ARTICLES

POWER WITHOUT BOUNDS? MIDDLE PRECLASSIC POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NACO VALLEY, HONDURAS

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Recently completed investigations in the Naco Valley, located within the Rio Chamelecon drainage of northwestern Honduras, suggest that, by 1200 B.C., emergent elites were experiencing variable success in their efforts to construct sociopolitical hierarchies. Though able to harness labor in the construction of large platforms, these scions apparently did not monopolize crucial economic processes nor could they command the exclusive allegiances of their subordinates over protracted periods. Political centralization, social heterogeneity, and boundary formation processes were, therefore, not mutually reinforcing and the polities that resulted were small and ephemeral. Comparison of Naco's trajectory with contemporary developments in neighboring portions of southeastern Mesoamerica hint at the varied developmental paths that ultimately laid the foundation for the emergence of relatively stable, hierarchically organized polities in the subsequent Classic period (A.D. 200–900).

Las investigaciones que recientemente se concluyeron en el Valle de Naco, que se localiza en la cuenca del Río Chamelecon en el noroeste de Honduras, indican que allí había un desarrollo precoz en términos políticos. Hacia 1200 a.C. se fundan centros administrativos, cada uno al menos con una plataforma de 3 m de altura, que fungen como focos políticos para la población que habitaba en caseríos pequeños. Las élites emergentes experimentaron un éxito variable en la conformación de jerarquías sociopolíticas, y aun cuando pudieron dirigir los trabajos encaminados a la construcción de plataformas grandes, al parecer no monopolizaron procesos económicos cruciales ni fueron capaces de controlar la devoción exclusiva de sus subordinados durante periodos prolongados. En consecuencia, los procesos de centralización política, de heterogeneidad social y de formación de fronteras, no se reforzaron mutuamente y las unidades sociopolíticas que resultaron fueron pequeñas y efímeras. Al comparar la trayectoria de Naco con la de desarrollos contemporáneos en zonas próximas del sureste de Mesoamérica, se observa que existieron distintas vías de desarrollo que finalmente constituyeron la base para el surgimiento de unidades sociopolíticas relativamente estables y jerárquicamente organizadas durante el periodo Clásico (200–900 d.C.).

The Middle Preclassic (1100–400 B.C.) witnessed the initial development of sociopolitical complexity in many portions of Mesoamerica. Though there is significant agreement on this point, it is often unclear what the statement means. "Complexity" is a protean concept consisting of variables whose expressions and interrelations are historically contingent (de Montmollin 1989; Feinman and Neitzel 1984; McGuire 1983; Nelson 1995; Roscoe 1993). Understanding when, how, and why people forged the novel political relations glossed as "complexity" requires clarifying what we mean by this term and specifying how its components may or may not have been related in specific cases. We must also eschew the temptation to let our knowledge of how the story ends determine our understanding of its beginning. That hierarchically organized, socially heterogenous polities would eventually be established throughout Mesoamerica by the Classic period (A.D. 200–900) does not imply that their development was inevitable, uniform, or free of setbacks. Identifying failed efforts to establish complex polities is as important as recognizing successful outcomes.

The present essay reviews evidence for the appearance of sociopolitical complexity during the

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Middle Preclassic Achiote phase in the Naco Valley, northwestern Honduras, and compares these processes with our emerging understanding of comparable developments throughout contemporary southeastern Mesoamerica (eastern Guatemala, western Honduras, and El Salvador). Three elements integral to this process will be examined because of their general importance in modeling complexity and our ability to address aspects of them using data from Naco and southeastern Mesoamerica generally. The factors in question are political centralization, social heterogeneity, and social boundaries.

Political centralization refers to the extent to which power, defined as the ability to direct the actions of others, is differentially distributed across factions within a social unit larger than the domestic group (Balandier 1970; Roscoe 1993:113–114; Webster 1990). This variable is measured here by the presence, dimensions, and numbers of monumental constructions (platforms rising at least 1.5 m) datable to the Middle Preclassic at Naco sites. Recourse to this criterion presupposes that power is often used to mobilize labor in raising constructions associated with rulers and the polities they lead. The more power magnates accrue, the larger and more elaborate are the buildings they commission (Hirth 1993:123; Stark and Hall 1993).

"Social heterogeneity" is a gloss for the degree to which populations are divided into interest groups by any number of factors (McGuire 1983:92; Roscoe 1993). Of particular concern in this case are distinctions based on wealth and occupation. The latter is evaluated using evidence of varying commitment among site residents to diverse crafts, reflected in the differential distribution of production debris, tools, and, where appropriate, manufacturing facilities (e.g., Costin 1991). Wealth discrepancies can be discerned by charting the prevalence of valued items among sites or portions of larger settlements (Smith 1987). An object's value is crudely estimated here based on the time and expertise needed to fashion the artifact and/or acquire it from a distant source (Feinman 1980; Hirth 1993:138; Smith 1987: 312–314, 318, 320–322; Stark and Hall 1993:260). Varying proportions of such esteemed goods within excavated Middle Preclassic assemblages will, therefore, be used to approximate the ancient material statuses of their owners.

Boundedness refers to the degree to which a polity's limits are clearly circumscribed (Blanton and Peregrine 1997:6–7). This variable concerns impediments to transactions occurring among people with different political allegiances. Boundedness is a complex phenomenon that refers both to who interacts with whom and what passes among the interactors. Variation along the first dimension extends from situations in which contacts are monopolized by a particular faction to those where all social members are free to establish extra-polity ties. The second continuum encompasses a wide range of interpolity transfers associated to varying degrees with different population segments. For our purposes, we distinguish only two types of connections: those through which goods and ideas pass. The artificiality of this division is immediately apparent and we hasten to acknowledge that the two categories are not mutually exclusive. There is some analytical advantage to the distinction in the Naco case, however, allowing us to discern the kinds of cross-border contacts that valley inhabitants might have maintained and the developmental significance of those ties.

Goods transfers are recognized through the identification of imports in local assemblages, their ideological counterparts being manifest by artifact styles of foreign inspiration. Styles, those aspects of human creations whose forms and combinations are determined more by choice than functional or technological necessity, are sufficiently free of utilitarian constraints to express concepts of varying sorts (Carr 1995; Hegmon 1992; Sackett 1982; Wiessner 1983, 1984). Stylistic patterning, therefore, is a crude estimator of idea flows, even though we may never know what precepts were expressed through the analyzed motifs.

Tightly bounded sociopolitical entities are those in which cross-border economic and ideological transfers are restricted, resulting in highly localized material and stylistic patterning. At the other extreme there is a total absence of such regional distinctions, styles and goods being widely dispersed across and within sociopolitical units. Arrayed between these poles are conditions in which ideas and objects move with variable ease among representatives of distinct population segments. Estimating the differential prevalence of exotic items and motifs across contemporary sites in a region provides a preliminary means of deciding where within that range specific polities fall.

Clearly, the above factors are related. Achieve-

ment of political centralization frequently gives successful factions the chance to accumulate valued items through exactions levied on followers (e.g., Earle 1991, 1997). Such tribute can then be used, for example, to finance artisans whose products may be employed as symbols of elite distinction or as "gifts" to subordinates who, in turn, repay this largesse with additional labor and surpluses (D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Kristiansen 1987). In the latter case, tribute not only begets more tribute through the medium of specialized production but can be a means of concentrating power, "aggrandizers" using monopolies over esteemed goods to attract and hold clients (Arnold 1995; Hayden 1995). Boundaries are often created, or at least reinforced, by elites attempting to lay exclusive claim to the loyalty and labor of a particular group of supporters while simultaneously denying competitors access to this power base (de Montmollin 1989; Ferguson and Mansbach 1996:21–22). Placing limits on interpolity transactions may also be part of elite maneuvers to monopolize local access to politically significant imported goods and ideas (Ekholm 1972; Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Peregrine 1991).

Social complexity, therefore, might well result from intrasocietal power struggles in which successful factions secure privileged access to valued commodities, both locally made and imported items, using this economic lever to obtain the undivided loyalty of their followers. The outcome of these contests would be a clearly bounded society internally divided by wealth, power, and occupation. Complexity need not take this form, however, and the interconnections described above are not inevitable (de Montmollin 1989; Feinman and Neitzel 1984:77–78; McGuire 1983). Local circumstances can upset the posited connections. Social leaders, for example, might wield the power to create public monuments but be unable, or unwilling, to convert community labor and surpluses into private wealth (Feinman et al. 2000; Peregrine 2001; Renfrew 1974:74–78). Similarly, some degree of social heterogeneity can be achieved through individual initiative but may not be enshrined within permanent hierarchies. So-called Big Man societies, for example, are riven by competitions over wealth and prestige that produce volatile, but not inheritable, political and material distinctions (Keesing 1983; Strathern 1971). The degree to which boundaries can be sealed is also likely to depend, at least in part, on such factors as local topography and communication technologies. Rugged terrain coupled with a reliance on foot travel will likely conspire to weaken the capacity of magnates to supervise and control the actions of their subordinates, especially those living on a realm's margins.

One route to complexity, therefore, links processes of political centralization, social heterogeneity, and boundary definition in a mutually reinforcing manner. Alternative pathways exist, however, combining variable degrees of power, wealth, occupational specialization, and boundedness in any number of historically contingent patterns. Understanding the different routes to complexity, and the varied ways in which these processes can be decoupled, requires treating each of the above factors as distinct continua of variation (deMontmollin 1989:12–16; Feinman and Neitzel 1984:72–73). Doing so allows us to gauge the form complexity assumed in Middle Preclassic Naco and to compare those developments with contemporary processes in neighboring portions of southeastern Mesoamerica.

Setting

The Naco Valley covers 96 km^2 of floodplain and terraces located at 100–200m asl. This flat to gently rolling landscape is ringed by the steep, rugged slopes of the Sierra de Omoa and watered by the Rio Chamelecon. The latter river courses southwest-to-northeast across the valley, dividing Naco into a larger western portion, containing roughly 80 percent of the level terrain, and a smaller eastern segment.

Passes connect Naco with nearby zones that sustained varying levels of sociopolitical development during the Middle Preclassic (Figure 1). The Chamelecon cuts a narrow fissure linking Naco with the vast Sula Plain, ca. 15 km to the northeast. The nature of Middle Preclassic developments here is suggested by the diverse burials recovered from the site of Playa de los Muertos (Gordon 1898; Kennedy 1981; Popenoe 1934; Strong et al. 1938) and data emerging from ongoing research at Puerto Escondido (Joyce and Henderson 2001). Lake Yojoa and the Comayagua valley, ca. 47 km and 100 km to the southeast, respectively, witnessed the founding of major centers (Los Naranjos and Yarumela [LP–1]) that were capitals of sizable polities (Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Canby 1949; Dixon 1989, 1992; Dixon et al. 1994; Joesink-Mandeville 1987).

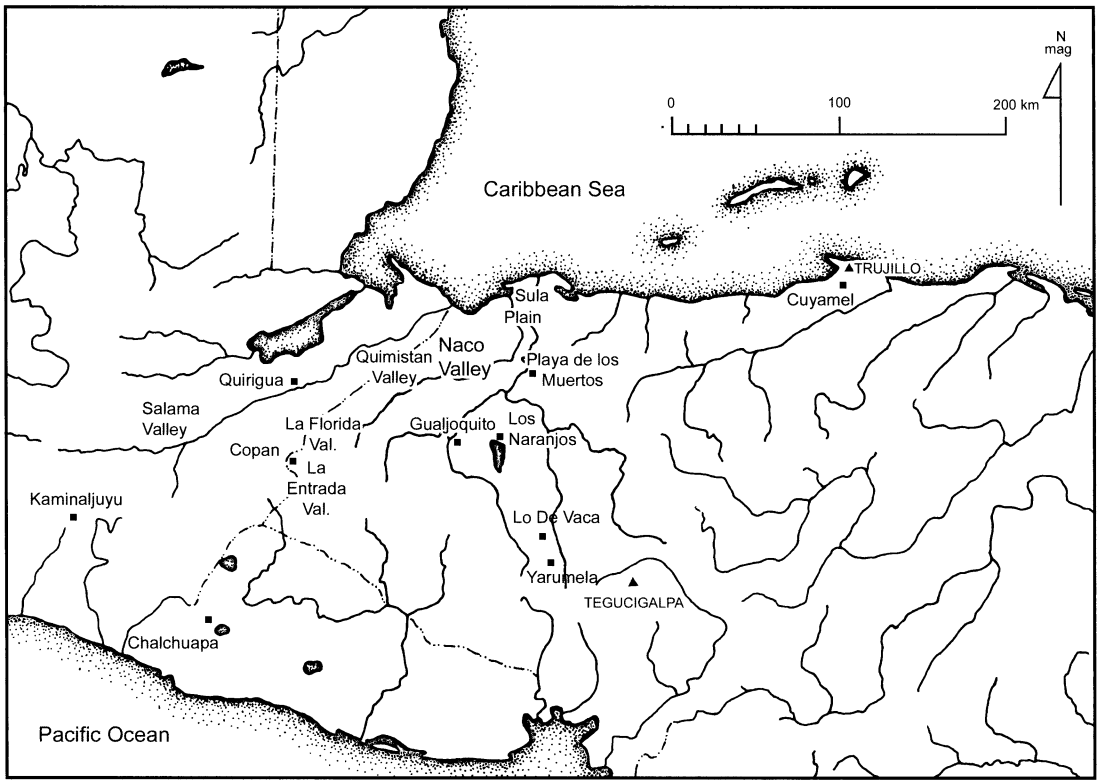


Figure 1. Southeastern Mesoamerica showing sites and areas mentioned in the text.

Approximately 60 km southwest along the Rio Chamelecon, investigations in the La Venta and La Florida valleys yielded evidence of scattered Middle Preclassic settlements (Nakamura et al. 1991). The Copan valley, ca. 115 km southwest of Naco, supported more complex sociopolitical relations, hinted at by variations in burial treatment (Fash 1985, 1991). More distant still is the major political/ceremonial center of Chalchuapa, roughly 200 km south of Naco (Sharer ed. 1978). Passage from Naco to Lake Yojoa, Comayagua, Chalchuapa, and Copan requires traversing different physiographic zones that may have been homes to distinct, independent Middle Preclassic polities but for which relevant archaeological data is currently lacking. Naco was, therefore, potentially linked by unknown numbers of intermediaries to a diverse array of sociopolitical formations.

As with so many portions of southeastern Mesoamerica, systematic archaeological investigations in Naco were late in starting. Cursory reconnaissance and test-excavations carried out in 1936 (Strong et al. 1938) were not succeeded by additional work until John Henderson of Cornell University began the Naco Valley Archaeological Project in 1975. Henderson directed field research here through 1977 (Henderson et al. 1979), the two senior authors continuing investigations for eight more seasons (between 1978 and 1996 [the 1979 season was conducted with A. Wonderley]; Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman and Urban eds. 1994; Urban 1986a, 1986b; Wonderley 1981). A total ground survey of the valley and its immediate environs recorded 463 prehistoric sites of which 65 have been excavated. Analysis of roughly 845,000 artifacts forms the basis for defining an occupation sequence that spans the Middle Preclassic through to the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century.

Components of 23 Naco sites are assigned to the Achiote phase (Figure 2). Identification of deposits and constructions pertaining to this earliest known period of valley settlement is based largely on the recovery of ceramics diagnostic of the interval from excavated contexts. Achiote phase materials rarely appear in the sparse surface collections secured from Naco sites, probably because relevant deposits are

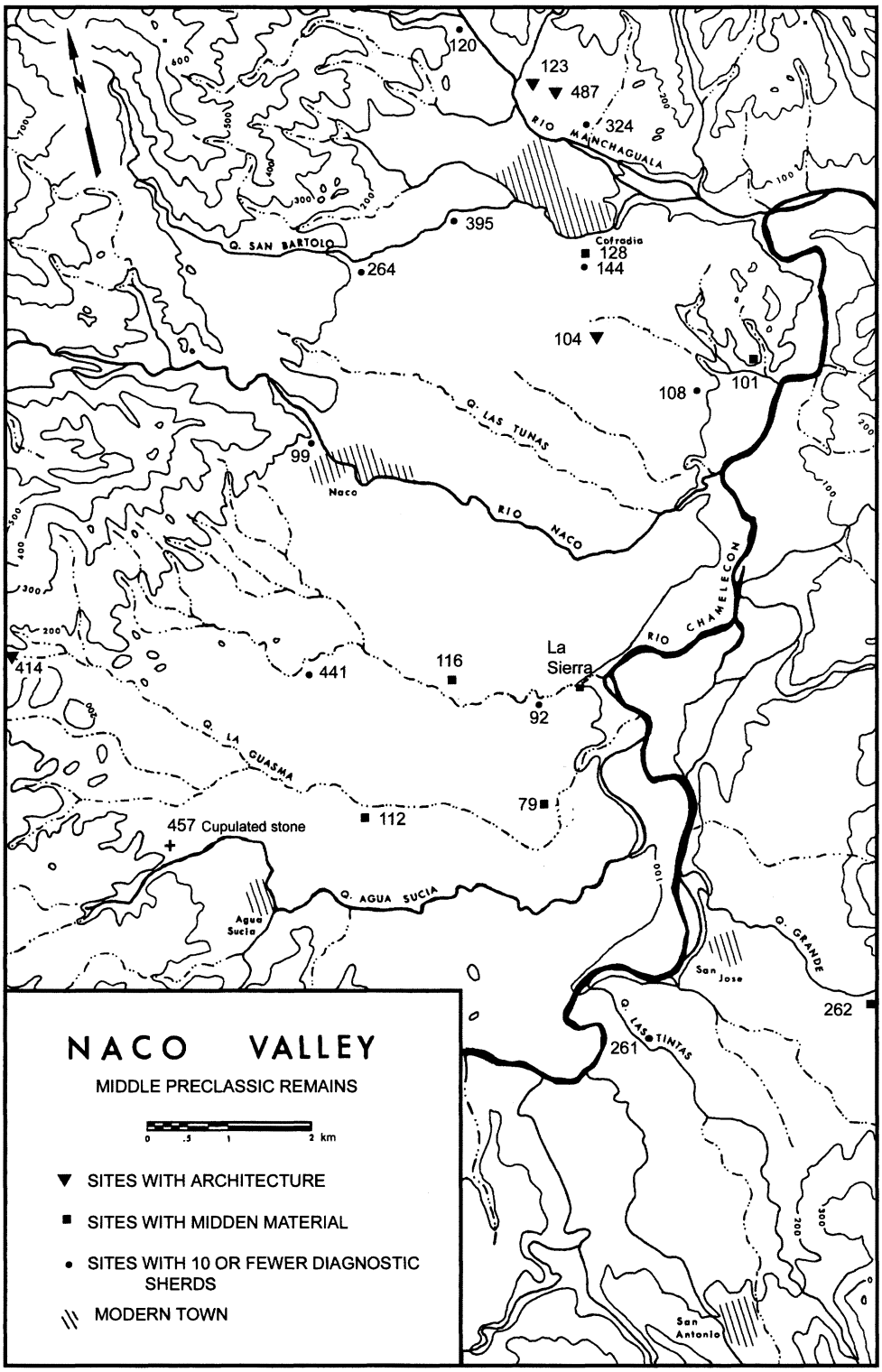


Figure 2. Naco Valley sites with evidence of Middle Preclassic occupation; one such settlement, Site 338, is located off the map, 5 km northeast of Site 262.

Table 1. Carbon-14 Assessments Relevant to Naco's Middle Preclassic.

Lot	Date	Provenience
123FF/53	2040 ± 50 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From a rock-filled pit, dug .44 m into the summit of Site 123's Achiote phase earthen terrace.
487B/30	3000 ± 50 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From charcoal found with a posthole associated with the penultimate summit floor of Structure 487-1.
414D/64	2530 ± 50 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From a midden predating the final construction phase of Structure 414-8.
414D/07	2370 ± 40 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From a midden predating the final construction phase of Str. 414-8.
99H/06	2590 ± 110 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From a midden predating visible Late Classic architecture at Site 99.
123AD/35	2500 ± 40 B.P. conventional radiocarbon age	From the earthen fill of Site 123's Achiote phase terrace, overlying (within .4m of) the cobble platforms of the second construction stage.

Note: All dates are given in their uncalibrated form followed by a one sigma spread (Beta- Analytic Laboratories). Lots are collection units from which samples were taken; the numerical prefix of each lot indicates the site where the material was excavated.

deeply buried. Exacerbating the identification problem is the enduring Naco fervor to recycle earlier debris into later edifices, thereby destroying buildings and mixing deposits. Achiote phase Naco habitations were, therefore, almost certainly more numerous than the current sample indicates.

Excavated Achiote phase materials derive from three contexts: middens, terminal debris (objects associated with a site's or structure's final occupation), and construction fill. The last category includes the hearting of Achiote phase platforms, where admixtures from other periods are nonexistent to minimal, and those of more recent edifices where Achiote phase items are outnumbered by diagnostics of later intervals. In the latter case, Achiote phase objects can only be used to identify the former existence of a settlement pertaining to this span somewhere close by, leaving the size and nature of that occupation in doubt. Such variations in recovery contexts pose interpretive problems as does the lack of in situ contexts wherein associations among objects resulting from use and/or storage patterns are preserved. Small sample sizes deny us the luxury of excluding objects found in behaviorally questionable contexts, such as fill, from analysis. Consequently, we draw cautiously on all the studied materials to infer conditions along the three continua of sociopolitical complexity outlined above.

Findings

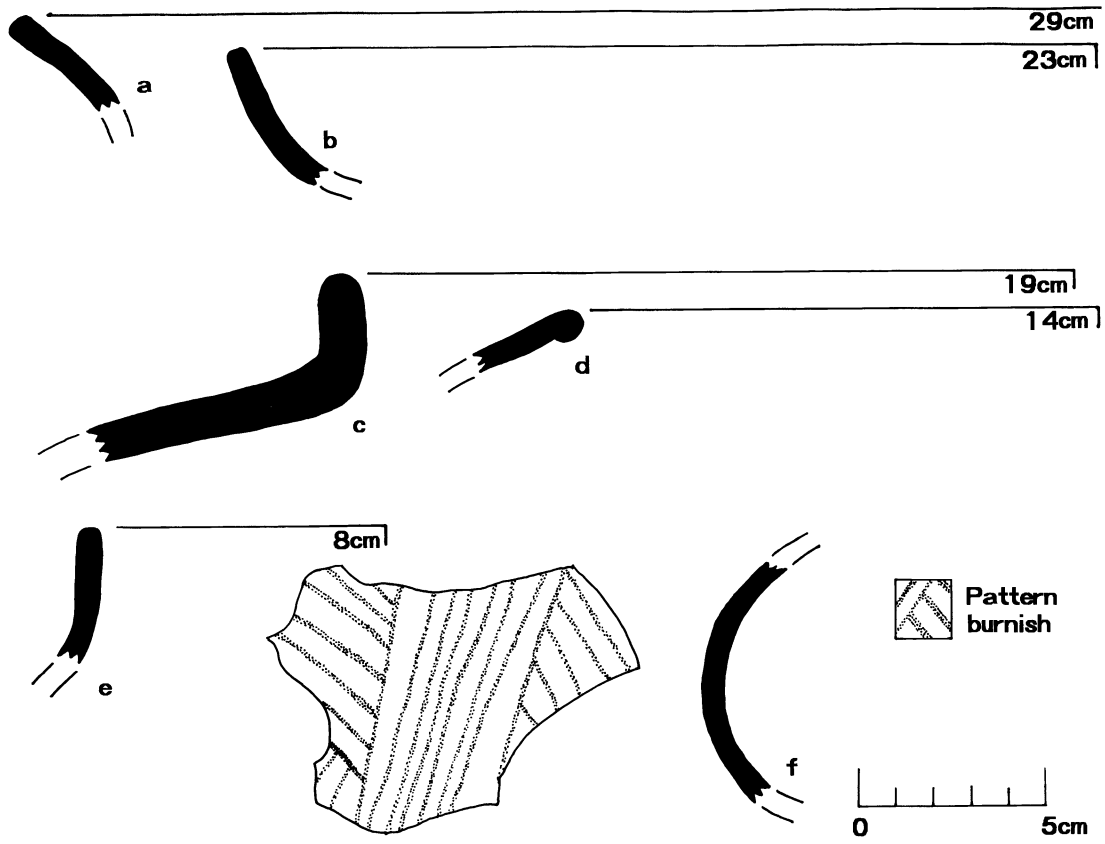
The following discussion is organized around the central issues of chronology, political centralization, social heterogeneity, and political boundaries.

Chronology

Temporal placement of the Achiote phase within the Middle Preclassic is based on comparisons of recovered artifacts (primarily ceramics) with findings published from nearby areas, the resulting estimation tested and refined through ^{14}C assays of six organic samples (Table 1). Type-variety-mode analyses of roughly 19,000 Naco sherds form the basis for defining the Manchaguala complex of the Achiote phase and specifying its chronological position. Particular attention was devoted in these studies to surface treatment and decorative variables, stylistic elements sensitive to temporal shifts (see Urban 1993; Willey et al. 1967 describes the relevant taxa).

The Manchaguala complex is dominated by variations on two ceramic themes: highly burnished, unslipped black to pale brown vessels (the Chagüites group and its component types/varieties) and smoothed to lightly burnished, reddish-brown containers (Peñonas, Campo Alegre, Las Yayas, and Sajarial categories; Figures 3–7). Decoration in both cases consists of red-painted stripes and a red-orange wash applied over vessel exteriors and, for bowls, interiors; striations; brushing; patterned burnishing; incised geometric designs; and modeled appliques. Pastes are generally medium to coarse, hard, and frequently preserve a firing core. Flaring and vertical-necked and neckless jars (tecomates) are found along with cylinders, open-mouthed bowls, and a few plates.

The Manchaguala complex fits comfortably within the range of variation exhibited by Middle Pre-



Figures 3. Forms and decorative modes associated with Achiote phase Chagtüites vessels.

classic ceramics found in surrounding areas. Chagüites containers, in particular, are nearly identical to El Congo group pottery from the Tok and Colos (1200–900 B.C., 900–650 B.C.) complexes at Chalchuapa (Sharer 1978a:13–15) and the Late Xox and Max ceramic complexes from the Salama Valley in the northern Guatemalan highlands (1000–800 B.C., 800–500 B.C.; Sharer and Sedat 1987: 279–280). Moguete Poli, a minority type from Jaral-phase Los Naranjos (800–400 B.C.), is comparable to Chagüites (Baudez and Becquelin 1973:156–158) as may be the "polished black and gray" vessels reported from Puerto Escondido's Chotepe Phase (1100–900 B.C.; Joyce and Henderson 2001:10). Naco's Campo Alegre Red-Washed generally resembles the numerous red-decorated taxa from Playa de los Muertos (600–200 B.C.; Kennedy 1981: 221–229), Puerto Escondido (Joyce and Henderson 2001), material found in the La Venta and Florida valleys (900–400 B.C.; Group II, Sato 1993), and sherds dating to Lo de Vaca I (700–300 B.C.) in the Comayagua Valley (Baudez 1966). Red-slipped and/or washed vessels are more rarely attested to at Jaral phase Los Naranjos (Baudez and Becquelin 1973:151–152). Coquima Red from Chalchuapa's Colos complex may be a distant analogue to Campo Alegre (Sharer 1978a:20). Pattern-burnishing appears frequently in Yarumela II deposits at the site of the same name in the Comayagua Valley (800–300 B.C.; Canby 1951:80–81; Dixon et al. 1994) and has a long history at Puerto Escondido where it stretches back to at least the Ocotillo Phase (1400–1100 B.C.) and continues to characterize the Middle Preclassic Chotepe and Playa de los Muertos assemblages (1100–700 B.C.; Joyce and Henderson 2001).

In contrast, the Naco collection yielded little evidence for white-slipping and zoned decoration, procedures known from contemporary Los Naranjos and the Comayagua valley, nor are there clear signs of the differential firing reported from Chotepe-phase

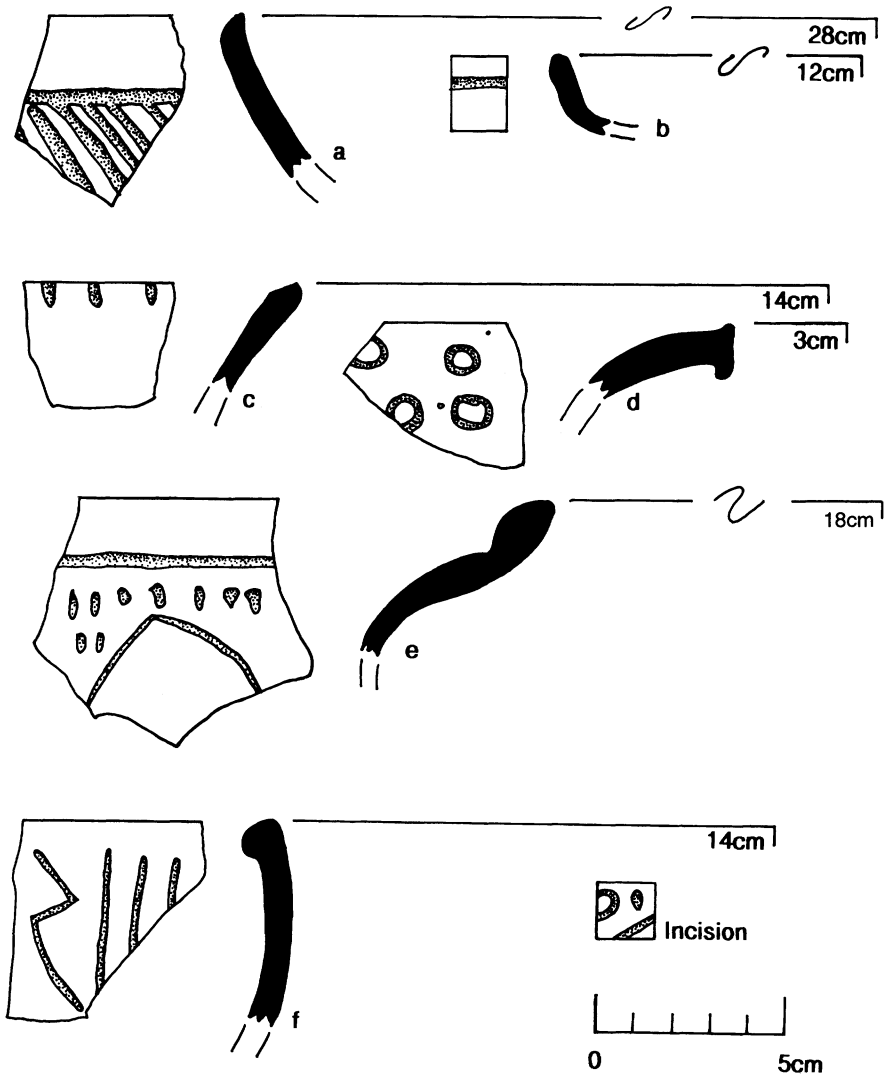


Figure 4. Forms and decorative modes associated with Achiote phase Chagüites vessels.

Puerto Escondido (Joyce and Henderson 2001:10). On the other hand, brushing and striation appear to have been rarely practiced outside Naco at this time. Overall, the Manchaguala complex is characterized by distinctive attributes (such as pattern-burnishing) and coherent associations among stylistic features (represented by Chagüites taxa) that link Naco with Middle Preclassic phases in both nearby and distant areas.

The vast majority of the 9,845 analyzed Achiote phase lithics are simple tools and debris generated within a percussion-flake industry (studied by N. Ross, 1997). Most of these casual implements are fashioned from locally available perlite (96 percent), chert (2 percent), and a variety of poorly represented other materials such as quartz, tuff, and basalt (1 percent in all). Only 83 examples of imported obsidian, 44 in blade form, were identified in good Achiote phase contexts. A percussion-flake industry is reported for Copan's Uir phase (900–400 B.C.; Sweeny 1983), and this form of tool production is apparently widespread throughout large portions of Middle Preclassic southern Mesoamerica (e.g., Clark and Lee 1984). Chalchuapa's Middle Preclassic lithic assemblage, however, is based on blades fashioned from imported obsidian cores (Sheets 1978:74).

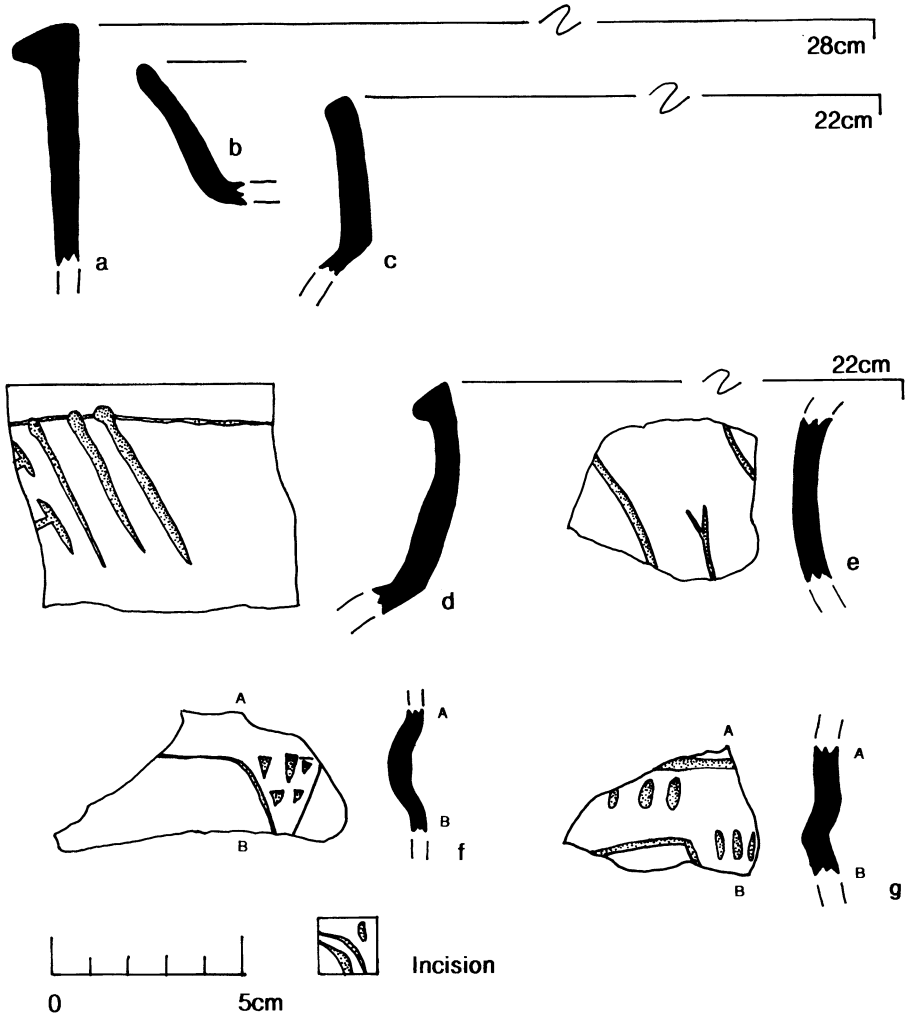


Figure 5. Achiote phase Peñonas vessels decorated with pattern burnishing.

Chotepe phase deposits at nearby Puerto Escondido also yielded blades made on obsidian derived from the distant Ixtepeque and El Chayal flows (Joyce and Henderson 2001:12). Achiote phase casual flake tools, therefore, conform to production strategies seen elsewhere in Middle Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica and contrast with the obsidian blade-dominated industries that characterize Naco throughout the Classic and Postclassic periods (A.D. 200–1500; Ross 1997).

Dates obtained from ^{14}C assessments of organic samples derived from Sites 99, 123, 414, and 487 generally fall within the range predicted by artifact comparisons (Table 1). The oldest sample, 487B/30, comes from charred material associated with a post-hole that was part of the superstructure topping the penultimate version of a massive earthen platform. This date is somewhat earlier than expected. Still, the most recent end of the sample's range, 1045 B.C., is not an unreasonable placement for the early portion of the Achiote phase. The two Site 414 collections fall near the end of the expected range. This finding tentatively confirms field-based estimates of Site 414's late placement within the Achiote phase based on the prevalence of ceramic attributes, including form shifts. Samples 123AD/35 and 99H/06 occupy a middle position vis-à-vis the Sites 487 and 414 collections, a finding in keeping with analyses of pottery from those settlements. Sample 123FF/53 was recovered from a .44 m deep, rock-filled pit sunk into the top of the principal Achiote phase construction at Site 123. Pottery recovered from the

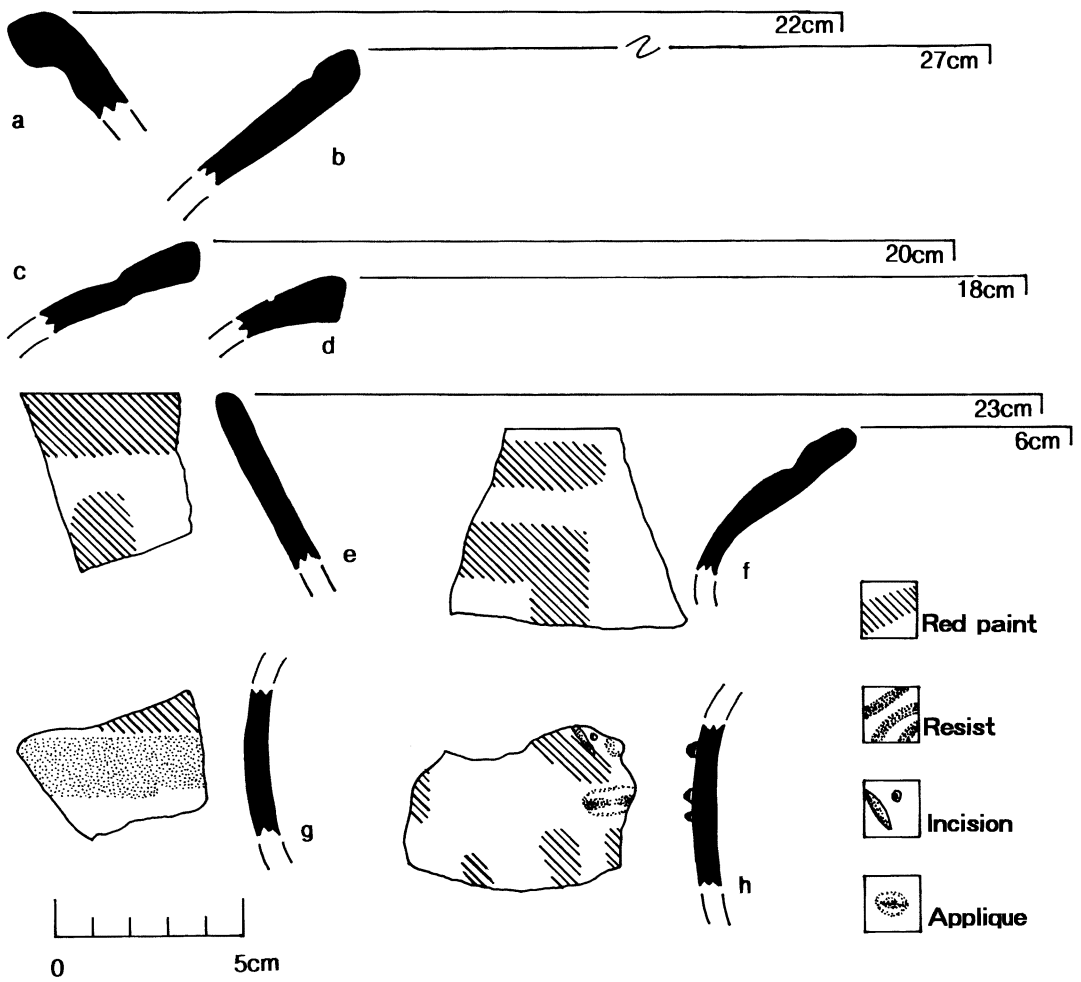


Figure 6. Forms and decorative modes associated with Achiote phase Peñonas vessels.

concavity pointed to its excavation long after the Achiote phase building had been abandoned. This ^{14}C assay, therefore, provides a *terminus ante quem* date for Site 123's Achiote phase occupation.

Radiocarbon assays, therefore, confirm chronological placement of the Achiote phase based on artifact analyses and cross-ties. They also remind us that not all Achiote phase settlements are likely to have been occupied simultaneously, a supposition that is seconded by the aforementioned changes in ceramic attributes. Lacking ^{14}C assessments, temporal placement of components *within* the Middle Preclassic requires analyzing large ceramic samples from relevant deposits. As most Naco settlements did not yield collections of sufficient size, or material suitable for ^{14}C testing, they can only be assigned a general Achiote phase date.

Political Centralization

The small collection of Achiote phase sites contains a surprising amount of variation. Eighteen were modest residential loci without preserved architecture. Site 459 on the southwest valley margin, however, consists entirely of a ca. 1 m^2 tuff slab into the level surface of which 15 cup-shaped depressions were carved. The latter range from .03–.2 m in diameter and are .02–.16 m deep. The stone extends down at least 1 m below current ground surface and seems to be part of local bedrock. No other signs of occupation were identified in the immediate area. The slab's modification is dated to the Achiote phase based on its general similarity to "cupulated" stones assigned to the Middle to Late Preclassic transition in the Salama valley (Sharer and Sedat 1987:

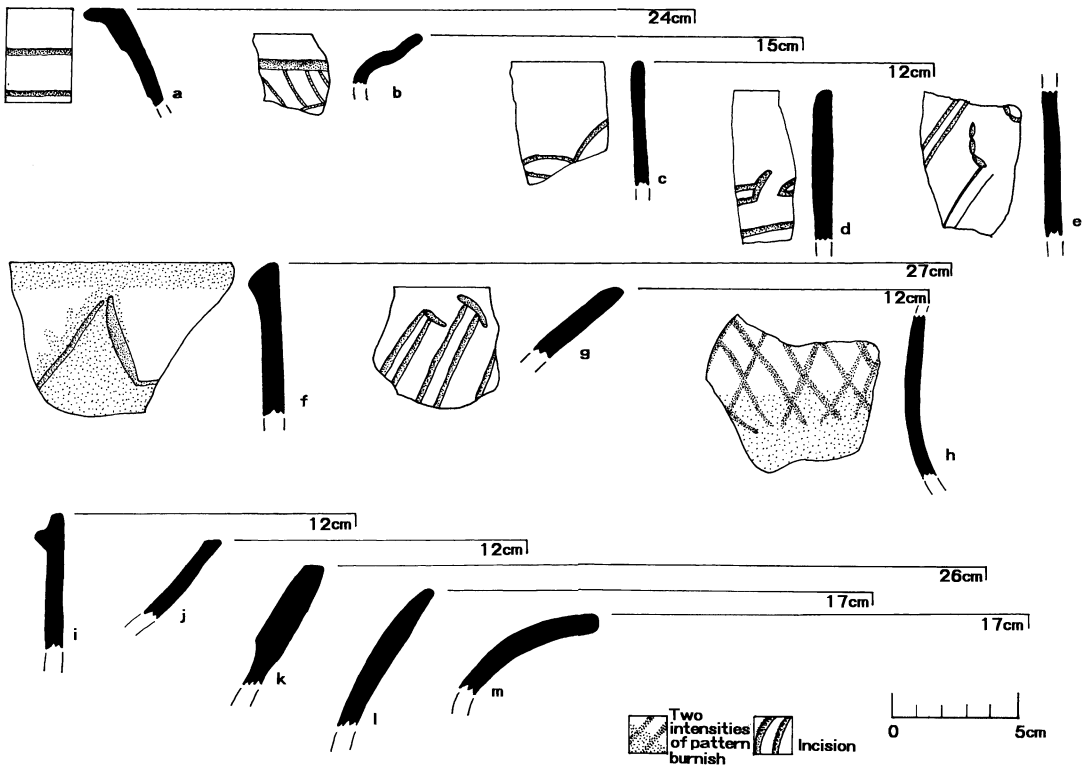


Figure 7. Forms associated with Achiote phase Peñonas vessels.

371–373) and to the Middle Preclassic in Veracruz, Mexico (Cobean 1996). The locally unique appearance of the stone, coupled with the absence of domestic debris, implies that Site 459 was a special-purpose settlement.

Four sites are distinguished by monumental constructions. Sites 104 and 487 are each dominated by a single, conical earthen structure. These buildings ascend ca. 3 m above current ground surface and have diameters of 41.5 m and 49 m (Structures 104-1 and 487-1, respectively). Excavating 123 m^2 of Achiote phase deposits altogether on these edifices revealed that the platforms were each the product of seven building phases (Figures 8 and 9). Both constructions began on a small scale, consisting of platforms capped by earth floors at least some of which were purposefully burnt to enhance their hardness. With exposures of the earliest levels restricted to 1 m^2 probes, all that could be discerned was that the first five phases in Structure 487-1 and three in Structure 104-1 added a total of .2–1.2 m to the heights of their predecessors.

This sequence of incremental growth was succeeded by a significant upsurge in construction activity during which roughly 2 m and 1 m of earth fill were added to the heights of Structures 104-1 and 487-1, respectively. Clearing 3 m^2 on the former's summit revealed that the expansion was capped by a .1 m thick earthen floor that had been intensively fired over most (probably all) of its extent. The majority of Structure 487-1's 90.5 m^2 summit was exposed, revealing a heavily burnt earth floor averaging .11 m thick. Six postholes, .25–.45 m in diameter, were preserved in this surface. Four of these entities define a quadrilateral measuring roughly 1.15 m x 1.45 m on the summit's southeast margin. A .24 m high, U-shaped cobble construction, encompassing 1.1 x 1.3 m and open to the southeast, partially overlaps one of these postholes and is one of the few stone constructions recorded on either building. Earthen terraces may have ascended Structure 487-1's flanks, elusive remnants of the uppermost elements being recognized .32 m and .6 m below the summit's northeast and southwest margins.

Considerable effort was invested in raising Structures 104-1 and 487-1 to their height of 2.2 m, as well as in fashioning their extensive earthen summit floors. The superstructures that rose above those

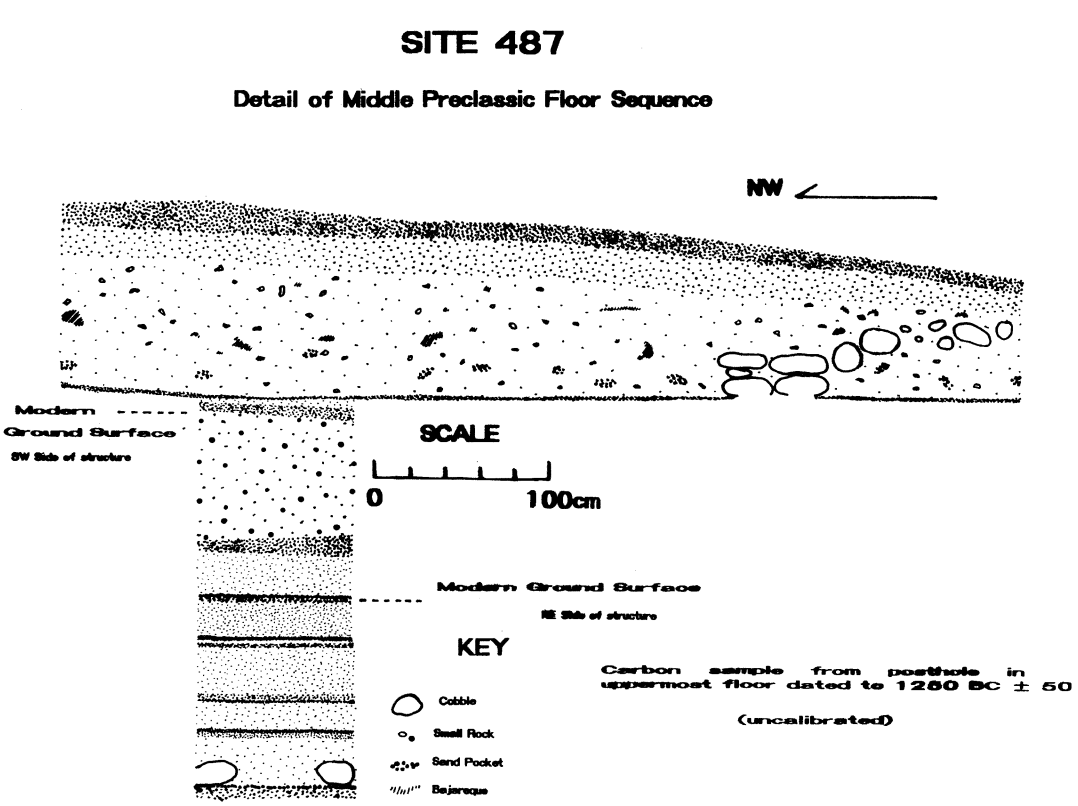


Figure 8. Construction sequence revealed within Structure 487-1.

surfaces were fashioned primarily of perishable materials, probably *bajareque* (wattle and daub). An additional ca. 1.1 m of earth fill was added, over the course of several building phases, to the tops of both edifices. Due to their proximity to current ground surface, most features associated with the latest versions are lost to erosion.

Excavation of ca. 60 m^2 of Achiote phase deposits at Site 123 revealed a somewhat different construction history (Figure 10). Located a scant 325 m west of Site 487, this settlement was a major Terminal Preclassic (A.D. 1–200) administrative center. Raising the 24 monumental platforms that dominate the Terminal Preclassic site may well have damaged and/or destroyed earlier edifices. Evidence of Achiote phase construction is currently known from only the southwest corner of Site 123 where deep tests unearthed a complex occupation and construction sequence divisible into three phases (Clark et al. 1991; Urban 1986a). Use of the investigated area begins with accumulation of a .2–.5 m thick midden directly atop culturally sterile, river-deposited, coarse, yellow sands. A mass of cobbles covering 10.5 m by 16 m include the remains of what appear to be two stone-faced platforms built over the midden. These edifices are preserved to .5 m high and each measures at least 6 x 6 m. A 1 m-long block of oxidized mud is the only sign of a *bajareque* construction raised atop ancient ground surface adjacent to the platforms. Three burnt, rectangular mud bricks (each measuring .05 x .15 m) recorded in section immediately above the platforms are the only such blocks identified for any time period in Naco.

Approximately 2 m of earth fill buries the aforementioned complex. Though the resulting construction's form is difficult to reconstruct, this final version is apparently a massive earthen terrace built into a natural south-to-north ascent away from the nearby Rio Manchaguala. There is no sign of a hiatus interrupting deposition of the terrace fill, suggesting that the edifice was raised to its final height in one major building effort. Faint outlines of at least one pit with tapering sides, sunk minimally 1.25 m into the terrace's summit, were discerned in excavations. Pit contents differed little from materials recovered in the surrounding fill, suggesting that the excavation in

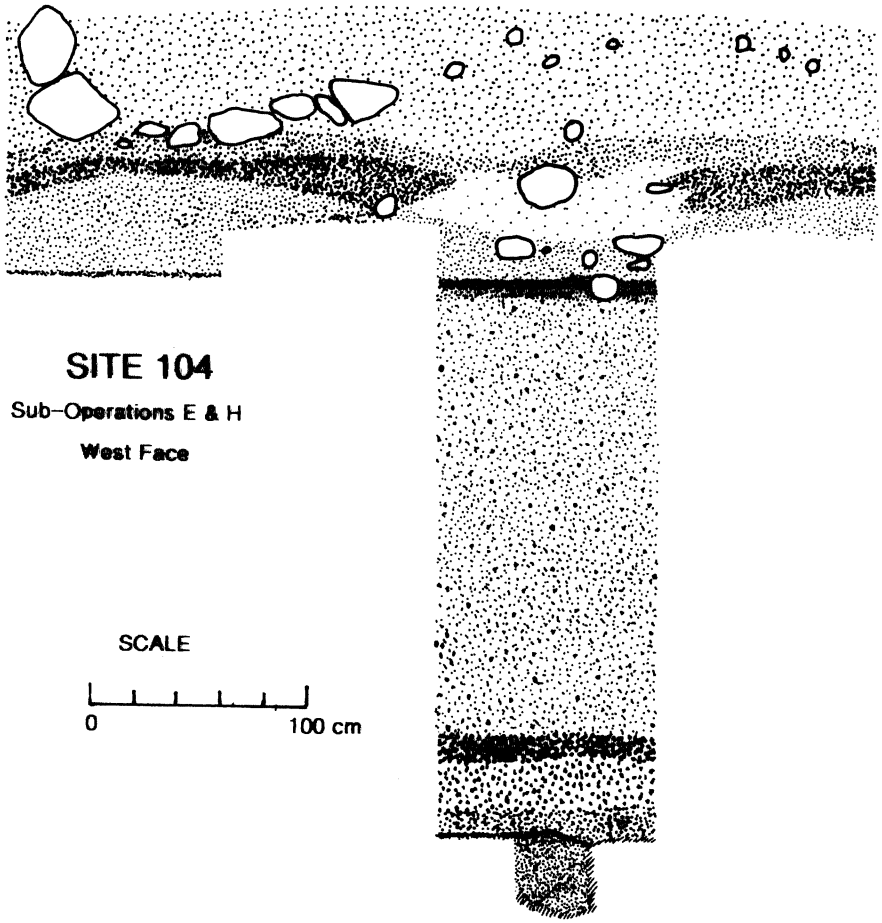


Figure 9. Construction sequence revealed within Structure 104-1.

question did not long postdate terrace construction.

Site 414 differs from the Achiote phase components of Sites 104, 123, and 487 in that no one construction dominates this settlement on the southwest valley margins (Figure 11). Instead, five sizeable platforms are dispersed over 32,100 m^2 here. Three of these edifices are loosely aggregated around a patio open to the southeast (Structures 414-7, 8, and 10). Site 414 buildings are extensive, covering 250–880 m^2, but rise only .45–1.66 m above current ground level.

Approximately 54 m^2 of Achiote phase deposits were excavated overall in three Site 414 buildings (Structures 414-6 through 8). Structures 414-7 and 8 are earthen platforms faced with walls fashioned of unmodified river cobbles and angular stones. The former is a reconstructed 1.9 m tall while the latter rose no more than .85 m. Superstructures in both cases were made of perishable material set, at least on Structure 414-7, atop stone foundations. Structure 414-6 was apparently not a purposefully constructed platform but a ca. 1.4-m-thick trash deposit.

Construction sequences at Structures 104-1, 487-1, and the Site 123 terrace share certain features. In each case, relatively diminutive buildings are succeeded by a single construction effort that radically transformed the edifice through the addition of 1–2 m of earthen fill. Subsequent construction continued to enhance the dimensions of Structures 104-1 and 487-1, though on a more modest scale than that characteristic of the previous building effort. There is no evidence that the Site 123 terrace was expanded following the third building phase. The result in each case was the creation of a single, massive earthen construction that dominated its respective site. Site 414's builders diverged from this pattern. Here, the single platform rising in splendid isolation is replaced by at least five edifices, none of which approaches

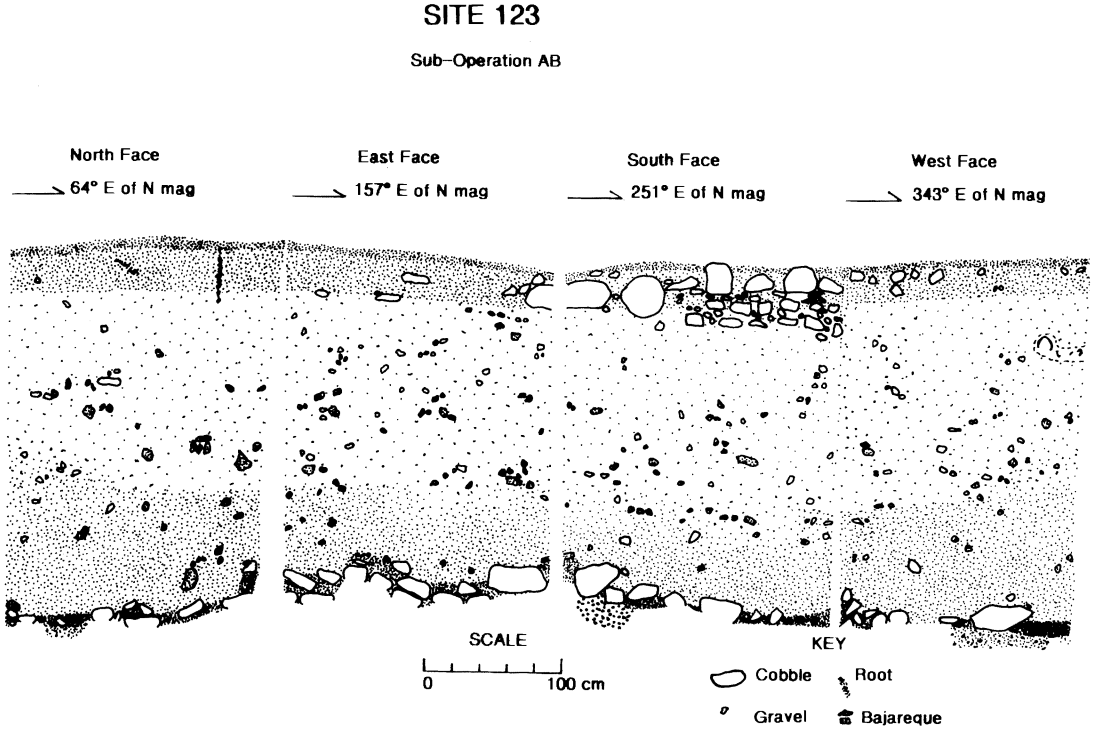


Figure 10. Construction sequence revealed within Site 123's Achiote phase monumental terrace.

the aforementioned buildings in size. Surrounded by other constructions, even a relatively large platform such as Str. 414-7 does not have the same visual impact as Structures 104-1, 487-1, and the Site 123 terrace. Site 414's Achiote phase buildings are also faced with stone retaining walls, a pattern not replicated at Sites 104 and 487.

Overall, the pace and magnitude of construction at Sites 104, 123, and 487 point to limited periods of intense building activity, tentatively implying equally restricted spans during which significant control over labor was exercised by those supervising the work. Dispersal of productive efforts among more numerous, smaller edifices at Site 414 may hint at less centralized control over labor or the provision of distinct physical facilities for activities aggregated on a single, larger platform at the other three settlements.

Deciding among these alternatives, as well as investigating the extent to which would-be aggrandizers commanded labor to meet their own, as opposed to community, needs, requires identifying the activities pursued on each excavated building. This effort is complicated by the absence of objects recovered from use-related contexts associated with all but the final versions of investigated edifices and the significant disruptions caused by reuse of the platforms from the Middle Preclassic to the present day. An extensive, maximally .7 m thick, midden located off the northeast face of the summit of Str. 487-1's final version suggests the performance of at least some quotidian activities on this platform. To what extent this pattern can be generalized to Achiote phase monumental constructions at Sites 123 and 104 is not clear. The Site 414 buildings may represent a move toward the creation of separate facilities for specific behaviors, a pattern that characterizes monumental and nonmonumental Naco settlements from this point onward. Site 414's occupation near the end of the Achiote phase makes an argument for changes in activity patterning plausible. Excavated materials associated with Site 414 structures, however, do not indicate if and how behaviors were variably distributed across the center.

Available evidence, therefore, indicates the existence of a two-tier settlement hierarchy during the Achiote phase, settlements at different levels distinguished by the amount of labor invested in their component buildings. Early in this span, pinnacle settlements contained one massive platform. Later on, construction efforts at the apical center were

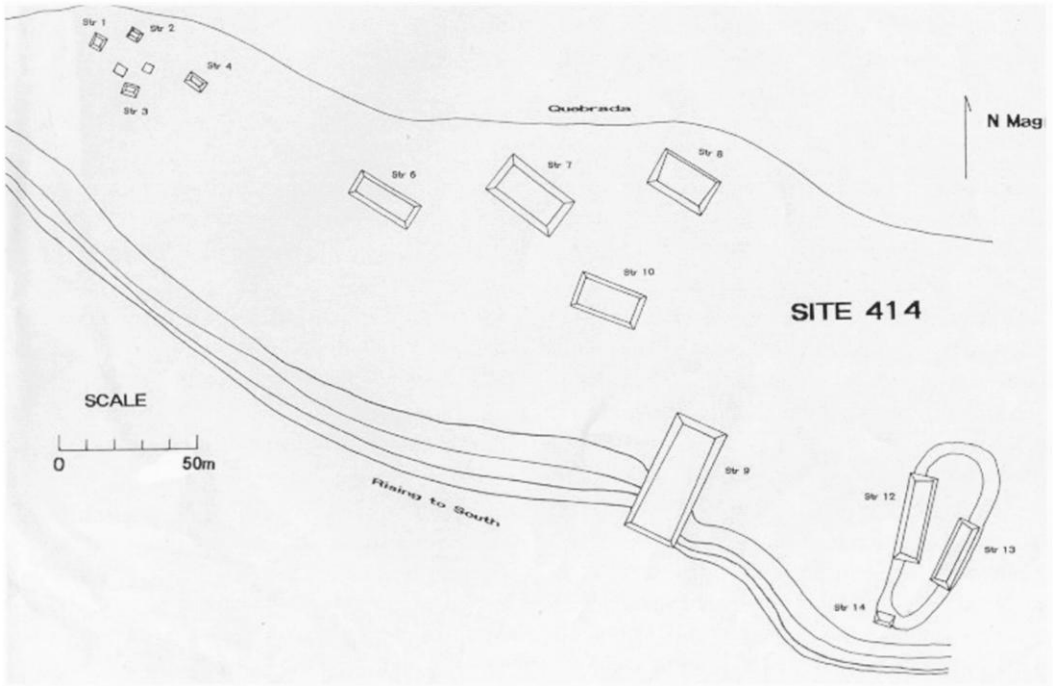


Figure 11. Site 414. Note that the cluster of buildings associated with Structure 1-4 seems to date to the Late Classic (A.D. 600–950); the temporal placement of Structures 12–14 is unknown.

divided among several more diminutive, though still substantial, edifices. As impressive as some of the buildings were, labor control may have been slow in developing and ephemeral. Site 104, 123, and 487 construction histories all document an initial, probably protracted, interval during which modest edifices were erected, none of which required considerable exertion from large numbers of people to fashion. Subsequent dramatic metamorphoses of the dominant structure bespeak a locally unprecedented change in labor mobilization regimes as many hands were needed to excavate, transport, and deposit large quantities of fill. Site 123's terrace was not modified thereafter. Additions made to Structures 104-1 and 487-1 pale in comparison to earlier exertions. Whatever faction commissioned these edifices, therefore, apparently had trouble maintaining their hold over labor. In addition, there is some evidence that political centers shifted during the Achiote phase. Radiocarbon assays tentatively suggest that initiation of substantial construction at Site 123 postdates similar activities at Site 487. This temporal disjunction may account for the physical propinquity of the two centers. We have already noted that Site 414 is the most recent of the four apical sites. While Site 104's chronological position vis-á-vis the other centers cannot be established by technical means, based on artifact analysis, it seems likely that no more than two political nodes existed simultaneously in Naco. Political centralization, manifest through labor control, was, therefore, relatively evanescent, power changing hands several times throughout the interval.

We hypothesize, therefore, that the relatively dispersed Achiote phase populations were divided by their access to power. A minority could organize and direct the productive efforts of the majority in raising large-scale edifices that were probably nodes of sociopolitical integration, as well as residences of the aggrandizers themselves. Such political preeminence was not long-lasting, however, and labor control shifted among the residents of various settlements throughout this long span. The apparent reorganization of administrative/integrative activities implied by Site 414's novel structural arrangement may have been part of an effort to fashion more durable power relations. It is difficult to ascertain how successful this strategy was. That all subsequent Naco political

centers possess cores where activities were distributed among multiple, large-scale constructions suggests that the organizational scheme initiated by Site 414's builders had an enduring appeal.

Social Heterogeneity

Data in hand indicate that occupants of each Achiote phase site were more-or-less economically autonomous. Even allowing for the existence of undiscovered settlements, population seems to have been dispersed across fertile, well-watered portions of the valley. Organic remains unearthed in Achiote phase excavations also tentatively point to widespread involvement in the same subsistence regime. All Naco residents at this time apparently relied on an economy that combined agriculture with hunting and exploitation of riparian species. There is little evidence for occupational specialization, each domestic unit probably furnishing most, if not all, of the basic goods needed to ensure physical survival and social reproduction. Raw materials and skills essential to fabricating essential items could be acquired readily by all Naco inhabitants.

Wealth differences are also minimally expressed. No clear status markers, imported or locally made, were recovered from excavated collections at any site. Instead, assemblages everywhere consist of essentially the same repertoire of utilitarian ceramics, chipped, and a few ground, stone implements. Burials, often key sources of information on wealth distinctions, were rarely encountered and did not clearly indicate status distinctions.

Though the results are far from definitive, there is presently no evidence to suggest that those who sought power exercised privileged control over basic local resources, imported goods, and the skills needed to fashion items valued by all Naco residents. Without such monopolies, power seekers would have been hard-pressed to ensnare people in dependency relations, thereby converting equals into indebted clients (e.g., Arnold 1995; Earle 1991; Hayden 1995; Paynter 1989). Leaders, therefore, lacked the economic levers with which to pry loyalty and labor out of subordinates. This perennial difficulty may well have contributed to the shifting power relations hinted at in construction sequences.

Boundedness

Given the points presented above, the Achiote phase Naco Valley seems to have been relatively isolated economically. Imports are rare, most artifacts being fashioned from raw materials found within the valley's confines.

Turning to the dimension of idea flows, as manifest in the distribution of ceramic styles, Naco is anything but a well-delimited unit. As noted in the discussion of chronology, Achiote phase populations freely participated in networks through which an extensive range of ceramic motifs were distributed. In the case of Chagüites vessels, Naco residents adopted a coherent suite of related attributes tying them to people living over broad areas of southern Mesoamerica. Specific decorative treatments, traveling independently of any "design package," also link Naco with a wide range of variably distant societies. Pattern burnishing, red-washing, and the use of simple, incised geometric designs are examples of these attributes. If Achiote phase ceramic production was as decentralized as we suspect, then motifs acquired from afar must have been available for emulation by a large segment of the total population. This surmise corresponds to the observation made earlier that no one faction enjoyed privileged access to external contacts.

Transactions conducted across social borders were seemingly unobstructed and open, if not to everyone, then at least to a significant proportion of Naco's residents. Insofar as boundaries are cultural creations designed, in part, to circumscribe zones of control, the vagueness of Achiote phase frontiers implies relatively weak political centralization in Naco (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996:21–22). Maintenance of external contacts affords options to relocate if and when demands of social leaders are judged excessive. This opportunity, realized or not, would have been an effective brake on the overweening ambitions of aggrandizers.

Comparisons and Surmises

Comparisons

This brief review of published material on Middle Preclassic developments in southeastern Mesoamerica focuses on processes of political centralization, social heterogeneity, and boundedness (see Figure 1 for the location of relevant sites). Significant power and wealth concentrations are attested to at Chalchuapa, Los Naranjos, and Yarumela (Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Canby 1949, 1951; Dixon 1989, 1992; Dixon et al. 1994; Sharer ed. 1978). Impres-

sive constructions are raised at all three centers during this span. Structure E3-1-2nd at Chalchuapa, a 22-m-high stone-faced earthen cone, dominates that center. Large-scale building efforts at Los Naranjos include the raising of two sizeable platforms, 3 m and 6 m high, as well as digging a massive ditch 1,300 m long, 15–20 m wide, and 6.5 m deep. Egalitarian relations in the Early Preclassic at Yarumela (ca. 1000 B.C.) gave way to a hierarchical structure by the end of the Middle Preclassic (1000–400 B.C.). This shift is strongly suggested by recovery at Yarumela of five plaster-coated platforms 2–20 m high, an elite domestic complex, and the unearthing of imported, high-value commodities such as jade beads and marble vessels. Elite burials assignable to Chalchuapa's Middle Preclassic were not found, but a rich interment was uncovered within the fill of one of Los Naranjos's monumental platforms (T.8, Sepulture 2). Included as offerings here are large stone ornaments as well as a necklace and belt of jadeite beads (Baudez and Becquelin 1973).

The contemporary Copan and Sula valleys yield evidence of some wealth differences associated with modest signs of labor control. Though Copan's Uir phase settlement generally consists of small, dispersed hamlets, deep probes dug beneath Group 9N-8 in the valley bottom revealed 32 interments enclosed within the fill of two substantial cobble-faced platforms (Fash 1985:138; Viel and Cheek 1983:563, 566, 569, 574–575, 588). Most of the burials are secondary interments with few to no associated goods. Burial VIII-27, however, contained large quantities of stone beads and engravers, jade effigy teeth, and four ceramic vessels. This individual's youth may imply that the deference reflected in the offerings was ascribed. At the very least, the prestige of parents was seemingly imparted to their young children to some degree (Hayden 1995). The sizes of the platforms themselves, one is over 20 m long, suggest a moderate amount of labor control, perhaps exercised by the faction buried with such pomp.

Burial No. 8 at Playa de los Muertos in the Sula Plain is distinguished from other Middle Preclassic interments at the site by the richness of its associated offerings (Gordon 1898; Kennedy 1981; Popenoe 1934; Strong et al. 1938; see Healy 1984). These include necklaces and belts of jadeite and shell beads along with four elaborately decorated pottery vessels and two ceramic figurines (Popenoe 1934:73–74). Once again, the individual so honored was quite young, hinting at means for acquiring wealth not dependent on individual achievement over a long life. That the very young are so distinguished in death need not imply inheritance of exalted status. The pattern does suggest, however, that an important component of an individual's charisma derived from their familial associations. The diversity of dress and ornamentation on contemporary Playa de los Muertos clay figurines also supports the existence of social distinctions (Agurcia 1978; Healy 1984:125). Differential burial treatment may be paralleled by architectural variation. Humble wattle-and-daub buildings raised directly on ground surface characterize Playa de los Muertos (Kennedy 1981:51–52). At Puerto Escondido in the Sula Plain, however, a "large, stepped earthen platform" was built during the transition from the Chotepe to Playa phases (ca. 900 B.C.; Joyce and Henderson 2001:10). Associated with this locally unprecedented construction is at least one deposit of jade ornaments and "two human burials with traces of pigment" (Joyce and Henderson 2001:10). These constructions and associated offerings contrast with the edifices unearthed at Playa de los Muertos and may point to an emerging political hierarchy. As of this writing, however, the magnitude of this distinction does not appear to be on the order of that witnessed at Chalchuapa, Los Naranjos, or Yarumela.

Middle Preclassic occupation in the La Venta and La Florida valleys consists of small hamlets dispersed near reliable water sources (Nakamura 1991:251–252). Power and wealth differentials do not seem to have been marked, though an unexcavated site with two earthen platforms standing 1.5 m high might have been an administrative center (Nakamura 1991:251).

Mindful of the patchy nature of the available data, several hypotheses concerning sociopolitical developments in Middle Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica can be offered. Political centralization and wealth differentiation were variably advanced throughout the zone. Social leaders at Chalchuapa, Los Naranjos, and Yarumela had apparently hit on successful labor control strategies, harnessing the exertions of subordinates to raise truly impressive edifices. The paucity of relevant burials at Chalchuapa and Yarumela leaves the issue of wealth distinctions in doubt, though exotics recovered from these centers hint at the ability of rulers to acquire prized items. Aggrandizers in the Copan and Sula

valleys may have been less successful in directing labor but were adept at collecting valuables. Whatever prestige accrued from and/or was built on this advantage apparently extended beyond individual leaders to encompass at least some of those directly associated with them, presumably family members. La Venta and La Florida Valley occupants were seemingly more successful at thwarting labor and wealth control strategies than were their counterparts in nearby areas. Naco's magnates fall between these extremes, exercising some, perhaps fleeting, control over labor but not wealth.

Distinctions between areas characterized by monumental constructions and those with relatively rich burials but lacking impressive architecture could reflect different political strategies. Emergent elites at Chalchuapa, Los Naranjos, Yarumela, and Naco possibly created hierarchies based on centralized control over performance of community-wide integrative activities enacted atop the monumental earthen platforms that dominate their centers (Blanton et al.'s "corporate strategy" [1996]; Feinman 1995; Feinman et al. 2000; Peregrine 2001; Renfrew 1974). Competitors for power in the Copan Valley and Sula Plain, however, may have sought preeminence through wealth acquired via connections maintained with compatriots in other areas (termed a "network strategy" by Blanton et al. [1996]; Feinman 1995; Renfrew 1974). The rich interment unearthed at Los Naranjos tentatively implies a combination of network and corporate strategies by magnates at this center, a tactic possibly replicated at Chalchuapa and Yarumela. Middle Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica, therefore, might well have witnessed a number of different efforts to achieve political ascendancy by elites deploying a diverse array of resources. That success was not assured is suggested by the way in which power apparently changed hands in Naco throughout the Achiote phase. Even Chalchauapa suffered a hiatus in monumental construction from 600–200 B.C. (Sharer 1978b:122), hinting at a protracted, albeit temporary, decline in elite power at this capital. The extant data may reflect numerous experiments in hierarchy-building with variable results.

Craft specialization was not well-developed in any of the studied areas. The jade/jadeite beads and shells found in several sites were fashioned by people well-versed in the necessary skills, but whether they lived where the finished artifacts were unearthed and at what scales these workshops operated we cannot tell in most cases. Data recently retrieved from Puerto Escondido does indicate that jade was worked at this nascent center during the Chotepe/Playa transition (Joyce and Henderson 2001:13). Obsidian blade production at Chalchuapa was probably conducted by resident artisans as well, but questions of scale and intensity are unresolved in both cases (Clark 1986).

As noted earlier, contacts were apparently freely maintained among all southeastern Mesoamerican populations. A limited subset of exotics might have been acquired and used exclusively by particular factions in some societies (such as the jade/jadeite beads and shells associated with a few burials), but ceramic designs were widely shared.

Evidence for more remote contacts is provided by the appearance of styles in a number of media that have analogues throughout much of Mesoamerica at this time (those pertaining to the so-called "Olmec horizon"; Grove 1993; Sharer and Grove 1989). Chalchuapa's residents incorporated motifs associated with this phenomenon in ceramics (Sharer 1974:169–170; 1978a:124–125), figurines (Dahlin 1978:175–176; Sharer 1974:169), public architecture (Sharer 1978b:73), and sculpture (Anderson 1978). Inhabitants of other southeastern areas exhibit more diffuse connections with the networks through which these styles spread, manifest primarily in the forms of certain elaborate burials (at Copan and Los Naranjos) and, more commonly, the incorporation of exotic designs in local ceramic decorative repertoires (seen at Copan, Los Naranjos, the Sula Plain, and the Cuyamel Caves on Honduras's northeast coast [Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Fash 1985:138–140; Healy 1974; Joyce and Henderson 2001]; Naco ceramics are too fragmentary to reconstruct ancient motifs).

The behavioral significance of the "Olmec" stylistic horizon is much debated (see papers in Sharer and Grove 1989). All we would argue here is that identification of "Olmec" styles in southeastern Mesoamerica suggests that local populations were variably connected to the network through which the motifs spread (see also Joyce and Henderson 2001:13, 20). Chalchuapa's inhabitants, in particular the leaders who commissioned Structure E3-1-2nd and large stone monuments, were the southeastern potentates most thoroughly integrated within the web. Further north, ties became more diffuse as reflected in the reduction of media in which

the styles appear and the low frequencies in which they are expressed. Such discrepancies hint at the various uses to which foreign designs might have been put. At Chalchuapa, exotic styles in monument carving and large-scale platform construction were seemingly used to distinguish rulers from ruled (Demarest 1989; Demarest and Sharer 1986). Residents of other southeastern Mesoamerican areas may have turned imported designs to more parochial concerns experienced by a wider range of people (e.g., Marcus 1989).

Surmises

Variations in power centralization, wealth accumulation, and the creation of political boundaries reflect, in part, the differential abilities of emergent elites to convert equals into clients who surrendered labor, loyalty, and surpluses as part of their enduring obligations to patrons (e.g., Arnold 1995; Earle 1991; Friedman and Rowlands 1978; Hayden 1995; Paynter 1989). Achiote phase Naco populations apparently maintained a high degree of economic autonomy that provided an effective base from which to resist domination strategies. The greater success enjoyed by paramounts at Chalchuapa, Yarumela, and Los Naranjos in advancing privileged claims to power and wealth may suggest less local self-sufficiency.

The general vagueness of social boundaries in Middle Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerica, coupled with the paucity of evidence for craft specialization here, imply that nowhere was power firmly established in the hands of a single faction. Leaders did not have the surplus at their disposal to underwrite coteries of artisans generating wealth from imported and local raw materials. Similarly, these same aggrandizers could not circumscribe their followers within well-defined borders. A wide range of people maintained extra-local ties through which styles and, presumably, ideas flowed. The behavioral significance of these links is hard to gauge. They might, at least, have provided contacts to which people could turn when dissatisfied with conditions at home. Maintaining an option to remove to another locale if elite demands became excessive would have been a powerful weapon in the arsenal of those resisting the pretensions of would-be paramounts.

Clearly, there is much to do before we can realistically model Middle Preclassic southeastern Mesoamerican sociopolitical forms and processes. This interval witnesses the first clear expressions of inequality known from the area and its study promises insights into a volatile period of intrasocietal competitions that gave way only after many centuries to relatively secure hierarchical formations (though see Joyce and Henderson 2001 for a discussion of the possible Early Preclassic roots of sociopolitical complexity in southeastern Mesoamerica). The hypotheses advanced here will likely be superceded. Hopefully, they suggest topics, and ways of addressing them, that will prove useful in efforts to model complex processes of competition within, and cooperation across, emerging borders.

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