CHAPTER 3

The Role of Pottery and Food Consumption among Late Preclassic Maya Commoners at Lamanai, Belize

TERRY G. POWIS

In recent years, ceramic research in the Maya area has adopted a number of approaches to help describe and explain ancient economic, social, political, and ideological organization. New trends in classification as well as those in chemical, statistical, petrographic, and iconographic studies have allowed researchers to expand beyond defining and refining site chronologies to examining more fully the socioeconomic aspects of ancient Maya life (Valdez et al. 1999). Many of these lines of inquiry focus on pottery as a tool for understanding increasing economic differentiation. Maya ceramicists have become concerned with pottery primarily as a form of wealth and for the role it played in promoting and maintaining social power among elite individuals (for example, see LeCount 1999). With an emphasis placed on the sociopolitical significance of ceramics for a small segment of the population, little recognition has been given to how Maya commoners, those who formed the majority of ancient Maya society, used pottery in their daily social and ritual activities.

One of the main goals of this study is to define the pottery inventory and the range of activity sets (both domestic and ritual) present in Late Preclassic (300 BC–AD 250) commoner households at the Maya center of Lamanai, located in northern Belize (Figure 3.1). To attempt this, however, there must be some discussion of what constitutes the pottery inventory for an elite household. This is necessary because so much more ceramic research has already been directed toward defining the archaeological signatures of elite households than toward non-elite ones, particularly during the Classic period (see Chase and Chase 1992).

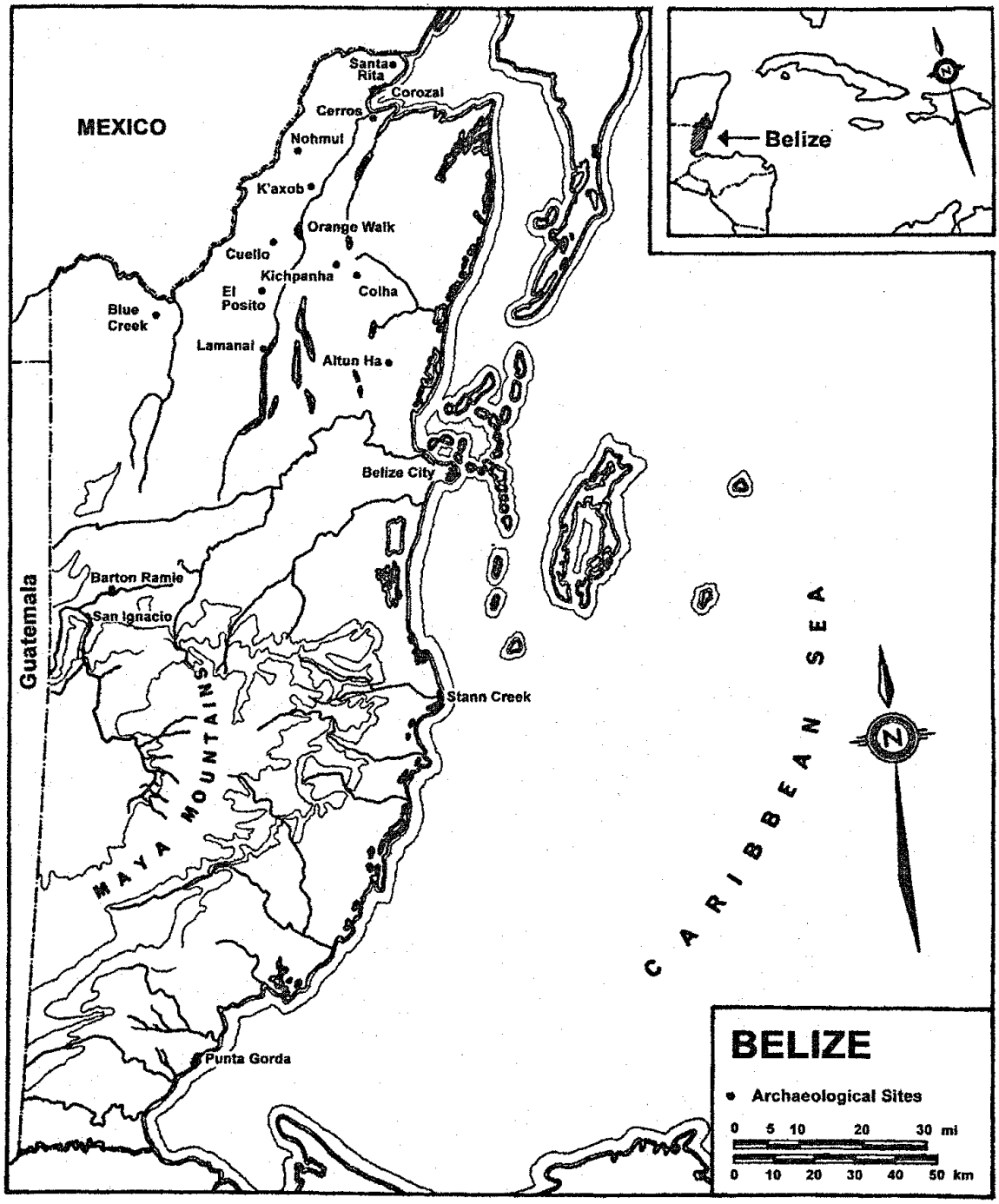

Figure 3.1. Map of Belize showing location of Lamanai (after Pendergast 1981a: Fig. 1)

Previous Research on Vessel Function

Although functional studies have been performed on Classic period assemblages, few attempts have been made to examine vessel function as a means of gaining insight into the variability and patterning of pottery at the household level during the Preclassic period. Some notable exceptions include Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971), Cerros (Robertson 1983), Chalchuapa (Sharer 1978), Cuello (Kosakowsky 1983), and K'axob (McAnany and López 1999). In particular, the material from Cerros has been subjected to a formal functional analysis. At Cerros, Robin Robertson (1983) looked at function based primarily on context, but also vessel form, surface treatment, paste, modes (e.g., medial ridges), and evidence of use (e.g., fire blackening and wear patterns). From this analysis, she developed nine functional categories: stationary storage vessels, soaking vessels, mixing bowls, water vessels, dry storage vessels, serving dishes for hot and cold foods, buckets, eating and ritual offering bowls, and ritual vessels. Robertson (1983:140) was able to determine a functional significance of the Late Preclassic (300 BC–AD 150) pottery with respect to social status, namely, that elites used ceramics to express social differentiation.

Generally speaking, ceramicists working in the Maya area have tended to establish only broad functional categories based on form and use-wear patterns. These types of functional studies are limited because they focus too strongly on vessel form and the nature of the ceramic type itself, which may limit or even suggest the possibilities of usage (Adams 1971:138). Therefore, rather than focusing too much on determining vessel function from vessel form, as has been the trend in the past, the attempt with the Lamanai material was to work from the contextual data to the establishment of ceramic categories or classes, an approach similar to that performed on the Cerros material (Robertson 1983). The analysis of the Lamanai pottery relies primarily on context, vessel form, surface treatment, paste, and use-wear patterns to determine the functional nature of the Preclassic ceramics. A concerted effort was made to use location within the community, degree of elaboration in architecture and burials, and presence/absence of luxury goods to provide information on distinguishing non-elite from elite and domestic from ritual areas of the site.

Lamanai Data

The site of Lamanai, located on the northwestern shore of the New River Lagoon in northern Belize (Figure 3.2), was excavated between 1974 and 1986 under the direction of David Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum (Pendergast 1981a). Analyses of the material remains recovered during those twelve years of investigation are now being directed by Elizabeth Graham of the Institute of Archaeology at University College London in England.

A total of 718 structures were mapped at Lamanai, of which 37 were excavated (Pendergast 1981a, 1981b, 1981c). Primary deposits dating to both the Middle Preclassic (900–300 BC) and Late Preclassic (300 BC–AD 250) periods were exposed in 11 of these sampled structures, over 25 percent of the total surveyed. Most of the Preclassic settlement is dispersed within a 2 km strip along the lagoon. To date, it appears that the Preclassic settlements were located in the north (close to the Harbour area), with a shift southward in later times as changes in the lagoon environment made the northern area less attractive for habitation (David Pendergast, personal communication 1999).

The ceramic analysis of the Late Preclassic assemblage began by enumerating types using the type-variety system of classification commonly used in the Maya lowlands (Gifford 1960, 1976; Sabloff and Smith 1969; Smith et al. 1960; Wheat et al. 1958; Willey et al. 1967). Additionally, a detailed ware or modal approach was employed on each pot to complement the types defined for each ceramic phase (Powis 2000). Functional inferences of the Lamanai ceramic types are based primarily on archaeological context and ethnographic data. The use of ethnographic data is particularly important for gaining knowledge about possible Preclassic household functional requirements, potting activities, and use and re-use strategies (Deal 1998; Reina and Hill 1978; Thompson 1958).

A total of 132 whole ceramic vessels were used in this study; these were recovered from mainly primary contexts (Powis 1999, 2000). The Late Preclassic assemblage at Lamanai is derived from a number of different contexts, shown in Table 3.1. Vessels from middens, burials, and caches were recovered from both commoner and elite contexts. However, the ceramic material from the hearth, rock feature, and *chultun* (subterranean storage feature) are considered commoner contexts only, whereas the pottery from the sherd feature represents an elite context.

In analyzing the Late Preclassic ceramic assemblage, I have been able to identify two, possibly three separate facets: an early, a late, and a ter-

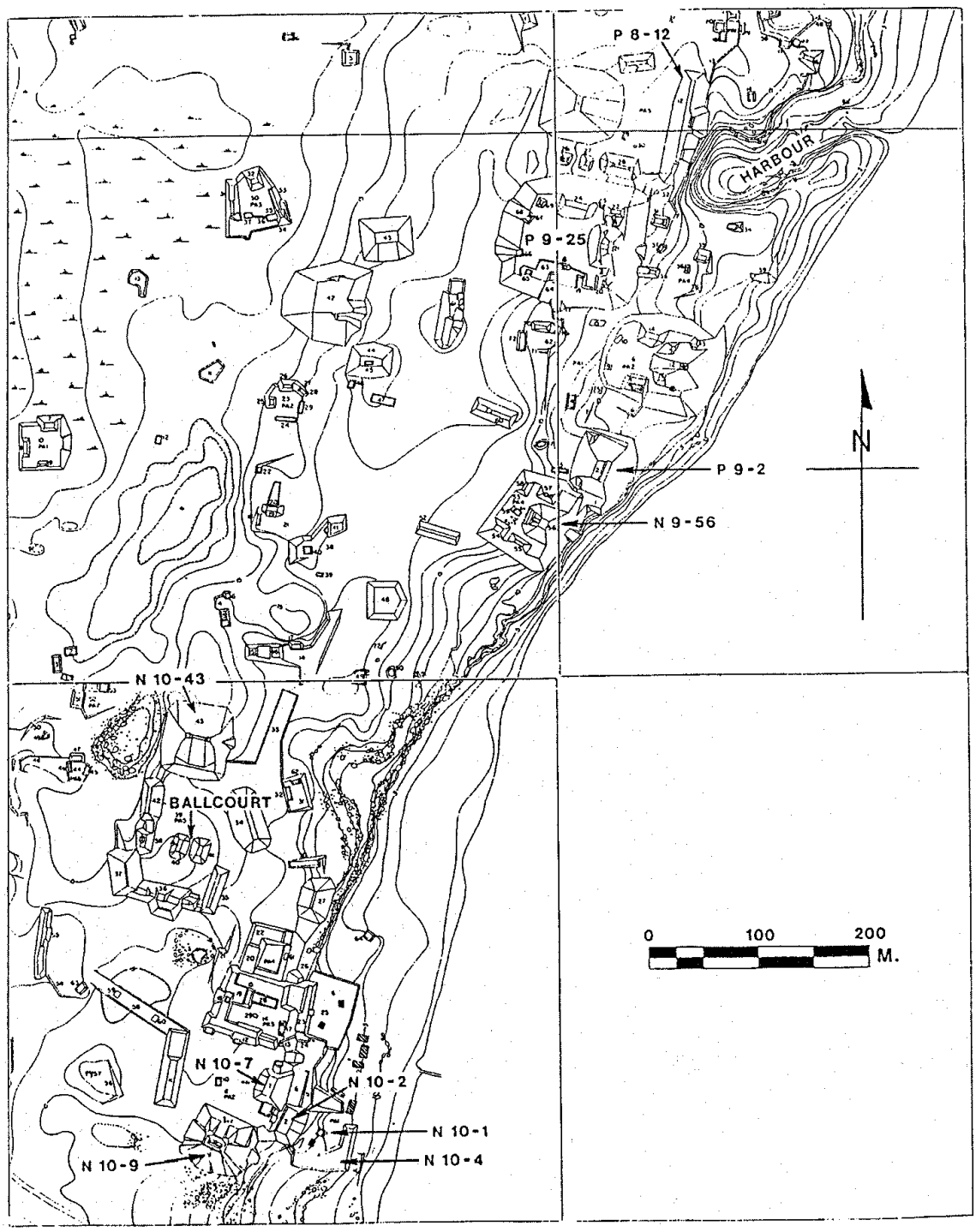

Figure 3.2. Plan of central portion of Lamanai, Belize (after Pendergast 1981a: Fig. 2)

Table 3.1. Late Preclassic domestic and ritual activity areas for elite and commoner structures at Lamanai, Belize

Structure	*Context*	*Function for Deposit*	*Time Period*
N10-2	Sherd Feature #1	Domestic/Elite	Protoclassic
N10-9	Lowest Floor	Domestic/Elite	Late Preclassic
N10-27	N10-27/3	Ritual	Late Preclassic
N10-43	Cache N10-43/2	Ritual	Protoclassic
	Hearth #1	Domestic/Non-elite	Late Preclassic
	Rock Feature #1	Domestic/Non-elite	Late Preclassic
	Cache N10-43/6	Ritual	early Late Preclassic
P8-2	Chultun	Domestic/Non-Elite	Late Preclassic
P8-9	Surface	Domestic/Elite	Late Preclassic
	Burial P8-9/1, 2, 3, and 5	Ritual	early Late Preclassic
	Cache P8-9/1	Ritual	early Late Preclassic
P8-11	Core material	Domestic/Non-elite	Late Preclassic
	Midden	Domestic/Non-elite	Protoclassic
P8-14	Lower Core	Domestic/Non-elite	Late Preclassic
	Cache P8-14/1	Ritual	Late Preclassic
P8-27	Core	Domestic/Non-elite	Protoclassic
P8-103	Burial P8-103/1 and 2	Ritual	Middle Preclassic
P9-2	Core material	Domestic/Elite	Protoclassic
YDL II-7	Cache YDL-7	Ritual	Late Preclassic

minal facet—the last two corresponding to the Protoclassic/Floral Park complex. The early facet is a long, relatively homogeneous one, which is followed by two shorter, more variable later ones (Table 3.2). The identification of the two later facets is based on the addition of a few new ceramic types to the earlier facet as well as the appearance of new modes. The three facets for the Late Preclassic period are based on stratigraphic position, modal comparisons, technological development, and relative cross-dating with other northern Belize sites. Beginning and ending dates are approximated.

The early facet dates to the early part of the Late Preclassic (300–100/50 BC), and the late facet (100/50 BC–AD 150) and terminal facet (AD 150–250) are dated to the end of the Late Preclassic, a ceramic stage known as the Protoclassic period. It was first identified as the Floral Park complex at Barton Ramie (Gifford 1976). During the Protoclassic period, a broad series of ceramic attributes begin to appear across the Maya area, including mammiform tetrapod dishes and bowls and wavy and nonwavy

positive and negative painting (Brady et al. 1998; Pring 1977). Technological experimentation and artistic expression mark this period of ceramic development across the Maya region. The Protoclassic period likely terminates about AD 400, depending on the site (Brady et al. 1998). Not all sites produced the same quantity or quality of these wares. Why some sites exhibited a stronger Protoclassic component compared to others, even within the same region, is not fully understood by Maya archaeologists and ceramicists (Forsyth 1993). In northern Belize, many sites produced Protoclassic pottery, including Blue Creek, Colha, Cuello, El Posito, K'axob, Kichpanha, Nohmul, and Santa Rita. The site of Lamanai also has a significant Protoclassic component (Powis 2001). The ceramic material dating to the late and terminal facets forms a major part of this study of identifying the pottery inventories for both elite and non-elite structures.

Identifying Elite and Commoner Contexts

The question of identifying "elite" versus "commoner" contexts must be briefly addressed before proceeding with a functional interpretation of the Lamanai Preclassic pottery assemblage. Traditionally, the criteria used by archaeologists to distinguish elite pottery from commoner pottery have been: (1) the superior quality of manufacture of the vessels; (2) the relative density of whole vessels recovered; (3) the execution of design and technique; (4) the variation of types; (5) the esoteric form (such as masks, drums, and effigy vessels) of the pottery; and (6) the evidence of vessel forms that are analogous to modern wealth/status forms (see Chase and Chase 1992). Additionally, Adams (1971:139) defined ceremonial and status pottery as "all finely made pottery whose decoration, by its symbolic nature, may indicate ritual or status functions." He included the following type classes: mortuary vessels, drums, incense burners, cult effigies, and trade exotics (Adams 1971:139).

Table 3.2. Facets represented in the Late Preclassic ceramic assemblage at Lamanai, Belize

Early facet (Chicanel ceramic sphere)	300-100/50 BC
Late facet (Floral Park ceramic sphere)	100/50 BC-AD 150
Terminal facet (Floral Park ceramic sphere)	AD 150-250

During the course of my study, it became obvious that using these traditional criteria to identify elite pottery from commoner pottery may not be possible for the Lamanai data set. While some of the traits listed in Chase and Chase (1992) for the Classic period could be used to a certain degree (e.g., numbers 1–3, 6), the other two (numbers 4 and 5) presented problems, as elite and commoner pottery exhibited both of these traits. Furthermore, a few of the pottery types (e.g., drums and incense burners) listed by Adams (1971:139) could not be employed because these forms were not recovered in the Lamanai Preclassic assemblage. Therefore, aspects of both trait lists mentioned above are used in my study in concert with degree of associated architectural and burial elaborateness.

Using a combination of approaches has alleviated potential problems with identifying elite and commoner pottery at Lamanai. Based on excavations in residential structures from the Classic period at the site, it appears that "elite" vessels were not restricted to elite individuals; quite elaborate ceramics occurred in distinctly "non-elite" contexts. Because of this distribution, it can be dangerous to define a structure as an elite residence on the basis of ceramic content alone, and equally dangerous to identify the depositors of the material as elite (David Pendergast, personal communication 1999). As a result, it may be better to identify elite contexts on the basis of architecture, although this approach is not devoid of problems. In some cases, a deposit is clearly associated with an elite structure. For example, in a major temple, whatever the nature of the ceramics may be, one can assume the deposit was placed there by members of the elite. The opposite is probably to be assumed in "low-status" structures, in which the structure suggests that the users were non-elite, no matter how elaborate the pots may be.

Difficulty arises in structures that are of considerable size and complexity in form but are clearly residential. Where is the dividing line between commoner and elite when it comes to architectural characteristics such as size and complexity? Echoing a theme repeated throughout this volume, I submit that determining whether a structure was the residence of members of the elite or of commoners is quite likely to be somewhat arbitrary, and it is hard in such circumstances to avoid being affected by the ceramics, which may not be a good basis for decision making. This is why every effort has been taken in this study to use architectural context, degree of elaboration in architecture and burials, and the presence/absence of luxury goods in burials and caches to provide information on distinguishing Preclassic elite from commoner structures.

Functional Data

Sierra Red is the dominant ceramic type during all three facets of the Late Preclassic, making up 65 percent of the total assemblage (Tables 3.3 and 3.4). All other groups, including Aguacate, Coconut Walk, Polvero, Flor, and Matamore, consist of less than 10 percent each (see Gifford 1976 and Graham 1994 for ceramic type descriptions). Of the 132 vessels, 37 were recovered from seven elite structures (N10-2, N10-9, N10-27, N10-43, P8-9, P9-2, and YDL II-7), and 96 were recovered from three commoner structures (P8-11, P8-14, and P8-27) and a midden in Chultun P8-2. The *chultun* contained significant amounts of late- and terminal-facet pottery (i.e., true Protoclassic wares).

Eight general vessel forms are present in the Preclassic Lamanai assemblage. There are sixty-six open bowls and dishes, twenty jars, eighteen open plates, eleven crudely fashioned bowls, nine restricted-rim bowls, three deep basins and buckets, three vertical-walled bowls, and three vases. Of the forms present, open bowls, dishes, and plates are the most common, making up approximately two-thirds (63 percent) of the Preclassic assemblage. Jars are also common, forming 21 percent (twenty out of ninety-six), and are represented by both spouted and unspouted forms. Only two of the twenty jars had handles. All unspouted ones were striated.

In the commoner assemblage of ninety-six vessels, all eight vessel forms are represented, with open bowls, plates, and dishes being found with the highest frequency—at 60 percent (fifty-seven out of ninety-six) of this subassemblage. Both bowls and dishes in the commoner assemblage have a rim diameter range of 11–46 cm and a height range of 3–35 cm. Elite bowls and dishes, on the other hand, have a rim diameter range of 10–42 cm and a height range of 3–18 cm. In Tables 3.5 and 3.6, both bowls and dishes in the commoner and elite assemblages are not significantly different in terms of diameter or height, regardless of whether the vessels were found in domestic or ritual activity areas. Additionally, vessel forms like basins, open plates, and jars are even larger, on average, in commoner contexts than those recovered from elite ones. In a domestic context, this information further suggests that both groups utilized a wide variety of vessel sizes for serving and eating individual-sized and family-sized meals. For example, the volume, in milliliters (ml), for twenty-six Late Preclassic vessels (eighteen elite and eight commoner) demonstrates the range of serving sizes or portions for the different vessel categories at the site (Table 3.7).

Table 3.3. Occurrence of ceramic types over the functional loci at Lamanai, Belize

Ceramic Type	*Elite*	*Non-elite*	*Ritual*
Sierra Red Variety	16	20	x
Sierra Red-and-Black	1	3	
Sierra Red Usulutan	0	5	
Society Hall Red	9	4	x
Society Hall Grooved	0	1	
Society Hall Red Punctated	0	1	
Laguna Verde Incised	2	2	
Laguna Verde Grooved	1	2	x
Laguna Verde Usulutan	0	1	
Puletan Red-and-Unslipped	0	8	
Dawson Creek Composite	0	1	
Rio Bravo Red	0	1	
Cabro Red	0	1	
Composite Red-on-Orange	0	1	
Unnamed Red-Rimmed	0	1	
Unnamed Red-Brown	0	1	
Unnamed Red-on-Buff	1	2	
Unnamed Red-and-Buff	0	1	
Polvero Black	2	2	x
Lechugal Incised	2	0	x
Lechugal Grooved	0	4	
Flor Cream	2	2	x
Accordion Incised	0	1	
Indian Church White	0	1	
Matamore Dichrome	0	1	
Matamore Dichrome Usulutan	0	2	
Monkey Falls Striated	0	1	
Coconut Walk Incised	0	11	
Ixcanrio Orange Polychrome	0	1	
Gavilan Black-on-Orange	0	1	
Unnamed Black and Red-on-Orange	0	1	
Unnamed Buff	0	5	
Unnamed Buff-Orange	1	0	
Unnamed Buff Usulutan	0	2	
Unnamed Orange Usulutan	0	1	
Ramgoat Red	0	1	x
Chunhinta Black	0	1	x
Guitara Incised	0	1	x
Consejo Red	0	1	x
Total	37	96	

Table 3.4. Ceramic groups represented in the Late Preclassic assemblage at Lamanai, Belize

Ceramic Group	*Total*	*Percentage*
Sierra	86	64.7
Aguacate	12	9
Coconut Walk	11	8.27
Polvero	10	7.51
Flor	6	4.51
Matamore	3	2.25
Monkey Falls	1	0.75
Ramgoat	1	0.75
Consejo	1	0.75
Chunhinta	1	0.75
Joventud	1	0.75
Total	133	99.99

About 51 percent of the commoner vessels are decorated compared to 38 percent of the elite vessels during all three facets. Both assemblages are generally highly polished and slipped red, black, cream, or a combination of the three. They are decorated with incisions, grooves, and punctations. The Late Preclassic assemblage exhibited a number of modeled vessels in the zoomorphic shapes of birds, bats, frogs, and crocodiles. The crocodile effigy vessel (Figure 3.3a), dating to the early facet, is important because it represents the first evidence of crocodile imagery at the site, perhaps related to the name Lama'anayin ("submerged crocodile"), which was the ancient name of the site and community (Pendergast 1981a:32). Three effigy vessels in the shape of birds, including a Lechugal Grooved-Incised (early-facet) bowl (Figure 3.3b) and an Unnamed Buff-and-Modeled (terminal-facet) spouted jar (Figure 3.3c), were recovered from commoner midden contexts, and compared to the crocodile effigy bowl recovered from an elite burial, the bird vessels are rather finely made. In late-facet times, surface decorations applied to commoner vessels included concentric horizontal streaky marks painted on the surfaces of Society Hall Red bowls and dishes as well as red crosses painted on the base of Sierra Red plates. According to McAnany et al. (1999:139–140), these cross motifs could represent an early example of the quadripartite motif or Kan cross. At Lamanai, two of the five vessel bottoms with red crosses also exhibited a painted circle creating a five-pointed cross, like the

Table 3.5. Mean diameter (in centimeters) of vessel forms for Late Preclassic elite and commoner pottery at Lamanai, Belize

Vessel Form	*Elite*	*Commoner*
Open bowls and dishes	24	26
Vertical-walled bowls	n/a	24
Restricted-rim bowls	20.4	20.2
Basins/buckets	23	42.5
Jars	15	17
Vases	14.3	12
Open plates	26.2	24.3

Table 3.6. Mean height (in centimeters) of vessel forms for Late Preclassic elite and commoner pottery at Lamanai, Belize

Vessel Form	*Elite*	*Commoner*
Open bowls and dishes	7.47	7.44
Vertical-walled bowls	11.6	9.5
Restricted-rim bowls	9.7	11.8
Basins/buckets	13	15.1
Jars	14.5	17.6
Vases	20.2	12.1
Open plates	3.7	4.2

vessels recovered from Late Preclassic burials at K'axob (McAnany et al. 1999:140). Freidel et al. (1993:59–122) have interpreted variations of this motif in Classic period monumental art as symbolic of the World Tree and the Milky Way. Interestingly, none of these Kan crosses at Lamanai were found on vessels recovered from elite contexts.

Ethnographic data from the Yucatán Peninsula and the Guatemalan highlands indicate that open bowls, dishes, and plates likely functioned as serving and eating vessels (Deal 1998; Reina and Hill 1978; Thompson 1958), and they may have done so during the Late Preclassic period as well. Many of these forms had broad, horizontal, everted rims, which likely made it easier to serve hot foods like soups and stews. Some of the flaring-walled bowls with convex interior bases and direct rims appear to have been used as mixing bowls. The interiors of some show horizontal scoring and the exterior basal break is worn in many cases, probably through con-

tact with a hard surface. Such patterns of wear would be produced if pressure were applied to the vessel while it was rotated, as is commonly done when mixing food (Fred Valdez, personal communication 1999). The convex base would reduce the area of contact, making it easier to rotate due to less friction.

The large, restricted-necked, striated jars were probably used to store

Table 3.7 Volume (in milliliters) of Late Preclassic elite and commoner vessels at Lamanai, Belize

	Elite	*Commoner*
Bowls	970	775
	1,160	1,705
	1,845	
	1,885	
	3,715	
Mean	1,915	1,240
Dishes	1,005	730
	1,340	1,155
	1,585	1,265
		2,345
Mean	1,310	1,374
Plates	385	
	2,265	
Mean	1,325	
Spouted jars	560	390
	2,175	1,205
	2,405	
Mean	1,713	798
Buckets	1,665	
	4,235	
Mean	2,950	
Vases	3,225	
Vertical-walled jars	2,695	

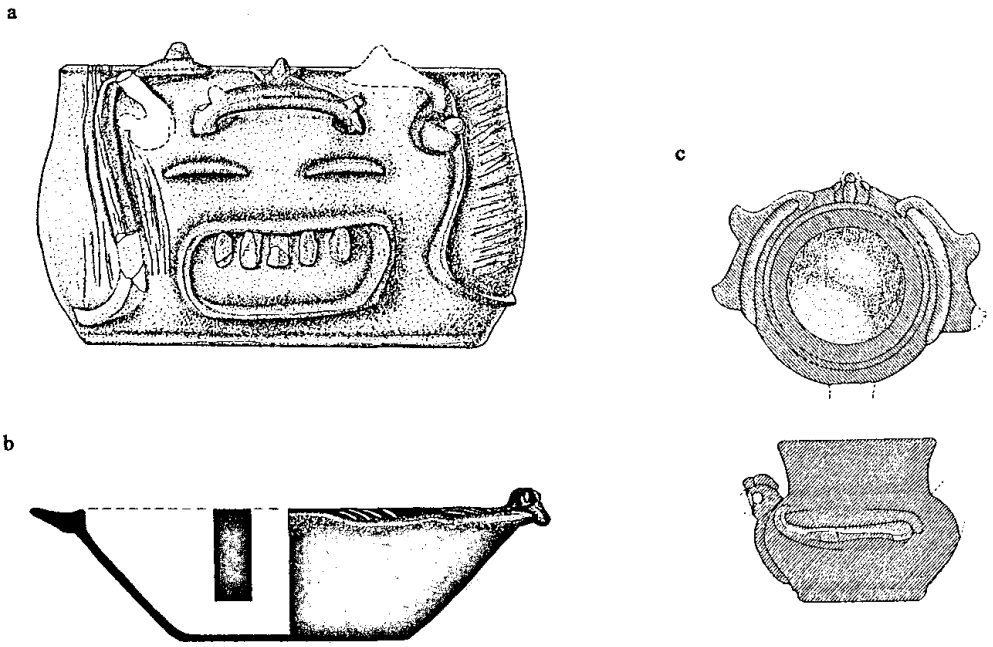

Figure 3.3. (a) Stylized crocodile effigy bowl from an elite burial in Str. P8-9; illustration drawn by Ruth Dickau; (b) bird effigy bowl from a commoner midden in Str. P8-11; illustration drawn by Ruth Dickau; and (c) bird effigy spouted jar from a commoner midden inside Chultun P8-2; illustration drawn by Louise Belanger.

water, whereas smaller versions may have been used to carry it. The jars with low, wide necks would have been better utilized for dry storage. Their low necks make it difficult to pour liquid contents and would thus not inhibit spilling.

Throughout all three facets of the Late Preclassic, spouted jars with and without bridge-supports likely functioned to hold liquid contents, like soup bowls and drinking cups (Figures 3.4a and 3.4b). Recent residue analyses conducted on spouted vessels have confirmed that these vessel types did indeed contain liquids. At the site of Colha, located to the northeast of Lamanai in northern Belize, preliminary data have revealed that some of the vessels found in Middle and Late Preclassic burials contained substantial amounts of liquid theobromine, a distinct marker for cacao or chocolate (Hurst et al. 2002; Powis et al. 2002). During the Classic period, cacao was typically associated with the elite as a luxury drink, trade item, tribute item, and currency (Coe and Coe 1996; McAnany 2000; Reents-Budet 1994: Stuart 1988). Why, then, during the Late Preclassic period at Lamanai, do we find spouted vessels recovered from a midden inside a *chultun*, a commoner context?

Other vessels that may have held liquids were double-slipped bowls and dishes found in both elite and commoner household contexts. Four Sierra Red vessels showing this double interior slip, along with a limited number of vertical-walled bowls and restricted-rim bowls, may indicate that specific forms served specific functions. Another form present in the commoner assemblage was one very large medial hip basin with a high vertical rim dating to the late facet (see Figure 3.4c). This basin may have served a similar function to the large buckets (Figure 3.5a) found in elite burials. From a functional point of view, the unrestricted orifices make all of them ideal for serving large quantities of food, such as soups and stews with a high liquid content.

Two out of the three vases found in Late Preclassic deposits come from

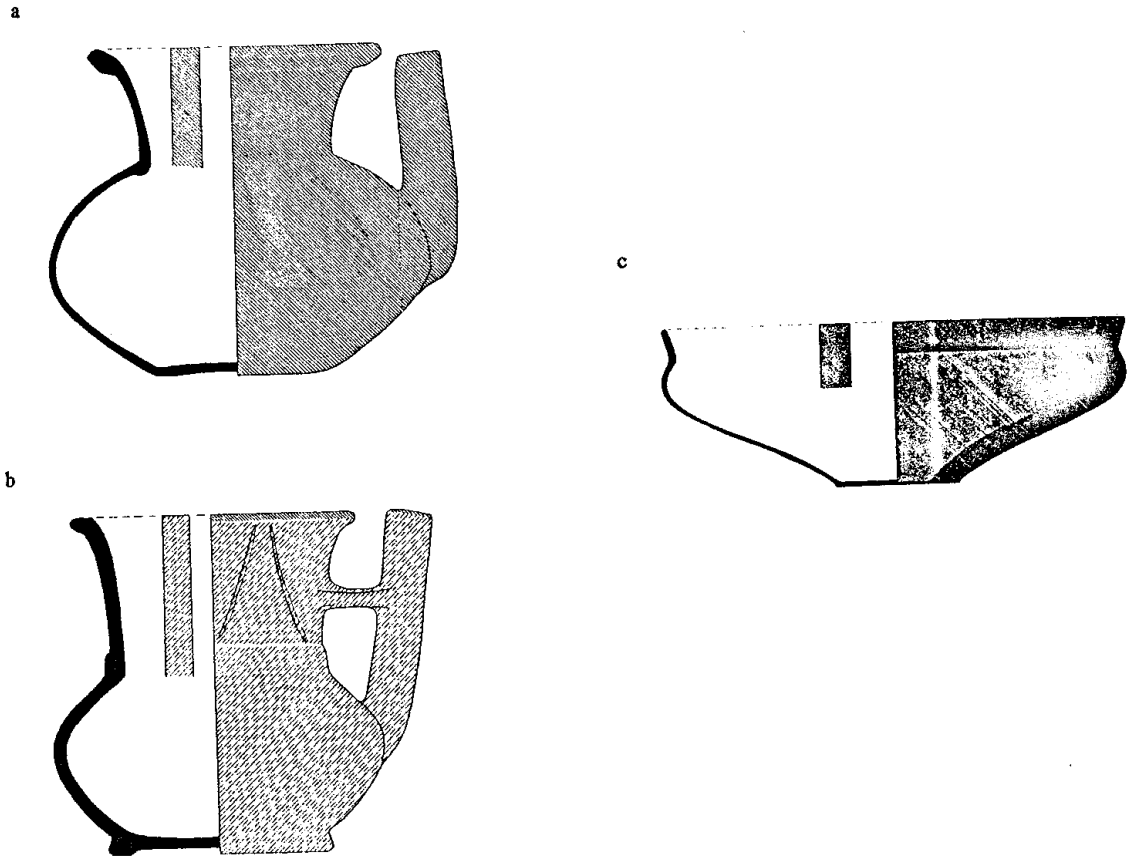

Figure 3.4. (a) Example of a spouted jar from an elite burial in Str. P8-0; (b) Unnamed Red-Rimmed Buff spouted jar with bridge-support from a commoner midden inside Chultun P8-2; and (c) a large medial hip basin from a commoner midden inside Chultun P8-2. Illustrations drawn by Louise Belanger.

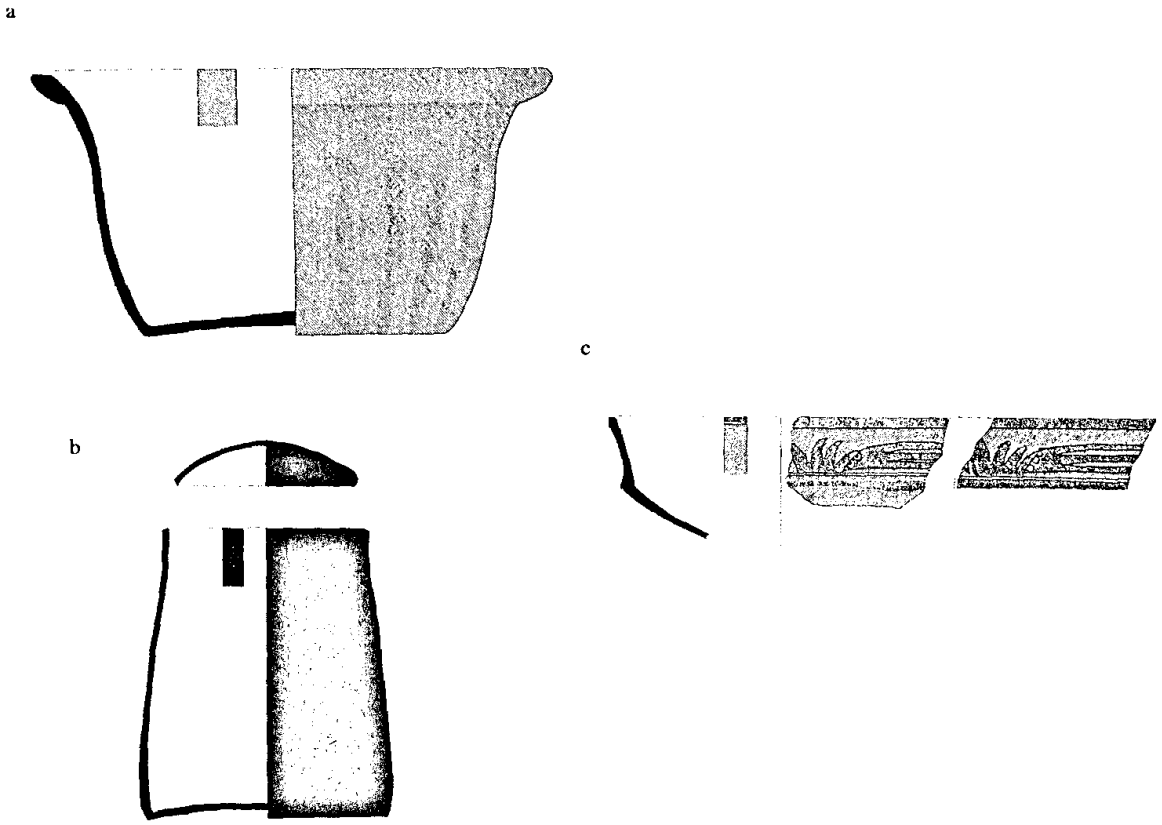

Figure 3.5. (a) A large bucket or "flower pot" from an elite burial in Str. P8-9; (b) a black-slipped cylinder lidded vase from an elite cache in Str. N10-43; and (c) a polychrome bowl with geometric designs and stylized images of birds (macaws?) from a commoner midden inside Chultun P8-2. Illustrations drawn by Louise Belanger.

non-elite middens. In the Classic period, vases are typically associated with elite contexts (Adams 1971:139), so it is important to note that two of them occur in non-elite midden locations. Functionally, the vases were probably used for storing liquids because of the slipped interior and the constriction of the vessel walls, which inhibited evaporation. Neither of the commoner ones is as finely made as the Polvero Black cylindrical lidded vessel dating to the early facet (see Figure 3.5b). This vessel was excavated from an elite cache found on top of the 33 m tall High Temple, designated as Structure N10-43 (Pendergast 1998:57).

The final vessel category to be discussed is the crude open bowls called Coconut Walk Unslipped. Eleven of these unslipped vessels were found alongside elaborate polychrome Usulutan-style wares and spouted jar vessels inside the *chultun* (P8-2). They are well smoothed on the interior, but their exterior surface is rough, showing grass impressions. They are thin-

walled (mean average = 4 mm) and have large rim diameters ranging from 34 to 40 cm. There is also evidence of spalling on their interiors. Their function is somewhat puzzling, but they may have been used to line pits, given the grass impressions; however, similar forms have been recovered by Elizabeth Graham (1994) in the Stann Creek region of Central Belize. She thinks that these kinds of vessels might have been used for soaking purposes, perhaps the soaking of corn in lime or the mixing of lime with water for construction purposes (Graham 1994:155).

Discussion

During the Preclassic at Lamanai there was a considerable variety of vessels that satisfied many domestic and ritual requirements for both elites and non-elites. Each vessel form was associated with a specific range of functions. Certain groups of vessels were likely used in distinct activity sets, as seen with contemporary Maya highland groups. Today, as in the past, activity sets consisted of a group of vessels that served a specific activity, were associated with a specific activity area, and were stored together near their area of use (Deal 1998:84; Sheets 1992). Generally speaking, in modern Maya households there are vessels for three kinds of activity sets: food preparation and serving, water procurement and storage, and ritual functions (Culbert 1965; Deal 1998). At Lamanai, the variety of vessels used in each of these three kinds of activity sets has been observed for the Preclassic period.

A number of fine-quality vessels are found in both elite and non-elite contexts at Lamanai, such as in household middens and burials. They are typically bowls and jars, and their predominance is consistent with the situation today, indicating they may have served a similar range of domestic and ritual functions. The abundance of fine-quality wares probably reflects the highly developed ritual system that required most Preclassic households to keep on hand quantities of finer serving vessels (Evon Vogt, personal communication 1999). In the Protoclassic, this is exemplified with the production of Usulutan-style and polychrome wares. Some of the finest vessels of these types were recovered from a midden context—the *chultun*. The Protoclassic polychrome bowls, dishes, and jars, for example, exhibit geometric designs and stylized images of birds painted in red, black, and orange (see Figure 3.5c). Given the amount of excavation at Lamanai, it is surprising to see that few polychromes have been excavated from Protoclassic elite contexts.

One explanation for this may be sampling bias or error. It may also be that the principle of placing cached offerings along the primary axis of ceremonial buildings was not followed in the Lamanai community during the Preclassic. As Pendergast (1998:56) has stated, "Neither architectural size and complexity nor the degree of change wrought by modifications was necessarily reflected in primary axis offerings of an appropriately sumptuous nature, or even the presence of an offering in any form."

Another explanation for a lack of elaborate pottery in elite contexts may be that variations in activity sets, the use of pots for ritual and domestic functions, did not seem to be markedly different within structures during the Late Preclassic. Additionally, the variations in the types of vessels represented within these activity sets may be minor between elite and non-elite groups. For example, there has been the tendency in Maya archaeology to equate the presence of polychrome pottery with high status later on in the Classic period. This inference probably has resulted from the prominent place of polychromes in high-status burials and in ceremonial contexts such as caches (Beaudry 1983:183). Nevertheless, there is evidence that polychromes were not restricted to the elite but were available to commoner households not closely associated with any one particular major center. At the Classic period sites of Barton Ramie (Willey et al. 1965:350–351), Cerén (Beaudry 1983:183), Copán (Webster and Gonlin 1988:187), and Tikal (Culbert 1974:183), polychrome pottery has been recovered from numerous commoner households. According to Culbert (1974:65), even the most remote households at Tikal during the Late Classic regularly used hand-painted polychrome pottery for serving food, and the vessels used for domestic activities like food storage and carrying water were the products of specialized manufacturers.

The viewpoint here is that certain types of pottery, like polychrome vessels for the Classic, may not be the best marker of wealth in Maya society (see Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992:54). Although polychrome decorations are often found in high-status contexts, such as burials, when using ceramics to try to distinguish between elites and commoners, the criteria should be amplified and qualified to include such differences as execution of design and technique of the painted and printed surfaces.

Generally, there is a positive correlation between status-level context and pictorial/hieroglyphic complexity and artistic (painting) quality of polychrome pottery. However, this does not hold true when we are discussing the quality of vessel formation and firing. The ability to manufacture vessels of the highest quality is seen in pottery from all socioeconomic and political contexts (Dorie Reents-Budet, personal communica-

tion 2001). Furthermore, there are anomalies in the archaeological record where we find sherds with elaborately painted designs in less than elite contexts. Likewise, we find poorly painted "commoner" service wares in the highest socioeconomic and political contexts. The site of Buenavista, located in western Belize, is one of the best examples of this inverse correlation (Reents-Budet et al. 2000). So, the picture is much too complicated to support simplistic statements about ancient Maya polychrome pottery as evidence of elite status. Given the variety of contexts in which polychrome pottery occurs, other indicators such as better construction, size, and elaborateness of architecture; presence of multiple structures within a household; percentage of polychrome wares versus percentage of plain wares; involvement in craft activities; inclusion of imported ceramic wares and exotic items such as jade in burials; and burial construction may be better measures reflecting household wealth (Chase and Chase 1992:54; Flannery and Marcus 1994:333–339; Hendon 1991; Smith 1987).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the preliminary data on the Late Preclassic whole vessels from Lamanai suggest that there was considerable variability in ceramic content within commoner and elite households. Based on ceramic content, there does not seem to be a significant difference in the frequency and variety of ceramic types and forms identified in elite and commoner contexts and domestic and ritual contexts at the site during the Late Preclassic. From commoner structures occupied during the Protoclassic (late and terminal facets), polychrome dishes have been recovered in midden deposits, and crude bowls have been found in a burial and a cache. In elite structures, finely made serving bowls and plates have been found in middens, and plainware has been recovered from caches and burials.

It may be, as recent ethnoarchaeological investigations in the Maya highlands of Chiapas have indicated, that most domestic ritual pottery types are undecorated plainwares and that finely made decorated wares served both ritual and domestic functions (Deal 1998:61). Therefore, the distribution of fine-quality decorated pottery versus plainware, which has often been used by archaeologists as an indicator of economic status, may not be a reliable indicator for status or wealth in ancient Maya society. Michael E. Smith (1987) has demonstrated the potential problems associated with making simple correlations between household wealth and

status. He states that there are a large number of complicating factors such as family size, developmental cycle, and the professions or specialized activities of household members (Smith 1987). Other factors, such as patterns of use and re-use and the borrowing of pottery by family and neighbors for both short-term and long-term periods, should also be considered.

Future Research

Although using a single line of evidence like ceramics as a material indicator to try to distinguish between elites and commoners at a single site for a single time period does not appear to work well at Lamanai, the current study could offer important leads for other researchers who are facing similar problems. Examining pottery has the potential of allowing us to discern social status, but certain criteria must be amplified and qualified to include such differences as execution of design and technique. For example, polychrome pottery could be used as an important marker of wealth if researchers recognize pictorial/hieroglyphic complexity and artistic quality as the superior criteria.

If a hierarchy of criteria is established (and maintained) for pottery, then it could be utilized as an equally important line of argument as architectural context, the degree of elaboration in architecture and burials, and the presence/absence of luxury goods in burials and caches for determining wealth in Maya society.

References

Adams, Richard E. W.

1971 *The Ceramics of Altar de Sacrificios.* Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 63, no. 1. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Beaudry, Marilyn P.

1983 The Ceramics of the Zapotitán Valley. In *Archaeology and Volcanism in Central America: The Zapotitán Valley of El Salvador,* edited by Payson D. Sheets, pp. 161–190. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Brady, James E., Joseph W. Ball, Ronald L. Bishop, Duncan C. Pring, Norman Hammond, and Rupert A. Housley

1998 The Lowland Maya "Protoclassic": A Reconsideration of Its Nature and Significance. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9:17–38.

Chase, Diane Z., and Arlen F. Chase (editors)
1992 *Mesoamerican Elites: An Archaeological Assessment.* University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Coe, Sophie D., and Michael D. Coe
1996 *The True History of Chocolate.* Thames and Hudson, London.

Culbert, T. Patrick
1965 *The Ceramic History of the Central Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico.* Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 19. Brigham Young University, Provo.
1974 *The Lost Civilization: The Story of the Classic Maya.* Harper and Row, New York.

Deal, Michael
1998 *Pottery Ethnoarchaeology in the Central Maya Highlands.* University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Flannery, Kent V., and Joyce Marcus
1994 *Early Formative Pottery of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico.* Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology 27. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Forsyth, Donald W.
1993 The Ceramic Sequence at Nakbe, Guatemala. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 4:31–53.

Freidel, David A., Linda Schele, and Joy Parker
1993 *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path.* William Morrow, New York.

Gifford, James C.
1960 The Type-Variety Method of Ceramic Classification as an Indicator of Cultural Phenomena. *American Antiquity* 25(3):341–347.
1976 *Prehistoric Pottery Analysis and the Ceramics of Barton Ramie in the Belize Valley.* Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology Memoir 18. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Graham, Elizabeth
1994 *The Highlands of the Lowlands: Environment and Archaeology in the Stann Creek District, Belize, Central America.* Monographs in World Archaeology 19. Prehistory Press, Madison.

Haviland, William A., and Hattula Moholy-Nagy
1992 Distinguishing the High and Mighty from the Hoi Polloi at Tikal, Guatemala. In *Mesoamerican Elites: An Archaeological Assessment*, edited by Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase, pp. 50–60. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Hendon, Julia A.
1991 Status and Power in Classic Maya Society: An Archaeological Approach. *American Anthropologist* 91:894–918.

Hurst, W. Jeffrey, Stanley M. Tarka, Terry G. Powis, Fred Valdez, Jr., and Thomas R. Hester
2002 Cacao Usage by the Earliest Maya Civilization. *Nature* 418:289–290.

Kosakowsky, Laura J.
1983 Intrasite Variability of the Formative Ceramics from Cuello, Belize: An Analysis of Form and Function. Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson.

LeCount, Lisa J.
1999 Polychrome Pottery and Political Strategies in Late and Terminal Classic Lowland Maya Society. *Latin American Antiquity* 10(3):239–258.

McAnany, Patricia A.
2000 Praise the Ahaw and Pass the Kakaw: Xibun Maya and the Luxury Economy of the Petén. Paper presented at the Annual Symposium of the University of Texas at Austin Maya meetings, Austin.

McAnany, Patricia A., Rebecca Storey, and Angela K. Lockard
1999 Mortuary Ritual and Family Politics at Formative and Classic K'axob, Belize. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 10:129–146

McAnany, Patricia A., and Sandra Varela López
1999 Re-creating the Formative Maya Village of K'axob: Chronology, Ceramic Complexes, and Ancestors in Architectural Context. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 10:147–168.

Pendergast, David M.
1981a Lamanai, Belize: Summary of Excavation Results, 1974–1980. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 8:29–53.
1981b The 1980 Excavations at Lamanai, Belize. *Mexicon* 2(6):96–98.
1981c A Regular Three-Ring Circus. *Royal Ontario Museum Archaeological Newsletter* 192. Toronto.
1998 Intercession with the Gods: Caches and Their Significance at Altun Ha and Lamanai, Belize. In *The Sowing and the Dawning: Termination, Dedication, and Transformation in the Archaeological and Ethnographic Record of Mesoamerica*, edited by Shirley B. Mock, pp. 55–63. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Powis, Terry G.
1999 The Role of Pottery and Food Consumption among Late Preclassic Maya Commoners at Lamanai, Belize. Paper presented at the 98th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago.
2000 A Preliminary Report on the Preclassic Ceramics of Lamanai, Belize. In *Lamanai Field Reports 1997 to 1999*, edited by Elizabeth Graham and H. Ritscher, pp. 26–37. Manuscript on file, Institute of Archaeology, University College London, England.
2001 Technological Experimentation and Artistic Expression at Lamanai during the Protoclassic Period. Paper presented at the 66th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, New Orleans.

Powis, Terry G., Fred Valdez, Jr., Thomas R. Hester, W. Jeffrey Hurst, and Stanley M. Tarka
2002 Spouted Vessels and Cacao Use among the Preclassic Maya. *Latin American Antiquity* 13(1):85–106.

Pring, Duncan C.
1977 Influence or Intrusion? The "Protoclassic" in the Maya Lowlands. In *Social Process in Maya Prehistory: Studies in Honour of Sir Eric Thompson*, edited by Norman Hammond, pp. 135–166. Academic Press, London.

Reents-Budet, Dorie
1994 *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period.* Duke University Press, Durham.

Reents-Budet, Dorie, Ronald L. Bishop, Jennifer T. Taschek, and Joseph W. Ball
2000 Out of the Palace Dumps: Ceramic Production and Use at Buenavista del Cayo. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 11:99–121.

Reina, Ruben E., and Robert M. Hill
1978 *The Traditional Pottery of Guatemala.* University of Texas Press, Austin.

Robertson, Robin
1983 Functional Analysis and Social Process in Ceramics: The Pottery from Cerros, Belize. In *Civilization in the Ancient Americas: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey*, edited by Richard M. Leventhal and Alan L. Kolata, pp. 105–142. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Sabloff, Jeremy A., and Robert E. Smith
1969 The Importance of Both Analytic and Taxonomic Classification in the Type-Variety System. *American Antiquity* 34(3):278–285.

Sharer, Robert J. (editor)
1978 Pottery and Conclusions. In *The Prehistory of Chalchuapa, El Salvador*, Vol. 3. Museum Monographs, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Sheets, Payson D.
1992 *The Cerén Site: A Prehistoric Village Buried by Volcanic Ash in Central America.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Fort Worth.

Smith, Michael E.
1987 Household Possessions and Wealth in Agrarian States: Implications for Archaeology. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 6(4): 297–335.

Smith, Robert E., Gordon R. Willey, and James C. Gifford
1960 The Type-Variety Concept as a Basis for the Analysis of Maya Pottery. *American Antiquity* 25(3):330–340.

Stuart, David
1988 The Río Azul Cacao Pot: Epigraphic Observations on the Function of a Maya Ceramic Vessel. *Antiquity* 62:153–157.

Thompson, Raymond H.
1958 *Modern Yucatecan Maya Pottery Making.* Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology 15. Salt Lake City.

Valdez, Fred, Lauren A. Sullivan, and Andrew Manning
1999 Old Problems, New Perspectives: Ceramic Analyses in the Northeastern Petén and Northern Belize. Paper presented at the 63rd Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Chicago.

Webster, David L., and Nancy Gonlin
1988 Household Remains of the Humblest Maya. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 15:169–190.

Wheat, Joe B., James C. Gifford, and William W. Walsey
1958 Ceramic Type, Type Cluster, and Ceramic System in Southwestern Pottery Analysis. *American Antiquity* 32(3):289–315.

Willey, Gordon R., William R. Bullard, John B. Glass, and James C. Gifford
1965 *Prehistoric Maya Settlements in the Belize Valley.* Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 54. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Willey, Gordon R., T. Patrick Culbert, and Richard E. W. Adams
1967 Maya Lowland Ceramics: A Report from the 1965 Guatemala City Conference. *American Antiquity* 32(3):289–315.

Printed in the United States of America

First edition, 2004

♾ The paper used in this book meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) (Permanence of Paper).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ancient Maya commoners / edited by Jon C. Lohse and Fred Valdez, Jr.— 1st ed.
p. cm.
"Most of these papers were originally presented as part of a symposium organized for the 1999 American Anthropological Association meetings held in Chicago, IL"—Ack.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-292-70571-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Mayas—Social conditions—Congresses. 2. Mayas—Antiquities—Congresses. 3. Working class—Central America—History—Congresses. 4. Social structure—Central America—History—Congresses. 5. Land settlement patterns—Central America—Congresses. I. Lohse, Jon C., 1968- II. Valdez, Fred.
III. American Anthropological Association. Meeting (98th : 1999 : Chicago, Ill.)
F1435.3.S68A53 2004
972.81'01—dc22
2004004631