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# POLYCHROME POTTERY AND POLITICAL STRATEGIES IN LATE AND TERMINAL CLASSIC LOWLAND MAYA SOCIETY

Lisa J. LeCount

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*The analysis of decorated pottery across house mounds at the lowland Maya site of Xunantunich in Belize investigates the complex relationships between wealth, social status, and political strategies in state-level societies. Rather than using the distribution of decorated pottery as an indicator of social status, this study treats it as an independent variable and illustrates how prestige goods circulated as political currency to further political ambitions. Two social strata and the two ranks within each stratum are defined by architectural complexity and intersite location of house mounds at the Late Classic II (A.D. 670 to 790) to Terminal Classic (A.D. 790 to 1000) provincial center of Xunantunich and its nearby hamlet, San Lorenzo. During the Late Classic II phase, elaborately decorated pottery was found concentrated in elite households in the civic center, whereas during the Terminal Classic, when Xunantunich was in the process of collapse, they were found dispersed equally among all house mounds. I suggest that local elites, to maintain power, abandoned rival displays of prestige goods and attempted to consolidate community support by gifting luxury items down through the social hierarchy. This article, therefore, seeks not only to craft a clearer definition of wealth, but to build a model of when and how prestige goods function as a means to promote political strategies in state-level societies.*

*El análisis de la cerámica decorada distribuida a través montículos de hogares investiga las relaciones complejas entre riqueza, posición social, y estrategias políticas en las sociedades a nivel de estado. En vez de interpretar la distribución de riqueza como un indicador de la posición social, los estudios en Xunantunich, Belice, un centro Maya en las tierras bajas, demuestran cómo la circulación de cerámica finamente decorada fue utilizada como una suerte de moneda política para conseguir favores y satisfacer ambiciones políticas. En el centro provincial al igual que el vecino caserío de San Lorenzo durante el Clásico Tardío II (670–790 d.C.) hasta el término del período Clásico (790–1,000 d.C.) encontramos que hay dos estratos sociales con dos rangos dentro de cada estrato que están definidos por la complejidad arquitectónica y la manera como están localizados los montículos residenciales. Durante el Clásico Tardío II la alfarería con decoración fina se concentraba en los hogares de las élites del centro cívico, mientras que a finales del período Clásico, cuando Xunantunich se encontraba en el proceso de colapso, estos objetos se distribuyen por igual entre los montículos residenciales. Sugiero que las élites locales, en su afán de mantener el poder, dejaron de lado la competencia por exhibir su riqueza e intentaron consolidar el apoyo de la comunidad a través del obsequio de bienes de lujo. Por lo tanto este artículo no sólo busca crear un modelo que defina más claramente el significado de riqueza sino que también trata de explicar cuándo y cómo los bienes de prestigio funcionan como estrategias de promoción políticas en las sociedades estatales.*

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Conventionally, Mesoamerican archaeologists define prestige goods as a fixed set of luxury items, including jade (Leventhal et al. 1987), greenstone (Grove 1984), pyrite mirrors (Flannery 1968), seashells (Andrews IV 1969), stingray spines (Marcus 1978), and decorated pottery (Ashmore and Sharer 1978; Coe 1975; Coggins 1975; Feinman et al. 1981; Sharer 1978), and use the distribution of these items to help separate ancient households into distinct social groups. This methodology is based on the recognition that elites are at the apex of sociopolitical, economic, and ideological institutions and have greater access to prestige goods than commoners (Chase and Chase 1992; Costin and Earle

1989; Drennan 1976; Tourtellot and Sabloff 1972). Research at the Late Classic II (A.D. 670 to 790) to Terminal Classic (A.D. 790 to 1000) Lowland Maya provincial center of Xunantunich, Belize has failed, however, to find a clear-cut class distinction in the distribution of decorated pottery. When social groups were ranked solely by house mound size, location, and architectural layout, the distribution of decorated pottery types were found concentrated in elite households during the Late Classic II phase, but in the Terminal Classic they were found dispersed equally among both elite and commoner house mounds. These patterns are interpreted as having been linked to shifting political strategies used to

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maintain power during the ninth century A.D. when Classic lowland Maya civilization was in decline. The study illustrates that although prestige goods should be a good index of status, their production and circulation are heavily influenced by their role as *political currency* (Brumfiel 1987a; Brumfiel and Earle 1987). This article, therefore, seeks not only to more clearly define what wealth is, but to elucidate how prestige goods function as a means to fund social and political ambitions in state-level societies.

Wealth has been broadly outlined as primitive valuables used in display, ritual, and exchange (Brumfiel and Earle 1987:4). Douglas and Isherwood (1979:62) suggest that people classify and evaluate others based on their consumption of these items; therefore, wealth legitimizes social status by reinforcing social boundaries. Given their role in communicating group inclusion, wealth items acquired exchange value in Prehispanic societies and circulated both horizontally, across groups within the same social stratum (Brumfiel 1987a:112–116; Hicks 1991:206–7; Rounds 1979:80), and vertically, between members of different strata (Berdan 1982:101, 105–20; Blanton et al. 1993:249; Brumfiel 1987a:112–116; Calnek 1978; Spencer 1982:42–62). Wealth exchange served not only to consolidate membership within a group by formally announcing social connections (Brumfiel 1994; Sabloff 1986), but also to differentiate between groups engaged in competitive consumption (Appel 1982; Blanton and Feinman 1984; Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Clark and Blake 1994; Rice 1987). The distribution of wealth items in the prehistoric record, therefore, reflects not simply social status, but the complex web of social and political relations between groups.

Wealth can be divided into three heuristic categories based on the way goods reflect social status and political relations (Figure 1). Exclusive status symbols are rare, primitive valuables, such as the lip, nose, and ear ornaments of Aztec lords (Anawalt 1980; Brumfiel 1987a:111) or the Jester God crown of Maya royalty (Freidel and Schele 1988:135), that unequivocally distinguish the rank of their bearer (Hirth 1992:22). As unique political insignias, they communicate rank through the display of specific symbols associated with gods, ancestors, foreign powers, or historic or mythical events. Weiner calls such items *inalienable possessions* since as “symbolic repositories of genealogies and historical

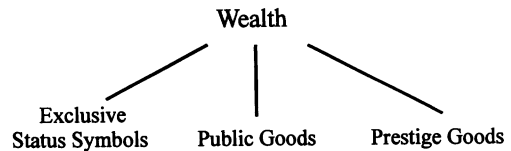


Figure 1. Categories of wealth.

events, their unique, subjective identity gives them absolute value placing them above the exchangeability of one thing for another” (1992:33). Production of such highly charged items was tightly managed by elites (DeMarrais et al. 1996:18), and circulation often was regulated by leaders (Smith 1976), the most notably example being Aztec rulers who instituted sumptuary laws that authorized the display of ornaments and cloth patterns associated with specific titles (Anawalt 1980; Sahagún 1950–69, Bk 9, p.91 [1577]). Rarely exchanged except in socially prescribed ways, exclusive status symbols circulated only as gifts or rewards between equals or superiors who occupied a particular political office or social rank.

The bulk of wealth items encountered by archaeologists, however, was produced and exchanged more widely across social groups. Their exchangeability makes them less specific indicators of social status than markers of civil and political relations. I separate these goods into two types—public and prestige—based on the manner in which they symbolize the source of an individual’s social power. The modern concept of public goods (Olson 1971:14), defined as any items or services created and managed by a central authority, can be extended to ancient public monuments and private residences. Buildings represent the collective actions or holdings of a group since family, lineage, or polity members pooled labor and resources for their construction. Archaeologists (Abrams 1989; Blanton et al. 1996:6; DeMarrais et al. 1996:18; de Montmollin 1989) often assess the centralization of power within ancient societies by the volume of such constructions since they reflect a leader’s ability to negotiate labor and tribute. Shifting authority within the polity, lineage, or household may transfer use rights to buildings, and among the Classic Maya, the passing of authority was marked by termination or transformation of residences or pyramids associated with specific leaders (Freidel and Schele 1988). Public goods, therefore, become permanent and highly visible statements of large-scale political relations and social obligations.

Prestige goods, such as jade jewelry, decorated pottery, and marine shell ornaments, on the other hand, are personal, portable items displayed in both public and private contexts. Some prestige goods, such as the modern British royal crown, are exclusive status symbols, and most display intricate symbols that affiliate individuals to a larger social group; but I suggest that the vast majority of these items express social actions on a much smaller, more intimate scale. These luxury items, especially decorated pottery, are commonly gifted between family, friends, and political allies as tokens of contracts and obligations (Mauss 1990). They were produced, using complex technologies or labor-intensive techniques, by a limited number of skilled craftsmen whose efforts were subsidized by elites (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Peregrine 1991). And elites attempt to regulate circulation by monopolizing trade networks or intensifying obligations, through marriages, alliances, or patron-client relationships, with individuals who command their production and/or trade (Smith 1976). The distribution of prestige goods, therefore, reflects specific linkages between individuals rather than polity-wide relationships.

Using these definitions, some decorated pottery types can be classified as prestige goods. Among the Classic lowland Maya, elaborately painted pictorial vases with hieroglyphic rim bands were produced by literate craftsmen in "palace schools" (Ball 1993: 258; Reents-Budet 1994:218), and exchanged over long distances between rulers and their noble partisans to cement social alliances and political arrangements (Adams 1971; Coggins 1975; Houston et al. 1992; Sabloff 1986; Taschek and Ball 1992). At Tikal, less elaborate fine wares such as polychrome cylinder vases and serving dishes, modeled *incensarios*, and figurines were manufactured in workshops and exchanged between local elite lineages (Becker 1973:399; Fry 1980:3; Fry and Cox 1974); this pattern also has been argued for other Late Classic centers such as Palenque (Bishop et al. 1982; Rands and Bishop 1980), Lubaantun (Hammond 1975), and Buenavista (Ball 1993). Rice (1987:77–79) suggests that simply decorated serving wares, as well as basic utilitarian pots, were fabricated by village specialists and circulated through a kin-based redistribution system that relied on the heads of kin groups to collect and exchange pottery for other goods and services. In an overview of Classic Maya pottery production and exchange studies,

Rice concludes that there is no evidence for a "hierarchically organized market economy nor an economy based on centrally administered production and exchange on a large scale" (1987: 77); rather the evidence is for a staple finance system in which craft specialists produced goods for elite redistribution. This relatively loose control over production and circulation of most decorated and plain ware pottery suggests that lineage heads throughout the social hierarchy would have had at their disposal at least some kinds of decorated pottery vessels for use in furthering social and political ambitions.

Pottery was not only an important gift item, but was an integral part of displaying status during household, communal, and polity wide feasts. Feasting occurred at all public and private ancient Maya gatherings and was an important part of social and political interaction among both commoners and elites. Bishop Diego de Landa observed that all sixteenth-century Yucatecan festivals involved gifts of sacred foods to the gods and large-scale celebratory feasting and drinking (Tozzer 1941:151–169). Feasting, as well as gift giving, was not confined to the elite class. According to Landa:

They have two ways of celebrating these feasts; the first, which is that of the nobles and of the principal people, obliges each one of the invited guests to give another similar feast. And to each guest they give a roasted fowl, bread and drink of cacao in abundance; and at the end of the repast, they were accustomed to give a *manta* to each to wear, and a little stand and vessel, as beautiful as possible. And if one of the guests should die, his household or his relations are obliged to repay the invitation. The second way of giving feasts was used among kinsfolk when they marry their children or celebrate the memory of the deeds of their ancestors, and this does not oblige the guests to give a feast in return (Tozzer 1941:92).

Hieroglyphic texts and illustrations on Classic period vases indicate that specific pottery forms were reserved for festival foods (Houston et al. 1989:722). Cylinder vases functioned as drinking cups for liquid cacao, plates and dishes served as containers for tamales, and small bowls contained liquid refreshments such as *atol(e)*. Feasting, like gifting, provided a social backdrop where political negotiations to consolidate support and amass tribute could occur.

Recent archaeological studies suggest that the circulation of prestige goods can be purposefully broadened or contracted to create, maintain, or expand

political power (Blanton et al. 1996:7; Brumfiel 1987b). Brumfiel (1987b:676) enumerates three basic propositions that link consumption with political strategies: 1) since consumption functions to classify persons, it provides an effective means for validating hierarchies and alliances; 2) since consumption is inherently competitive, it provides an effective means for waging political contests; and 3) since consumption varies with openness of competition, it is sensitive to changes in political structure. According to Brumfiel, consumption of local prestige goods should flourish in fluid, competitive political situations such as that found among the pre-Aztec petty kingdoms of central Mexico and languish in structured contexts such as those found under Aztec rule when social and political rights and titles were rigidly defined.

Similarly, Blanton et al. (1996) view the control of prestige goods as one of several political strategies to create and maintain power. They suggest that production and consumption of prestige goods is greatest, but their distribution is narrowest, in network-based political organizations where privileged individuals monopolize rights to social standing and political offices, but also contend with intra-factional rivalries for those positions (1996:5). In such situations, competition is most fierce among groups within the same faction, since benefits and authority are socially restricted along these lines. When power and leadership are contested, ostentatious consumption and competitive exchanges become effective methods to recruit internal support and to craft a strong external image (Cannadine 1985; Hayden 1995). For example, among the Aztec, wealth items proliferated within the elite stratum where relatively minor differences in the consumption of prestige goods and the display of exclusive status symbols marked dramatic divisions in rank and power (Anawalt 1980; Rounds 1979:80; Sahagún 1950–1969, Book 9, p. 91 [1577]). In corporate political organizations where power is shared among subgroups, Blanton and colleagues imply that the production of prestige goods should be reduced overall in society and there should be a greater equity in wealth distributions since leaders emphasize solidarity and interdependence between social and political factions (Blanton et al. 1996:7). They note, however, that this situation requires further empirical testing. The corporate political strategy is based on the concept of collective governance in which

leaders permit other subgroups, such as secondary elite or commoner lineages, limited roles in the political process. To publicly announce this social arrangement, leaders should loosen control over the circulation of prestige goods and exchange items down through the social hierarchy to form political alliances. Parity in the archaeological distribution of luxury items, especially highly decorated pottery, signals an elite strategy to build consensus and establish ties with subgroups in the polity.

### The Archaeological Context

#### *Late and Terminal Classic Maya*

Current models of Maya political organization emphasize the variable and shifting nature of centralization and integration within Late Classic polities (Demarest 1992; de Montmollin 1989; Marcus 1992, 1993). Polities ranged in regional scale and political centralization from relatively large, centrally controlled states such as those centered at Tikal and Calakmul to comparatively small, loosely integrated kingdoms such as that at Xunantunich. No matter what the scale, political integration is considered to have been relatively weak both horizontally, between factions of the same political rank and social standing, and vertically, between ruling nobility, subordinate elite, and their supporting populace. Maya polities were unstable partly because political position was dependent on social status (Demarest 1992; Freidel 1992; Hendon 1991; Sanders 1989). At the top of the political hierarchy, the hereditary ruler assigned administrative offices to members within his own noble lineage and other closely ranked elite groups. Secondary elites, in turn, replicated the kingly model and formed loyal factions with their own political agendas. Internal competition for kingship, tribute and regional power fueled rivalries between elite groups (Culbert 1991; Demarest 1992; Hendon 1991; Pohl and Pohl 1994; Sabloff 1986; Sanders 1989). Political instability is documented in historical inscriptions that describe intra- and inter-polity warfare (Stuart 1993:332–336), social conflict (Fash and Stuart 1991:175), and the rapid succession of rulers (Pohl and Pohl 1994:149).

By the ninth century A.D., the large Maya states centered at Tikal, Palenque, and Calakmul had lost many of their outer provinces and were in the process of decline (Marcus 1992; Sharer 1994:341). The disintegration of power and authority at state capitals

allowed some provincial centers, such as Xunantunich, to break away and usurp control over peripheral regions in the Terminal Classic. Seibal, previously a provincial center of the Petexbatún state, embarked on a major construction program incorporating foreign stylistic elements (Willey et al. 1975). Fash (1991:182) suggests that in Copán, *mut tepal* or “joint rule” was instigated by rulers in an attempt to stabilize power in the face of social discontent and environmental degeneration. Although strategies to maintain power varied among sites, many lowland Terminal Classic centers failed to maintain a lasting authority and collapsed around A.D. 1000.

It is clear that political strategies to maintain power shifted during the Late and Terminal phases in Maya centers, although these processes remain vague at small centers lacking historical monuments. It also has been proposed that the distribution of prestige goods can elucidate the nature of political organization in ancient polities. Research at the Classic Maya site of Xunantunich in Belize will now be examined in order to construct a view of the changing political milieu at a small, provincial center located on the eastern periphery of the central Petén.

#### *Xunantunich Political History and Development*

Ashmore and Leventhal’s (1993) reconstruction of Xunantunich’s political history directly links the rise of the center to the fall of Naranjo, a large state center located 15 km to the west (Figure 2). Architectural styles and the timing of the civic construction demonstrate that a Naranjo royal family rapidly assumed power at Xunantunich during the Late Classic and legitimized their right to rule by espousing connections to the larger, more powerful state. Extensive excavations from 1991 to 1997 at the site by the Xunantunich Archaeological Project (XAP) reveal the hilltop was initially occupied in the Middle Preclassic; however, construction of the Late Classic center between A.D. 580 and 660 razed most of this early architecture (Jamison and Leventhal 1997; LeCount 1996). By the Late Classic II phase (A.D. 660–790), the civic center had been modeled after Naranjo’s Group B and a plaster frieze commemorating royal ancestors encircled Structure A-6 2nd. After A.D. 820, Naranjo ceased to dedicate monuments and, in the wake of this power vacuum, Xunantunich’s ruler proclaimed paramount authority in the upper Belize Valley by commemorating public mon-

uments. Stela 8, which was erected in 9.19.10.0.0 (A.D. 820), contains what appears to be the Naranjo emblem glyph at position C2 and correlates precisely with the cessation of monument building at Naranjo (see Graham 1978:111, 124). The last of the site’s three stelae was erected in 10.1.0.0.0 or A.D. 849. Although Terminal Classic civic construction at the site core was confined to minor modifications of existing architecture, we argue that the site continued as the seat of regional authority in the upper Belize Valley into the tenth century (Ashmore and Leventhal 1993; LeCount et al. 1998; Leventhal and LeCount 1997; Leventhal et al. 1993).

The center is a mid-size, yet architecturally impressive, site (Figure 3). The focal point of the civic center is the Castillo (Structure A-6), a 39-m pyramid topped with a two-story superstructure and a plaster frieze exhibiting symbols across its eastern face that denote acts of creation, and symbols across its western face associated with death, warfare, and ancestor worship (Fields 1994). At the far northern end of the site is the royal residential compound, the ritually prescribed home of ancestors (Ashmore 1991). Structure A-1, constructed during the Late Classic II phase, separates the central zone into two plazas: Plaza A-I and A-II. Further defining the civic core are flanking range structures and ball courts. Two internal walkways or *sacbeob* link Structure A-21 and the nonroyal elite group, Group D, to the civic core.

Household investigations focused on the elite stratum at Xunantunich, which was comprised of two groups: the royal compound at Group A and the secondary elite at Group D. XAP excavations concentrated on defining the layout of residential architecture, determining their developmental sequence, and locating their associated refuse.

The royal compound consists of four palace structures (A-10, A-11, A-12, and A-13) arranged around the semi-enclosed Plaza A-III. Structure A-11 is considered the royal residence because of its northernmost position and room arrangement (MacKie 1985), while Structures A-10 and A-12 are interpreted as palace structures that functioned as the residences of the royal court. Structure A-13, a range structure with multiple small rooms facing both Plaza A-II and A-III, probably served as an *audiencia* to receive visitors. Immediately east of the compound and linked by private access to the royal compound is a set of three platforms (Structures A-23, A-24, A-25)

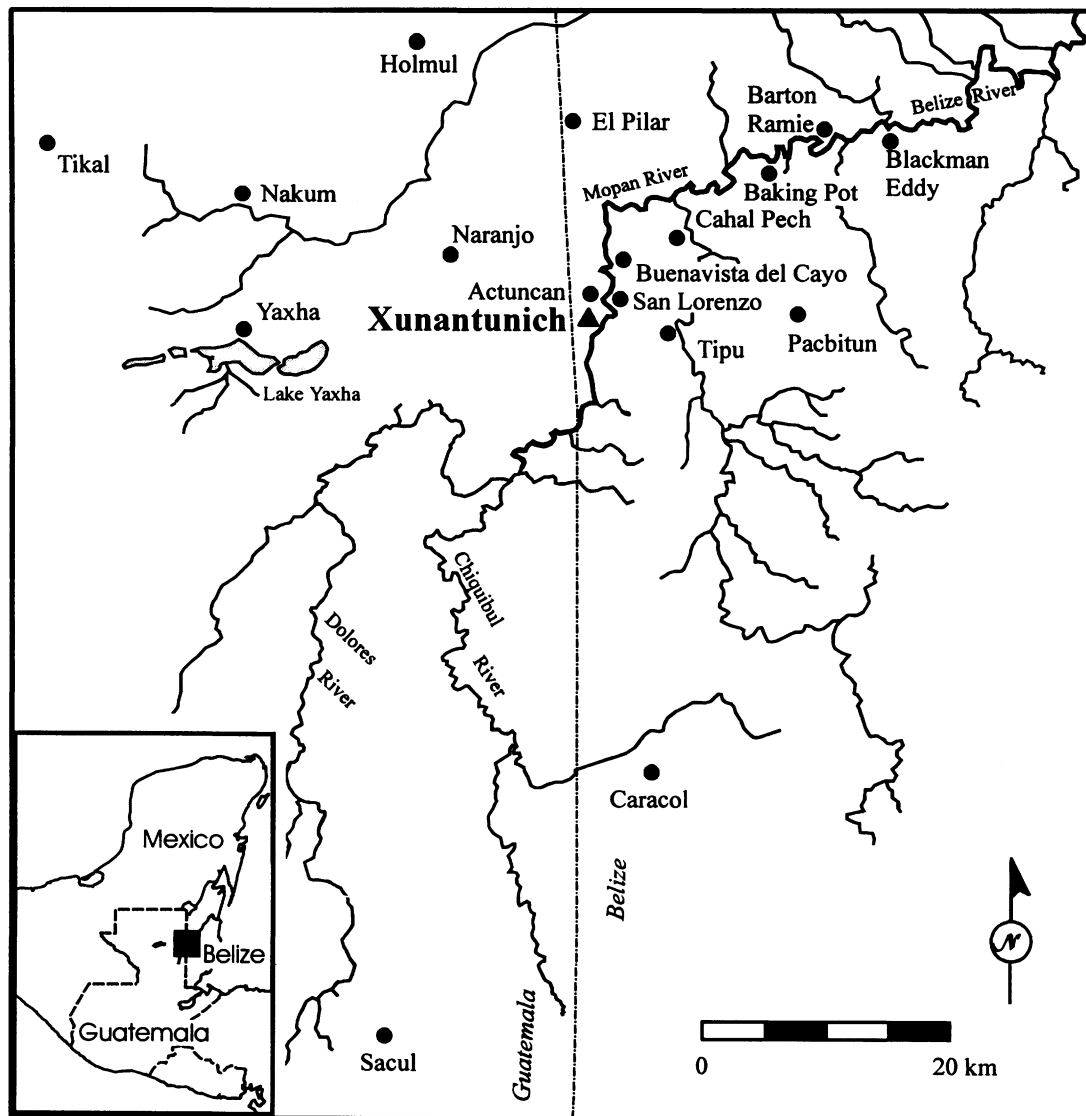


Figure 2. Classic period sites in the upper Belize Valley.

and two terraces that contained extensive trash deposits (Jamison and Wolff 1994). Middens located in the alley way between Structures A-12 and A-24 and in front of A-24 facing Plaza A-II were found to yield the highest frequency of polychrome cylinder vases, tripod plates and other serving containers of any household tested (LeCount 1996:268). These middens' proximity to the royal compound and their high volume of both utilitarian and highly decorated pottery suggest that Structures A-23, A-24, and A-25 may have functioned as a service area for the royal residence and for public events held in Plaza A-II.

Group D is a discrete cluster of mounds located southeast of the civic core. The residential group consists of 14 mounds located around Structures D-8 and D-6, a raised central plaza and an 8-m high pyramid. Braswell (1998:30) suggests that the complex was the home of a nonroyal elite group since small pyramids, like Structure D-6, have been interpreted as ancestor shrines, and range structures, like those found around the central platform, have been interpreted as elite dwellings. Two uncarved stelae also attest to the elite status of the occupants. Stela 11, which sits directly in front of the ancestor shrine (Structure D-6), and Stela 12, at the terminus of

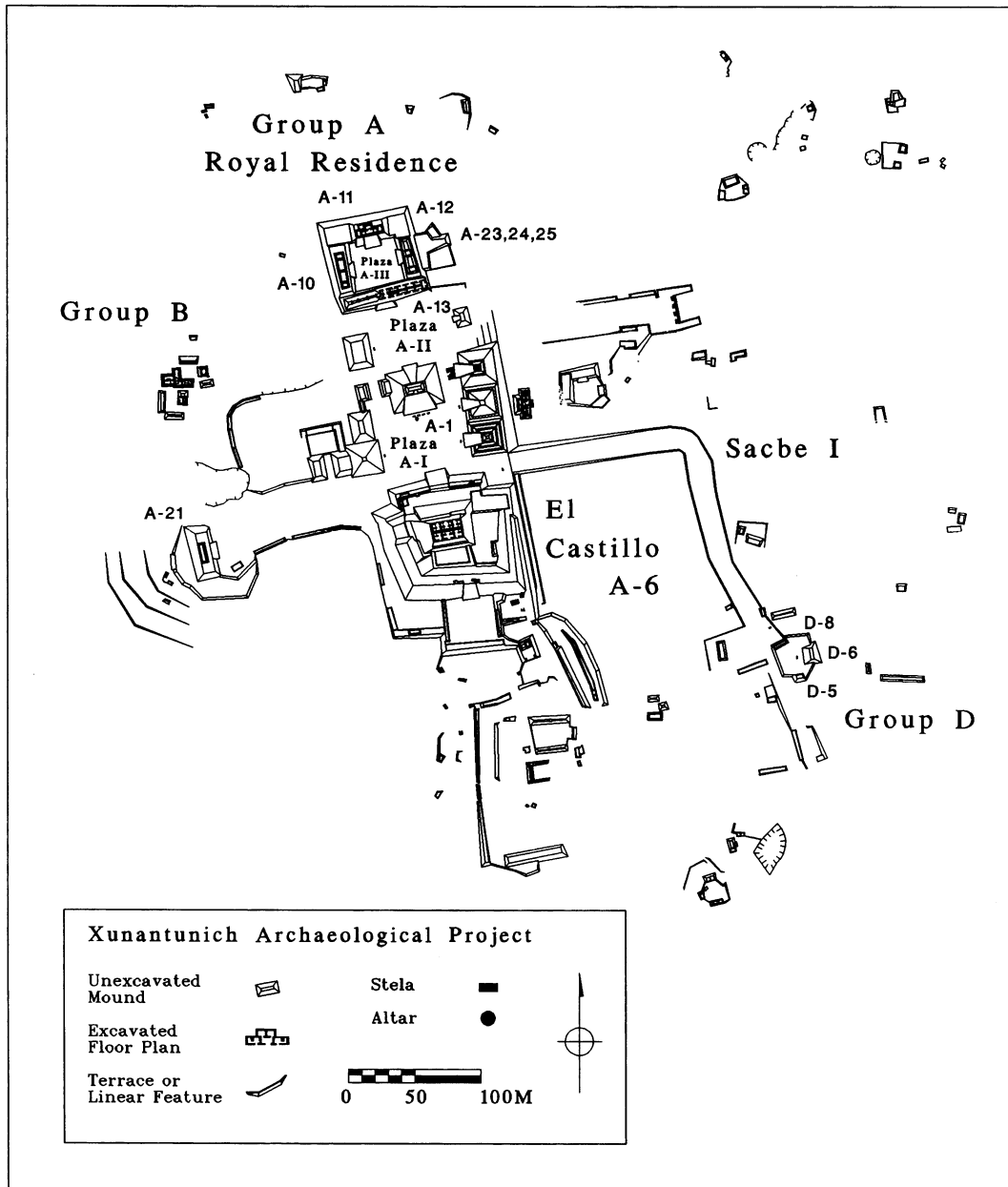


Figure 3. Classic period architecture of Xunantunich, Belize. Map prepared by Angela Keller and modified by author.

Sacbe 1 leading from Group D to Plaza A-I, may have portrayed the painted images of lineage leaders and possibly described their genealogical background. Extensive excavations at 12 of the 14 mounds recovered occupation material and midden associated with domestic and ritual activities.

The relationship between members of Group A's royal lineage and Group D's nonroyal elite lineage is suggested to have involved shifting strategies of

competition and cooperation through time. During the Late Classic II phase, the royal compound at Group A was rapidly constructed (Jamison and Leventhal 1997; MacKie 1985). Initially, the south side may have been open to the public; later, Structure A-13 was built to close off the residence to the public. The rapid construction of the compound, as well as the royal family's ancestor shrine, Structure A-6, support Ashmore and Leventhal's contention that a



member of Naranjo's royal lineage assumed power at the site around A.D. 700. In contrast, excavations in the central platform of Group D demonstrate that the nonroyal elite group had a long history of continuous occupation, and may have been the ancestral home of the oldest family living on the hilltop. Analysis of ceramics from the fill of the ancestor shrine places initial construction of the residential cluster as early as the Early Classic, if not before. Structure D-5, which anchored the southern axis of the central platform, was built afterward, during the Late Classic I phase (A.D. 580-660), and its cardinal position symbolically indicates association with the underworld and ancestors (Ashmore 1991), possibly with an important lineage head. Other platforms, especially those to the south, were added to the group in the Late Classic II phase. Residents of Group D erected the uncarved Stela 12, which may have documented their social position and long-term history at the site, and they may have been instrumental in building the eastern *sacbe* to formally link them to the civic center.

After an initial burst of activity associated with the erection of stelae in the civic center, the fragmentation of public space and degradation of civic architecture signals a slow decline in royal power during the Terminal Classic. Civic construction is limited to modification of existing architecture, most notably the rebuilding of Structure A-1's top platform. However, some staircases in the civic center were dismantled (Keller 1995:89) and small, internal walls were constructed to restrict access through the civic core (Jamison and Leventhal 1997). Additionally, no evidence of Terminal Classic occupation has been found within the royal compound, and very little trash has been identified in the service area. Civic activities appear to have dramatically decreased in size, and their location may have shifted to the Castillo and Plaza A-I. Despite the social and political ramifications of these observed changes, there is little evidence for violence or serious disruptions in the occupation of the site during the Terminal Classic. No squatters built small ephemeral structures in the plazas nor were patterns of domestic activities, such as trash disposal, disrupted. Refuse continued to accumulate in the same locations as during the previous phase, and no sheet middens produced by squatters have been found anywhere within the site core. Although residents of Group D suffered a reduction in the size of their corporate group at this

time, they compensated by reorienting the central platform and erecting a second stela, Stela 11, in front of their ancestor shrine. These events signal an attempt to share or even regain power from the royal family during the Terminal Classic.

#### *The Hamlet of San Lorenzo*

Most commoners lived off the hilltop in the valleys surrounding the regional center. The nearest Late Classic settlement is the hamlet of San Lorenzo, situated 1.5 km northeast of Xunantunich on a set of ancient alluvial terraces overlooking the Mopan River and its rich flood plains (Figure 4). Some of San Lorenzo's architecture is much larger and more elaborate than rural residential architecture elsewhere in the Belize Valley (Fedick 1995:29), leading Yaeger (1994, 1995) to suggest that San Lorenzo families were well supported by farming and their close sociopolitical connections with the regional center.

The hamlet is a spatially discrete settlement cluster composed of eight patio groups (*plazuelas*), and 13 mounds without patios (mound clusters). Yaeger documents a fair degree of internal morphological variability within these two architectural categories and suggests variation in residential group morphology reflects both community history and lineage status within the hamlet (Yaeger 1994, 1995; Yaeger and LeCount 1995). He proposes that the community was composed of a group of related patrilineages not dissimilar to the *pet kahob* hamlets mentioned in colonial period documents (Marcus 1983), or to kin groups that exist in many modern Maya communities (e.g., the *sna* of Zinacantan [Vogt 1983] or the *aldea* of Chiquimula [Wisdom 1940]). *Plazuelas* were home to the descendants of the first families who founded the community and established control over local resources. Lineage heads who lived at these sites held the highest social status and greatest authority within the community. Mound clusters were the residences of new families related by real or fictive ties to the founding families. Over time, gradual growth and fissioning processes related to the domestic developmental cycle created a community composed of several intermarrying localized patrilineages. Variation in the size of households and their location in the community, therefore, can be linked to two ranked social statuses within the presumed commoner stratum.

To understand community development and integration, and its sociopolitical relationship to Xunan-

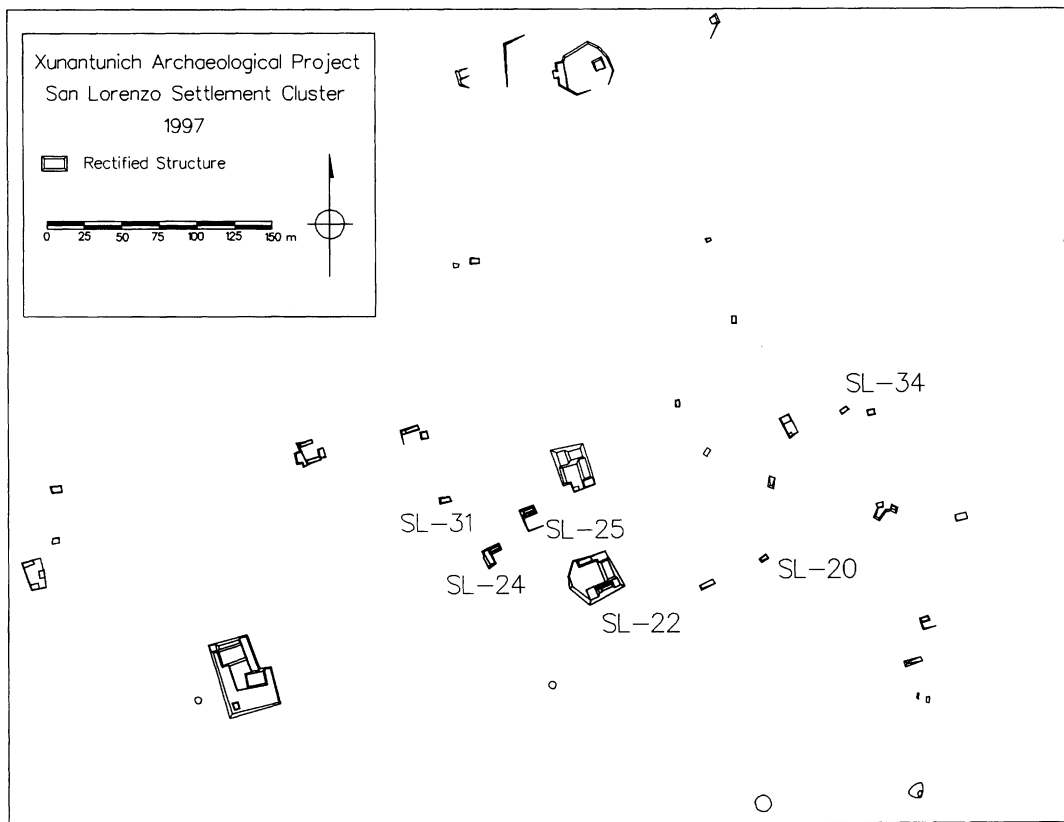


Figure 4. The community of San Lorenzo, Belize. Map prepared by Jason Yaeger and modified by author.

tunich, excavations sampled *plazuelas* and mound clusters (Chase 1993; Yaeger 1995). Data derive from six residences: three *plazuela* groups (SL-22, SL-24, and SL-25) and three mound clusters (SL-20, SL-31, and SL-34). Mounds were initially sampled using 1-x-2 m test units to locate household middens, determine the state of architectural preservation, and assign temporal designations (Chase 1993). Using these data, Yaeger (1994, 1995, 1996) selected a sample of mounds for horizontal stripping of the last occupation surfaces to recover artifactual material pertaining to the Late and Terminal Classic habitation. Mounds also received axial trenching to better understand their developmental history.

Ceramic analysis dates initial construction of many *plazuelas* to the Early Classic and confirms that *plazuelas* were the founding households of the hamlet. Mound clusters were built in Late Classic I and Late Classic II phases, when other areas in the Belize Valley surveyed by the Xunantunich Settlement Survey also experienced substantial increases in new sites and expansion of existing sites (Neff et al. 1995).

In the Terminal Classic, mound clusters were already abandoned but some *plazuelas* underwent at least one episode of architectural modification. Apparently, small families were the first to disappear from the Belize Valley population, while large, well-established households were the last to leave, presumably because of their long-term investment in homes and lands along the Mopan River.

#### Ceramic Analysis

It is proposed that ceramic wares and groups, compared across household assemblages at Xunantunich and San Lorenzo, reflect changes in political strategies from the Late Classic II to Terminal Classic phases (670–1000 A.D.). Pottery complexes of the upper Belize Valley and eastern Guatemala have been the focus of intensive study and are well documented (Gifford 1976; LeCount 1996; Smith 1955; Thompson 1942). The complexes are remarkably variable, with a wide range of wares, types, and exotic vessels exhibiting both locally derived and Petén-influenced styles.

Shepard established two major wares based on temper—calcite and ash—in upper Belize Valley complexes of the Late and Terminal Classic (Thompson 1942:7–8). The most common is a set of calcite wares made from locally available clays and inclusions found in the Cretaceous limestone sediments of the Belize and Macal Valleys. The vast majority of utilitarian jars and open bowls are made of calcite wares, including Pine Ridge Carbonate, Uaxactun Unslipped, and Opaque Carbonate. In contrast, British Honduras and Vinaceous Tawny ash wares, manufactured using volcanic tephra temper, comprised more than 90 percent of the polychrome serving vessels at Xunantunich. No local ash deposits have been found in the upper Belize Valley, and the closest known source is located in the northern Maya highlands (Ford and Glicken 1987). Simmons and Brem (1979:85–89) have suggested that volcanic ash and/or pumice was traded along with obsidian from the highlands, presumably via canoes up the Belize River. Ford and Glicken contend, on the other hand, that the sheer amount of fresh, unaltered volcanic ash required to produce the great quantity of Late Classic pottery evident in the archaeological record argues for a local source (1987:484–92). For the purposes of this paper, I suggest that even if the volcanic ash was a regional resource, its quantity and distribution was likely limited, since no excavations in open-air sites, rock shelters, or protected caves in the Belize Valley have recovered lenses of the material. Ash ware pottery, therefore, would have had added value due to procurement costs.

Wares are divided into ceramic groups composed of closely related types that share slip (background) color, surface finish, form, and other technological attributes (Gifford 1976: 17). Ball (1993:245) suggests ceramic groups represent the products of a single pottery-producing community, and therefore they can be used as analytical units reflecting levels of craft specialization. Since groups contain types that are decoratively and technologically similar, presumably they functioned in comparable ways and contexts.

Mount Maloney Group, a fugitive black-slipped calcite ware, defines and dominates the complex, comprising 40 to 50 percent of the Xunantunich and San Lorenzo Late and Terminal Classic assemblages. Over 70 percent of Mount Maloney vessels are medium- to large-sized incurving bowls with truncated, conical-shaped bodies and small flat bottoms

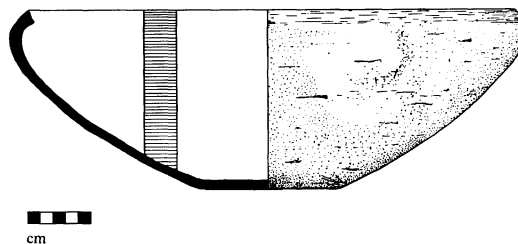


Figure 5. Mount Maloney bowl (79DD/3.7050).

(Figure 5). The ubiquitous presence of this bowl form in domestic and ritual contexts attests to its significance as the obligatory preparation and serving vessel for maize-based foods. Mount Maloney vessels also include narrow-necked, small jars that, based on ethnographic analogy with modern Maya groups, would have been used for water transportation and storage (Reina and Hill 1978:26; Thompson 1958:121–3). Other slipped calcite groups, such as Dolphin Head, Chial, Vaca Falls, and Garbutt Creek, are red- or orange-slipped vessels and are less common at Xunantunich comprising between 5 and 8 percent of the domestic assemblage. Like Mount Maloney, these vessels were made predominately in open forms and would have functioned as the communal serving containers for daily fare and, especially among less privileged social groups, festival specialties. Unslipped pottery, the most common being Cayo Group, comprised less than 25 percent of the domestic assemblage. Cayo Unslipped vessels were predominately utilitarian forms such as large open jar forms presumably used for long-term storage of water and dry food stuffs, and smaller narrow-mouthed jars probably used for transporting water (Figure 6). Small, unslipped globular cooking jars were made with micaceous clay that I assigned to a new ceramic group called Macaw Bank. Censers

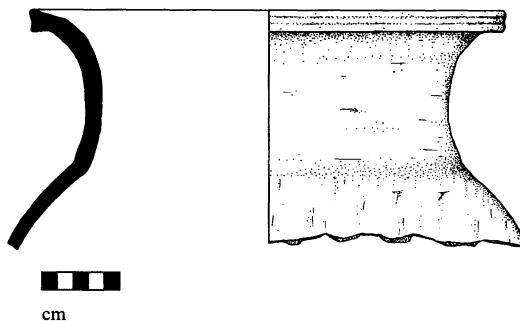


Figure 6. Cayo Unslipped open jar (117A/2.10523).

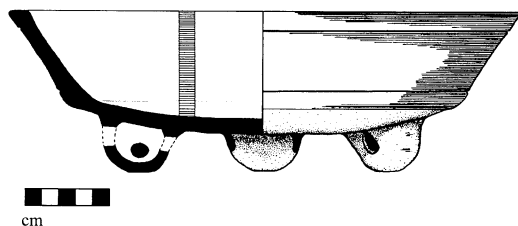


Figure 7. Belize Red Incised dish (IE/12-P2.20067).

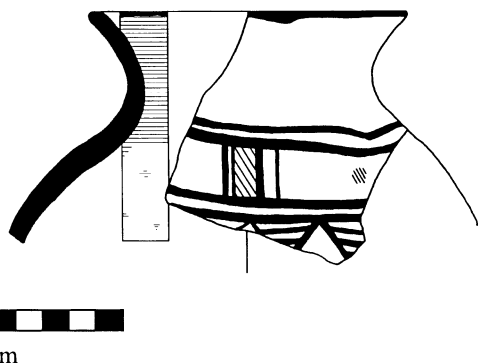


Figure 8. Benque Viejo (black and red on orange) Polychrome jar (116J/5.13006).

and their accessories are catalogued as a local variant of the Cambio Group. Censers, which were post-fire painted, are subsumed within unslipped pottery groups for this analysis since their rims are generally eroded and indistinguishable from Cayo Unslipped jars. Production of calcite groups, with the exception of Cambio Group, is presumed to have been a part-time seasonal activity, with specialization occurring at the village level. Likewise, distribution of these minimally decorated, utilitarian vessels was unrestricted.

Finely made serving vessels were produced in two major ash ware groups, Belize Red and Chunchutz Orange, and together comprise roughly 16 percent of the assemblage. Belize Red is a set of monochrome types, many of which are incised, fluted, punctated, notched, and/or appliquéd, and sit on tripod supports (Figure 7). Polychrome painted types are found within the Chunchutz Orange Group, the most common being Benque Viejo (Figure 8). Motifs ranged from geometric patterns to simple abstract designs consisting of triangles, circles, dots, wavy lines fashioned as Es and Ss, blocks of variegated color and *kin* signs, that are logographic day

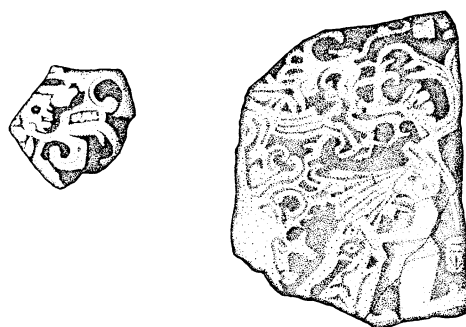


Figure 9. Pabellon Molded-carved style sherds (71A/2.1602 and 1E/3.9999 from left to right). Illustration courtesy of Sydney Cosselman.

glyphs in the form of an X. These local fine wares exhibit moderate amounts of labor investment, but a relatively low degree of skill indicative of either dispersed or nucleated *corvée* specialization (Costin and Hagstrum 1995). Such craft specialists work part-time in local community settings to produce goods for elite consumption.

Exotic pottery is quite rare at Xunantunich, and after seven years of excavation only 10 items have been identified in occupation contexts. Palmar Group polychromes, with their intricate pictorial scenes and hieroglyphic texts, are some of the most recognizable exotics, as are Fine Orange wares with their distinctive pastes. Xunantunich appears to have received both regional and long-distance types including molded and carved body sherds in the Pabellon style (Figure 9), and a Cedro Gadrooned bottle. Collections also contain a number of unspecified cream-slipped ash wares, some of which may be Zacatel Polychromes; others, with their bold red and orange painted zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures, may be regional variants of Holmul styles. A Big Falls Gouged-incised cylinder vase also was found, and like other less well-known polychromes, it may have been a regional trade ware since these vessels are found in limited quantities throughout western Belize and eastern Guatemala. San Lorenzo Black, a reduced black ash ware with channel grooves near the rim, is a new group that I identified at Xunantunich and is included in the exotic category. Exotic vessels are predominately vases, and presumably functioned as personal cacao drinking vessels; how-

Table 1. Frequency of Ceramic Wares and Groups in Late Classic II and Terminal Classic Assemblages.

	Late Classic II		Terminal Classic	
	n	%	n	%
Calcite wares	1029	77.02	616	81.59
Ash wares	307	22.98	139	18.41
Total rims	1336		755	
Calcite groups				
Unslipped groups <sup>a</sup>	234	23.54	172	30.12
Mount Maloney	496	49.90	278	48.69
Other slipped groups <sup>b</sup>	83	8.35	31	5.43
Ash groups				
Belize Red	88	8.85	75	13.13
Chunhuitz Orange	86	8.65	12	2.10
Exotic items <sup>c</sup>	7	.70	3	.53
Total rims	994		571	

Note: For wares,  $X^2 = 6.00$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .014$ ; For groups,  $X^2 = 41.826$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Includes Cayo, Cambio, and Macaw Bank Groups.

<sup>b</sup>Includes Dolphin Head, Vaca Falls, Garbutt, and Chial Groups.

<sup>c</sup>Includes Palmar Group, San Lorenzo Black, unspecified cream-slipped ashwares, and Fine Orange Ware and related styles.

ever, some may have been solely display items. I suggest that these exotic vessels were not produced at Xunantunich since no evidence of ceramic production has been found at the site; thus they presumably arrived as gifts between elite individuals. As of yet, there also is no evidence to suggest that elaborately decorated vessels were available through long-distance traders or market systems.

The frequencies of ceramic wares and groups in households are based on rim sherds counts recovered from single-occupation domestic contexts. Rims, rather than body sherds, were used for analysis since they exhibit the critical attributes that define forms and types. Rims were refit before analysis resulting in counts of the maximum number of vessels per deposit. In an attempt to control for brokenness and completeness, only those rim sherds from refuse deposits qualified for analysis. This procedure also guarantees that the sample derived from ancient activities specific to a given household. Utilization of sherds from fill contexts increases the likelihood that the pottery was not the product of a specific household since construction material often was brought from outlying areas, especially in elite contexts where corporate labor would have been used to construct buildings. Single-occupation deposits are critical for analytical comparisons since mixed lots tend to over-represent Late Classic material. Domestic middens associated with the royal family were recovered from deposits located immediately east of the Group A's residential compound in Structures A-23 through A-25. The Group D, nonroyal, elite sample was recovered from middens located

along the base of habitation platforms. At San Lorenzo, trash deposits were consistently located in front, beside, or behind habitation platforms and especially in staircase corners. Such strict sampling criteria results in small sample sizes, especially for the Terminal Classic phase, but these data best represent the domestic assemblages of Xunantunich and San Lorenzo households.

## Analytical Results

### *Assemblage Characterization and Change*

Temporal differences in ceramic ware and group frequencies are clearly evident in Xunantunich household assemblages and point to economic, social, and political changes occurring within the polity (Table 1). Ash ware frequencies drop slightly through time, although statistically they are as common in the Late Classic II assemblage as they are in the Terminal Classic when Xunantunich broke with its Naranjo overlords and began its slow decline. A closer examination of ash ware groups, however, shows that Chunhuitz Orange, the group containing the fanciest painted local pottery, declined by more than 75 percent during the Terminal Classic. Benque Viejo Polychrome plates, dishes, and cylinder vases virtually disappeared, leaving the Chunhuitz Orange Group composed predominately of monochrome orange-slipped types. Concomitant with the contraction in polychrome types, less labor was invested in the production of Mount Maloney bowls, the most widely used domestic container. Reduction in tooling is most evident around the orifice of these ves-

Table 2. Frequency of Ceramic Wares and Groups in Late Classic II Assemblages.

	Group A		Group D		Plazuelas		Mound clusters	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Calcite wares	570	73.08	245	80.59	129	86.00	85	83.33
Ash wares	210	26.92	59	19.41	21	14.00	17	16.67
Total rims	780		304		150		102	
Calcite groups								
Unslipped groups <sup>a</sup>	174	27.32	32	16.08	21	18.75	7	15.22
Mount Maloney	273	42.86	116	58.29	72	64.29	35	76.09
Other slipped groups <sup>b</sup>	56	8.79	18	9.05	8	7.14	1	2.17
Ash groups								
Belize Red	61	9.58	18	9.05	7	6.25	2	4.35
Chunhuitz Orange	68	10.68	13	6.53	4	3.57	1	2.17
Exotic items <sup>c</sup>	5	.78	2	1.01	0	.00	0	.00
Total rims	637		199		112		46	

Note: For wares,  $X^2 = 18.175$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .001$ ; For groups,  $X^2 = 47.016$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p = .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Includes Cayo, Cambio, and Macaw Bank Groups.

<sup>b</sup>Includes Dolphin Head, Vaca Falls, Garbutt, and Chial Groups.

<sup>c</sup>Includes Palmar Group, San Lorenzo Black, and unspecified cream-slipped ashwares.

sels, and resulted in asymmetrical rims and crudely formed lips. Overall, unslipped calcite groups make up a higher percentage of the Terminal Classic assemblage than in the previous Late Classic II, presumably because of the increased importance of storage jars during this precarious time. The Terminal Classic assemblage, however, should not be characterized as an impoverished Late Classic II complex. The Belize Red Group exhibited a fair degree of stylistic innovation and continued to serve as markers of social and political connections. The most elaborated local type in this group is McRae Impressed, a red-slipped ash ware commonly produced as tripod plates and dishes with notched and incised basal aprons. The formerly plain Unslipped Cayo large jars sport widely flaring lips, many of which have pie crust impressions, in the Terminal Classic. Calcite serving wares, including Garbutt Creek and Vaca Falls, increased in frequencies within the complex. Although simple in surface decoration, their forms continue to follow Petén stylistic canons as illustrated by the replication of Tinaja Red carinated tripod dishes in the local Vaca Falls Group. The presence of Fine Orange wares also illustrates the lasting importance of the western polities as sources of social and political symbols for members of the Xunantunich polity.

Changes in pottery complexes indicate a major shift in supply and demand of both common utilitarian wares and fine prestige goods. The stability of simply decorated Belize Red types and the elaboration of utilitarian vessels underscore the continued use of traditional styles and forms for small-scale

social functions such as lineage-level feasting, albeit at a reduced level. The dramatic decrease in polychrome plates and cylinder vases is a pattern found across the Maya lowlands during the Terminal Classic (Culbert 1963; Gifford 1976; Sabloff 1973; Smith 1955). Highly decorated types exhibited stylistic motifs and scenes that had widespread recognition across the southern Maya lowlands. From Uuaxactún in Guatemala (Smith 1955) to Copán in Honduras (Beaudry 1987; Willey et al. 1994), elites demonstrated their participation in pan-Maya society by displaying and exchanging pottery and the commodities they contained in prescribed ceramic forms and styles. Political instability during the Terminal Classic appears to have shifted elite attention away from the conspicuous consumption of wealth items to more fundamental matters of community solidarity. Examining the household distribution of prestige goods more closely at Xunantunich will illuminate the political strategies used to maintain power and authority in the Terminal Classic.

#### *Pottery Distributions across Social Groups*

During the Late Classic II, when the two elite groups vied for political authority and power at Xunantunich, significant statistical differences in the distribution of pottery types existed between elites and commoners, but not within the two classes (Table 2). As to be expected, elites at Group A and Group D had access to all exotic items, although there are only seven vessels accounted for between the two elite groups. Commoners residing at *plazuelas* and mound cluster had no items that so clearly reflected regional Belize Val-

ley connections or pan-Maya affiliations. Overall, the paucity of exotic vessels at Xunantunich can be interpreted as a reflection of the elite's peripheral position within the greater political landscape. It is interesting to note, however, that the nonroyal elite at Group D appears to have accumulated more exotic vessels than the royal family at Group A. Royal rights to authority over people, land, and tribute permitted Maya rulers to build elaborate palaces and civic monuments to honor divine ancestors and promote political agendas. Headdresses and other exclusive status symbols verified their superior political position. Consumption of highly decorated pottery, therefore, may have been less critical in marking status for the royal lineage than for nonroyal elites. Although secondary elite would have worn adornments that authenticated rank as well, accumulating prestige goods such as exotic pottery was another highly visible means to bolster their image and muster support for their social and political ambitions.

Patterning within the locally produced ash wares is more complex. Commoner households, including *plazuelas* and mound clusters, were found to have no more than 14 ash ware rims in contrast to the elite households, which yielded over 150. Although the sample sizes are small for commoner households, ash wares were found predominately in elite households with only 10 percent of Belize Red (n=90) and 11 percent of Chunhuitz Orange (n=88) rims found in commoner households. The two groups both show a gradual decrease in assemblage frequencies from royal to nonroyal to *plazuela* to mound clusters households. For example, Chunhuitz Orange rims are concentrated in elite households with 11 percent of the royal assemblage and 7 percent of the nonroyal elite assemblage composed of this fine ware, in comparison to 4 percent of *plazuela* and 2 percent of mound cluster assemblages at San Lorenzo. This trend also is replicated in the distribution of Benque Viejo Polychromes. These patterns can be used to argue for some type of elite control of ash wares, although the nature of that regulation may be difficult to access at this time. It could be suggested that elites did not heavily regulate their production since ash wares are persistently found in less privileged social groups. Further, they may have been circulated by way of lineage head men or, plausibly, even through markets. This line of reasoning brings into question the assumption that all ash-tempered pottery types are prestige items. My model, however,

views the distribution of prestige goods as reflections of social and political actions. If prestige goods symbolize personal alliances, then the low frequency of local fine wares in commoner households attests to the minimal number of social commitments established between Xunantunich elites and San Lorenzo commoners during the Late Classic II phase. Although commoners would have lent support for elite ambitions, they would not have directly participated in political activities that determined rulership. Those rivals would have come from elite lineages whose status was institutionalized through ideological connections with ancestors and gods (Demarest 1992; Freidel and Schele 1988). Competitive displays and exchanges of prestige goods would have occurred predominately between elite lineages. Long-established *plazuela* households at Xunantunich, however, did accumulate some fine ware. And this pattern may be used to support the idea that *plazuela* head men at San Lorenzo had some political influence at the regional center, possibly through patron-client relationships.

All households had access to calcite wares, yet there is surprising variability in the frequency of basic vessel forms among social groups. Twenty-seven percent of the royal family's assemblage at Group A was composed of unslipped ceramic groups, which stands out in comparison to all other household assemblages that contained between 18 and 15 percent of these types. Since most unslipped vessels are large, open-mouthed jars, the difference reflects the importance of stored goods at the royal compound, presumably for feeding the court and service personnel, and for sponsoring polity-wide festivals. Other slipped groups, such as Dolphin Head and Chial, are found in fairly even frequencies across households, except among mound clusters. The low frequencies of these minimally decorated serving dishes and bowls at newly established households may reflect their dependent relationship to founding families living at *plazuelas* who were responsible for sponsoring feasts associated with lineage-based rituals.

Differences evident in wealth consumption during the Late Classic II disappear in the Terminal Classic as the distribution of ceramic groups became more equitable across households (Table 3), signaling changes in the social and political organization centered at Xunantunich. The Terminal Classic phase is marked by a truncation of the bottom and, possibly, top rungs of society as political and economic

Table 3. Frequency of Ceramic Wares and Groups in Terminal Classic Assemblages.

	Group A		Group D		Plazuelas	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Calcite wares	69	82.14	361	82.61	186	79.49
Ash wares	15	17.86	76	17.39	48	20.51
Total rims	84		437		234	
Calcite groups						
Unslipped groups <sup>a</sup>	15	23.44	109	29.95	48	33.57
Mount Maloney	33	51.56	186	51.10	59	41.26
Other slipped groups <sup>b</sup>	2	3.13	15	4.12	14	9.79
Ash groups						
Belize Red	10	15.63	46	12.64	19	13.29
Chunhuitz Orange	4	6.25	6	1.65	2	1.40
Exotic items <sup>c</sup>	0	.00	2	.55	1	.70
Total rims	64		364		143	

Note: For wares,  $X^2 = 1.008$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .604$ ; For groups,  $X^2 = 17.192$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p = .070$ .

<sup>a</sup>Includes Cayo, Cambio, and Macaw Bank Groups.

<sup>b</sup>Includes Dolphin Head, Vaca Falls, Garbutt, and Chial Groups.

<sup>c</sup>Includes Fine Orange Ware and related styles.

turmoil fragmented the social hierarchy. During the Terminal Classic, the frequency of ceramic wares and groups is not statistically different between households. Of the three exotic vessels identified, two were found at the non-royal elite residential group, Group D, and one as located in a large *plazuela*, SL-22, at San Lorenzo. Surprisingly, the most skillfully crafted vessel, a Fine Orange Cedro Gadrooned bottle, was found in the commoner household along with other Pabellon Molded-carved style sherds. In terms of locally produced prestige goods, all household assemblages contained relatively the same frequency of ash ware groups. Belize Red vessels made up between 16 and 12 percent of the assemblage, and although Chunhuitz Orange frequencies were higher at Group A, the only Benque Viejo Polychrome rims recovered were located in Group D. One of the most notable differences between household assemblages appears within the other calcite groups. *Plazuelas* utilized much higher frequencies of Vaca Falls and Garbutt Creek types in the Terminal Classic than elite groups. This pattern may signal shifting commoner alliances with polities to the east, where red-slipped vessels are in greater abundance than the black-slipped Mount Maloney pots common to Xunantunich (see Gifford 1976).

Patterning in the ceramic distribution across households strongly indicates that leveling mechanisms were at work during the Terminal Classic phase. Equalization in the distribution of ash ware groups may signal a breakdown in the elite's ability to control the production and/or distribution of local prestige goods. And I hypothesize that the presence

of a small number of exotic vessels found in Group D and SL-22 signals an attempted by elites to stabilize community relations through gift exchange with commoner households. In contrast, these data could be interpreted as reflecting increased activity and empowerment among commoners as they struggled to establish autonomy from a slowly disintegrating political hierarchy center at Xunantunich. In either case, parity in the distribution of prestige goods would have reduced obvious class inequalities and acknowledged, to some extent, shared political power.

### Discussion

Research at the Late and Terminal Classic site of Xunantunich, Belize illustrates the complex relationships among prestige good distribution, social status, and political strategies. Although status may be grounded in and validated by the consumption of wealth, social position is not conferred by its accumulation in many noncapitalistic societies. In societies with ascribed status, such as the Classic period Maya (Hendon 1991:895; Marcus 1983:470), social status was firmly based on principles of kinship and descent rather than the accumulation of wealth. Using the distribution of wealth as an archaeological index of social status, while overlooking its role as political currency, may misrepresent the number of elite individuals within ancient societies, and limit our view of the complexity of prehistoric social and political organizations.

I have attempted to demonstrate that the circulation of decorated pottery was deliberately restricted



or broadened by elites depending on the nature of competition and the source of support for political ambitions. Social classes and ranks within classes were independently defined in this study by architectural layout, the location of the household within the site, and the size of the mound. The frequencies of ceramic wares and groups were compared across these social groups to determine access to prestige pottery. At Xunantunich, class-related differences in the distribution of decorated pottery reflect the degree of factional competition between elite groups as they vied for power during the Late Classic II phase. Exotic and locally produced ash ware pottery was concentrated in the hands of elite groups who accumulated luxury vessels to display status, cement alliances, and wage contests of competitive consumption. Few of these items trickled down into the hands of commoners, presumably because rituals that validated high office and solidified factional support occurred predominately among the elite rather than the lower ranks of Maya society. The paucity of exotic items in elite contexts overall, however, attests to the provincial nature of this relatively small, secondary polity located on the eastern frontier of the central Petén.

Equalization in the distribution of decorated pottery across social groups during the Terminal Classic illustrates how prestige goods functioned as political currency thus making them a poor archaeological indicator of ancient social status in certain circumstances. I suggest that decorated pottery circulates more widely when community solidarity takes precedence over individual rivalries and power building. At Xunantunich, elites may have gifted decorated pottery to commoners to build vertical alliances and symbolize shared power. Other factors also may influence the circulation of prestige goods including the empowerment of less privileged individuals through social, economic, and political means, or the devaluation of older, once reputed luxury possessions, and their replacement by newer, value-laden items. Prestige goods may be useful as status indicators only when we understand the overall social nature and context of these items in ancient societies.

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