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Politics with Style: Identity Formation in Prehispanic Southeastern Mesoamerica

Those seeking to ensconce themselves at the pinnacles of emerging sociopolitical hierarchies must forge alliances with both their immediate subordinates and distant peers. In the first case, allegiance to a polity that transcends extant and emerging sectarian affiliations must be achieved if the realm is to survive the passing of individual charismatic rulers. Cooperation with foreign leaders, in turn, guarantees a steady supply of political valuables useful in ensnaring clients within dependency relations that undergird sociopolitical hierarchy. Achievement of these objectives requires creation and propagation of at least two distinct social identities, one linking rulers and ruled within a polity and the other uniting paramounts in a network covering vast territorial expanses. In this article, we examine Late Classic (A.D. 600–950) material patterns from the Naco valley, northwestern Honduras, for the light they shed on the proposed integration of political and cultural processes within developing complex polities. The strategic manipulation of material symbols to fashion new affiliations and the implications of these identities for social change are also considered. [social identity, Mesoamerican archaeology, ideology, political contests, symbols]

Politics of Identity

Successful acquisition of power, the ability to direct the actions of others, depends on evoking cooperation among peers and acquiescence from subordinates. In this essay we examine how social identities, those cultural categories into which we group ourselves and others and onto which we project behavioral expectations, figure in such processes. Special attention is devoted to considering ways in which social affiliations are used in political strategies operating on local and macroregional scales. Even a casual scanning of the daily newspaper reveals countless, often tragic, uses of social identities in power struggles. This linkage, we argue, has its roots in factional contests that were as much a feature of prehistoric political units as they are of their modern analogues (papers in Brumfiel and Fox 1994). In order to make this point, we draw on material patterns identified during archaeological investigations in the Naco valley, northwestern Honduras. Studying social affiliations

in prehistoric contexts is fraught with difficulties, however, making what follows very much a work in progress.

All societies are composed of identities that are variably enduring, inclusive, and prominent. Each affiliation encompasses individuals who share a sense of solidarity, are organized to accomplish specific objectives, and express membership through display of symbols unique to their association (Barth 1969; Cohen 1978; Ferguson and Mansbach 1996; Jones 1997; Rapoport 1982; Schortman 1989; Vincent 1974, 1978; Wobst 1977). Any person claims multiple identities, the conflicting demands of each lessened by their operation at different levels of generalization, within distinct social contexts, and directed toward achieving complementary goals (Barth 1969:10; Cohen 1978:387; Jones 1997; Royce 1982; Vincent 1974:376). Among this welter of affiliations, a few salient social identities stand out because of their importance in repetitive interactions centered around the acquisition of resources important to physical survival and social reproduction (Schortman 1989).

Salient affiliations are one of the primary means by which leaders organize themselves and followers for political action. Acquiring and defending power depends, in part, on defining an elite identity. Assuming that parochial assets basic to hierarchy building, such as land and labor, are the "property" of distinct social groups within a polity, those seeking overarching power must find novel ways to consolidate these resources and turn them to their own benefit (Charlton and Nichols 1997:12–13; Yoffee 1997: 262). One means to this end is creation of an identity that unites local social leaders in pursuit of goals that benefit their "class" at the expense of the entities they direct. At one extreme, class consciousness completely submerges preexisting loyalties resulting in a socioeconomic chasm separating rulers and ruled. Even if the process does not go this far, creation of an elite identity can still be an effective means for encouraging cooperation in the capture and pooling of essential resources (Cohen 1981:2–4; Parsons [1951]1964:132, 228–229).

Aspiring elites also frequently draw on exotic assets in their rise to power. Contact with remote peoples can imbue local paramounts with whatever charisma attaches to distant realms (Helms 1979, 1993; Wheatley 1975:239). To the extent that physical distance is equated with supernatural potency, magnates who obtain goods and ideas from afar are charged with a sacredness that underwrites their local political machinations (Helms 1993; Wheatley 1975: 239). In addition, foreign transactions can be means of securing objects and ideas used to distinguish paramounts from the rest of the population. Such contacts are also sources of gifts deployed in attracting and holding followers, eventually converting equals into clients indebted to elite patrons (Arnold 1995; Ekholm 1972; Hayden 1995; Paynter 1989:370, 381; Peregrine 1991; Wells 1984).

But how are these intersocietal linkages established and preserved? Extrasocietal transactions occur among strangers, i.e., people who do not acknowledge a common set of values that serve as a framework for generating understandable and predictable behaviors. Such shared precepts create the trust that underlies persistent interactions. Travelers have to rely on the good will of hosts who, themselves, will be visitors one day. Without monetary instruments and credit institutions, regular and repeatable transfers of items across political frontiers are frustrated by interpersonal tensions (Curtin 1984; Kipp and Schortman 1989). Lacking trust, intersocietal links are brittle, not the sort of relationships elites can rely on for valuable resources (Curtin 1984).

One solution is promulgation of a social identity transcending polity boundaries, linking interactors through commitment to a common value system expressed and created through manipulation of distinctive material symbols (Abu-Lughod 1989:16–17; Austen 1978:7; Blanton et al. 1996:5; Cohen 1969; Curtin 1984; Donley 1982; Schortman 1989; Schortman and Urban 1987). Allying these

symbols with the sacred further strengthens international affiliations by elevating their precepts to a plane where they appear immutable and beyond question (Bloch 1977; Geertz 1973). Use of Islam and Mayahana Buddhism to unite and distinguish long-distance traders in precolonial western sub-Saharan Africa and sixth-century A.D. southeast Asia, respectively, exemplifies this tendency (Curtin 1975; Hall 1985:36–38).

A shared elite identity, therefore, facilitates cooperation among distant magnates engaged in the common enterprise of political domination. Such an affiliation also restricts participation in cross-border contacts to those who express membership through appropriate use of relevant symbols (Curtin 1984; Donley 1982; Schortman 1989; Wells 1984). The latter point is especially important where goods and concepts obtained through intersocietal contacts distinguish rulers and serve as gifts to attract and hold clients. Monopolizing access to exotic assets excludes usurpers from those channels by which foreign valuables, and the power derived from them, are acquired.

There is another side to the issue, however. Developing elites must find ways of creating an enduring polity by transcending preexisting divisions based on differences in wealth, occupation, power, and/or allegiance to extant social-territorial entities (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996:36; Yoffee 1991:287). Processes of competition and specialization integral to the formation of hierarchically organized realms exacerbate these divisions, making unity increasingly hard to achieve (Adams 1992:220–221; Brumfiel 1994; McGuire 1983; Paynter and McGuire 1991:6–7). Instilling a feeling of solidarity that cross-cuts sectarian distinctions, including emergent class divisions, is a challenge that aspiring rulers must confront if they are to institutionalize inequality and inspire loyalty to a novel, large-scale political unit (Cohen 1979; Curet 1996:122–125). Cohesiveness and cooperation on the polity scale can only be achieved through participation of all members in a salient identity (Brumfiel 1996:49–50; Gilman 1991:150–151; Kertzer 1988:68; DeMarrais et al. 1996:22–23; Paynter and McGuire 1991:9). Symbols are again marshaled, this time to fashion and express a value system transcending socioeconomic, not territorial, boundaries. Leaders strive to be perceived by themselves and their subordinates as participants in this new identity while simultaneously legitimizing their exalted status by distancing themselves from most of its members.

Paramounts are engaged in a complex balancing act. In order to command local resources needed to gain preeminence at home, they create an elite identity that encourages social leaders to pool their assets in the collective enterprise of domination (Smith 1986). Carried far enough, this incipient distinction between rulers and ruled can blossom into full-fledged class divisions, reinforcing solidarity among increasingly powerful magnates in opposition to their subordinates. But this elite affiliation is not a purely

local affair. Seeking regular, predictable, and locally exclusive access to politically valuable exotics, rulers and their aristocratic entourages enlist in affiliations that are shared with their structural analogues in other societies. Such ties facilitate centralized control over foreign ideas and goods that figure in parochial domination strategies. At the same time, magnates must reach across the divisions they create, inspiring commitment to a stratified sociopolitical entity whose members are separated by enduring distinctions of wealth, power, occupation, and place. Elites, therefore, divide their loyalties between at least two affiliations defined by potentially contradictory goals and values (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996:26). As long as these identities are actualized in complementary social contexts, and meeting the objectives of one does not require sacrificing the assets of the other, "identity crises" are minimized. When these conditions are not realized, however, elites find themselves in the untenable position of having to reconcile incompatible precepts and demands, assured that any action they take will weaken their position within one of their reference groups. Insofar as political preeminence depends on maintaining good relations with holders of all relevant identities, these contradictions will seriously undermine extant political structures (Bauden 1995).

Crucial to formulating and maintaining social identities is strategic manipulation of artifact styles, those attributes whose forms and combinations are determined more by choice than functional or technological necessity (Carr 1995; Hegmon 1992; Sackett 1982; Vincent 1978; Wiessner 1983). Charged with meaning by those who make and use them, styles, like all symbols, cue behavior (Beaudry et al. 1991:153; Carr 1995; Cohen 1979:99; Hegmon 1992; Keightley 1987; Larick 1991; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Wobst 1977). As such, style is one means for mobilizing the emotions and actions needed to create social affiliations. Prominently displayed items bearing motifs distinctive of an identity can evoke feelings of commonality, cohesion, and cooperation among participants while simultaneously distinguishing them from adherents of other affiliations (Beaudry et al. 1991:155; Bourdieu 1977:169, 1989:23; Braun 1991:387; Carr 1995; Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 67–68; McGuire 1983:117; Wiessner 1983; Wobst 1977). Such divisions and linkages are most effectively stimulated when identity holders encounter relevant membership symbols in a number of different social contexts (David et al. 1988). Portable items easily acquired by all polity members are especially suitable for creating affiliations uniting heterogenous populations as general ownership of symbols encourages shared feelings of belonging to the entity represented.

Conveying aloofness is better accomplished by displaying objects that are easily seen, but can only be "owned," by a small population segment (Earle 1997; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Moore 1996). Large, immovable items most effectively transmit this message where high labor costs

and/or esoteric knowledge difficult for most to learn are crucial to creating and using the symbols. The last two features frustrate emulation of elite identity markers (Earle 1997). If, as argued above, symbols of high status define affiliations linking rulers in several polities, then restricted distribution of these markers in any one territorial unit will be balanced by their replication in elite contexts across several realms. The foregoing is an example of symbolic entrainment, the widespread sharing of material styles across a network of interacting polities, that figures so prominently in peer polity theory (Price 1977; Renfrew 1986:8).

This model simplifies a complex reality. People redefine symbols in ways other than those intended by their promoters (Bourdieu 1979; Gailey 1987; Moore 1996:171; Scott 1985). Repetition of a symbol within a polity does not guarantee uniform interpretation of its meaning just as its exclusive ownership does not invariably lead to acquiescence in the legitimacy of the distinctions expressed (Earle 1997:10; Thomas 1992). A symbol's material prominence, therefore, cannot be equated with its political efficacy (Abercrombie et al. 1980; Adams 1992:217–220; Cowgill 1993:560–561; Gailey 1987). Nevertheless, those who would rule must try to legitimize, in the eyes of their subordinates, the polity they seek to lead and their preeminence and distinctiveness within that unit, all while gaining acceptance by other paramounts with whom they wish to establish politically lucrative relationships. Accomplishment of these objectives requires manifesting the abstract in the material. It is only by expressing such abstruse concepts as "identity" in concrete terms that they can become part of the shared experience of a population and so influence behavior (Earle 1997:10, 147–148). Material styles and their spatial distributions, therefore, are the surviving physical clues whose study contributes to understanding the use of social affiliations in ancient political strategies. Specifying how successful those machinations were is a far more difficult task.

The Naco Valley

The Naco valley covers ca. 96 km^2 of flat to gently rolling terrain at 100–200m asl. The Sierra de Omoa's steep escarpments ring the valley, while the Rio Chamelecon courses southwest-to-northeast across the basin's eastern margin. Research conducted over ten seasons between 1975 and 1996 has reconstructed an occupation sequence extending from the Middle Preclassic (1000–400 B.C.) through to the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century (Henderson et al. 1979; Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman and Urban, eds. 1994; Wonderley 1981). Three intervals of political centralization, when power within the valley was concentrated in the hands of paramounts residing at a major center, have been identified. The most pronounced of these episodes occurred during the Late Classic

(A.D. 600–950) when the site of La Sierra served as capital of a polity encompassing Naco and an undetermined distance beyond the valley. La Sierra, with its 468 surface-visible constructions crowded within 0.7 km². is ten times the size of its next largest contemporary. Nearly one-third of all known Late Classic structures are concentrated at the capital and in its near periphery, an area within 1 km of the center (based on a total ground survey during which 463 prehistoric sites were located in the valley and its immediate environs). Such nucleation suggests the actions of a powerful elite capable of influencing their followers' settlement choices. Population aggregation would have greatly facilitated paramount access to the productive efforts of subordinates while denying potential competitors a population base from which to usurp power (de Montmollin 1989; Roscoe 1993). That labor control efforts were at least moderately successful is suggested by the locally unprecedented concentration of 37 monumental platforms (buildings at least 1.5 m high) bounding two adjacent patios in the site core.

The lack of any marked breaks in the material record of the Naco valley from the Late Preclassic (200 B.C.–A.D. 250) through the Late Classic strongly suggests that valley rulers were of local origin. Certainly, architecture and artifacts associated with Naco's Late Classic magnates bear the stamp of foreign influences, especially those emanating from the major lowland Maya center of Copan (see below). Nevertheless, these items were employed within a decidedly parochial behavioral and symbolic system, implying adoption and reinterpretation of exotic ideas much more than the imposition of an established ideology by foreign interlopers. How Naco's Late Classic scions rose to power is a subject worthy of a separate paper. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that this ascent involved the establishment of privileged, though never complete, control over certain production processes and extraregional transactions by an ever more powerful faction residing at La Sierra (see below).

Facilitating the establishment of intersocietal contacts is Naco's physical location. Easily traversed passes link the valley to neighboring areas (Figure 1). The Rio Chamelecon
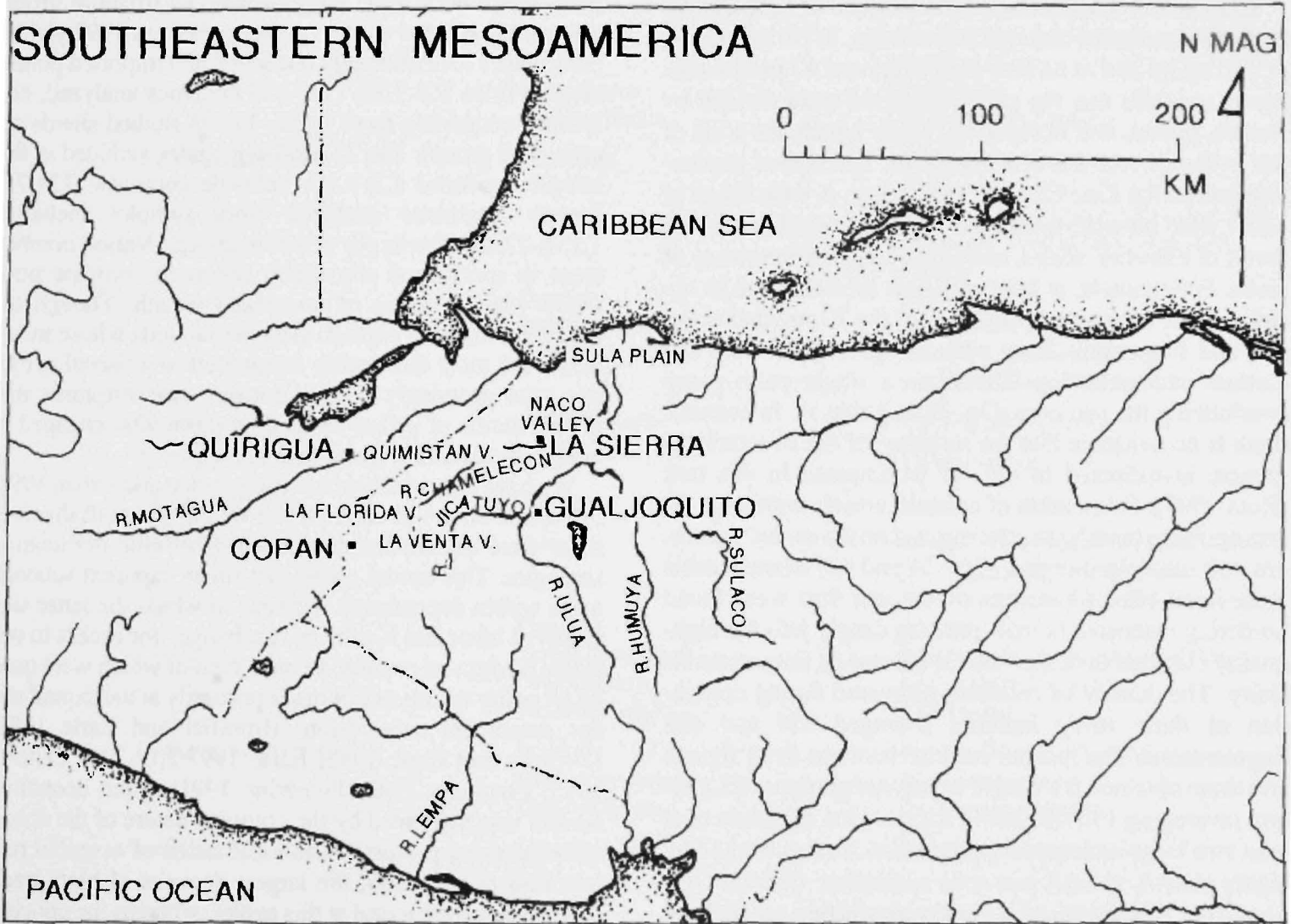

Figure 1. Southeast Mesoamerica showing sites mentioned in the text.

cuts fissures leading to the Sula Plain on the northeast and the Quimistan, La Venta, and La Florida valleys to the southwest. Trails heading out of the Chamelecon drainage provide passage to the Copan and lower Motagua valleys to the west and the Ulua valley on the east. Each of these areas sustained complex sociopolitical formations during the Late Classic (e.g., Ashmore et al. 1987; Baudez 1983; Fash 1991; Henderson 1984; Joyce 1991; Nakamura et al. 1992; Sanders 1986; Schortman 1993; Schortman et al. 1986; Sharer 1990). That contacts with residents of the aforementioned zones were maintained is affirmed by recovery of objects from Naco that were imported, or whose forms and/or decorations were influenced by prototypes derived, from these regions. Items passing through the network include elaborately decorated ceramics, marine shell (worked into artifact blanks at La Sierra), and polyhedral obsidian cores. The first two items figured in social displays, whereas blades knapped from imported nuclei were used in a wide range of domestic tasks.

Economic and Political Heterogeneity

Excavation of approximately 13,300 m² of Late Classic deposits distributed among La Sierra (ca. 7,050 m² cleared at the capital and in its near periphery) and 47 rural settlements suggests that the polity's citizens were divided by wealth, power, and occupation. Table 1 includes a list of the evidence for, and distribution of, specialized production within the Late Classic Naco valley. A wide range of crafts were pursued within the regional capital at varying levels of intensity, scales, and employing a diverse array of skills. For example, at least part-time specialization in obsidian blade knapping is indicated by the 70 polyhedral nuclei and fragments, along with 500 pressure blades, unearthed while clearing 200 m² in a single patio group overlooking the site core (Op. 38 in Table 1). In contrast, there is no evidence that the residents of the structure aggregate investigated in Op. 11 participated in this task (Ross 1997). Fabrication of ceramic vessels within La Sierra seems to have been concentrated on the center's northern and southern margins (Ops. 31 and 43) where sizable stone-lined kilns (diameters of 5m and 6m) were found bordering extensive borrow pits dug deeply into the high-quality clay that underlies the capital and its immediate vicinity. The density of ceramics recovered during excavation of these firing facilities averaged 354 and 488 fragments/m². The marked contrast between these figures and those obtained from other excavated portions of La Sierra (averaging 190 sherds/m²) supports the existence of at least two large-scale pottery production locales worked by highly skilled, at least part-time specialists. Outside Ops. 31 and 43, diagnostics of ceramic manufacture are slight to nonexistent within and beyond La Sierra (Urban et al. 1997).

Rural valley denizens took advantage of raw materials available in the immediate environs of their residences to fashion an extensive suite of items. Though production scale, intensity, and requisite skills were generally more limited than those attested to within La Sierra, there is still considerable variation along all of these vectors across valley sites (compare, for example, the 29 figurine molds recovered from clearing 120 m² at Site [Op.] 337 with the total absence of these items from such nearby contemporary settlements as Sites [Ops.] 335 and 411). Different social groups, in short, produced different items using varied techniques at divergent scales and levels of intensity.

Wealth was not evenly shared by all Late Classic Naquenos. This variable is estimated from the relative frequency of imported and elaborately decorated ceramic vessels within excavated assemblages, assuming that the time and skill required to make these containers and/or acquire them from afar contributed to their evaluation within Naco's Late Classic political economy (Smith 1987). Though fragments of such vessels comprised greater proportions of the assemblages excavated at La Sierra than was the case in the rural zone, there is still considerable variety within each area. For example, 15 structure groups extensively cleared within La Sierra through 1992 yielded percentages for elaborately decorated and imported pottery ranging from 3.7–9.5% (117,839 ceramics analyzed, collections containing from 1,151–46,438 studied sherds per excavated group). The 27 rural aggregates included in this sample produced 1.2–9.1% valuable ceramics (134,716 pottery fragments analyzed from samples including 1,154–22,851 sherds per structure group). Varied involvement in specialized production seems to correlate positively with measures of household wealth. Though the linkage is far from perfect, those social units whose members were most thoroughly committed to artisanal activities were seemingly able to convert their surpluses into greater stores of prized items than those who engaged in craft manufacture to lesser extents.

We have argued elsewhere (Schortman and Urban 1994, 1996) that observed variations in wealth and craft involvement were unintended consequences of elite domination strategies. This model posits that rulers captured subordinates within dependency relations in which the latter surrendered labor and loyalty in "exchange" for access to obsidian blades and ceramic vessels, both of which were used by all polity members but made primarily at the capital under paramount supervision (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Earle 1997:203–204; Ekholm 1972; Friedman 1982; Peregrine 1991). Such economic control was facilitated by the complex nature of the above manufacturing processes and localization of essential raw materials at La Sierra; the largest deposits of high-grade clays in Naco are found at this center, whereas the concentration of polyhedral obsidian cores at the capital suggests that these nuclei were acquired from sources 100–200 km

Table 1. Summary of specialized production in the Late Classic Naco valley.

Operation[a]	Location	Craft	Evidence
11	La Sierra, north cluster	Food processing	60 grinding stones
12	La Sierra, north cluster	Figurines Textile decoration Weaving? Obsidian blades	3 molds 28 stamps,[b] 5.8% of the total assemblage 1 pierced sherd disk[c] 15 cores/core fragments
13	La Sierra, north cluster	Figurines Weaving? Obsidian blades	1 mold 3 pierced sherd disks 3 cores/core fragments
14	La Sierra, north cluster	Weaving? Ground stone Obsidian blades	2 pierced sherd disks 1 rough-out[d] 6 cores/core fragments
15	La Sierra, north cluster	Obsidian blades	1 core/core fragment
16	La Sierra, north cluster	Figurines Ceramic bowls Textile decoration Weaving? Paper/Clothing Obsidian blades	4 molds 1 bowl mold 45 stamps, 9.3% of the total assemblage 2 pierced sherd disks 1 barkbeater 40 cores/core fragments
18	La Sierra, north cluster	Figurines Weaving? Hachas Ground stone Obsidian blades	3 molds 3 pierced sherd disks 1 artifact-blank 1 rough-out 20 cores/core fragments
19	La Sierra, north cluster	Ornaments Figurines Obsidian blades Pottery?	1,256 marine shell fragments (9 pieces/excavated m²), 12 coral pieces, 12 distinctive chert tools presumably used in fabricating shell artifacts 2 molds 14 cores/core fragments Possible ceramic firing facility, dense sherd concentrations
20	La Sierra, north cluster	Obsidian blades	5 cores/core fragments
28	La Sierra site core	Hachas	1 artifact-blank
29	La Sierra site core	Figurines	1 mold
31	La Sierra, north cluster	Pottery Figurines Textile decoration? Obsidian blades Paper/Clothing?	At least 1 kiln, proximity to clay borrow pits, dense sherd concentrations (354 sherds/excavated m²) 2 molds 40 stamps, 8% of the total assemblage 17 cores/core fragments 1 barkbeater
32	La Sierra, north cluster	Pottery? Food processing Obsidian blades	Possible firing facility, slag 43 grinding stones 2 cores/core fragments
33	La Sierra, west of the site core	Obsidian blades	7 cores/core fragments

Table 1. Summary of specialized production in the Late Classic Naco valley (cont.).

Operation[a]	Location	Craft	Evidence
36	La Sierra. north cluster	Figurines Obsidian blades Pottery?	3 molds 11 cores/core fragments 1 small firing facility, associated with slagged *bajareque*, intruded into the summit of a former residential platform
38	La Sierra. south of the site core	Obsidian blades Figurines Woodworking?	70 cores/core fragments 1 mold Concentration of large bifaces plus the presence of such woodworking tools as spokeshaves and scrapers
39	La Sierra, south of the site core	Obsidian blades Figurines	3 cores/core fragments 1 mold
42	La Sierra. south of the site core	Weaving? Obsidian blades	4 pierced sherd disks 9 cores/core fragments
43	La Sierra. south of the site core	Pottery Figurines Weaving? Ground stone Obsidian blades	At least 1 kiln. proximity to clay borrow pits. dense sherd concentrations (488 sherds/excavated m² immediately around the kiln: artifact dump with 1.730 sherds/excavated m³) 1 mold 2 pierced sherd disks 1 rough-out 28 cores/core fragments
46	La Sierra. northern margin	Obsidian blades	6 cores/core fragments
53	La Sierra, north cluster	Figurines Textile decoration? Weaving? Ground stone Paper/Clothing? Obsidian blades	1 mold 26 stamps, 8% of the total assemblage 5 pierced sherd disks 2 rough-outs 1 barkbeater 15 cores/core fragments
55	La Sierra. north cluster	Figurines Textile decoration? Weaving? *Hachas* Ground stone Obsidian blades	3 molds 67 stamps, 13.8% of the total assemblage 4 pierced sherd disks 1 artifact-blank 1 rough-out 26 cores/core fragments
79	200m south of La Sierra	Obsidian blades *Hachas*	4 cores/core fragments 5 *hachas.* 1 smoothing stone possibly used in celt manufacture
81	300m north of La Sierra	Figurines Obsidian blades	3 molds 4 cores/core fragments
84	300m southeast of La Sierra	Obsidian blades	3 cores/core fragments
92	440m northwest of La Sierra	Obsidian blades	2 cores/core fragments
96	320m northwest of La Sierra	Obsidian blades Figurines Food processing?	3 cores/core fragments 1 mold 38 grinding stones
101	Rural center	Figurines *Hachas*	1 mold 1 artifact-blank

Table 1. Summary of specialized production in the Late Classic Naco valley (cont.).

Operation[a]	Location	Craft	Evidence
104	Rural hamlet	Figurines Ground stone Obsidian blades	3 molds 1 rough-out 2 cores/core fragments
108	Rural hamlet	Figurines Pottery?	1 mold Located on a good clay source still used today
112	Rural hamlet	Limestone quarry Chert quarry	Proximity of the raw material Numerous chert flakes, tools, and cores, proximity of the raw material
113	Rural hamlet	Figurines	1 mold
120	Rural center	Figurines	1 mold
123	Rural hamlet	Figurines	1 mold
128	Rural center	Figurines Textile decoration? Weaving? Ground stone Obsidian blades Pottery?	11 molds 31 stamps, 6.4% of the total assemblage 2 pierced sherd disks 1 rough-out 5 cores/core fragments 1 possible clay borrow pit
168	Rural center	Obsidian blades Figurines	1 core/core fragment 1 mold
175	Rural hamlet	Weaving? Ground stone	1 pierced sherd disk 7 rough-outs
262	Rural hamlet	Ground stone Paper/Clothing?	5 rough-outs 1 barkbeater
335	Rural hamlet	*Hachas*	1 unfinished celt and 1 artifact-blank
337	Rural hamlet	Figurines Pottery	29 molds 3 bowl molds
338	Rural center	Figurines	1 mold
386	Small rural center	Figurines Obsidian blades Woodworking(?)	4 molds 2 cores/core fragments 4 drills, 1 spokeshave
395	Rural hamlet	Figurines	2 molds
411	Rural hamlet	Obsidian blades	1 core/core fragment
418	Rural hamlet	Masonry?	1 smoothing stone, possibly for finishing cut blocks
423	Rural hamlet	Figurines Obsidian blades *Hachas*	7 molds, 1 lump of unfired clay 5 cores/core fragments 1 artifact-blank
426	Rural center	Figurines Stamps Pottery? Drilled stones Sculpture Obsidian blades	12 molds 1 stamp mold 1 possible, small kiln 11 examples 1 incomplete example. a possible tenoned sculpture 2 cores/core fragment
428	Rural hamlet	Figurines	2 molds

Table 1. Summary of specialized production in the Late Classic Naco valley (cont.).

Operation[a]	Location	Craft	Evidence
462	Rural hamlet	Ground stone	4 rough-outs
470	Rural hamlet	Figurines	8 molds
		Ground stone	2 rough-outs
		Obsidian blades	2 cores/core fragments
471	Rural hamlet	Figurines	1 mold, 1 small, possible kiln
485	Rural hamlet	Figurines	1 mold
		Weaving?	1 pierced sherd disk
486	Rural hamlet	Ground stone	1 rough-out

[a]Operation refers to distinct research units; each operation usually encompasses excavations conducted within a specific patio-focused structure group at La Sierra or an individual site outside the Late Classic capital. "North cluster" signifies a particularly dense agglomeration of buildings lying immediately north of La Sierra's site core.

[b]Clay stamps, taken as evidence of textile decoration, are found in just about all excavations; only unusually large concentrations are noted here.

[c]Pierced sherd disks are pretty much what the name implies, fragments of ceramic vessels worked into roughly circular shapes with a biconically drilled hole in the center. The functions these items served are not clear, but they seem to be the appropriate size and shape for spindle whorls.

[d]Rough-outs, diagnostics of ground stone manufacture, are incomplete examples of *manos* and *metates*, implements used in converting corn and other grains to flour.

distant by valley paramounts (90% of all known Late Classic polyhedral obsidian cores and core fragments derive from La Sierra, 94% from La Sierra and its near periphery; N = 341). Access to essential production skills and manufacturing components could, therefore, be centrally monitored.

Rather than going gently into subservience, rural households tried to salvage limited economic autonomy by fashioning some items to meet their own requirements and for exchange with others engaged in complementary economic pursuits. Those who enjoyed advantageous access to the raw materials and skills needed to engage in a wide array of crafts could more effectively protect their own material assets and acquire wealth than those who had to rely more heavily on the productive efforts of others. Goods, including valuables, therefore, flowed toward households whose artisans generated significant surpluses and away from those who struggled to meet even their basic needs. This interdigitation of wealth and artisanal activity created the complex economic landscape alluded to above.

Power, measured by the capacity to direct labor in raising monumental constructions, was correlated with control over specialized production only at La Sierra. Rural centers containing large-scale platforms exhibited variable degrees of wealth and involvement in specialized manufacture. Outside the regional capital, power was seemingly more firmly related to length of occupation, possibly indicating that labor control here followed from privileged claims to arable tracts by dint of early settlement.

Ongoing data analyses are currently testing these notions. Whether the above ideas are eventually supported or undermined, it is clear that the Late Classic Naco polity was riven in complex ways by the economic pursuits,

wealth, and power of its inhabitants. Each of these variables could easily serve as the basis for defining shared values, objectives, and, finally, identities. The result was a volatile, dynamic social milieu more prone to fragmentation than unity. Overcoming such centripetal tendencies while maintaining their positions of preeminence were daunting challenges to those who would rule this polity.

Power by Design

La Sierra dominated a small polity (estimated peak population of 6,500, achieved during the Late Classic; Urban 1994) that was nonetheless partitioned into significant divisions. How were potentially conflicting interests, if not denied, at least situationally overcome? The physical evidence for an inclusive Late Classic Naco identity is, we argue, emblazoned on decorated serving vessels used by all valley residents. Our remarks focus on painted bowls and cylinders that, because of their relative abundance and/or local antecedents, are presumed to have been made within the valley (ongoing neutron-activation assays of sherd and clay samples from Naco will, hopefully, test these propositions). Such containers are portable and, as serving utensils, were regularly encountered in the course of domestic activities. They are, therefore, suitable "vessels" for conveying politically important messages, all the more effectively because their use was woven into the practice of quotidian life (Bourdieu 1977; David et al. 1988).

Late Classic Naco painted pottery, in general, is characterized by simple, redundant designs. The taxa of particular concern here are orange-slipped vessels designated Conejo Bichrome: Conejo var.; Chamelecon Polychrome: Chamelecon var.; and Chamelecon Polychrome: Fine-Line var.

(hereafter simply called Conejo, Chamelecon, and Fine-Line, respectively [described in Urban 1993]). Conejo, Chamelecon, and Fine-Line, comprising 1%, 1.3%, and 0.1% of the analyzed Late Classic Naco assemblage, provide the majority of locally made decorated serving containers in Naco, objects that were likely on display in household contexts.

Motifs found on the above vessels are striking in their regularity. Conejo consists, primarily, of subhemispherical bowls decorated on the interior with overhead views of crabs whose round bodies and three to four pairs of legs are painted red (Figure 2). Chamelecon vessels are open bowls bearing on their interiors profiles of birds outlined in black with their bodies painted red. These avians are almost always rendered in the same manner, that is, a globular body with a small circle for a head, three tail feathers, and a pronounced beak. Feet are rarely shown and the animal rests on a circumferential black band (Figure 3). Crabs and birds do not appear together nor are they incorporated within larger scenes. Geometric elements are used to create panels in which birds and crabs are set. Rather than distracting attention from the motifs, these elements enhance the central figures' visual prominence. Users of Chamelecon and Conejo bowls would have been hard-pressed to miss the birds and crabs that decorate the containers.

Fine-Line ceramics diverge from the last two taxa in design and form. These vessels are primarily cylinders, decorated on their exteriors with monkeys. The latter are rendered in black with linear torsos, long limbs and tails, some with prodigious erect penises, and are shown in profile, often as if marching in single file. The primates commonly appear as parts of larger friezes, including complex geometric elements, though they dominate these scenes (Figure 4).

Chamelecon and Conejo are virtually unique in the Late Classic southeast Mesoamerican corpus. The structure of elements and combination of colors generally call to mind Gualpopa Polychromes described for Late Classic western El Salvador and common at Copan (Beaudry 1983; Sharer 1978; Viel 1977, 1993). Still, only the relatively rare Fine-Line cylinders appear to be conscious efforts to emulate vessels in that taxon (the monkeys, in particular, closely resemble renditions on Gualpopa containers). Crabs reminis-

Figure 2. Example of Conejo Bichrome: Conejo variety.

cent of Naco examples appear uncommonly on Classic period vessels from the Sula Plain (Beaudry-Corbett et al. 1993; Joyce 1993:262), but are virtually unknown elsewhere. The Chamelecon bird has yet to be identified in other taxa.

Chamelecon and Conejo are found together in small but consistent numbers within just about every excavated Naco settlement. Conejo sherds comprise 1.11% of La Sierra and 1.02% of rural assemblages while Chamelecon makes up 1.54% and 0.94% of these collections, respectively. Fine-Line cylinders are not nearly so prevalent within Naco. They are more commonly found at La Sierra (making up 0.18% of that assemblage) than in rural settings (0.04% of those collections on average; 54% of the 24 rural sites included in this study had none). Fine-Line was seemingly more restricted in its distribution to the capital than either Chamelecon or Conejo. Lack of regular, repeated contact with the designs employed on Fine-Line cylinders likely meant that the majority of Naco's Late Classic population was relatively unfamiliar with these symbols and the messages they conveyed. Even if Fine-Line motifs were intelligible to all, their restricted distribution implies that they did not figure significantly in social displays and ceremonies outside La Sierra.

The motifs missing from Late Classic Naco painted bowls are intriguing. Human figures, so common on such Late Classic southeast Mesoamerican pottery as Copador (Beaudry 1983) and Ulua (also known as Babilonia) Polychromes (Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Joyce 1993; Viel 1977), are absent as are pseudo-glyphs (faulty renditions of lowland Maya script) that frequently run in sublabial, circumferential bands on items in such categories as Copador, Gualpopa, and Ulua Polychromes. There was no lack of foreign models for Naco potters to copy. Sherds from imported decorated containers, primarily Ulua Polychromes, are found at sites of all sizes and locations within the valley. Familiarity did not engender emulation, however. A choice was made to limit the Naco design repertoire, but by whom and why?

We argue that birds and crabs, together, are emblems of a social identity that encompassed all segments of the La Sierra polity. Conejo and Chamelecon repeatedly co-occur in Late Classic Naco deposits, this juxtaposition strongly suggesting that their messages were mutually reinforcing, not contradictory (as would have been the case if they signified contrasting affiliations). Consistent repetition of Conejo and Chamelecon designs in a manner highlighting their visibility implies that the images were intended to have a maximum impact on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of those using the vessels (Carr 1995; David et al. 1988). The portability of Conejo and Chamelecon containers and their ubiquity indicates that all Naco residents, regardless of rank, owned at least one of these bowls and so *likely* shared in the affiliation they symbolized. Relative scarcity of these vessels in domestic assemblages may reflect the limited
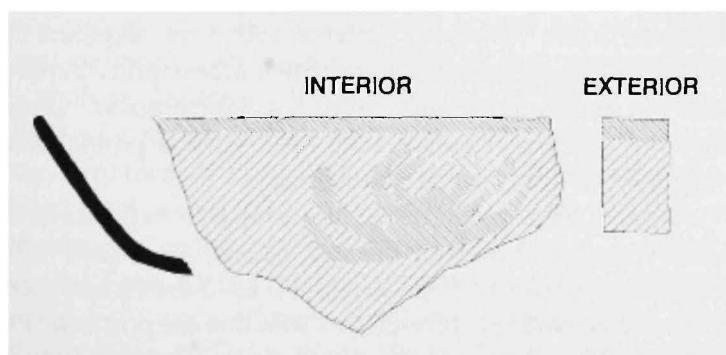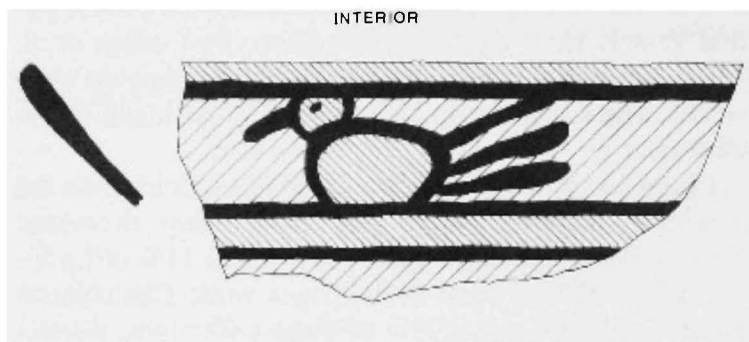
Figure 3. Example of Chameleon Polychrome: Chameleon variety.

array of contexts in which they functioned. Rather than weakening the communicative capacity of Chameleon and Conejo bowls, such restrictions probably enhanced their dramatic impact on the occasions when they were displayed. A promiscuous use of symbols can cheapen the entity they signify, especially when the symbols are linked with "demeaning" activities (as when national icons are used to hawk merchandise or sell political candidates).

The absence of humans and anthropomorphic deities on Chameleon and Conejo bowls also gives the wares a "faceless" quality, allowing motifs to stand for something that transcends and outlasts the histories of particular ruling families and cults (Cowgill 1993). All of these factors combine to make a plausible argument for Chameleon and Conejo ceramics as one means by which a single identity that cross-cut factional divisions was conveyed, created, and recreated on a daily basis in Naco. Unwillingness to integrate foreign motifs into Chameleon and Conejo designs may reflect a desire to maintain the clarity of the intended message while eschewing symbols associated with identities developing in neighboring areas.

This affiliation was probably encouraged, if not actually created, by valley paramounts. Evidence for this interpretation falls into three categories: motive, means, and duration. Promulgation of an identity linking all polity members served the interests of La Sierra's rulers more than those of other factions. Convincing people to look beyond
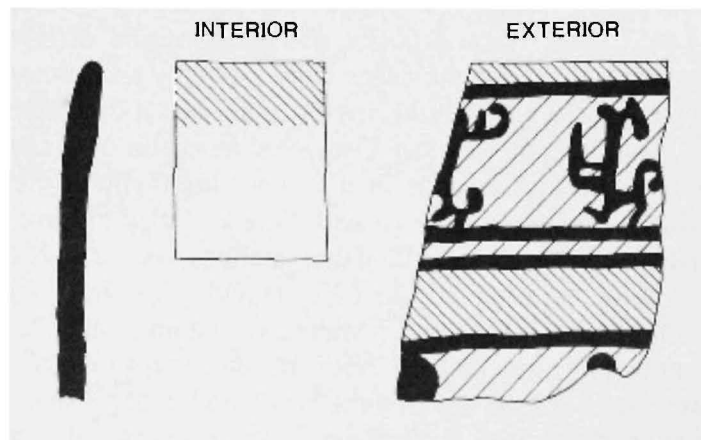
sectarian allegiances and enlist in an affiliation spanning an entire political unit is crucial to creating and stabilizing such entities. Valley paramounts, located at the center of an emerging polity, had the most to gain from general acceptance of the putative identity symbolized on Chameleon and Conejo bowls.

These magnates might also have had the means to create and disseminate the affiliation. The largest pottery workshops are situated at La Sierra in association with nearly inexhaustible sources of clay and temper. This juxtaposition implies that manufacture of ceramics on a large scale was both feasible and pursued at the Late Classic capital. *If* the output included Conejo and Chameleon bowls, then valley scions would have been in an excellent position to impose the designs that grace the containers. Making this linkage is difficult. The nearly invariant manner in which birds and crabs are rendered tentatively implies centralized control over, at least, vessel decoration. Continuing neutron-activation analyses of Naco ceramics and clay samples hold the best chance, however, of testing the above proposition.

The temporal span of Chameleon and Conejo is largely coterminous with the duration of the La Sierra polity. Representatives of both categories may first appear in the Early Classic (A.D. 250–600), but these taxa become fully established, and are most numerous, during the Late Classic florescence of the La Sierra realm. Bird and crab images disappear from the Naco decorative repertoire by the Early Postclassic (A.D. 1100–1300) when La Sierra was largely abandoned and the valley divided among three small polities. Symbols used to unify and distinguish a realm may not outlive the conditions that spawned them.

Not all material styles served the same goals in Naco. While birds and crabs arguably symbolized polity unity, other motifs were employed to segregate factions. The restricted distribution of Fine-Line vessels and the apparent alien inspiration for their designs suggest that the audience for this ceramic was limited primarily to local and foreign notables who could easily decode the imagery. These objects may have been part of the symbolic structure uniting spatially dispersed rulers. Possession, use, and display of the vessels thereby signaled participation in a pan-regional elite identity while simultaneously distinguishing their owners from the rest of the local population. Fine-Line containers are, however, portable and were acquired by people living outside the capital. Such accessibility implies that the motifs in question were not the exclusive "property" of elites and makes Fine-Line vessels problematic media for defining social boundaries.

A more physically salient and effective expression of difference was achieved through rituals, associated with leadership, performed exclusively in La Sierra's site core. This cult is manifest through symbols that are primarily localized within the monumental epicenter. The signifiers in question are: elaborately modeled ceramic incense burners;

Figure 4. Example of Chameleon Polychrome: Fine-Line variety.

Spondylus bivalves (intact as well as broken and/or burnt fragments); sculpture, including a defaced tenoned portrait head; and distinctive temple and ballcourt architectural forms. The last two building types are distinguished from other Naco constructions by their great size, forms, and the use of masonry blocks in at least parts of their facings. Other Late Classic Naco structures, even monumental examples, are almost invariably faced with unmodified stones. A striking feature of this inventory is its apparent foreign inspiration, most of the elements probably deriving from the lowland Maya center of Copan. Evidence suggesting this conclusion includes: motifs on some Naco modeled incense burners with parallels at Copan, especially the placement of effigy cacao pods pendant from vessel rims; the headdress adorning the portrait sculpture seems to be a simplified version of the turbans distinguishing Copanec rulers; *Spondylus* shells played significant roles in blood-letting rituals conducted by lowland Maya notables; and the organization of the La Sierra ballcourt, oriented roughly north-south and backed in the latter direction by a terraced eminence, parallels the arrangement of the principal Copan court (Cheek 1983). Cult objects of a different sort enjoy an extensive distribution in the valley (figurines, whistles, ocarinas, and a variety of relatively simple incense burner forms). This patterned distribution hints at the existence of at least two contemporary religious systems linked to different social strata.

Esoteric rites performed solely by paramounts within distinctive architectural settings and using objects that contrasted with those employed in domestic observances may, therefore, have been one means by which rulers dramatically created and recreated their social identity (Earle 1997:153–155). Linked to each other and the sacred through these rituals, local magnates would have reinforced those bonds of cooperation needed to acquire and protect power while simultaneously distancing themselves from their subordinates who could not raise the monuments or properly manipulate the paraphernalia essential to the cult. The apparent foreign inspiration for so many of the elements used to fashion and express the identity relates to the intended audiences for these symbols. Elite power and legitimacy might have been enhanced in the eyes of their followers by paramount associations with, and use of, symbols derived from realms whose remoteness imparted a supernatural aura to all that was associated with them (Helms 1979; Wheatley 1975:239). If, as seems likely, La Sierra's scions were the primary agents in contact with foreign representatives, they could have monopolized local access to these symbols, practices, and the raw materials used to create cult paraphernalia (e.g., *Spondylus* shells). Such control would help guarantee that elements of ritual style were effective markers delimiting elite status (Kristiansen 1987:44; Wells 1984). The labor required to raise facilities needed for such rites, for example, temples

and ballcourts, would further restrict dissemination of exotic symbols to a privileged few (Earle 1997:151–154).

Valley rulers also looked outward. The artifactual and architectural symbols outlined above may well be emblems of an elite identity spanning multiple polities. Participation by rulers in a common cult, using widely shared symbols, would have been a powerful way to create the trust needed to ensure regular, predictable, and reliable interactions across political borders. Prominent display of these symbols, especially monumental facilities used in ritual, effectively signaled membership to visiting dignitaries. Besides La Sierra, Copan, and Quirigua in the lower Motagua valley, manifestations of this elite ideology are expressed in the form and arrangement of monumental constructions along the middle Rio Ulua drainage and upstream on the Rio Chamelecon in the La Venta and La Florida valleys, ca. 35km south and 40km southwest of Naco, respectively (Ashmore 1987; Ashmore et al. 1987; Nakamura et al. 1992; Schortman and Nakamura 1992; Schortman et al. 1986). As research progresses elsewhere in southeastern Mesoamerica, we anticipate seeing evidence for other participants in the system. It is already clear, however, that some Late Classic southeast Mesoamerican rulers rejected, or were excluded from, membership in this putative identity (Schortman 1993; Schortman and Nakamura 1992).

Variable expression of the proposed elite affiliation in Late Classic southeast Mesoamerica also raises intriguing questions of just how deep commitment to, and understanding of, the precepts underlying the identity really were among members. Gualjoquito, capital of a Late Classic polity along the middle Rio Ulua drainage, for example, faithfully replicates not only lowland Maya monumental architectural forms but site planning principles as well (Ashmore 1987). The positioning of a large public ceremonial space on the north, balanced by a sizable elite residential enclave on the south, with a ballcourt intermediary between them at Gualjoquito conforms to lowland Maya ideological precepts expressed in the organization of many centers (including Copan). It has been convincingly argued that, in the Maya lowlands, this site plan evokes a worldview in which north was sacred and associated with the heavens, south was the earth's surface or the underworld, and the ballcourt was a conduit for passing between the two (Ashmore 1987, 1991). Whether the foregoing interpretation is correct or not, however, it is hard to ignore the consistent replication of this organizational pattern throughout the Late Classic Maya lowlands. La Sierra's monumental epicenter has the "right" building forms but in the "wrong" order (Figure 5). The site core runs east-west, elite residences apparently surrounded the temples, rather than lying south of them, and the ballcourt is on the core's southeast margin. Elites were apparently free to reinterpret foreign symbols, adapting them to local circumstances. Borrowers may also have been variably able to observe
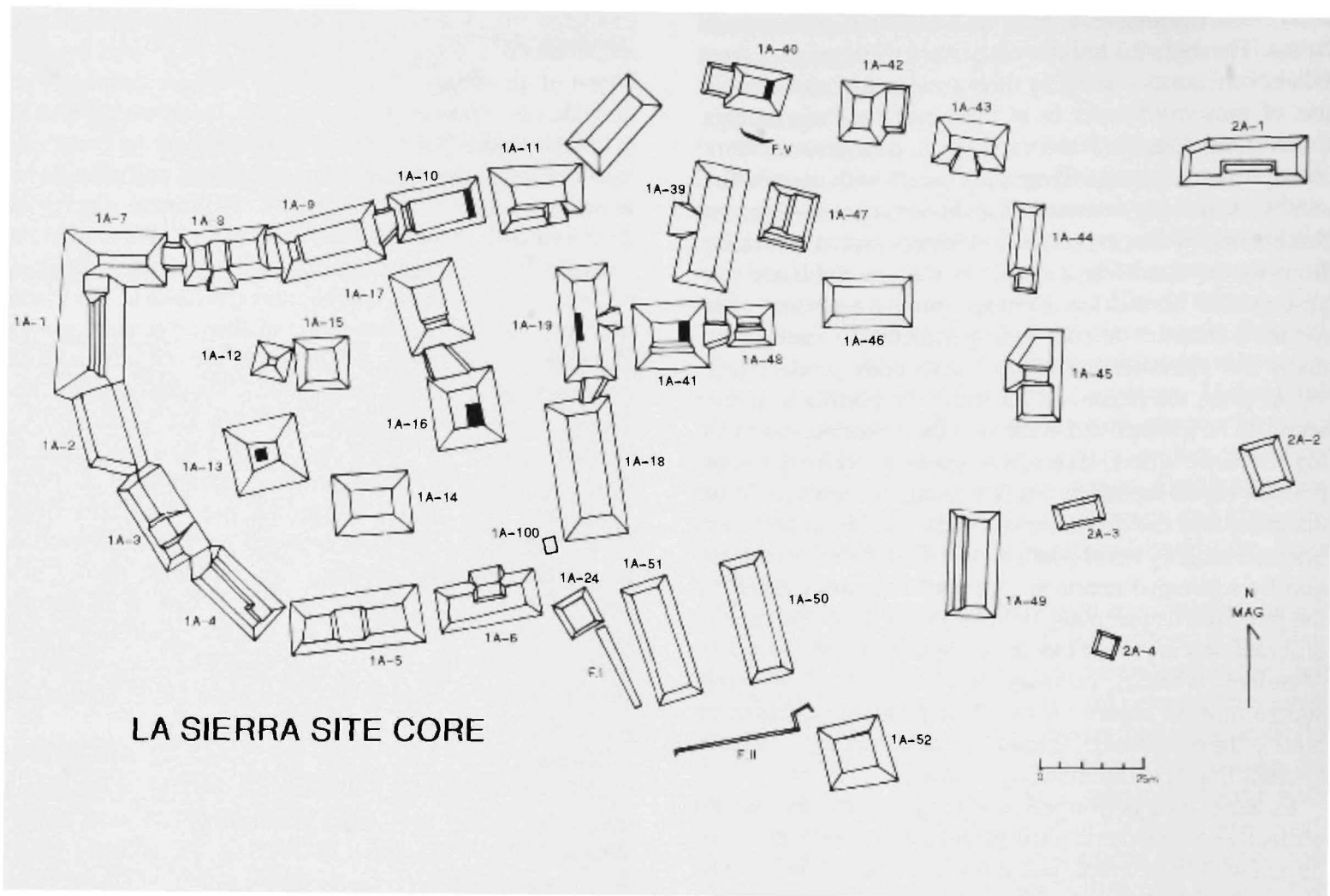
Figure 5. The La Sierra site core: Structures 1A-12 through 1A-17 are ritual buildings (temples); "Operation (Op.) 37" is an excavation conducted between Structures 1A-16 and 1A-17 that uncovered dense deposits of cult objects set in an ash matrix; Structures 1A-50 and 1A-51 comprise La Sierra's ballcourt. The remaining buildings are elite residences.

and internalize elements and expressions of the elite conceptual model, their recreations of essential symbols incorporating different amounts of "error." We do not know how much reinterpretation of identity symbols was tolerated before they ceased to be accepted as membership criteria.

Late Classic Naco scions, we argue, may well have used material styles to create identities that solidified intra-elite cohesion and linked rulers to magnates in some, but not all, nearby realms. These styles "spoke" to different audiences, conveying messages of inclusion and aloofness according to the symbols used, the context(s) in which they were displayed, and the sources of their inspiration. Contacts with numerous realms, including lowland Maya states, were the means by which at least some politically valuable symbols were obtained. There is no evidence, however, that these transfers were conducted in the context of unequal power relations (Schortman and Urban 1994). Rather, free exchange of prosaic (e.g., obsidian) and esoteric goods and

ideas was conducted among paramounts who shared an identity that circumscribed interactions within a narrow group of equals.

This discussion has not touched on other artifact categories rich in stylistic detail. Naco ceramic figurines, whistles, ocarinas, and stamps, for example, display a wide range of motifs, some of which find parallels in neighboring areas, but few are replicated on ceramics. If, as suggested by their contexts of recovery, objects in the first three categories figured in household rituals (Marcus 1996), this commonality may point to a religion shared by non-elites over extensive areas of Late Classic southeastern Mesoamerica. Evidence for widespread production of the above items throughout Naco may further imply that this conceptual scheme was created and reproduced outside elite control (Table 1). Fired clay stamps, probably used in textile decoration, bear yet another array of designs that may have been prominently displayed on the clothing of polity members. How these motifs compare with analogues in nearby

zones is a focus of current study. Clearly, a wide range of messages was being conveyed through Late Classic Naco material culture. How, if at all, these styles were related to social identities and what, if any, their political significance might have been remain questions in need of answers.

Summary

We hypothesize that, under conditions of persistent, noncoercive interaction among polity rulers, identity-formation processes will follow two trajectories. Paramounts, seeking to create an enduring power base at home while monopolizing local access to politically valuable goods and ideas, will construct an "international" affiliation uniting members of an emergent elite "class" with potentates in distinct realms. This association is created and re-created through the manipulation of symbols in the context of rituals that dramatically convey, sacralize, and materialize values distinctive of elites and important to undergirding long-distance interactions. Membership in the affiliation is limited to those who can command the labor needed to create facilities for cult observances and acquire the esoteric knowledge and objects integral to conduct of relevant performances. Exclusive control of these assets ensures centralized monopolies over external contacts and the political valuables that pass through them. Rulers subscribe to aristocratic affiliations because they see participation as serving their best interests, though commitment to, and understanding of, relevant precepts may vary. The widespread sharing of material symbols among the upper echelons of different societies helps create those linked developmental trajectories often described as "peer polity interaction" (Renfrew 1986).

Simultaneously, paramounts seek to convert loose associations of clients into enduring, hierarchically organized political formations, in part by promulgating a common identity among all citizens. Concocting such an affiliation depends on strategic use of styles manifest on portable objects that every polity member owns. Repeated exposure to the relevant symbols within domestic contexts encourages acceptance of the inclusive affiliation. Contact with these symbols during the daily round may stimulate recognition among people of a commonality and solidarity that crosscuts preexisting and developing divisions of occupation, wealth, power, and/or place of residence. In the process, earlier social units are subsumed within larger political entities whose boundaries are defined with increasing precision and clarity (Blanton and Peregrine 1997).

The result is the genesis of two social identities, one geared toward maintaining elite networks and the other toward creating localized corporate identities (Blanton et al. 1996). Both affiliations benefit an emerging ruling class but come with costs and dangers. Elites find themselves committed to affiliations whose divergent referents, val-ues, and objectives may well generate conflicting expectations. Failure to satisfy the demands of both aristocratic peers and fellow polity members severely undermines the ability of rulers to sustain their political prominence at home and acceptance abroad. Further, subordinates may be less than enthusiastic about accepting a new identity. This disenchantment can be expressed by open revolt or covert reinterpretation of elite-sponsored symbols. The latter process, so pervasive in situations of forced religious conversion the world over (e.g., Bricker 1981; Farriss 1984; Stern 1993), is difficult to perceive archaeologically. La Sierra's tumultuous history, characterized by apparent shifts in the location of paramount residence and administration within the center, hints at the difficulties experienced by those promulgating ideological innovations. Social identities are, therefore, components of dynamic sociopolitical systems, their salience, success, and membership shifting as other elements of that structure change.

Elite and polity-wide identities are also innovations within an existing framework of affiliations. Older identities, such as those based on gender, age, kinship, and earlier political formations, are unlikely to disappear as long as they are used to organize activities and guide interpersonal interaction. So too, the significance, defining characteristics, and relation to resources of preexisting affiliations will shift in complex ways. The varied connections among new and old identities demand study.

The identity-formation processes sketched here may have been quite commonplace in prehistory. Hierarchically structured polities frequently arise within interaction networks characterized by the increasing regionalization of some material styles (possibly signifying inclusive polity-wide identities) while others associated with elite, especially ritual, behaviors undergo rapid and extensive dispersal (Feinman 1991; Renfrew 1986). Examples include: the Mississippian phenomenon in the late prehistoric central and southeastern United States (Brown 1976); interactions among agents of Chinese, Hindu, and southeast Asian political units from the fifth through fifteenth centuries A.D. (Hall 1985; Wheatley 1975); the spread of the Chavin "cult" over large segments of Peru in the first millennium B.C. (Keatinge 1981; Patterson 1971); and transactions linking western Europeans with, first, Greek and, later, Roman states during the classical era (Dyson 1985; Wells 1984). Formation of spatially extensive elite and polity-wide identities may be commonly reinvented solutions to problems of solidifying power at home while seeking the means to preeminence abroad.

Whatever the fate of the specific interpretations offered here, this essay should alert us to the daunting complexity and fluidity of social identities. Affiliations vary in spatial scale, duration, and the sociopolitical statuses of their members. Identities are not fixed components of social structure but are creations of people inhabiting those frameworks. As such, affiliations persist only as long as

they are valued by their originators. We have been concerned here with only one element of that "value," the utility of social categories in political strategies. Further, we have followed the well-trodden path of examining past processes from an elite perspective. Wandering off that trail to examine social identities fashioned by non-elites along with the emotional and psychological components of affiliations will only enhance appreciation for the topic's complexity (Jones 1997). Such studies will almost certainly expose the errors and simplifications embedded in current models, including the one outlined here. A better understanding of past social formations and the roots of modern political turmoil, however, requires making that detour. We very much hope that this article helps stimulate an interest in the journey.

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