

This is an extract from:

*Social Patterns in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica*

*David C. Grove and Rosemary A. Joyce, Editors*

Published by

*Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection*

*Washington, D.C.*

© 1999 Dumbarton Oaks

Trustees for Harvard University

Washington, D.C.

Printed in the United States of America

[www.doaks.org/etexts.html](http://www.doaks.org/etexts.html)

# *The Genesis of Hierarchy: Mortuary and Offertory Ritual in the Pre-Classic at Cuello, Belize*

NORMAN HAMMOND

boston university

Masses, like individuals, invariably possess elusive traits that no one has seen, that slip through one's fingers—to note them, study them, read, observe, make conjectures, to dedicate one's entire being to their study, to offer the result to humanity as a healthy dish which it has never before tasted, that is the task—the joy of joys!

Modest Mussorgsky, letter to Vladimir Stassov, 1872

**R**ecent investigations at Nakbe, El Mirador, Tikal, Lamanai, Cerros, and other Late Pre-Classic sites of the central and eastern Maya Lowlands have documented the emergence of a complex society in the latter part of the first millennium b.c. manifested in large-scale architecture, elaborate architectural sculpture, and an iconography that suggests a coherent controlling ideology. The cultural tradition thus established continues unbroken for nearly fifteen hundred years, but the development from early farming communities into such proto-urban centers needs further study. As a contribution to this, I here outline briefly some of the evidence for Pre-Classic Maya ceremonial behavior that we have encountered at the small site of Cuello in northern Belize, a community that was probably never of great importance in the Maya world of its day. Cuello has, however, yielded useful evidence on the technology and economy of the Middle and Late Pre-Classic periods, including the identification of manioc and other root crops and the systematic exploitation of dogs for food, and also of funerary and offertory behavior within a slowly aggrandizing architectural matrix which documents the gradual establishment of a local elite.

The site includes a minor ceremonial precinct of two plazas, each with a pyramid ca. 9 m high and a number of long “range” structures, around and south of which is a zone of dispersed settlement covering about 1.6 sq km (Hammond 1991: fig. 2.2). The site as mapped by 1980 comprised some two hundred platforms and structures; the discovery of ground-level dwellings detectable only by excavation led Wilk and Wilhite (1991) to suggest a population of 300–400 in the early Middle Pre-Classic prior to 600 b.c., rising to 2,200–2,600 in the Late Pre-Classic and a peak of 3,400 in the Early Classic period ending ca. a.d. 600.

Further mapping in 1992 added another 52 structures, with density diminishing toward the natural boundary enforced by low-lying terrain to the south; although any postulated higher population requires testing by excavation, an increase of 25 percent over the published estimates would not be unreasonable, to around 500 in the early Middle Pre-Classic and perhaps 3,000 in the Late Pre-Classic; the land to the east remains in dense tropical growth, however, and has not been mapped. The Classic period ceremonial precinct of a.d. 250–900 lies close to the northern limit of settlement, but Platform 34 some 300 m to the south, the apparent core of the Pre-Classic community, can now be seen as centrally located rather than toward the southern end of the community.

#### *Excavations and Chronology*

All major excavations so far have been into Platform 34, a broad raised area ca. 80 by 70 m supporting a small pyramid (Str. 35) at the western end; those of 1975–87 are summarized in Hammond (1991), of 1990–93 in Hammond, Clarke, and Robin (1991), Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli (1992), and Hammond, Clarke, and Donaghey (1995) respectively. Test excavations in Platform 34 in 1975 were followed by excavation of 50 sq m to bedrock in 1976 and by further investigations in 1978–80 during which the area was enlarged to include some 3,000 sq m of Late Formative deposits. Within this a “Main Trench” of 300 sq m was dug to either the buried palaeosol or bedrock beneath it. Completion of this area and of an additional trench at the south end of Platform 34 in 1993 has given a cross section of the Pre-Classic deposits at Cuello some 47 m long and 4 m deep.

The ceramic chronology begins with the Swasey complex, which is followed by the Bladen, both within the Swasey ceramic sphere (Kosakowsky 1987; Hammond 1991: figs. 1.2, 3.26–3.33). The Bladen complex and the coeval Bolay complex at neighboring Colha have links with the Xe sphere of the Pasión basin, with the Eb complex at Tikal, and more distantly with the Xox

complex of the Salama Valley in Baja Verapaz (Sharer and Sedat 1987). These suggest a span of ca. 900–650 b.c. for Bladen and a date of perhaps 1200–900 b.c. for Swasey (Andrews and Hammond 1990; Housley, Hammond, and Law 1991; Law et al. 1991). The sequence continues after 650 b.c. with the Late Middle Pre-Classic Lopez Mamom and Late Pre-Classic Cocos Chicanel complexes, full members of their respective ceramic spheres, with a Mamom-Chicanel transition generally placed at about 400–300 b.c. (Hammond 1991: figs. 1.2, 3.34–3.44).

I examine first, and briefly, the evidence for Middle Pre-Classic funerary practices in the period 1200–400 b.c., then that for the Late Pre-Classic, and finally the complementary data on Late Pre-Classic caches and other offerings which has resulted from the Cuello research.

### *Funerary Practices*

A total of 162 Pre-Classic individuals were excavated at Cuello, 27 dating to the Swasey and Bladen phases, 1200–650 b.c.; 31 to the Lopez Mamom phase, 650–400 b.c.; and 104 to the Cocos Chicanel phase, 400 b.c.–a.d. 250, comprising the largest present sample of Pre-Classic lowland Maya burials. They are examined here in terms of the format of the grave and burial and in terms of the social, ritual, and ideological mechanisms that may underlie these patterns. Robin (1989: app. A) gives a complete catalogue of data, burial plans, and illustrations of grave goods for burials excavated through 1987; those found in 1990 and 1992 are published in summary in Hammond, Clarke, and Robin (1991) and Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli (1992) respectively, and will be fully published, together with burials excavated in 1993 (Hammond, Clarke, and Donaghey 1995), in a supplement to Robin's monograph.

#### MIDDLE PRE-CLASSIC BURIALS

##### *Early Middle Pre-Classic: Swasey/Bladen Phases, 1200–650 B.C.*

Twenty-seven individuals in 23 graves date to the Early Middle Pre-Classic Swasey and Bladen phases, of which five (19 percent: Burials 62, 159+167, 179+180) are of Swasey date. Seven (26 percent) are definite or probable male adults, ten (37 percent) female adults, two teenagers (7 percent), and eight (30 percent) are children aged six months to ten years.

Most of the Early Middle Pre-Classic interments were in graves cut into house platform floors during initial construction, during use, and at abandonment, indicative of family-type residential burials as Haviland (1985)

demonstrated for small Classic period residential groups at Tikal. The earliest burials were not associated with plaster-floored houses, but their clustering suggests that they may have been dug through the earthen floor of a building at ground level. Twenty-two of the twenty-three graves were simple; one grave (Burial 116) is a cist containing a child (Hammond 1991: fig. 10.1).

Extended, flexed, seated, and disarticulated skeletal positions occur, with extended supine burial (nine examples) most common. The earliest Swasey burials (62, 179+180) are extended or slightly flexed, while slightly later Swasey interments (159+167) are tightly flexed and the earliest Bladen burials (176–178) are unusual in being both flexed and supine, with the knees drawn up to the chest. Extended and flexed positions are more common than seated, of which there is only one Middle Pre-Classic example at Cuello (Burial 9). There is no clear relationship between age and sex or context and skeletal position in the sample of Swasey/Bladen individuals.

The Swasey/Bladen grave good assemblage is among the most diversified and least consistent at Cuello, including pottery, a ceramic bird whistle, jade, greenstone, and shell jewelry, bone and chert tools, and ground stone. The presence of jade and greenstone in the burial assemblage by the end of Bladen, ca. 650 b.c., indicates the procurement of long-distance trade items for sumptuary use from as far as 350 km away in the Guatemalan highlands.

Only 7 (26 percent) of the 27 Swasey/Bladen interments had no grave goods, but ceramic and shell objects were the only offerings frequently deposited. The most common occurrence was a medium-to-large-sized bowl inverted over the head. Shell objects were slightly more commonly associated with female adults (6/10; 60 percent) than male adults (3/7; 43 percent); three juvenile burials also contained shell objects, one with some five hundred carefully made discoidal shell beads (which, given the presence of shell-working scrap at this period, may well have been made at Cuello).

Jade was associated with one male (14 percent), three females (30 percent), and four juveniles (50 percent). Two jade objects, associated with adult female burial (114) and child burial (166), are of particular interest. One is a blue jade spangle pendant (Hammond 1991: fig. 9.8n), the other a blue jade mirror-skeuomorph or “clamshell” pendant (Fig. 1; Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli 1992: fig. 5). The geological source for this blue jade is unknown, but, as the former piece resembles blue jade spangle pendants from La Venta, it is possible that it originated as an artifact in the Gulf Coast/Isthmus of Tehuantepec region some 600 km west of Cuello. The latter is similar to jades from Chacsinkin, Yucatan, which Andrews (1986) called “Olmec” before recanting (1987).

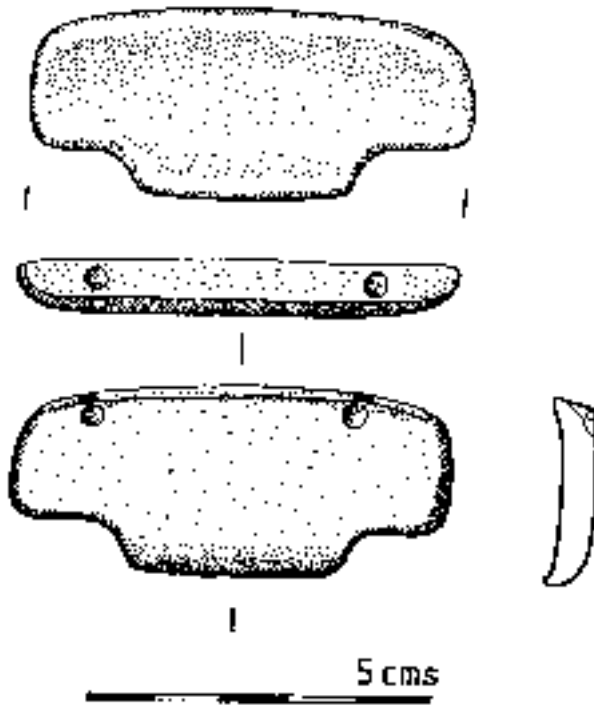


Fig. 1 Blue jade concave pendant of mirror-skeuomorph form from Cuello Burial 166, late Bladen phase, ca. 650 b.c.

Access to both multiple grave goods and long-distance trade items cut across age and sex boundaries. If generalizations on social structure could be based on so few individuals, the distribution of grave goods in the Swasey/Bladen phase would suggest some social differentiation not based on age or sex.

*Late Middle Pre-Classic: Lopez Mamom Phase, 650–400 B.C.*

Thirty individuals in single graves dated to the Late Middle Pre-Classic Lopez Mamom phase, of which 20 (67 percent) were adults (16 males [53 percent], 3 females [10 percent], and one of unknown sex) and 10 (33 percent) were juveniles.

By Lopez times the patio floor was less the locus of domestic activity than previously. Burial 22, of a male middle-to-old adult, located in the center of the patio, may indicate use of the patio area for communal ritual activity in the form of ancestor veneration, a practice more common in the Late Pre-Classic at Cuello. The subsequent patio floor contained no pits associated with domes-

tic use: all domestic activity was relegated to ancillary platforms. Patio floor V was cut by one jade cache (F190), though by no burials.

Twenty-eight (93 percent) of the Lopez phase interments were situated in houses or ancillary structures, one in an occupation surface associated with a domestic platform, and one, as noted above, was located in the center of the patio floor. As in the preceding Swasey/Bladen phases, adults of both sexes and juveniles were interred in domestic platforms. The predominant grave type (29/30; 97 percent) in the Lopez phase continued to be simple, with one cist grave, and there seems to have been a preference for extended positions over flexed, with no prevalent orientation.

Most Lopez burials had pottery vessels, and all those with grave goods had some kind of shell ornament: shell beads were associated with males and juveniles, shell bracelets/necklaces were found with males, females, and juveniles, and groups of shell beads with males and females. Other grave goods, chert, hematite, and jade, were less common. Jade beads were found only with males and by the elbows or in combination with shell jewelry. There was greater differentiation in Lopez between individuals with and those without grave goods than in the Swasey/Bladen sample. Seventy percent of the Lopez phase burials had at least three grave goods, and the majority of those with grave goods had three to five items. A high number of grave goods was associated



Fig. 2 Bone gorget made from human skull, Cuello Burial 160, Lopez Mamom phase, ca. 500–450 b.c. The technique combines incision, cut-out, and drilling; the drilled pupils of the eyes may have held jade beads, since loose specimens of an appropriate size were found in the grave.

with long-distance trade items; one of the most elaborate, Burial 160, had jade beads, carved bone tubes at the waist, and a bone gorget (Fig. 2; Hammond, Clarke, and Estrada Belli 1992: fig. 6).

There are also some distinctive traits correlated with the location of burials: Burial 1 lacked the skull, possible evidence of decapitation, or retention for veneration; it was interred, with a slab of chert where the head would have been, in the western platform, Str. 317. In Str. 352 above it a decapitated adolescent burial was placed axially, and a juvenile skull burial was placed at the top midpoint of the final pyramid, Str. 35, at the beginning of the Early Classic; thus only mutilated burials are known from the western platform throughout the Pre-Classic and into the Early Classic. All other Middle Pre-Classic platforms contained only complete burials, although no great architectural distinctions are apparent between the western platforms and those on the other sides of the patio. Thus by the end of the Middle Pre-Classic in the fourth century b.c. we see variability in burial format suggestive of social differentiation, and of differential treatment of some dead compatible with sacrificial and offertory burial or with veneration (see McAnany 1995), although the youth of some individuals makes their designation as “ancestors” problematic.

*Late Pre-Classic Burials: Cocos Phase, 400 B.C.–A.D. 250*

The largest number of burials, 104 individuals comprising 68 percent of the total Cuello sample, date to the Cocos phase (Robin 1989: tables 16–52). The large size of the sample and an excavation strategy exploring all Cocos phase contexts on Platform 34 suggest that it is representative of the population buried on Platform 34 in this period. As Platform 34 was the apparent focus of the Late Pre-Classic ceremonial precinct at Cuello, the burial practices were perhaps most representative of those of the elite segment of the population. Both sexes and all age groups from infancy to old age are represented in the Cocos phase sample, but it is clear that the 4.8:1 ratio of men to women does not represent a normal population distribution.

*Contexts.* Early in Cocos times the Lopez patio group was buried by limestone rubble more than a meter deep, in a drastic architectural transformation that culminated in the construction of the broad, elevated, open Platform 34 (Hammond and Gerhardt 1990; Hammond n.d.). A sacrificial mass burial (Mass Burial 1: Burials 29–60) of 32 individuals was placed in the center top of the rubble fill (Hammond 1991: figs. 10.4–10.5). Two adult males were the first to be deposited; in their laps and by their feet lay body bundles of nine male adults: the bones must have been at least partly fleshed prior to burial; interpre-



tation of any or all of these men as venerated ancestor interments is, to me, less plausible than the sacrificial alternative. Around this central group were placed 21 more individuals, all (with one possible exception) males, from young adult to old adult; not all of them were necessarily members of the Cuello community, as the capture of victims for sacrifice cannot be discounted. This holocaust marked the construction of Platform 34 and a change in architectural layout from the Middle Pre-Classic patio group to the broad open platform of the Late Pre-Classic.

Successive plaza floors were constructed on Platform 34 in phases VA to XIV, and in phase XI ca. a.d. 100 the plain Stela 1 was erected above the locus of the mass burial. Another sacrificial mass burial (F128: Mass Burial 2, Burials 68–79), containing 12 male individuals, was deposited east of Stela 1 (Hammond 1991: fig. 10.6). Two single primary burials, a double secondary burial, and two body bundles, containing eight secondary interments, make up Mass Burial 2. In both mass burials two individuals are the first to be placed in position, had human body bundles in their laps, and the remainder of the interments were located around the central pair. Not only are the central pair the focus of each mass burial, but they also possess the most grave goods: such patterning suggests that the two individuals were not just the physical focus of the group but also its social focus.

Six other burials seem to have been sacrifices associated with the construction of Platform 34: two were decapitated adults, one male and one female (?), lying parallel to each other but on opposite orientations, their skulls and mandibles standing upright some little way from their natural position (Hammond 1991: fig. 10.7). The others included two young children, one decapitated with a pot over the stump of the neck (Robin 1989: 382–384).

On the western side of the plaza in phases VI–XIV stood a succession of apparently ceremonial buildings of which the earliest, Str. 352, was a raised platform and the later ones stepped pyramids (Strs. 351, 350, 35). An axial burial of a decapitated adolescent (Burial 27) was placed in the final phase of Str. 352, the first western ceremonial structure. This is the only burial in these western structures in the Cocos phase.

Only the buildings on the north side of the Late Pre-Classic plaza are well known: those to the south and east were badly eroded, although a triadic layout embracing Str. 352 and its pyramidal successors existed. Burials were placed in every Cocos phase residential platform; there were no special funerary structures. As in the Middle Pre-Classic, there was opportunistic placement of domestic burials with continued use of structures, contrasting with the purposeful placement of the two mass burials and two ceremonial platform interments.

It is clear that strikingly different populations were buried in the public plaza area and the residences on the northern edge of the plaza. If one considers only definitely sexed individuals, the ratio of males to females is 28:0, while that of adults to children is 47:0 in the public plaza area; in residential platforms the ratios are 16:10 and 31:11 respectively. Males were selected for public burial, implying their importance in public activity (including sacrifice) in the Cocos phase. Within the residential sector the ratio of men to women to children suggests the same family-type burial grouping seen in the Middle Pre-Classic patio residences; juveniles were about one-third of the buried population in both northern platforms.

*Burial format.* Fifty-three graves (including the two large mass burial graves) contained the 104 Cocos phase interments. The predominant grave type (42/53; 80 percent) was still simple, although these included single, double, and triple primary and secondary interments, as well as both mass burials. Six cist graves and four crypts were found; two of the latter were plaster crypts. More elaborate types of graves do not seem to be sex-associated; seven were located in residential platforms; no association between grave wealth and grave type is apparent.

The fact that 31 percent (32 individuals) of all Cocos burials were disarticulated reflects the large number of individuals (24) contained in body bundles in the two mass burials; only three examples of completely disarticulated remains were found outside the public plaza locus. Otherwise, the seated position was the most common articulation (43 percent), while 28 percent of individuals were flexed, 17 percent extended, and 12 percent semi-reclining; every cardinal and intercardinal orientation was present, with west (25 percent) the most common. Within the plaza area, 54 percent of burials (7 individuals) were oriented west. The correlation between plaza burials and a predominantly western or toward-the-pyramid orientation may also signify the importance of these burials in public/ceremonial rituals.

*Mortuary assemblage.* The Cocos phase mortuary assemblage was the most diversified in the Pre-Classic phases at Cuello. Types of grave goods found in the Cocos phase include pottery vessels (one imported), carved bone tubes, jade, greenstone, and shell beads and shell pendants, obsidian blades, a chert tool, two metates, and red ocher sticks. Contact with the eastern Maya Highlands is indicated by an Olocuitla Orange Usulután tetrapod bowl, dated by Demarest and Sharer (1982) to 400 b.c.–a.d. 100, the only imported vessel found at Cuello (Hammond 1991: fig. 9.5).

In the Middle Pre-Classic the mortuary ceramic assemblage did not differ from that used for domestic purposes; in the Late Pre-Classic also the absence of specifically mortuary ceramics is noted, although burials often included rather large examples of generally used vessel forms (Pyburn and Kosakowsky n.d.), unsurprising given their function of covering the body.

There were a few grave goods unique to mortuary contexts in the Cocos phase, including the Usulután bowl, an amphora-shaped jar (Hammond 1991: fig. 3.39a), and seven carved bone tubes which could have functioned as handles for feather fans or bloodletting implements (Hammond 1991: figs. 8.35–8.38). All were found in mass burial assemblages, where the body bundles of disarticulated remains might also be considered as “human grave goods.” The five tubes with the *pop* motif, together with the cruder examples from burial 160, seem to be the earliest firmly provenanced instances of this symbol of authority in the Maya Lowlands, and suggest that from the late fifth or early fourth century b.c. onward the effective exercise of power was accompanied and advertised by an iconography that developed into a greater Classic complexity.

Seventy-seven percent ( $n = 61$ ) of the individual Cocos phase interments had grave goods. Sixty-nine percent ( $n = 55$ ) had at least one ceramic vessel, and 23 percent ( $n = 19$ ) had some type of shell object. The remaining Cocos phase grave goods were only occasionally found. Within domestic contexts, males (1.05) and females (1.09) had roughly the same mean number of pots per individual, and juveniles had a mean 0.73 pots. Males within public/ceremonial contexts had a higher mean number of pots than either males, females, or juveniles buried in other contexts at Cuello.

Vessel placement includes 64 percent of those thus equipped ( $n = 35$ ) who had at least one vessel, whole or smashed, inverted over their head. Another vessel position, not found previously, was common in the Late Pre-Classic: 14 individuals (25 percent) had a vessel upright in their lap, suggesting its possible use as a food/beverage container. The vessel-in-lap position was most commonly found with seated burials, perhaps explaining why it was not used until the Late Pre-Classic. The smashing of ceramic vessels was a fairly common Cocos phase custom unrestricted by age, sex, or context.

Fourteen of the 17 long-distance trade items were found with sacrificial burials. Jade was associated with adult male burials insofar as sex can be specified; other greenstone was associated with females and juveniles, suggesting that the Maya could distinguish real jade from “social jade” (Hammond et al. 1977: 61).

Though all ages and sexes had access to long-distance trade items, they were much more commonly associated with public/ceremonial burials of males. In contrast to the Middle Pre-Classic, where access to long-distance trade items was associated with high overall total numbers of grave goods, in the Cocos phase, long-distance trade items were found with individuals possessing no other grave goods, as well as with those possessing many.

The mean number of grave goods per Cocos phase individual is 1.92: almost all the interments fall within two standard deviations of the mean. Only five individuals, those with seven or more grave goods, fall beyond this: all five of these individuals were sacrificial burials, four from the mass burials. Thus, whether the grave goods of these individuals marked individual wealth or the importance of the ritual activity in which they played a part is difficult to say, but certainly “wealth” in terms of total grave goods was concentrated in public/sacrificial burials in Cocos times.

In residential burial contexts, 25 percent (eight individuals) had no grave goods; the mean number of grave goods was 1.30. The same lack of age/sex differentiation in total number of grave goods observed in the Middle Pre-Classic continued into the Late Pre-Classic in residential contexts; but individuals buried in public contexts had significantly more grave goods than those buried in houses.

### *Sacrifice*

In the Late Pre-Classic, human sacrifice may be indicated by the number and condition of those interred in the mass burials and also by four types of disarticulation ( $n = 14$ ): severed skull, decapitated body, disarticulated complete body, and disarticulated leg bones only. Such burials were most common in public contexts, but three skull burials, perhaps dedicatory, in the northern residential structures indicate that these possibly had a public/ceremonial function sometimes as well as a domestic one.

Individuals packaged into body bundles were unique to the mass burials. Robin and Hammond (1991: 224) suggest that they lost not only their physical identity as individuals but their social identities as well, and can be interpreted as “human grave goods.” Although we cannot determine whether mutilation was the cause of death or part of postmortem ritual, such secondary burials are our best evidence for Pre-Classic Maya human sacrifice, although sometimes the context of a primary burial will also indicate it. On the evidence to hand, individual sacrifice was practiced from the Early Middle Formative onward, persisting throughout the Cuello sequence, while mass sacrifice was introduced at

the same time as monumental architectural construction begins to reflect the reality of political power at the beginning of the Late Pre-Classic around 400 b.c.

*Offertory Practices: Caches*

Thirty-one caches of deliberately deposited artifacts were found at Cuello, all but one definitely of Late Pre-Classic date; the exception (F190) is likely to fall at the very beginning of that period. All pottery vessels included in cache offerings are of the Cocos Chicanel ceramic complex, with the majority belonging to Sierra Red and Society Hall Red, the two dominant ceramic types of the Late Formative. Most are flaring-side bowls, which when paired are set lip-to-lip.

The caches form three main groups: (1) dedicatory offerings for successive plaza floors on top of Platform 34; (2) dedicatory and valedictory offerings for successive buildings on the north side of the plaza; and (3) dedicatory offerings for successive raising and enlargement of the buildings on the west side of the Platform 34 plaza, culminating in the Early Classic pyramid, Str. 35. The main exceptions to this are the earliest offering (F190) of phase IVA, set into the latest patio floor (V), but possibly at the end of its history and actually linked to the infill of the patio and initial raising of Platform 34, with Plaza Floor I as its surface; and the dedicatory cache of Stela 1 (F136), coeval with Plaza Floor VII. Even the exceptional caches, therefore, seem to be associated with construction activity.

*Plaza Floor caches.* The Plaza Floor caches are varied in their content, but show a certain consistency in the artifacts offered and an increase in the size and number of offerings through time. The earliest caches, associated with Plaza Floor III, consist of a pair of bowls set lip-to-lip (F181) and a concentration of deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) mandibles with a large tanged chert macroblade “dagger” (F140). The next offering (F30; Hammond 1991: fig. 10.12) is also a concentration of deer mandibles, with upper molars and cranial fragments suggesting that entire heads may have been offered, some two-thirds (20/30 MNI) of them juveniles, associated with Plaza Floor VI. This part of the animal does not carry much meat, so that they are unlikely to be the remnants of a ceremonial meal; the high proportion of juveniles suggests selection. The significance of ritual faunas such as these deer-head offerings has been discussed by Pohl (1983).

Plaza Floor IX has three caches within the area of the Main Trench (F11, 122, 76/15), and eight others probably associated (F6, 12, 28, 47, 58, 60, 76, 83).

F6, the largest cache so far found (Hammond 1991: fig. 10.13), contains 94 bowls in 47 pairs, organized most often in groups of four pairs on a north-south alignment, with a total of 21 jade beads. A north-south orientation predominates where a group is linear: this may be facing the entire group toward (or away from) the pyramid on the west side of Platform 34. On a larger scale, seven of these eleven caches form a north-south line in front of the pyramid (Hammond 1991: fig. 10.16).

*North side structure caches.* Eight caches were found in the successive subcircular and subrectangular buildings on the north side of the plaza, none earlier than phase VIII. They included single and paired bowls, three of these enclosing a child's skull. One unusual offering consisted of a spindle-shaped limestone hammerstone, a chalcedony flake, and a Colha-type chert tranchet-bit tool.

*Pyramid caches.* Five caches lie in the succession of buildings on the west side of Platform 34. The earliest (F80; Hammond 1991: fig. 10.17) is associated with Str. 352 at the beginning of Cocos (phases VI–VII). It consists of four unworn chert macroblade “daggers” and two stingray spines, all bundled together as though once wrapped, as well as a worn small dark greenstone ax. All except the ax could have been used in bloodletting. It may be significant that Str. 352 is the first of the succession of west side buildings to be raised to any marked degree, and possibly the first ceremonial rather than residential structure at that locus.

*Stela cache.* The Late Pre-Classic Stela 1 at Cuello, with an estimated date of a.d. 100, was sealed by Plaza Floor VII; in the pit cut into Plaza Floor VI to receive the stela butt, an offering (F136) of three vessels was made, including a trichrome open bowl, a monochrome red high-necked bowl, and an inverted red bowl with a parrot effigy modeled over it (Hammond 1991: figs. 3.43, 10.19). The stela, one of the earliest in the Maya Lowlands, and its offering are discussed by Hammond (1982).

### *Discussion*

Absent from all these caches are any contents that the vessels might have held, apart from three with child skulls and those with jade beads. The provision of bloodletting equipment in F80 reminds us that bloody paper could have been among these perishable offerings, as well as the foodstuffs often suggested. The parity of content between dedicatory offerings in the west side buildings, which are in form ceremonial, and those on the north side, suggests that the latter also might have had a ritual function, even though they were clearly lived in.

The mass of plaza floor caches shows that reflooring Platform 34 was not just a practical affair, but one accompanied by ceremony and offerings. While F6 with its 94 vessels is among the larger Maya caches known, the vessels themselves and their imperishable contents were, like the grave goods found with the burials, modest in kind. The only vessels that might be seen as made for offertory purposes, being distinct from those found in middens, were those in the cache below Stela 1. Of the few nonceramic offerings, the most unusual are the two collocations of deer mandibles (F30, F140).

The number of caches is low early in the Late Pre-Classic (one to three per phase up to phase X, perhaps four in phase VIII), rising to a maximum of eight in phase XI. This increase in offertory activity coincides with the construction of the first pyramid on the west side of the plaza, with the alignment of Strs. 304–305 on a common front (perhaps forming a triadic group with the pyramid and the south side structures), and with the erection of Stela 1 and then the construction of Str. 302 in the plaza center. The coincidence of stela erection with Mass Burial 2 and the high number of caches suggest that a significant increase in the ritual status of the plaza took place around a.d. 100, and was maintained through subsequent periods of use.

#### SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF PRE-CLASSIC BURIAL PRACTICES AT CUELLO

Throughout the Pre-Classic the inclusion of individuals of both sexes and juveniles in domestic platforms illustrates the family nature of these burials. Domestic burials show no age/sex differentiation of grave “wealth” in terms of type and number of grave goods or their absence. The association of juveniles with as many grave goods as adults could indicate hereditary wealth, or, equally likely, grave goods were personal equipment that did not function as “wealth.” The presence of cranial deformation or dental mutilation is not correlated with burial locus or content: it might denote social role, but it does not appear to mark social rank.

Throughout the initial construction, use, reflooring, remodeling, and eventual abandonment or destruction of a building, burials were incorporated into its structural fills and floors, indicating opportunistic sepulture in residential contexts; continued occupation seems to have been the norm, although temporary abandonment is probably archaeologically undetectable. Though some Pre-Classic structures at Cuello lacked burials, none lay completely within the excavation, and unexcavated portions of these structures could hold interments. Although some of the northern buildings have a high density of burials, there is no evidence that they were mausolea; those burials at Cuello not in house platforms seem to have been dedicatory to ceremonial buildings.



Mortuary assemblages were fairly consistent throughout the sequence, internally and in relation to refuse assemblages (Pyburn and Kosakowsky n.d.); although some pottery types are known only from burials, there is no indication that they were made only for sepulture, and where there was apparent selection, as for especially large dishes and bowls in some Cocos burials, there was also a clear practical function of protecting the corpse. Throughout the Pre-Classic at Cuello, ceramic vessels and shell objects, predominantly beads, were the most common grave goods. Jade was used from the end of the Bladen phase, and although obsidian occurred in refuse contexts at Cuello from Bladen onward, it was not part of the mortuary assemblage until the Cocos phase. Chert tools were found throughout the Pre-Classic, bone tools only in Bladen burials, ground stone in both the Bladen and Cocos mortuary assemblages, and red ochre in Lopez and Cocos. The low frequency of many objects, rather than true chronological differentiation, probably causes this apparent association with certain time periods.

Throughout the Middle Pre-Classic, males, females, and juveniles were comparably furnished; in the Late Pre-Classic, residential burials continued to be so, but by this time the focus of elaborate burial activity had changed from the domestic/individual locus to the public/communal one. Males predominated there, especially in the two mass burials, with far “wealthier” grave assemblages containing more exotic and unique items than residential burials. Whether this “wealth” represented individual lifetime possessions or the importance of the public burial rite is uncertain. The nonrandom patterning of grave goods in the mass burials suggests that the two central individuals in both mass burials were elaborately interred not just as the foci of these mortuary rites, but also possibly as members of a perceived elite, either that of Cuello or that of the community from which the burial participants were drawn. If the former, the inclusion of the bone tubes with the *pop* motif suggests veneration of a ruling lineage; in either case, differentiation of nobility in death as in life. Such indications of developing social complexity accord with what is becoming known from other Pre-Classic Maya sites, including K’axob, Colha, and Cerros in northern Belize and several much larger sites in Peten including El Mirador and now Nakbe.

Hansen (1992: 184) suggests that the development of Pre-Classic Maya religion followed a Durkheimian model, itself based on Greek and Roman evidence, whereby ancestor worship became established initially with individual family lineages. Then, as the population grew, cults arose which transcended lineage worship and created a broader religious solidarity which underwrote and legitimized the status and actions of a ruling elite. This manifested itself in the enormous social investment in ritual architecture seen early in the Late



Pre-Classic at Nakbe and then El Mirador, Guiro, and Tintal and more distant centers such as Calakmul, Uaxactun, Tikal, Lamanai, and Cerros. The huge sculptures adorning these buildings were of deities, not kings—focus on the ruler as a link between the mundane and supernal worlds came several centuries later. The burial evidence from Cuello suggests that this latter process began with ancestor veneration from around 600 b.c., with recognition of rulership status by 400 b.c. and iconographic representation of rulers elsewhere occurring in the mid-Late Pre-Classic, initially on small objects such as jades but by the second century a.d. on public monuments also.

#### CONCLUSION

Both offerings and burials at Cuello document a Pre-Classic community developing a ritual life over a period of nearly fifteen hundred years. While there are few hints of stratification in Middle Pre-Classic society, there is some disparity in grave goods which is not clearly age-linked: ascribed status may well have existed before 700 b.c. By 400 b.c., even though the burials still exhibit a high degree of social homogeneity, Mass Burial 1 and the architectural transformation of Platform 34 indicate the existence and use of political power and its iconographic expression in the carved bones with their *pop* motifs. After this date we see the occurrence of public offerings, the beginnings of the elite culture that was to culminate in the Classic period. The cultural sequence at Cuello, the longest continuous Pre-Classic development so far documented in the Maya Area, is distinctively Maya; yet it is also clearly Mesoamerican in all its essentials and reminds us that, although the Maya evolved their own civilization from deep roots, it was never isolated from the larger world of Mesoamerica.

*Acknowledgments* The burials excavated at Cuello before 1990 have been discussed in detail by Cynthia Robin (1989), and some of the data presented here have been taken from that monograph and from the chapter by Robin and myself in Hammond (1991). All skeletal analyses were by Julie M. Saul and Frank P. Saul. The data on caches were compiled by Juliette Cartwright Gerhardt, although the analysis is my own. The excavations at Cuello were funded by the National Geographic Society (1978–90), the British Museum (1978–87), Cambridge University (1975–87), Rutgers University (1978–87), and Boston University (1990–93). Figures 1 and 2 were drawn by Sheena Howarth.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andrews, E. Wyllys, V  
1986 Olmec Jades from Chacsinkin, Yucatan, and Maya Ceramics from La Venta, Tabasco. In *Research and Reflections in Archaeology and History: Essays in Honor of Doris Stone* (E. Wyllys Andrews V, ed.): 11–49. Tulane University, Middle American Research Institute, Publication 57. New Orleans.  
1987 A Cache of Early Jades from Chacsinkin, Yucatan. *Mexicon* 9: 78–85.
- Andrews, E. Wyllys, V, and Norman Hammond  
1990 Redefinition of the Swasey Phase at Cuello, Belize. *American Antiquity* 54: 570–584.
- Demarest, Arthur A., and Robert J. Sharer  
1982 The Origins and Evolution of Usulután Ceramics. *American Antiquity* 47: 810–827.
- Hammond, Norman  
1982 A Late Formative Period Stela in the Maya Lowlands. *American Antiquity* 47: 396–403.  
n.d. Architectural Transformation in the Late Middle Formative at Cuello, Belize. In *Reconstructing the Past: Recent Studies in Maya Prehistory* (David M. Pendergast and Anthony P. Andrews, eds.). In preparation.
- Hammond, Norman (ed.)  
1991 *Cuello: An Early Maya Community in Belize*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hammond, Norman, Arnold Aspinall, Stuart Feather, John Hazelden, Trevor Gazard, and Stuart Agrell  
1977 Maya Jade: Source Location and Analysis. In *Exchange Systems in Prehistory* (Timothy K. Earle and Jonathan E. Ericson, eds.): 35–67. Academic Press, New York.
- Hammond, Norman, Amanda Clarke, and Sara Donaghey  
1995 The Long Goodbye: Middle Preclassic Maya Archaeology at Cuello, Belize, 1993. *Latin American Antiquity* 6: 120–128.
- Hammond, Norman, Amanda Clarke, and Francisco Estrada Belli  
1992 Middle Preclassic Maya Buildings and Burials at Cuello, Belize. *Antiquity* 66: 955–964.
- Hammond, Norman, Amanda Clarke, and Cynthia Robin  
1991 Middle Preclassic Buildings and Burials at Cuello, Belize: 1990 Investigations. *Latin American Antiquity* 2: 352–363.
- Hammond, Norman, and Juliette Cartwright Gerhardt  
1990 Early Maya Architectural Innovation at Cuello, Belize. *World Archaeology* 21: 461–481.
- Hansen, Richard D.  
1992 El proceso cultural de Nakbe y el área del Petén nor-central: las épocas tempranas. In *V Simposio de investigaciones arqueológicas en Guatemala, Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, 15–18 de Julio de 1991* (Juan Pedro Laporte,

*Norman Hammond*

- H. L. Escobedo A., and Sandra Villagrán de Brady, eds.): 81–87. Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Asociación Tikal, Guatemala City.
- Haviland, William A.  
1985 *Excavations in Small Residential Groups of Tikal: Groups 4F-1 and 4F-2*. Tikal Report 19. University Museum Monograph 58. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Housley, Rupert A., Norman Hammond, and Ian Law  
1991 AMS Radiocarbon Dating of Preclassic Maya Burials at Cuello, Belize. *American Antiquity* 56: 514–519.
- Kosakowsky, Laura J.  
1987 *Prehistoric Maya Pottery at Cuello, Belize*. Anthropological Paper 47. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Law, Ian, Rupert A. Housley, Norman Hammond, and Robert E. M. Hedges  
1991 Cuello: Resolving the Chronology through Direct Dating of Conserved and Low-Collagen Bone by AMS. *Radiocarbon* 33: 303–315.
- McAnany, Patricia A.  
1995 *Living with the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Pohl, Mary D.  
1983 Maya Ritual Faunas: Vertebrate Remains from Burials, Caches, Caves, and Cenotes in the Maya Lowlands. In *Civilization in the Ancient Americas: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey* (Richard M. Leventhal and Alan L. Kolata, eds.): 55–103. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., and University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Pyburn, K. Anne, and Laura J. Kosakowsky  
n.d. *Burial Practices: Description of Ceramic Grave Goods* [at Cuello]. Manuscript on file, Cuello Project Archive, Boston University, 1982.
- Robin, Cynthia  
1989 *Preclassic Maya Burials at Cuello, Belize*. British Archaeological Reports International Series 480. BAR, Oxford.
- Robin, Cynthia, and Norman Hammond  
1991 Ritual and Ideology: Burial Practices. In *Cuello: An Early Maya Community in Belize* (Norman Hammond, ed.): 204–225. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sharer, Robert J., and David W. Sedat  
1987 *Archaeological Investigations in the Northern Maya Highlands, Guatemala: Interaction and the Development of Maya Civilization*. University Museum Monograph 59. University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Wilk, Richard R., and Harold L. Wilhite, Jr.  
1991 The Community of Cuello: Patterns of Household and Settlement Change. In *Cuello: An Early Maya Community in Belize* (Norman Hammond, ed.): 118–133. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.