences in vessel forms between these and Uck Red. It is important to point out that body sherds from the ash tempered Joventud and Uck Red types are easily misidentified, and thus identification of terminal Early Preclassic or Cunil occupations based largely on the identification of early red-slipped ashwares are not reliable. To complicate matters further, ceramics within the Sikiya Group are also very similar to the later Jocote Group in paste and surface treatment, and can as well be mistaken for the wrong type. Chronological assessments should be based on a thorough analysis of the entire assemblage with special attention to formal modes and when possible coupled with radiometric dating.

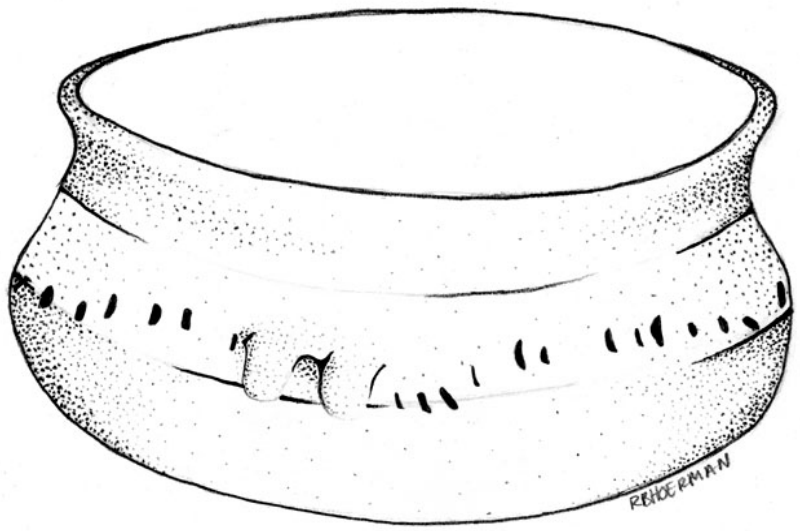

Figure 18. Reconstruction Drawing of Ash Tempered Bowl (Joventud Group) (Illustrated by Rachel Hoerman).

The second conclusion involves the ritual use of ceramic by the Preclassic Maya, which in turn has implications for the rise of complexity. This study led to several important observations related to this topic. First, a subset of the earliest ceramics found in the Maya Lowlands (Cunil and Kanocha complexes) were incised with ideologically related symbols that were part of the greater pan-Mesoamerican Symbol System, indicating that the early Maya were interacting with their hierarchically organized neighbors. It is significant that these incised motifs were found on serving vessels, as it suggests that these symbols were

meant to be seen by participants in meals such as feasts. This, in turn, sanctified the communal ritual and produced a link between the special vessels, the supernatural, and by extension the host of the feasts.

It is a noteworthy fact that the display of these early symbolic motifs diminishes significantly after the Cunil/Kanocha phases, while at the same time we begin to see signs of social differentiation in the archaeological record indicative of hierarchical social relations. The coincidence of these two trends suggests that hierarchies were becoming naturalized within these Preclassic Maya communities, and that the link between the supernatural and elites and aspiring elites no longer needed to be emphasized through motifs carved on ritual ceramic vessels. Instead, through their repeated use in feasts and other rituals, the vessels themselves had come to take on symbolic meanings and thus had become symbols of portals to the otherworld and, indeed, actual portals to the otherworld. By the Middle Preclassic, ritual ceramic vessels were vehicles for sacred objects including exotic items such as jade, marine shell, special foods, sacred fluids such as blood, water, and chocolate, as well as ancestors, just to name a few.

Three other important trends parallel these. First, we see the development of taller, more restricted pyramidal structures at the end of the late Middle Preclassic that replace earlier community platforms, and in the case of Blackman Eddy Structure B1 are placed directly atop them, suggesting continuity in the importance of sacred space. Second, the practice of dedicatory caching within public architecture develops, such that by the end of the late Middle Preclassic period, these more restricted-access pyramidal structures were being dedicated through offerings of valuable and sacred substances that were placed in ceramic vessels buried in them. The deposition of these caches was necessarily open to fewer participants than was ritual feasting, reflecting the growing social differentiation seen in other aspects of the archaeological record.

Finally, by this same time period, ceramic vessels had become the central component in most ritual offerings within the Maya Lowlands. The use of ceramics in this way is clearly documented in the archaeological record through dedicatory caches, burials, and is seen in iconography on Classic period polychrome vessels and carved monuments, as well as the above described iconography from Blackman Eddy and Palenque. The examination of the ritual use of ceramic vessels within this study traces the simple use of serving vessels as both containers and displays of symbolic expression during the Cunil/Kanocha phase when Maya society was egalitarian. Through time and repeated use within special ceremonies, the function of the ritual vessel itself changes from container/medium of display to vehicle/implement of power. These instruments of power were integral in rituals used by elites during the Middle Preclassic and later to reinforce and legitimize uneven social relationships.

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