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# Forging identities through style: Elite interaction and identity formation at Late Classic (AD 650-900) Palmarejo, Northwest Honduras

Claire Novotny  
*University of South Florida*

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Forging Identities through Style: Elite Interaction and Identity Formation at Late Classic

(AD 650-900) Palmarejo, Northwest Honduras

by

Claire Novotny

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Karla L. Davis-Salazar, Ph.D.  
E. Christian Wells, Ph.D.  
Thomas J. Pluckhahn, Ph.D.

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For my Mother, who inspired my initial interest in archaeology, and continues to inspire me with her strength of character.

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Forging Social Identities through Style: Elite Interaction and Identity Formation at Late  
Classic (AD 650-900) Palmarejo, Northwest Honduras

Claire Novotny

ABSTRACT

The representation of social affiliation is dependent upon material signifiers that can serve as communicative links between individuals or communities. This study evaluates the material manifestation of an elite social identity during the Late Classic (AD 650-900) period at the site of Palmarejo, northwest Honduras. Previous studies on social identity in prehistory point to the importance of site plans, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials in conveying sociocultural messages. A regional comparison of these types of data is made between Palmarejo and three coeval sites in northwest Honduras, La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas. I argue that the chosen style of site plans, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials worked to convey different types of messages to specific populations. Patterns revealed by the regional comparison indicate that paramounts were able to access a common affiliation while maintaining localized distinctiveness. Finally, I argue that Palmarejo elites may have utilized a common regional belief system to reinforce their power and authority during the Late Classic.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis explores the manifestation of elite social identity at the Late Classic (AD 650-900) site of Palmarejo, northwestern Honduras. Specifically, it compares the ways in which identity was created and materially expressed among the inhabitants of Palmarejo and elite groups residing in communities throughout the Naco region. I argue that the integration of local and regional social identities may have been a key factor in strengthening and maintaining elite power during the Late Classic. This has important implications for understanding elite use of style as a method of affiliation at the community level. The goals of this thesis are: 1) to consider how and why social identity is linked to material culture, 2) to document how this is manifested between rural communities in a specific region, and 3) to evaluate this anthropological issue using an archaeological dataset.

This thesis evaluates the archaeological dataset from Palmarejo, employing a body of anthropological theory that emphasizes identity formation at the community level and the stylistic representation of identity. Theoretical models that explore identity in the archaeological record indicate that affiliation is signaled materially through site planning techniques, architecture, ceramics, and human interments (e.g., Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Hegmon 1992; Plog 1992; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman et al. 2001; Stockett 2005). I examine these lines of evidence at three settlements in northwestern Honduras, La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas, in order to set up expectations as to how elite identity may have been styled at Palmarejo. While there are regional patterns displayed in each of these lines of evidence, there is also variation in styles between sites.

For example, preliminary data suggest an inconsistency at Palmarejo between architectural style, which is congruent with regional patterns, and ceramic styles and mortuary practices, which appear to be unique to the Palmarejo Valley. Forging a social identity that was expressed through both regional and local styles could have facilitated elite sociopolitical control during the Late Classic.

Most archaeological studies of social identity are characterized by broad interpretations of large, state-level polities (for example, Teotihuacan and Maya city-states [Braswell 2003], as well as many examples concerning the formation of modern ethnicities and the nation-state [e.g., Diaz-Andreu 1996; Shore 1996]). One of the goals of this study is to evaluate social identity in a community that is separate from a state-level sociopolitical system. This will expand our knowledge of the complex nature of rural communities. Palmarejo is well suited for a study of social identity and regional interaction because it is a rural community situated within the known interaction sphere of the Naco Valley.

#### *An Elite Interaction Sphere: The Naco Valley*

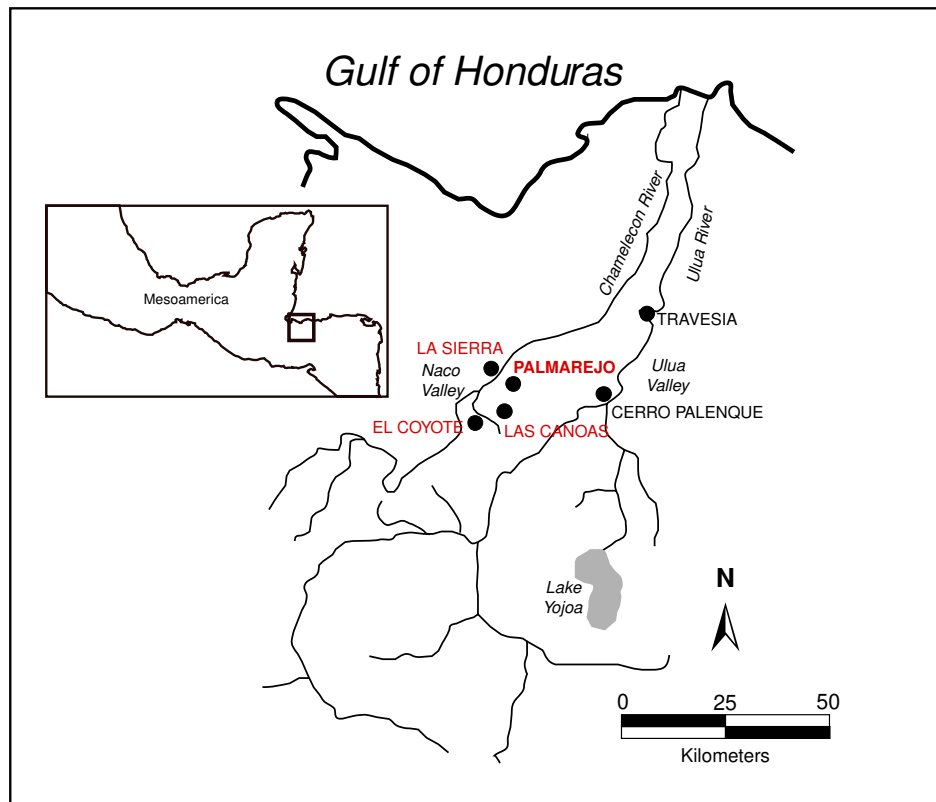
In the prehispanic period, fertile agricultural land, abundant water sources, and a variety of naturally occurring plant and animal species drew people to the Naco Valley region beginning as early as 1000 BC (Newson 1986; Urban 1986). Though references to the Naco Valley can be found in the accounts of early Spanish explorers (e.g., Chamberlain 1953; Cortes 1971), most of what we know about the pre-history of the Naco region comes from archaeological investigations, which were initiated during the 1970s (Henderson 1979; Henderson et al. 1979; Schortman and Urban 1986). Full

coverage surveys conducted in the valley have recorded 369 sites with 1,200 surface-visible structures, which evince the substantial 1,500 year prehistory of the region (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Henderson 1979; Henderson et al. 1979; Schortman and Urban 1986; Urban 1986; Wells 2006).

Southeastern Mesoamerica has historically been defined as a peripheral frontier zone, overshadowed by its powerful Maya neighbors to the northwest (Figure 1.) (Schortman and Urban 1986). Recent research in the region has demonstrated that there was considerable social, political, and economic complexity among the communities of northwestern Honduras (Ellison 2006; Novotny and Wells 2006; Schortman and Urban, 2001; Stockett 2005; Urban and Schortman 1994). The material record of northwest Honduras indicates that these complex systems emerged from centuries of social and economic interactions between local groups, as well as with external Mesoamerican populations.

The Naco Valley occupies a strategic location in northwestern Honduras. The Río Chamelecón creates a natural route from the mountains surrounding the Maya settlement of Copán, southwest of Naco, to the Naco Valley and northwards to the Sula plain and the Caribbean. This connection greatly facilitated trade and commerce between regional elites and Mesoamerican groups. Regional trade is indicated by the presence of specific styles of polychrome pottery, obsidian, marine shell, and jade (Henderson 1979, Schortman and Urban 1994). The occurrence of these types of artifacts at Palmarejo suggests that elites residing there were connected not only to other communities within the Naco Valley, but also to a wider southeast Mesoamerican interaction sphere (i.e.,

northwest Honduras and certain areas of the Maya zone, including Belize and eastern Guatemala).



**Figure 1. Map of Northwest Honduras, indicating regional sites and those discussed in this study (modified from Wells 2003:7).**

Assessing elite culture is important for southeastern Mesoamerica because it can lend insights into the social and political organization of communities during the Late Classic. Specifically, defining elite culture includes addressing issues of power, control, social stratification, and ranking (Chase and Chase 1992; Henderson 1992). Since this study is focused on elite identity and interactions, an introduction of accepted material correlates of a Naco Valley elite population is necessary.

In Mesoamerica, elites are traditionally identified in the material record by their access to imported or finely crafted goods, the construction of monumental residences,

and elaborate burial patterns (Blanton 1978; Coe 1975; Rathje 1970; Tourtellot and Sabloff 1972). Chase and Chase (1992) point out that these correlates are often automatically assumed by archaeologists and do not hold true for every site. They argue that it is “extremely problematical to discriminate between a noble and a commoner, for the status and roles available to each group cross-cut one another and it is probable that similar goods were also available to at least certain members of each group” (Chase and Chase 1992:8). Their argument is well taken; it is a valuable exercise to question our blanket assumption that Mesoamerican societies were only organized into two tiers: elite and non-elite. Research in southeastern Mesoamerica alone demonstrates that prehistoric societies were indeed more varied than a two-tiered model allows (Schortman and Urban 1994; Stockett 2005).

However, in the archaeological record we still find unique, exotic, or specialized items distributed among buildings requiring more labor to construct than others, arranged around open plaza spaces with limited access. Given the high energy expenditure of construction, transportation, cultivation, and specialization during prehistory, I think it is reasonable to relate some of these material signatures to a more powerful, certainly wealthier, population. I agree with Chase and Chase (1992) that items valued as “elite” goods could differ from region to region, and for this reason I will specify what previous researchers have considered to be indicators of elite status in the Naco region.

Schortman et al. (2001) define power as “the ability to control the actions of others.” It is assumed that those in power (i.e., elites) were able to control the labor required to gather resources and construct monumental architecture. Thus, the presence

of monumental civic, ceremonial, and residential structures within a community is indicative of elite control of the local labor force.

The ability to acquire exotic goods over long distances is one common characteristic possessed by elite populations. The assumption is that elites would have had sufficient control over local resources with which to trade for preciosities from remote locations. For the purposes of this study, artifacts proven to originate in other regional or extra-regional locations include *Spondylus* shells, jade, and marble vessels (Henderson 1992; Schortman et al. 2001; Luke and Tykot 2002). In addition, there are certain identifiable styles of polychrome ceramic plates and vessels that have been demonstrated to originate in the Naco, Ulúa, and Copán valleys (Henderson 1992; Schortman and Urban 1994). The presence of these artifacts in archaeological contexts suggests that the inhabitants of the location were of elite status. Obsidian, while also a long-distance trade item from Guatemala, is found in assemblages recovered from most social strata in Mesoamerica and does not immediately identify a location as elite. However, when found in certain contexts and qualities, elite control over obsidian trade could be inferred. If certain buildings or locations within a community contain these objects, then they could be interpreted as elite domains. It is assumed that these material belongings signify the abstract tenets of high social rank, i.e., power and authority.

Previous research in southeastern Mesoamerica indicates that elite power was garnered from control over craft production and trade (Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman et al. 2001; Wells 2003). It has been argued that the ability to access distant resources was a significant source of social power for elites in the Naco region (Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Wells 2003). While an in-depth analysis of the



repercussions of trade and craft production on the sociopolitical organization of Palmarejo is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study, investigating elite identity and interaction through material residues adds to discussions of social power by analyzing the ways in which elites might have manipulated the stylistic qualities of both imported and locally produced goods.

The elite segment of the Naco Valley is used for the purposes of this study for two main reasons: 1) in general, residues of elite materials (i.e., monumental stone residences and temples, jade) tend to preserve in the archaeological record for longer than those signifying non-elites, and 2) elite ability to conduct long-distance trade enables archaeologists to trace interactions between elite populations. The distinctiveness of non-local goods also affords an opportunity to analyze the style of elite material culture, and to evaluate it in terms of a social identity. Excavations in the Naco Valley have provided a more than adequate sample of elite-associated materiality. These examples will be analyzed and compared with the data from Palmarejo in order to investigate how and why elite identity was manifested there during the Late Classic.

#### *Study Area: Palmarejo*

The Palmarejo Valley is located along the base of the hills that flank the Naco Valley, and is divided between the present day Honduran departments of Santa Bárbara to the south and Cortés to the north. Palmarejo is separated from the wider Naco Valley by a ridge of hills creating a geographically isolated pocket. The valley includes a series of seasonal streams, soils conducive to intensive agriculture, as well as sources of clay, perlite, and building materials (Hawken 2007; Verdaasdonk 2007; Wells et al. 2004).

These natural resources made the Palmarejo Valley an ideal place to settle in prehispanic times. Indeed, the Palmarejo zone meets every important prerequisite for site establishment in the Naco Valley as expressed by Urban (1986:672), including close proximity to water, stone, and agricultural land.

Palmarejo is the largest settlement in the Palmarejo Valley, which includes 96 smaller sites dispersed according to resource zones throughout the valley (Hawken 2007; Wells et al. 2004). Palmarejo is composed of 93 surface visible structures, including 15 monumental buildings (over 1.5 m in height, several over 3 m), two elite residential groups, two formal plazas, and a ball court. It is suggested that Palmarejo elites were in political and economic control of this entire valley during the Late Classic (Wells et al. 2004). Preliminary investigations conducted by the Proyecto Arqueológico Comunidad Palmarejo (PACP) under the direction of E. Christian Wells and Karla L. Davis-Salazar in 2004, immediately raised questions as to Palmarejo's economic, sociopolitical, and cultural connections with the regional sites of La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas.

### *Organization of the Thesis*

This chapter has provided an introduction to the goals of this thesis and has given a brief outline of the study area. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for evaluating style and social identity in the archaeological record. This chapter begins with a review and anthropological assessment of the concepts of social identity and ethnicity. The material expression of identity is discussed within the context of debates among anthropological archaeologists over meaning and the interpretation of style. I draw on

other archaeological examples that address social identity and stylistic choice in prehistory.

I consider style and stylistic choice to be stylistic tools deployed for creating and maintaining social identities. Thus, I take a communicative (Wobst 1977) and emblematic/assertive (Weissner 1983, 1985) approach to assessing the style of material culture. I argue that site planning techniques, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human interments convey meaning and messages through their stylistic qualities.

An important part of assessing elite style at Palmarejo through a communicative and emblematic/assertive approach is establishing the sociohistorical context in which elite style is expressed, in this case the Late Classic Naco Valley. In Chapter 3, I provide a description of the natural, cultural, and historical environments of the Late Classic Naco Valley. In particular, I establish elite manifestations of social identity through an analysis of regional research performed at the sites of La Sierra, Las Canoas, and El Coyote. Based on the identification in Chapter 2 of site planning techniques, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human interments as important signifiers of elite identity, I analyze these lines of evidence at La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas. This provides a set of expectations with which to compare the data from Palmarejo.

In Chapter 4, I outline the excavation and laboratory methods employed to evaluate the ways in which Palmarejo elites chose to express their social identity. I present a more detailed natural and culture-historical background for the Palmarejo Valley, followed by a description of the archaeological methods used in this study.

In Chapter 5, I present data collected from the 2005 and 2006 excavations at Palmarejo using the methods described in Chapter 4. Survey observations add

information on site planning, while excavations of the Palmarejo architecture contribute construction and occupation histories of the structures, as well as stylistic features indicative of social identification. In addition, preliminary ceramic analysis is central in beginning to understand regional trade relationships between elites. Analysis of the skeletons recovered from Palmarejo supplies further insights into the ways in which social identity was constructed.

I synthesize the Palmarejo dataset in Chapter 6. I interpret the site plan, architecture, artifacts, and human burials recovered from Palmarejo, and contextualize these data with a comparison to the regional styles described in Chapter 3. This synthesis serves to illuminate Palmarejo's identification with a southeast Mesoamerican elite interaction sphere, as well as elite activities and social life within Palmarejo.

Concluding comments and modern implications are given in Chapter 7. I summarize my argument that distinctive qualities were embedded in the regional styles of community plans, architecture, ceramics, and human burials in the Naco region. I argue that this common identity could have facilitated intercommunity sociopolitical and economic interactions, while local styles may have worked to consolidate elite authority at each settlement. These findings have important implications for evaluating the means by which elites garnered and maintained power in hierarchical societies.

Finally, I consider the ways that archaeological studies of social identity can be applied to modern societies. Issues of social identity and ethnicity are pertinent in the lives of contemporary Palmarejo residents. As the impacts of globalization extend themselves into rural communities, historical ascriptions of social identity are challenged. I discuss the relationship between cultural resources and modern communities in the

Palmarejo Valley, and how that might affect social affiliation. Broadly speaking, the topics covered in this study (i.e., elites, power, social identity, ethnicity) are elemental to understanding human societies and thus are important issues for anthropological investigation, both in prehistory and the modern world.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Social identity has remained a central theme in anthropological research, both through time and across subfields. While social identity is widely acknowledged to be an integral component of any culture (Barth 1969; Canuto and Yaeger 2001; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Jones 1996, 1997; Hodder 1982, 1986, 1989; Shennan 1989; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Stockett 2005), its meaning to and expression by any particular group is difficult to evaluate. Assessing how people expressed their identity, and with whom they chose to affiliate themselves, is especially problematic for archaeologists. How can archaeologists tangibly identify something as immaterial and varying as identity? Can we presume to understand how past peoples might have defined themselves and their societies? I would argue that archaeology can be instrumental in evaluating questions of identity formation. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates the feasibility of inferring identity from archaeological datasets (Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Díaz-Andreu et al. 2005; Hodder 1986; Jones 1996, 1997; Shennan 1989; Stockett 2005). Specifically, these authors argue that if one of the objectives of affiliation is to set oneself apart from others, then material markers would be essential for the outward expression of social identity. This material expression can take a variety of forms, and the interpretation of these forms relies on demonstrating the connections between the artifact, its style, and the expressed social identity made salient by the chosen style.

### *Theorizing Social Identity and Ethnicity*

Archaeological research has become increasingly intent on investigating the individual in prehistory. Studies focusing on individual practice and agency were instrumental in shaping the way that archaeologists currently conceive of and interpret identity (Hodder 1982, 1986, 1989; Conkey 1982; Gero and Conkey 1991; Hastorf 1991; Shanks and Tilley 1987). Stemming from the post-processual critique of the 1980s, researchers sought to move away from static interpretations of cultural “evolution” (e.g., Fried 1967; Service 1962, 1971), towards dynamic explanations focusing on the varied roles different individuals played in shaping their societies (Hastorf 1991; Hodder and Cessford 2004; Leone et al. 2005; Leone and Potter 1984; McAnany 1995). Many ideas on identity and ethnicity draw primarily from the work of Frederik Barth (1969).

Barth’s (1969) seminal study on ethnicity altered the assumptions that anthropologists made regarding cultural differences. By re-evaluating the dominant idea that cultural differences occur only under conditions of isolationism, he argued that ethnic boundaries and distinctions could persist within a context of cultural interaction. In fact, Barth (1969:10) suggested that social interaction and acceptance were “often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built...cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.” The most significant aspect of Barth’s model is his separation of “ethnicity” from “culture.”

Barth (1969) views “culture” as the most problematic component of previous definitions of ethnicity. By equating the two concepts, ethnic groups can only be distinguished by the morphological characteristics of the culture to which they belong. This is limiting, Barth (1969:12) argues, because culture can change and hence exhibit

different characteristics over time. Barth (1969:13-14) sees ethnicity from a categorical perspective, such that ethnicity is ascribed “when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background.” Hence, ethnic groups are organized in order to distinguish between different actors for purposes of interaction. It follows that signals or signs would be established by groups to distinguish themselves from others, and social boundaries would be realized and maintained.

Social boundaries are set by interactions of any kind between ethnic groups, through which accepted requirements signaling inclusion and exclusion are established. Ethnic group interactions provide the crux of Barth’s argument that cultural differences are fostered, and not hindered, by social interactions. He suggests that where different groups interact, cultural differences would have to be reduced, since communication would necessitate either a common understanding of cultural norms, or a newly conceived set of agreed upon norms. “Thus the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences” (Barth 1969:16). Barth’s model of social interaction emphasized the fluid nature of culture and defined ethnicity as a self-ascribed category of identity. These points greatly influenced later anthropologists and archaeologists working on problems of ethnicity and identity (Barth 1969; Canuto and Yaeger 2001; Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005; Hodder, 1986; Jones 1996, 1997; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Shennan 1989; Stocket 2005). Instrumental in further advancing the study of these concepts were Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, who also



emphasized the flexibility of culture and added the individual actor to the equation of cultural transformation.

Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984) proposed that society does not operate in a realm apart from the people who constitute it; individual actions and practices articulate with societal norms and expectations to derive, as well as transform, society (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005). Giddens (1984) argued that people are aware of society's norms and are active participants in manipulating social structures. Thus, people and society have a recursive relationship, alternately changing and influencing each other. Giddens (1984:258) describes power as being structured by the conjunction of certain types of allocative and authoritative resources. In terms of archaeology, artifacts are considered "produced goods" (Giddens 1984:258), or, the intersection of raw materials with the "organization of social time-space" (Giddens 1984:258). In short, material products are defined by their sociohistorical contexts, and can be manipulated by people in order to build and maintain power structures. Giddens's work is relevant for this study, which examines the ways in which elites (i.e., those in power) construct social identities using material culture as media.

Bourdieu (1977) also shaped the way that archaeologists came to think about individuality and identity. He used the term *habitus* to describe "people's understanding of how the world operates, an understanding that was not based on explicit rules, but on principles that governed practice. It is through practice that the individual moves, acts, lives" (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005:5). These ideas infused research with the idea of "agency," which assumes that individuals make choices and perform actions under their own abilities, though not completely separate from the expectations of their society.

Practice theory has been readily adopted by some archaeologists, who argue that it can be used to elicit meaning from prehistoric remains (Hodder 1982, 1986; Hodder and Cessford 2004; Stockett 2005; Canuto and Yaeger 2001).

Ian Hodder was one of the first to apply Bourdieu's (1977) ideas to archaeological datasets. Hodder (1982) argued that archaeological remains concomitantly structured, and were structured by, social practice. Practices take place even on quotidian levels of society; day-to-day efforts of production, consumption, and exchange produce relationships between people that involve material correlates. In this way, "While people are reproducing the material conditions of their lives, they are both reproducing their society and their personal and group identities" (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005:6). As the individual was increasingly acknowledged in interpretations of prehistory, issues of identity and ethnicity rose to the forefront of archaeological research, along with attempts to recognize meaning in the material record.

Extrapolating the individual from the archaeological record remains an arduous task, but is nevertheless embraced by post-processual archaeologists (Canuto and Yaeger 2001; Díaz-Andreu et al. 2005; Hodder 1986; Jones 1996, 1997; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Shennan 1989; Stockett 2005). Advocated by Hodder (1986:13), the role of the individual became central to societal change. Instead of viewing "material culture to a passive by-product of human behavior," the emphasis was on "the active individual" and his or her role in creating society through actions. "Material culture does not just exist. It is made by someone. It is produced to do something. Therefore it does not passively *reflect* society – rather, it creates society through the actions of individuals" (Hodder 1986:6). Interestingly, in order to evaluate his theoretical ideas, Hodder used

ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological approaches, both of which were pioneered by processual archaeologists.

Integral to Hodder's approach was the context of material culture, which gave artifacts their meaning. Artifacts were not just functional objects but the material manifestation of a cultural meaning that can only be interpreted given its specific context. Hodder (1986:9) fused the use of material culture with the concept of agency, which allowed for individuals to "manipulate material culture as a resource and as a sign system" in order to transform society.

Placing the individual at the center of culture change also allowed for meaningful insights into ethnicity and identity. Following their views on individual action, post-processual archaeologists see ethnicity as a self-ascribed identity that is shaped principally by shared origins (Hastorf and Conkey 1991; Hodder 1986). In addition, ethnicity is seen as one aspect of social identity, and would have been expressed through social interactions between distinct, self-defined groups (Hodder 1982, 1986, 1989; Shennan 1989; Jones 1996, 1997; Lucy 2005).

One task of the archaeologist is to move from abstract ideas and theories to recognizing these themes in the archaeological residues of prehistory. Archaeologists need to find material correlates in order to infer human behavior from the archaeological record. One method that has been devised to study issues of identity is to analyze the style and spatial patterning of artifacts, with the assumption that chosen stylistic variables are associated with certain aspects of social identity. In the next section, the debate over the use and purpose of style, and how meaning may be conveyed through material culture, will be discussed in greater detail.

### *Meaning, Style, and Messages*

As archaeologists began paying greater attention to the contextual meaning behind material culture, the issue of stylistic meaning among artifacts arose. H. Martin Wobst (1977:320) acknowledged that the study of style variation in archaeological research lacked meaning, despite the human species' exceptional ability to interact and exchange information through the medium of symbols. Wobst (1977:321) defined style as "that part of the formal variability in material culture that can be related to the participation of artifacts in processes of information-exchange." In this model, information exchange included all interactions in which messages were sent (emission) or received (reception). Messages can take the form of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. For Wobst, sending messages (emission) was equated with artifact use and production, and reception of the message was defined as access to that artifact. Information exchange also required that messages be visible to the recipient. Using systems theory as its main approach, this model gave style a functional role in society.

Wobst's (1977) model of information exchange through artifact style generated considerable dialog on the subjects of identity, material culture, and style (Sackett 1982, 1985, 1986; Weissner 1983, 1985). He is most criticized for his functionalist approach, which relegates style to a passive position within culture systems. For example, Wobst's (1977) assertion that style must be visible is qualified by Hegmon and Jones (1992), who found that, "the importance of visibility and social distance varies with the kind of information transmitted stylistically. Material visible only in private is more likely to convey messages about ritual or belief systems, whereas highly visible material often indicates group or ethnic boundaries" (Hegmon 1992:521). Wobst never responded to

any reviews of his influential 1977 article, though his ideas about style and information exchange prompted a fruitful debate between Polly Weissner (1983, 1984, 1985, 1989, 1990) and James R. Sackett (1973, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1990).

Style can take many forms, which necessitates varying explanatory frameworks with which to interpret it. The Weissner/Sackett debate is an acknowledgement of this reality, and demonstrates an effort to develop explanations from different perspectives. Sackett (1982:72) argues that stylistic choices stem from the artisans, with emphasis on the functional end. These choices result in variants that are equal in use, which he calls isochrestic variation (Sackett 1982:73). According to Sackett, choices are learned and socially constructed; therefore style reflects historical context and social interactions (Sackett 1985:115), but not cultural meanings. However, Sackett (1982:82) does not wholly reject Wobst's ideas about information exchange (which he calls the "iconological approach"), acknowledging that in some contexts isochrestic variation may assume iconological cultural meanings (Sackett 1985:158). In contrast to Sackett, Weissner (1983, 1985) emphasizes the iconographic aspect of style.

Following Wobst (1977), Weissner (1983, 1985) argues that stylistic information can be an important strategy in social relations. However, contrary to Wobst (1977), Weissner (1983, 1985) points out that stylistic information need not be found solely in visible contexts, but that certain styles portrayed in non-public ways (or to a select audience) may convey important information in close social relations. This active view is embodied in her assertion that there are two aspects of style: emblematic and assertive (Weissner 1983). These distinctions are important for this study, because they each

emphasize different manifestations of style, which could be associated with specific material residues at Palmarejo.

Emblemic style is similar to Wobst's (1977) idea of style as information exchange. It refers to "formal variation in material culture that has a distinct referent and transmits a clear message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation or identity...Most frequently its referent will be a social group...and thus it will be used to express objective social attributes of identity (Weissner 1983:257). Alternatively, assertive style is a non-public expression of identity and does not have to be employed in the overt manner that emblemic style is. "Formal variation in material culture which is personally based and which carries information supporting individual identity has no distinct referent as it supports, but does not directly symbolize, individual identity and may be employed either consciously or unconsciously" (Weissner 1983:257).

Weissner (1989) also points out that specific referents for a chosen style are dependent on the context and conditions in which the referents are socially constructed, for example, whether distinctive social units are recognized in society, or whether factors such as competition make it advantageous to send a clear stylistic message to a defined target population, and so on. Weissner's model of stylistic variation is useful for archaeology, because it allows for a dynamic interpretation of artifacts. By identifying two features of style, emblemic and assertive, Weissner confers a participatory role to material culture, while emphasizing the context and conditions that make style relevant at any given time.

Despite the ongoing debates concerning the use and nature of style in the material record, most archaeologists and anthropologists take the viewpoint that style is an active

component of group definition (Hegmon 1992:528). They also apply both Sackett's concept of isochrestic variation and Weissner's emblematic style to explain variations in social status, or change in society over time (e.g., Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Plog 1990; Pruceel 2001).

The demonstration of style as a correlate for social identity has important implications for archaeological research. Equating stylistic variables with identity gives archaeologists an opportunity to investigate fundamental components of human behavior. This has been demonstrated in a number of archaeological examples, which I explore in the next section (Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Pruceel 2001). These studies build on the theoretical viewpoints outlined above (Barth 1969; Hodder 1982; Weissner 1983, 1985; Wobst 1977) by inferring social identity from the stylistic qualities of several classes of artifacts. These archaeological examples anchor the concept of social identity to the physical evidence of the material record.

#### *Operationalizing Identity: Archaeological Examples*

In order to investigate social identity archaeologically, site planning principles, architecture, ceramics, and human burials (or any combination of these four artifact classes) have been analyzed by scholars. Each study discussed in this section provides insights into how stylistic choice contributes to the definition and maintenance of a social identity (e.g. Hodder 1982; Jones 1997; Shennan 1989; Weissner 1983, 1985; Wobst 1977).

Hodder and Cessford (1994) point out the different messages that material culture can convey, depending on the type of object used. Architecture creates and reinforces

identities differently than other types of material culture. While ceramics and burial styles may convey a more personal identity, “architecture embeds certain specific meanings in society through the control of people and their encounters with the world around them” (Hodder and Cessford 1994:74). Structures not only send symbolic messages, they are active participants in constructing society.

Recent archaeological investigations of the role of architecture and spatial order (Ashmore 1991, 2002; Houston 1998; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994) argue that “structures are both the medium and the outcome of social practices” (Parker Pearson and Richards 1994:3). Preucel’s (2001) study of Puebloan communities in central New Mexico is an example of this perspective.

Following a structuralist viewpoint and practice theory approach (Bourdieu 1977; Hodder 1982, 1986; Hodder and Cessford 1994), Preucel (2001:69) argues that the layout of Puebloan villages “are not only responses to environmental considerations; they also embody the values and beliefs of the people who constructed and lived in them.” He (Preucel 2001) investigates the differential construction styles of two contemporaneous villages, which were built during a period of Puebloan revitalization exemplified by a revolt against Spanish dominance in the American Southwest. He argues that the construction of the plaza pueblo Kotyiti can be interpreted as an assertion of tradition. Using ethnographic examples, Preucel relates that the Keresan conceived of their world as a square with Houses at the four corners which were inhabited by supernatural beings. Constructing these Houses made the landscape “intelligible, safe and timeless” (Preucel 2001:70). The Kotyiti pueblo was a planned construction whose gates are interpreted by Preucel as symbolic referents to the dwellings at the corners of the earth. In addition, the



style of the buildings themselves is argued to symbolically suggest mountains and clouds. The buildings and their specific arrangement are meant to evoke a traditional Puebloan identity in opposition to Spanish threats (Preucel 2001). Thus, social as well as political identities are manifested through architecture.

Ceramic artifacts are used for many different interpretations. Their prevalence in the archaeological record lends important information concerning site chronologies, technological innovation, and stylistic variation (e.g., Culbert 1993; Rice 1984, 1987). In terms of identity, ceramic studies have focused on stylistic choice as an indicator of individual identity, or in some cases as representative of a regional affiliation, economic interaction spheres, or social status. While these studies incorporate several of the theoretical viewpoints described above (Sackett 1982; Weissner 1983, 1985), researchers tend to interpret style as an information exchange on some level (following Wobst 1977; Weissner 1983, 1985).

In Plog's (1992) study of American Southwest ceramic design, the author equates changes in ceramic style with differences in status. Plog interprets strongly co-varying designs on early decorated pottery as representing isochrestic variation; they did not convey a social message (Sackett 1982). On later types, more variability is observed in the designs, leading Plog to interpret them as symbolic, or emblematic (Weissner 1983) of the special status of the artifact's owners (Plog 1992). This study demonstrated that the diverse nature of stylistic choice (especially when it changes over time) can be explained by seemingly different theoretical views. Following Plog (1992), it may be necessary to employ different theoretical viewpoints (i.e., both Weissner and Sackett) in order to fully interpret the archaeological record at Palmarejo.

The expression of social group identity is the focus of Bartlett and McAnany's (2001) study of craft production among four Formative Period (800 BC-AD 250) sites located in present-day Belize. Similar to Plog (1992), Bartlett and McAnany (2001) investigate change in style over time, though they take a more singularly emblematic (i.e., iconographic) approach. During the Middle Formative, ceramic vessels at the sites of K'axob, Cuello, Colha, and Cerros show limited variability in style. A discernable shift takes place in the Late Formative, when distinct, community-based styles begin to emerge. Bartlett and McAnany (2001) correlate this trend with the rise of institutionalized power in the Maya Lowlands and suggest that demonstrating social identity might have played an integral role in the negotiation of status (Bartlett and McAnany 2001:117). They (Bartlett and McAnany 2001) further argue that the presence of specific ceramic styles and forms in caches and burials indicates a strong association with place-making. The placement of community-style ceramic vessels in individual burials links individual identity to social identity. This argument has significant implications for Palmarejo and the Naco region, from which we have a relatively large sample of burials and an established ceramic typology.

Human interments, when accessible to archaeologists, can be indicators of individual and social identities (e.g., Binford 1971; Chapman 2003; Goldstein 1980; Hodder 1980; O'Shea 1984; Parker Pearson 1982). The archaeological analysis of burial attributes, such as body position, inclusion of grave goods, and the spatial patterning of burials, is a unique opportunity for archaeologists to infer the purposeful behavior of the prehistoric peoples they study.

In a seminal paper, Binford (1971) argued that important elements of the social persona could be seen in mortuary remains – these elements included age, sex, social position, sub-group affiliation, cause of death, and location of death. He (Binford 1971:23) identified burial attributes as symbols of social identity and demonstrated that “the form and structure which characterize mortuary practices are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organizational characteristics of the society itself.” Therefore, archaeologists can infer social structure and affiliation from mortuary remains.

Hodder (1980) used the ethnographic example of the Mesakin Nuba of Sudan to illustrate that burial patterns do not always reflect social patterns among the living. The Mesakin Nuba idealized their funerary rituals, meaning that a person’s social standing could be distorted in death. Parker Pearson (1982) agreed that burial patterns do not necessarily directly reflect life, but furthered this idea by stating that the dead can be manipulated by the living for their own interests. These critiques added living people as a variable in the enactment of mortuary practices. “These arguments gave the living an active role in the design and practice of ritual activities such as mortuary practices, and placed the decision making process within wider economic and political contexts” (Chapman 2003:309). This critique urges researchers to put mortuary analysis in an historical perspective. In addition, the critique can also make accurate the application of cross-cultural ethnographic data to specific culture and period.

If mortuary programs can be used to explore the societal relationships of the living, then we should be able to see sociopolitical interactions reflected in burial data. While this point has been argued by researchers (Binford 1971; Chapman 2003; Goldstein 1980; Hodder 1980; O’Shea 1984; Parker Pearson 1982, 1999), using burial

data as an emblematic method of information exchange is obviously problematic. The most significant issue is that burials are buried – how can they convey information when no living person can view them?

Wobst (1977) required artifacts to be visible in order to convey social information. However, as mortuary analysis has become further integrated into archaeological research designs, researchers have increasingly argued that burials contain important information concerning social and personal identity (Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Hegmon 1992; McAnany 1995). Human interments (and ceramic artifacts in certain instances) convey different messages than other, more overt symbols of social identity (e.g., monumental architecture). As quoted above, Hegmon (1992:521) argues that privately viewed artifacts can relate information about ritual or belief systems, while overtly visible materials are more likely to indicate group boundaries. Therefore, interpreting burial data adds a holistic quality to the inference of social identity by recognizing a more personal aspect of affiliation (i.e., belief systems) in addition to the explicit representations of group identity.

As argued by McAnany (1995), human interments can have a practical application in establishing community and family identity. McAnany (1995:100) argues that Maya burial patterns involving the ritual interments of the dead in their homes created a “genealogy of place,” empowering and symbolically rooting the family to the landscape. Linking ancestors to the earth benefited the living as “an indicator of the enclosure of land into exclusionary tracts with inherited entitlements” (McAnany 1995:65). Thus the maintenance of lineage identity through ritual placement of ancestors also worked in the favor of the living by legitimizing land claims and hence accumulating

resources. McAnany (1995) uses this as a model for the development of social inequality in the Classic-period (AD 250-900) Maya lowlands. In this example, identity cannot only be inferred from mortuary analysis, it is evidenced to be a motivating aspect of social change. However, by their largely indistinguishable nature, human interments do convey more community-specific, personal, or religious messages than other forms of material culture (e.g., Hegmon 1992).

Another study of social identity and elite power in Mesoamerica was conducted by Schortman and Nakamura (1991) in northwestern Honduras. The authors argue that a specific identity was made salient in order to facilitate and encourage economic interactions between non-Maya and Maya elites. Special attention is devoted to this study because it situates issues of social identity and stylistic choice within the sociohistorical context of Late Classic southeastern Mesoamerica, which is the area of study for this thesis.

Schortman and Nakamura (1991) set out to evaluate prehistoric economic and cultural interaction processes in southeastern Mesoamerica, specifically between the lower Motagua Valley in northeastern Guatemala, and the La Venta and La Florida valleys of northwestern Honduras. Two issues are confronted in this study: what social entities are involved in intersocietal contact, and how they overcome obstacles (such as language) that occur between groups. The authors (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:312, emphasis original) argue that “intersocietal interaction is carried out not by cultures but by factions within them. These factions deal with each other in terms of *salient social identities*, mutually agreed upon, self-ascribed, cultural categories to which are attached

specific behavioral expectations.” These behavioral expectations are manifested in easily visible material culture identifiers, such as style of dress or ornamentation.

Schortman and Nakamura (1991) employ site planning principles and architectural data, as well as ceramic and lithic assemblages as signals of an elite identity. These are used to demonstrate that during the Late Classic, non-Maya elites chose to make salient an elite identity through the construction of Maya-style architecture in order to control economic exchange. Following a similar line of thought to Preucel (2001), Schortman and Nakamura (1991) demonstrate that non-Maya elites in northwestern Honduras utilized expressions of Maya elite architectural styles to signal a recognizable identity. Architecture is argued to be the visible referent that would have held social meaning to elite Maya factions. Economic exchange can be observed in ceramic and lithic assemblages displaying imported exotic goods such as obsidian, jade, *Spondylus* and other marine shells, as well as finely made polychrome ceramic vessels (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:317).

In this brief outline of their theoretical perspective, Schortman and Nakamura draw principally from the perspectives of Barth (1969), Wobst, (1977), and Weissner (1983). Following Barth (1969), they present intersocietal interaction as a communication that creates commonly agreed upon behaviors, and they identify social identity as a self-ascribed category. Following Wobst (1977), communication is facilitated by readily visible stylistic cues that facilitate information exchange. Finally, following Weissner (1985), Schortman and Nakamura take an emblematic approach to the style of material culture. Specifically, material culture is employed to manifest a referent that is recognizable to all, which is emblematic of a particular social identity; in this case, an

elite identity marshaled in order to control resources. Most importantly, Schortman and Nakamura (1991:312) hope to bring identities from “static features of the social landscape to the dynamics of their manipulation.” In this way their study builds on the theories presented above, which characterize identity, style, and meaning as active participants in the shaping of societies.

The most notable departure taken by Schortman and Nakamura (1991) is their assertion that social affiliations are constructed around encounters focused on resources. They (Schortman and Nakamura 1991) argue that resource procurement plays a fundamental role in society and therefore brings people together in predictable and agreed upon ways. “Salient identities develop, therefore, as a means to an end and may exist on a local or interregional scale, depending on the nature and distribution of the resources under contention” (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:313). Archaeological manifestations of social identity include “patterned associations of stylistic choices that reflect shared assumptions, values, and standards of identity holders” (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:313). Style is sensitive to cultural changes and is defined by specific choices made by individuals hoping to express a certain social affiliation.

Schortman and Nakamura (1991:326) conclude that the interaction systems extant during the Late Classic (Lowland Maya and lower Motagua, non-Maya), were defined by easily visible symbols “related to proxemic, social, and ideological assumptions, standards, and values of the ruling elite.” These patterns are interpreted as stylistic choices made to develop a salient elite identity, which would have restricted access to imported goods, and ensured elite control over economic exchange in the region (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:326). Their study provides a possible explanation of how

and why elites expressed a common identity in southeastern Mesoamerica during the Late Classic.

The model set forth by Schortman and Nakamura is useful in that it is an example of how social identity can be demonstrated archaeologically within the sociohistorical context of southeastern Mesoamerica. However, as demonstrated in the previous sections, stylistic choice can take a myriad of forms, for many different reasons. Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) argument, though well taken, is somewhat limiting in the sense that elites are presented as motivated purely by resource procurement. The authors (Schortman and Nakamura 1991:312) argue that actors can select from a range of identities the one that best suits their needs at any given time, but they do not discuss what other identities these elite factions might have expressed. Other archaeological examples (Bartlett and McAnany 2001; McAnany 1995; Plog 1992; Stockett 2005) have utilized ceramic and burial data in order to discuss more personal or ritualized aspects of social identity, which demonstrates that with additional information Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) model could be expanded to include these types of data.

### *Summary*

The issue of social identity has been dealt with by a number of anthropologists, whose theories have been instrumental in explaining the diverse forms that human social identity can take (Barth 1969; Canuto and Yaeger 2001; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Jones 1996, 1997; Hodder 1982, 1989; Shennan 1989; Schortman and Nakamura 1991). For archaeologists, studies of social identity necessitate distinct linkages between identity and its expression in the archaeological record (Hodder 1982, 1986, 1989; Lucy 2005;



Shennan 1989; Jones 1996, 1997; Sackett 1982, 1985, 1986; Stocket 2005; Weissner 1983, 1985; Wobst 1977). Specifically, the stylistic variability of artifacts was recognized as playing a significant, active role in the creation and reproduction of social identity (Sackett 1982, 1985; Weissner 1983, 1985; Wobst 1977).

Following Giddens (1984), the interplay between the individual and society can foster social reproduction as well as social change. Importantly, forms of media (i.e., the combination of allocative and authoritative resources) can involve “the retention and control of information or knowledge whereby social relations are perpetuated across time-space” (Giddens 1984:258). Thus, powerful elites can manipulate material culture in order to express social identity.

In addition, the dynamic nature of Weissner’s (1983, 1985, 1989) emblematic and assertive manifestations of style give an active, participatory role to material culture. An important component of Weissner’s (1983, 1985, 1989) approach is the identification of material referents for certain social groups, which can then be used to convey specific messages to target populations. This is especially important in evaluating how social status is materially expressed and manipulated by elites. Furthermore, by acknowledging that stylistic choice is embedded in sociohistorical contexts, this approach allows inferences to be made linking changes in style to changes in societies over time.

Archaeologists have implemented emblematic and assertive approaches (Weissner 1983, 1985) to interpret specific material styles adopted by social groups, as well as stylistic changes over time. Specifically, site planning, architecture, ceramic styles and mortuary patterns have been identified as media used by elites to construct a social identity (Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Hegmon 1992; Plog 1992; Schortman and

Nakamura 1991; Schortman and Urban 2001; Stockett 2005). Each of these artifact classes has been correlated to different aspects of social identity.

For example, site planning and architecture can be emblematic of worldview (Preucel 1991), which is part of constructing social as well as political identities. Ceramic styles are also emblematic features of affiliation; they have been demonstrated to correlate with status (Plog 1992) and can be representative of community identity (Bartlett and McAnany 2001). In some cases, ceramic artifacts can be considered an assertive form of social identity; that is, their styles are portrayed in a non-public way that can reference a more individual identification. Human burials are an interesting material example that combines both emblematic and assertive forms of identity; mortuary placement and individual burial practices are often viewed by the living and therefore can be utilized to establish and convey meaning (emblematic), while the unseen positioning of the body or the placement of grave goods can be interpreted as non-public ways of personal identification (assertive). Emblematic and assertive aspects of style compliment each other in the holism they bring to interpreting the archaeological record. Communities are composed of public and non-public characteristics that influence their built environment and material culture. Therefore, considering a combination of datasets can enhance our understanding of elite identity internal to a particular site, but within sociohistorical contexts shaping these stylistic choices. These types of data have the potential to lend insight into different (and perhaps overlapping) spheres of identity.

For these reasons, Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) study has important implications for this thesis. Their work focuses specifically on identifying a common elite material affiliation that was motivated and sustained by resource procurement. This thesis

tests this model with the Palmarejo dataset, in order to evaluate the degree to which Palmarejo elites participated in an affiliative network with other Naco valley elites. This study also aims to expand on this model by including ceramic, human burial, and soil chemistry datasets (in addition to site planning and monumental architecture) to explore elite identity and activity in a community context. By focusing on the material culture from one particular site, a more refined picture of elite affiliative practices can be developed.

In addition, it is hoped that this smaller-scale focus will in turn illuminate the motivations and goals behind Palmarejo elites' possible inclusion in the southeast Mesoamerican interaction sphere that is evident from Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) work (see also Schortman et al. 2001; Schortman and Urban 1986, 2004; Stockett 2005; Urban 1986). If Palmarejo elites were attempting to ascribe to a regional elite identity for economic purposes, then site planning techniques and monumental architecture styles should resemble the regional stylistic signifiers described in Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) article. Exotic, imported goods such as polychrome pottery, *Spondylus* shells, and perhaps jade should also be present in the Palmarejo dataset, pointing to long-distance trade and economic success.

The expanded dataset considered here also allows for the exploration of other affiliations ascribed to by elites besides an outward identity that could be manipulated for economic gain. Schortman and Nakamura (1991:312) argue that elites select from a number of identities the one that best suits their needs at any given time. This study considers what those alternative identities might be, how they can be recognized materially, and what their role may have been in shaping elite social life and interactions.

In the following chapter, I situate Palmarejo in its natural and historical context and then identify the specific material correlates of elite identity for southeastern Mesoamerica using previous archaeological investigations.

### **Chapter 3. Exploring Elite Style and Identity in the Late Classic (AD 650-900) Naco Valley, Northwest Honduras**

Studies concerning social identity in Mesoamerica have historically been conducted at large, state-level settlements with long historical chronologies and rich material records (for example, Teotihuacan and the Maya world [Braswell 2003]). These investigations, while significant in their own right, tend to produce broad interpretations for what was surely a diverse population. Shifting the focus from state-level societies to rural, mid-level communities presents archaeologists with the opportunity to investigate the complex nature of smaller groups, which will expand our knowledge of how, why, and with whom people chose to affiliate themselves (Schortman and Nakamura 1991). The Naco Valley provides a unique opportunity to study social identity, because it is characterized by small communities that seem to display certain distinctiveness in material culture (Stockett 2005). Palmarejo is one such community.

The goal of this chapter is to describe the sociohistorical context of the Late Classic Naco Valley. The landscape and environment of the region will be reviewed, as well as pertinent culture-historical information from other sites in the region. I focus on the contemporaneous sites of La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas, discussing each of their site planning principles, monumental architecture, ceramic artifacts, and human burials in order to evaluate the ways that elites expressed their social identity during the Late Classic (AD 650-900). This discussion will provide a set of expectations for the Palmarejo data.

Site planning and monumental architecture are evaluated as materially signifying an elite identity or worldview (Hodder and Cessford 1994; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; Preucel 2001; Schortman and Nakamura 1991). The stylistic choices made by elites in the construction of their communities and buildings are considered for the purposes of this study as evoking social and political identities. In addition, these visible manifestations of elite identity are considered to convey stylistic messages of affiliation to other elite groups (Schortman and Nakamura 1991).

Ceramic styles present at Naco Valley sites are considered to be devices of information exchange as well (Wobst 1977). Following Weissner (1983, 1985), ceramic styles can represent emblematic or assertive features of social identity; they can embody a communal social identity or an individual affiliation (Plog 1992), especially with regards to status. Similarly, mortuary patterns in the Naco Valley are also analyzed in terms of their emblematic and assertive contributions to social identity. Following Binford (1971), a social persona can be inferred from the purposeful placement of a burial, the positioning of the body, and the inclusion of grave goods. The non-public (assertive) aspect of human interments can relate information on ritual or belief systems important to the individual (Hegmon 1992; McAnany 1995).

Taken together, these lines of material evidence provide a framework with which to assess manifestations of elite social identity at Palmarejo, within the context of the rest of the Naco region. Settlements in the Naco region are also addressed in terms of the regional interactions and identity formation of their elite populations for comparative purposes with Palmarejo. This will lay the groundwork for the following

chapters, which discuss the study area of Palmarejo, and the data recovered from the site.

### *Landscape and Environment*

Resting at an elevation between 100 and 200 m above sea level, the Naco Valley encompasses an area of approximately 96 km<sup>2</sup> and receives about 1300 mm of rainfall per year (Anderson 1994; Urban 1986). The valley is surrounded by the mountains of the Sierra de Omoa range, whose network of seasonal streams intermittently flow into the Río Chamelecón. The climate is suitable for supporting a tropical rainforest, but centuries of human activity have severely reduced the forest cover (Newson 1986:48).

The valley floor is characterized by fertile alluvial soils that were intensely cultivated in pre-Hispanic times with maize and cacao (Newson 1986; Urban 1986). Today, these have been replaced by tobacco and sugarcane, with large tracts of valley land utilized for cattle grazing (Urban 1986). Newson (1986:46) describes the northwestern portion of Honduras as a short grass savanna punctuated with pockets of evergreen and semi-evergreen seasonal forests. In addition to cultivated foodstuffs, a diverse group of fauna were available for hunting in pre-Hispanic times, notably deer, peccary, birds, and rabbits. Land snails and fresh-water fish were also collected as edible resources (Stockett 2005). In the pre-Hispanic period fertile agricultural land, abundant water sources, and a variety of naturally occurring plant and animal species drew people to the Naco Valley region beginning as early as 1000 BC (Newson 1986; Urban 1986).

The culture and history of the Naco region is reviewed in the following sections, with particular attention to the Late Classic (AD 650-900) period, at the sites of La Sierra, El Coyote, Las Canoas, and Palmarejo.

### *The Naco Valley in Cultural-Historical Perspective*

Evidence for occupation of the Naco Valley extends from the Middle Preclassic (ca. 1050-400 BC) period through the Spanish conquest (ca. AD 1525). During the Middle Preclassic, settlement in the immediate valley was dispersed, though construction of monumental earthen platforms (>3 m high) at three sites indicates some degree of hierarchical organization (Urban 1986). During the Late/Terminal Preclassic (ca. 300 BC – AD 300), these three sites (#104, #123, and #487) seem to have established themselves as administrative centers, demonstrated by diverse ceramic assemblages indicating exchange with regional and extra-regional interaction spheres (Urban 1986). Outside of the immediate Naco Valley zone, El Coyote (located in the nearby Cacaúlapa Valley, a tributary of the Río Chamelecón) emerges during the Late Preclassic as a small farming village (Stockett 2005). The sites of Las Canoas and Palmarejo had not yet been settled, based on extant data.

While there is no single dominating site in the Naco Valley region during the Early Classic (ca. AD 300-600) period, occupation density increased in the center of the valley, close to the site of La Sierra (Urban 1986). Continued interregional contact is demonstrated by imported Ulúa and Yojoa polychromes, as well as stylistic similarities in the Naco assemblages to ceramics manufactured in the Copán and Ulúa Valleys (Urban 1986). The presence of exotic ceramic vessels, stone-faced



monumental architecture, and other imported goods suggests that elites were beginning to control labor and establish their power through the acquisition of valued items. Elites also began incorporating Mesoamerican architectural traits such as ball courts and monumental site cores into their communities (Schortman and Nakamura 1991). Radiocarbon dates obtained from Palmarejo indicate that there was some occupation during the Early Classic (Wells, personal communication 2006), however, the scale and nature of occupation is still unclear. In addition, Early Classic monumental architecture is present at El Coyote. There is also evidence for occupation at Las Canoas, demonstrated by Las Canoas style ceramics recovered from the Naco Valley (Stockett 2005).

The Late Classic (AD 650-900) shows a significant increase in population size in the Naco Valley, with the number of occupied sites jumping from a mere 14 during the Early Classic to 135 by the Late Classic. La Sierra emerged as the dominant political and economic force in the region, suggested by the number and size of monumental platforms, amount of imported goods, and presence of craft workshops (Schortman and Urban 1986, 1994, 2004; Urban 1986). El Coyote, Las Canoas, and Palmarejo all saw dramatic increases in population during the Late Classic, resulting in the construction of monumental site centers, as well as increases in regional trade and localized craft production (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Ellison 2006; Stockett 2005; Wells et al. 2006).

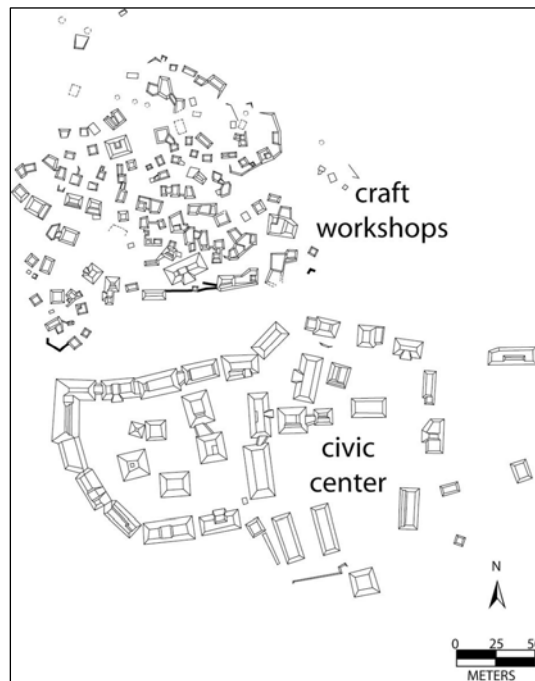
In the following sections, I describe what we know about each of these sites during the Late Classic period. Their contemporaneous florescence resulted in a sociopolitical and economic regional interaction sphere among the elite populations.

One of the aims of this thesis is to elucidate this interaction sphere and its implications for the expression of social identity (specifically at Palmarejo). I focus on the stylistic choices of elites in site planning, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials, as these have been shown to play a role in the expression of social identity (see Chapter 2).

### *La Sierra*

By the Late Classic period there were at least 135 sites spread across the Naco Valley, dominated by the capital of La Sierra. According to the five-tiered settlement typology established by Schortman and Urban (1994), La Sierra is a Tier 1 site, since it incorporates more than 400 structures into its boundaries. El Coyote is a Tier 1 site as well. Tier 2 sites include 45 structures or more, with several monumental platforms and a plaza. Palmarejo and Las Canoas both fall under this category, and are considered to be secondary administrative centers. The remaining three tiers incorporate most of the sites in the region, those having less than 41 buildings.

As one of the most successful sites in the Naco region, La Sierra has an impressive center (Figure 2). The site core contains a ball court and 37 monumental platforms (defined as 1.5 m or higher), arranged in a rough D-shape around several plazas (Schortman and Urban 1994:405). Schortman and Urban (1994) link this pattern to an elite strategy of centralized political control based on trade, initiated to keep supporters close by and to facilitate tribute payments. In addition, this style of monumental architecture utilizes such Mesoamerican traits as a highly nucleated, monumental site core and a ball court.



**Figure 2. La Sierra, showing the monumental architecture of the civic center and the craft workshops (from Wells 2003:59).**

La Sierra (and the rest of the Naco Valley) displays a site planning pattern unique to the region. Urban (1986:672) notes that several site planning traits are distinctive to the Naco Valley: 1) proximity to resources (most importantly water, stone for construction, and agricultural land); 2) manipulation of the natural topography in the construction of buildings; 3) irregular, non-orthogonal site plans; and 4) organization of structures in a circular shape around a central patio. These characteristics imply that if there was a regional social identity expressed through architecture (Ashmore 1987; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman and Urban 1994), then we should see this pattern throughout Late Classic sites in the Naco region.

Though situated on a highly fertile alluvial floodplain conducive to intensive agriculture, excavations indicate that La Sierra was further supported by a large

number of craft workshops that processed both local materials, such as clay, and imported raw materials, such as obsidian. Among the luxury products processed at La Sierra were incised marine shells, primarily conch. In one La Sierra patio group, 1,256 pieces of marine shell were recovered, along with chert tools suited to heavy cutting and engraving (Schortman and Urban 1996). However, only one engraved marine shell has ever been found in the Naco Valley, suggesting that worked “blanks” were processed for export to finishing workshops. It has been suggested that conch shells, a precious commodity found at both Copán and Quirigua, were traded for polyhedral obsidian cores, which were finished in La Sierra workshops and distributed to subsidiary sites in the region (Schortman and Urban 1994:409). This is convincing evidence as to the importance of this centralized industry to La Sierra elites.

The Naco population in general was producing a wide range of crafts, such as groundstone tools, figurines, whistles, ocarinas, ceramic stamps, masonry blocks, textiles, and sculpture (Ellison 2006; McFarlane et al. 2005; Schortman and Urban 1996, 2004; Stockett 2005). The ability to produce these goods as well as subsistence foodstuffs created a dynamic relationship between the outlying sites and the monopoly of La Sierra.

While they may have dominated trade in certain luxury goods such as conch shells, the outlying population “may have been spurred to become involved in specialized manufacture by elite efforts at craft monopolization. Local economic autonomy could have been preserved to a limited extent by producing to meet some immediate needs” (Schortman and Urban 1994:410). The typical core/periphery

relationship results in underdevelopment of the rural sites due to exploitation. However, there is no deterioration of outlying sites as a result of exploitation in the Late Classic Naco Valley; in fact there are increases in craft production and specialization (e.g., Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Ellison 2006; Stockett 2005; Wells et al. 2006).

In a recent study of one such rural crafting community, Ellison (2006) found that the inhabitants of these sites were producing pottery to meet their immediate needs, as well as those of their neighbors. This demonstrates that hinterland sites, while probably relying on La Sierra for some trade items (i.e., obsidian), were capable of maintaining a certain degree of economic autonomy. These findings imply that if rural sites were able to craft different styles of pottery, they could have fostered localized community identities separate from regional referents.

Outwardly, La Sierra dominated a thriving trade network connecting northwestern Honduras with the rest of Mesoamerica. Their visible material record suggests an attempt to signal an elite Mesoamerican identity to trading partners (e.g., Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Wobst 1977). I assess the site's ritual and mortuary programs for two main reasons: 1) indications of site-wide burial practices might signal a non-public facet of La Sierra identity, and 2) these patterns can serve as a basis for further regional comparisons (e.g., Hegmon 1992; McAnany 1995; Weissner 1983, 1985).

At La Sierra, lowland Maya-style rituals performed in the site center may have been employed to legitimize elite rule during the Late Classic. A sizable cache of ritually important objects was concealed in a low platform connecting site-core

Structures IA-16 and 17. This cache contained 25 percent of the censer fragments from the entire valley, along with *Spondylus* shells (including entire bivalves along with broken and burned fragments) and a cache of six small ceramic cups. These ritual deposits were purposefully buried with a white soil or ash. Pieces of the only stone sculpture found in the valley were situated here as well (Schortman and Urban 1994:410). All of these objects have been linked to lowland Maya rituals. The location of the cache in the site center is significant in that it points to elite control: “Monopolizing the performance of rituals with polity-wide significance would have served to legitimate centralized rule, giving paramounts a privileged relationship to the supernatural realm” (Schortman and Urban 1994:411). While ritual at La Sierra seems to have been focused on the site center (and hence elite control over certain expressions of ritual), mortuary analysis from La Sierra lends insight into the various material forms that belief can take.

La Sierra burials were directly associated with household architecture. Twenty-five of 38 individual burials were found within structure walls, while 11 were found outside structure walls. Four were interred at the base of platform walls, which were later expanded, indicating that the intent of their original placement was on the outside of the building. Field notes for seven of the burials were incomplete, so their burial placement is unknown. The burials fall into two main categories: individual and commingled (Novotny 2002).

The burial pattern of individuals at Naco shows some variability in placement, several instances of grave goods, and limited grave preparation. Of the 25 individuals placed within structures, five were buried inside rooms within the structures, one was

placed on top of a wall, and one was interred 0.20 m beneath a floor. Only four skeletons were interred in shallow graves. All of the recovered interments were flexed, most likely due to space constraints and the placement of bodies against platform walls. Bundling bodies in biodegradable materials (such as woven textiles) before burial is also a primary cause of flexed positioning. Architecture probably dictated the orientation of the bodies, since the walls were built before the individuals were interred (Novotny 2002).

Grave goods were associated with three of the individual burials. Two polychrome bowls were found in one burial, one of which was an imported Ulúa polychrome, and the other a Chamelecón polychrome of local origin. The second burial had a polychrome bowl and an ear spool. Both of these burials were found inside rooms. The third instance of grave goods occurring with an individual included an ocarina, ear flares, a bone sewing needle, and faunal remains. The skeleton was identified as a woman; the grave goods may have been the individual's personal possessions during life (Novotny 2002; Mooney 1999).

The commingled burials found at La Sierra also show a varied mortuary pattern, though only one includes grave goods. In total, five commingled interments were recovered - two contained the remains of two flexed skeletons, one contained the remains of three flexed skeletons, and two were caches consisting solely of skulls. One cache included seven skulls that were set into a purposefully constructed niche on the north side of the structure, facing south. They were found with a cache of artifacts placed on the front edge of the niche, including obsidian blades, faunal remains, many censer handles, and a plate on which one of the skulls was resting. The

skull cache contained one middle-aged adult and six young adults, one female, one probable female, three probable males, and an undetermined individual (Mooney 1999). No post-cranial remains were associated with the skulls. The individuals were either interred somewhere else until the flesh had decomposed or they were defleshed before being placed in the niche. None of the skulls has signs of decapitation. Two left parietals were identified as having healed porotic hyperstosis showing that two people had some sort of iron deficiency during development. One individual, a young male between 20 and 27 years old, had modified his left maxillary incisors by filing one edge straight and filing a notch in the center of the tooth. Mooney (1999) interprets the skull cache as a small shrine set up for ancestor worship. The second cache included three skulls buried 0.40 m beneath the basal wall of the associated structure, but no artifact assemblages were found (Novotny 2002).

Health at La Sierra was moderate for the time period, and did not seem to vary by burial location, number, or sex. Periostitis was present in both males and females from either poor nutrition or disease, or both. Poor dental health was recorded as well, with hypoplasias, periodontal disease, loss of alveolar bone, and caries all being very common. Three individuals had filed teeth – one single interment and two from a commingled interment (Mooney 1999).

As the paramount site in the Naco region during the Late Classic, La Sierra-produced artifacts set the normative standard for stylistic variation at other sites. This includes: 1) the Mesoamerican style of their site center, with monumental architecture arranged around a plaza, elite residences in close proximity to the ceremonial center (if not within it) and a ball court, 2) distinctive pottery types, including Chamelecón

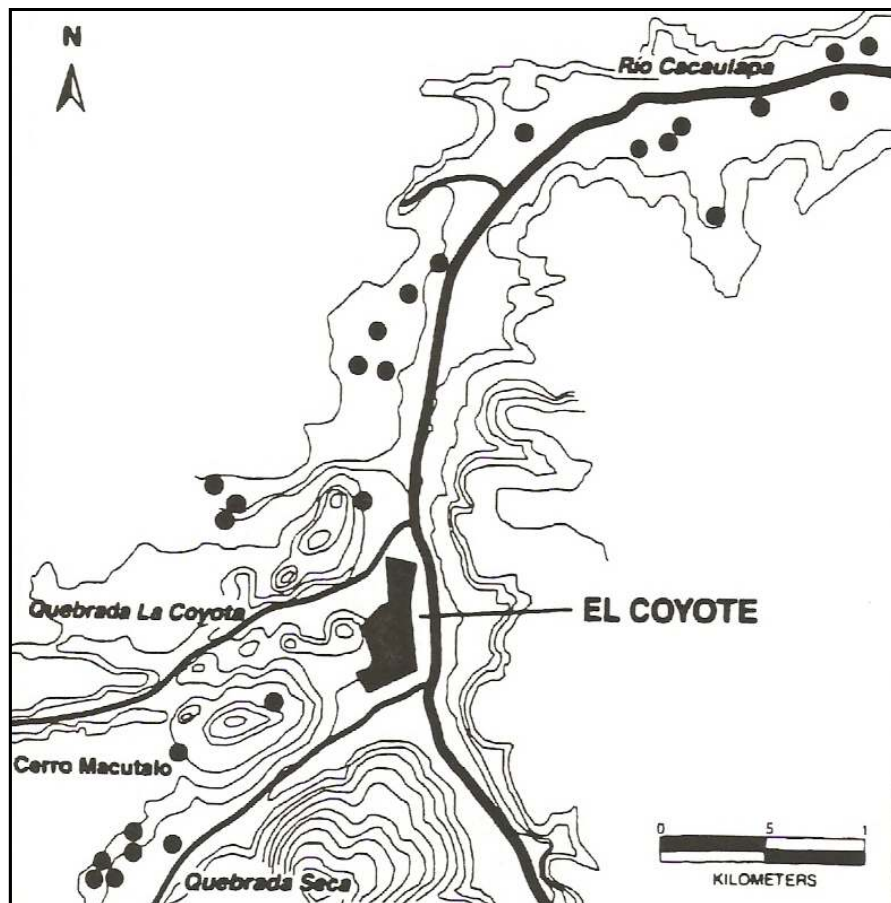


polychrome, 3) ritual paraphernalia such as *Spondylus* shells, censers, and ritualized caches (including human remains), and 4) a generalized mortuary program, with people interred in primary contexts, individually, in a flexed position within a household structure, usually on the northern side, without grave goods. The stylistic representation of this evidence at La Sierra is used here as a baseline for comparison between the rest of the sites in the Naco Valley. This is done because La Sierra remains the most extensively excavated site in the Naco region and hence it has historically been employed as the regional paradigm. In this way, reliable comparisons can be evaluated with the data from Palmarejo, and the other sites. If there is a strong, common regional identity operating in the Naco Valley, then we would expect to find similar artifact styles at each of the sites. If affiliations differ by site, then we would expect artifact styles to vary as well. Given the amount of complexity recognized among populations in southeastern Mesoamerica, we could also expect to find a combination of these expectations. Following Plog's (1992) example mentioned in Chapter 2, there could be several different identities present at each site, which correlate to different material signifiers.

### *El Coyote*

El Coyote is located in the Cacaupala valley, a southern tributary of the Río Chamelecón (Figure 3). The Cacaupala carves a steep path through the surrounding hills, widening to only 1 km at its broadest point. Small settlements are scattered throughout the north/south valley, though El Coyote is by far the largest with about 400 buildings (Figure 4). Occupation began in the Late Preclassic (100 BC-200 AD)

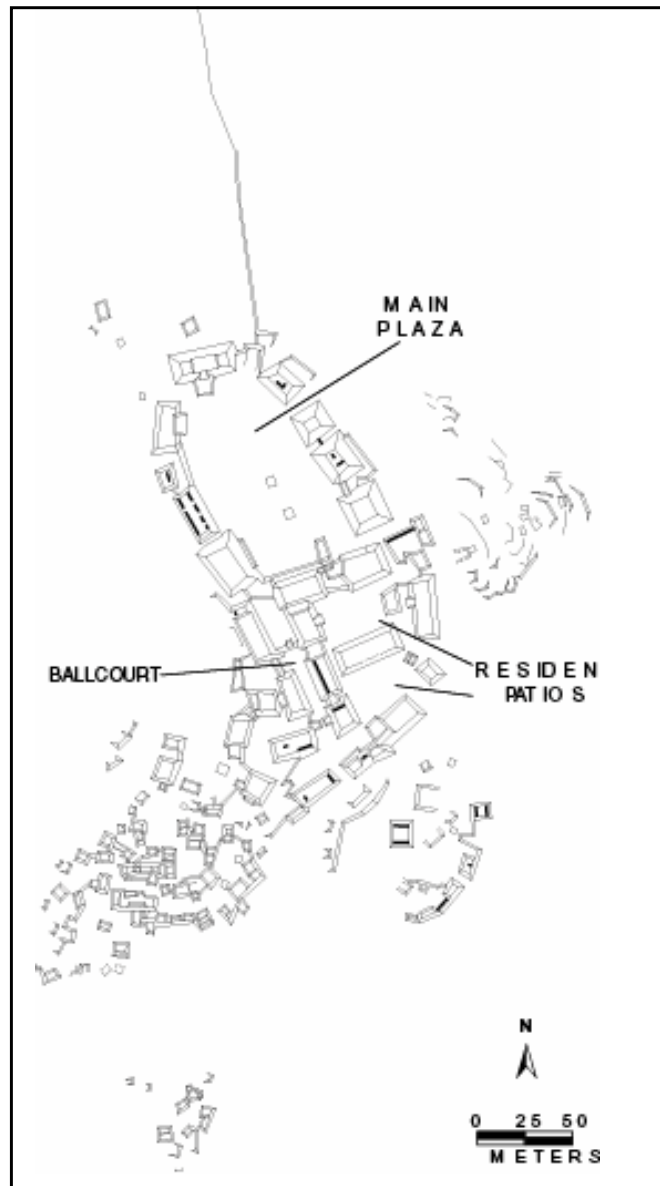
and continued through the Late Postclassic (AD 1100-1300). Natural resources are scarce in the circumscribed valley, leading Schortman and Urban (personal communication 2004) to hypothesize that the residents of El Coyote sustained their population through regional contact and trade, most likely with La Sierra and/or Copán (Wells 2003). The hypothesis for trade as a motivating factor in establishing El Coyote is supported by its strategic location. The Cacaúlapa Valley runs north/south, and El Coyote could have monitored southern access to the Ulúa Valley, another prosperous Late Classic settlement area.



**Figure 3. Map of the Lower Cacaúlapa Valley showing the site of El Coyote and smaller surrounding sites (from Wells 2003:71).**

Excavations of middens surrounding the main plaza reveal that the residents of El Coyote were also participating in various craft activities, including lithic processing, animal or hide processing, pigment processing, paper-making, and possible ceramic production (Wells 2003). Craft production and the presence of La Sierra produced ceramics recovered during the 1999, 2000, and 2001 field seasons support the idea of trade interactions, indicating that the people of El Coyote maintained ties with La Sierra. However, their differing site plans suggest localized variability in site construction principles.

Stockett (2001) identifies several site planning characteristics of El Coyote and the Cacaupala valleys: 1) topography is a guiding factor in site planning and structure placement, 2) sites are built away from flat open spaces, 3) some incorporate rectilinear site plans, and 4) central patios are absent as an organizing principle (Stockett 2005). These are slightly different than the planning principles of the Naco Valley, which emphasize irregular shapes, circular boundaries, and central patios into their site designs, and are built on wide, flat alluvial planes (Urban 1986). While this implies discontinuity in social affiliation between the Naco and Cacaupala valleys, the spatial constraints of the Cacaupala Valley must be reiterated. Rectilinear site planning could signal a difference in social identity, but it could also be because the valley terrain is not conducive to circular site plans. Leaving patios open could have been considered to be a waste of space. For these reasons, further material evidence is needed to demonstrate social affiliation at El Coyote.



**Figure 4. The settlement of El Coyote, indicating the Main Plaza, elite residential patios, and ball court (from Wells 2003).**

The site core of El Coyote consists of 11 monumental buildings that range in height from 4 to 10 m (Figure 5). These formed the borders of the main plaza, and were most likely non-residential structures. A causeway on the northeast corner provided access to the main plaza during the Late Classic. South of the main plaza is

a ball court, as well as two other plaza groups. Excavations during the 2000 field season indicate that these were non-elite residences constructed during the Late Classic, though they might have occupation histories dating from the Early Classic to Early Postclassic as well (Novotny 2002; Urban 2001).

Early Classic (AD 200-600) ceramic assemblages recovered from El Coyote proved remarkably similar to those from La Sierra, suggesting interaction between the two sites. However, during the Late Classic the ceramic assemblages deviate from the Naco styles, indicating that the residents of El Coyote were moving away from the influence of La Sierra. Mortuary evidence (discussed below) indicates that this relationship may have resulted in violent conflict by the Terminal Classic period (AD 950-1100) (Novotny 2002). El Coyote burials show less variation in style (i.e., burial position, grave goods, orientation, location) than those of La Sierra. However, more excavations need to be conducted at El Coyote in order to confirm this pattern. Most burials were recovered from a residential zone in the southwestern corner of the site. The major anomaly in an otherwise standard burial style is a fascinating cache of skulls located on the northeastern edge of the Main Plaza.

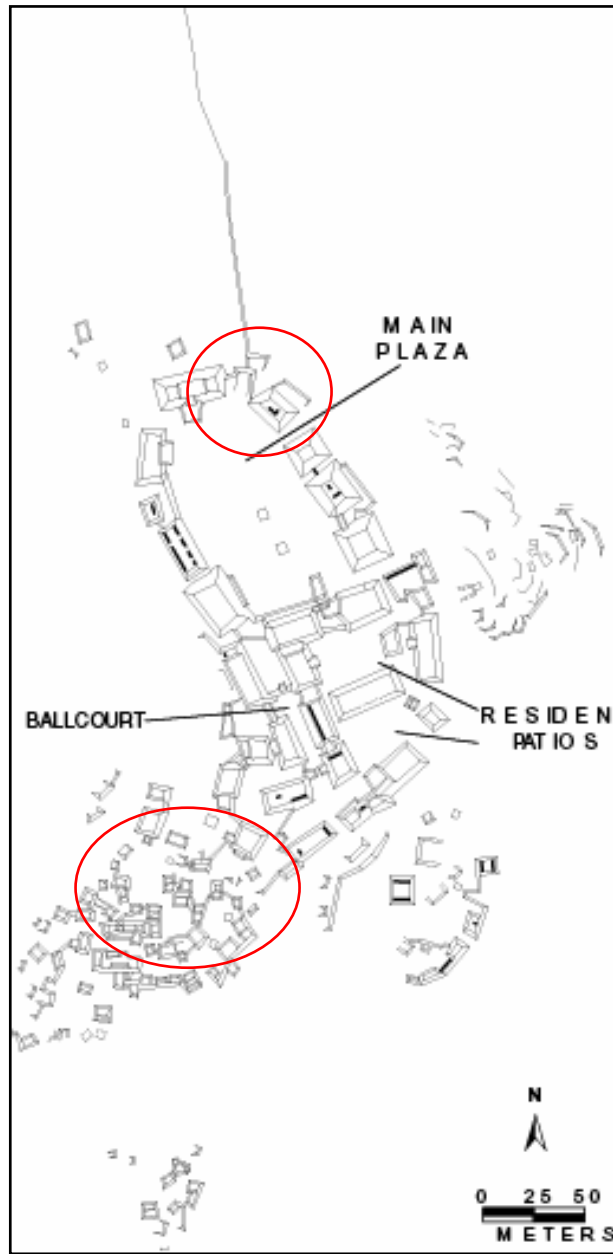
The structures in the southwestern residential zone were non-elite residences perched on the edge of an escarpment leading down to a seasonal streambed. The buildings were inhabited for several hundred years during the Late Classic, and incorporated many additions and construction phases over this period of time. A total of 20 skeletons were found in 16 interments in the group. There were eight children and 12 adults ranging in age from neonate to +50 years old. Of 20, preservation was

only complete enough to assign a sex to six individuals – three males and three females; the sexes of the rest are unknown (Novotny 2002).

There were 12 individual, flexed burials and four commingled burials. Sixty-five percent of the burials were placed outside of house walls. Five burials containing seven individuals were found in middens, and one was interred in the fill of a terrace addition. Eleven out of the 20 were found oriented with their heads to the north. Some graves were prepared by laying down a layer of pebbles, or they were densely packed with sherds. There were no grave goods found associated with any of the burials from the southwestern zone (Novotny 2002).

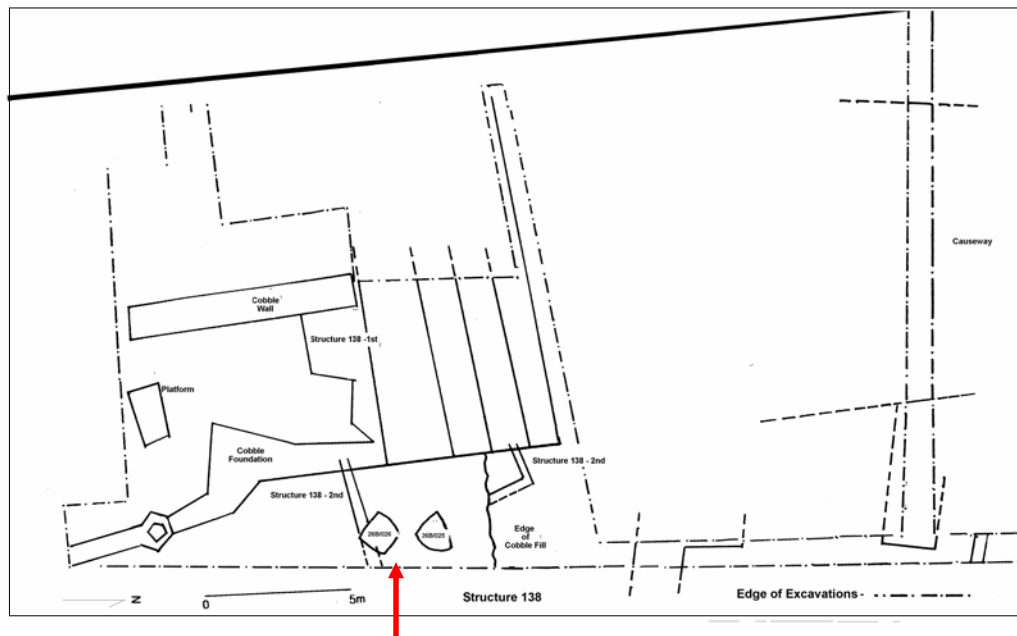
Pathologies identified on the skeletons of the southwestern zone include periostitis, caries, periodontal disease, hypoplasias, trauma, and osteoarthritis. This diagnosis is consistent with a non-elite population for this time period (Novotny 2002). These households were most likely engaged in hard physical labor that resulted in some of the recognized pathologies (trauma and osteoarthritis, for example).

Two ossuaries were uncovered on the northeastern causeway leading up to the Main Plaza (Wells 2003:196-200), yielding a Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) of 14 (Figure 6). The northern cyst contained eight individuals and the southern contained six. The northern ossuary was encountered first, and contained six skulls arranged around the eastern and western sides of a cyst, forming a half-circle around the post-cranial skeletal components that were placed in the center (Figure 7).



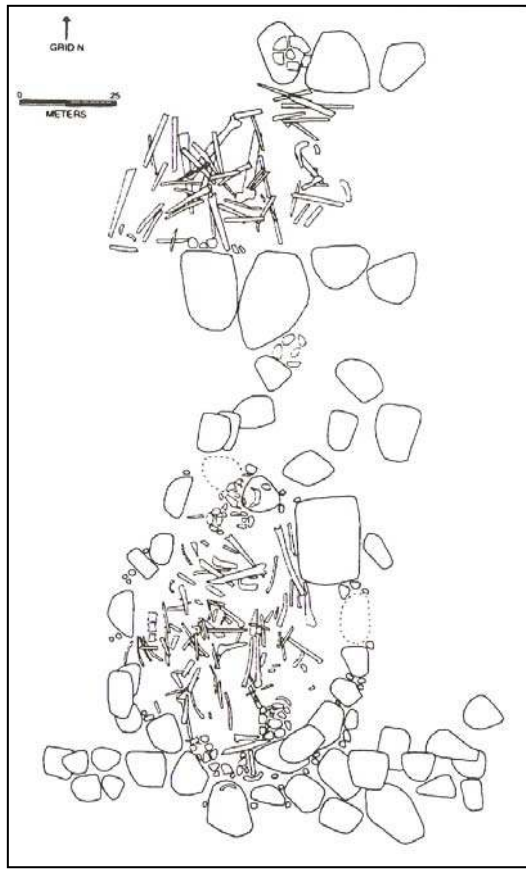
**Figure 5. El Coyote. Circled areas indicate where the burials discussed in the text were recovered – the southwestern residential zone and the northeast causeway (modified from Wells 2003).**

The southern cyst was less formal but displayed a similar pattern, with eight skulls surrounding disarticulated post-cranial bones. Cranial characteristics confirmed that they were young males, aged 25-35. The disarticulation indicates that this was a secondary interment. The presence of one partially articulated torso and a varied ceramic assemblage indicates that the cyst had been re-used multiple times. The excavator (Wells 2003) theorizes that the southern cyst could have been used after the first was full.



**Figure 6. Structure 138, northeastern causeway leading into El Coyote's Main Plaza. The two skull caches are located east of the stairway and indicated by an arrow (Wells 2003).**





**Figure 7. Plan view of the two ossuaries containing commingled individuals from Structure 38 (from Wells 2003:199)**

The young men in the ossuaries show differing pathologies from the other individuals from El Coyote. The periodontal disease, caries, trauma, and osteoarthritis present in the southwestern residential group occurred at a very low rate in the young men in the cyst. This could be because of their age, but also because of status differentiation. The presence of healed porotic hyperostosis in 7 of the 14 cases sets these individuals further apart from the people of the southwestern group. Five skeletons had cut marks, indicating that they were defleshed before interment, perhaps to fit so many of them into the cyst. One individual had a filed tooth, an

indicator of elite status that is associated with the physical expression of social identity (Figure 8).



**Figure 8. Dental modification of a left maxillary incisor recovered from Burial 26B/025. Dental modification is believed to indicate self-ascribed social identity in Mesoamerica (from Novotny 2002).**

The paucity of evidence for this practice in the Naco region suggests that at least one El Coyote individual did not self-associate with the regional groups, and most likely originated elsewhere. Dental modification was commonly practiced by the neighboring Maya, which hints at the complexity of societal interactions during this time period. In addition, this unusual burial is reminiscent of a skull pit recovered at the Terminal Classic Maya site of Colha, Belize (Massey and Steele 1997).

In their cultural and osteological study of the Colha skulls, Massey and Steele (1997) determined that they did not die of natural causes, but were “killed at approximately the same time, decapitated, and the heads flayed and buried together next to the stairway of a monumental structure.” Massey and Steele (1997:76)

postulate that the people were sacrificed for religious reasons, that they were an elite family that was violently deposed, or that they were political victims treated with ritual violence. Since the skull pit at El Coyote contained only male individuals, it is conceivable that they were ritually sacrificed or killed in some sort of conflict and then ritually interred. Further analysis needs to be done on the skeletons in order to determine cause of death, and perhaps where the individuals originated.

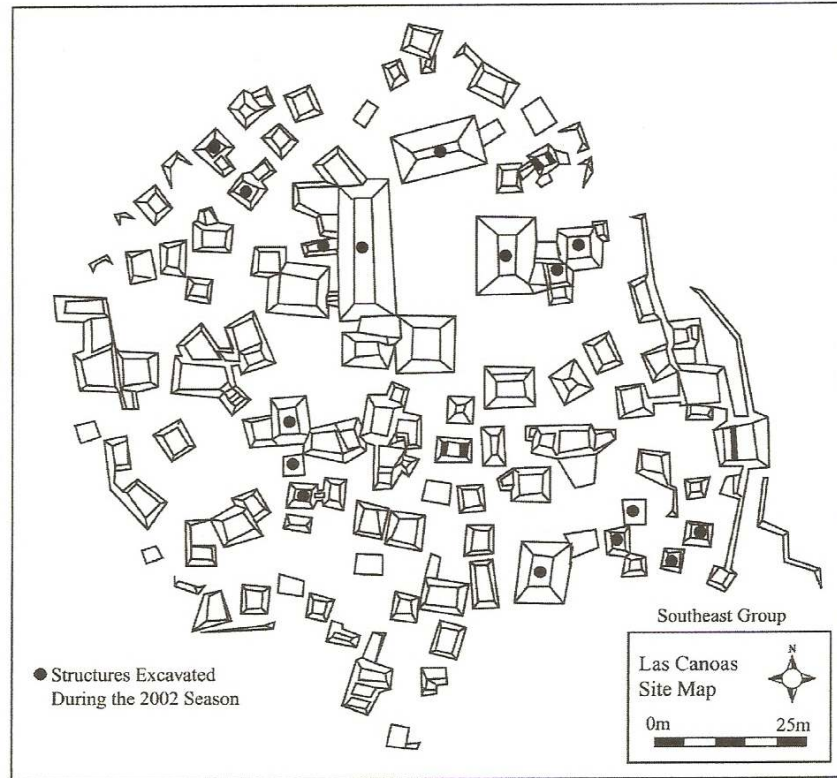
El Coyote was a seemingly prosperous site whose control over trade routes through the Cacaúlapa drainage supported a large population occupying land with limited agricultural potential. Craft production met immediate needs, but it is apparent that monitoring trade was the primary means of accruing power at El Coyote. Social identity seems to be visibly materialized at El Coyote in the same manner as at La Sierra – a site plan dominated by monumental buildings (administrative and ceremonial structures) constructed around a central plaza with limited access and a ball court. The steady decrease of Chamelecón polychromes from the Early to Late Classic periods and an increase in imported and El Coyote produced ceramics, indicates a decline in interaction between La Sierra and El Coyote. Ritual practices at El Coyote in the form of the skull caches, as well as feasting residues, suggest that elite use of the Main Plaza played an instrumental role in the demonstration of elite power (Wells 2003). Burial styles (besides the anomalous skull caches) are fairly standard at El Coyote, a departure from La Sierra practices, suggesting social affiliation at a more localized level.

### *Las Canoas*

Research at Las Canoas was initiated in 2002 by Miranda Stockett. Stockett's (2005) study focused on identifying practices of affiliation through material culture residues at Las Canoas. Consequently, Stockett's findings have significant implications for this study. Analysis and comparison of regional stylistic patterns will create a comprehensive context for situating the data from Palmarejo.

The site of Las Canoas includes 105 surface visible structures constructed on an alluvial terrace bordering the Río Chamelecón (Figure 9). It is the largest settlement in the lower Chamelecón river valley, which includes five other sites of up to seven structures each (Stockett 2005). However, these settlements are quite dispersed, leaving Las Canoas relatively isolated. Excavations directed by Stockett in 2002 revealed that Las Canoas was occupied for a short period of time during the Late Classic, from AD 650-960. This is anomalous for the region, which is characterized by sites with occupational histories reaching back into the Early Classic and Formative periods, such as at La Sierra and El Coyote.

In terms of site planning, Las Canoas seems to have taken on stylistic variables present in both Naco and Cacaupala site designs. As noted by Stockett (2005:494), Las Canoas resembles Naco site plans in its occupation of a flat, open river terrace, irregular, circular shape, and organization around a central patio. Cacaupala characteristics present at Las Canoas include a rectilinear style of the Main Plaza and residential East Group, and utilization of the natural topography to achieve a more commanding presence.



**Figure 9. Map of Las Canoas (Stockett 2005:6).**

The monumental architecture constructed at Las Canoas is concentrated around the Main Plaza, in the northern section of the site. The Main Plaza Group was raised in three major construction episodes, which Stockett (2005) suggests is indicative of shifting social affiliations at Las Canoas. Early in its occupation, Las Canoas displays architecture similar to that of Naco styles, with low-lying cobble architecture arranged in an irregular pattern. During the second phase, the Main Plaza buildings were remodeled with terraces, while the plaza was shaped to be more rectilinear, and paved with bright orange clay. The use of the clay for paving is unique to Las Canoas, though the practice of paving central plazas is found at other sites in the region. La Sierra's plaza remained unpaved, though El Coyote's was

paved with limestone plaster. The final phase of construction at the Main Plaza was composed of additions to the structures to raise their heights. Stockett (2005:509) argues that these changes were achieved, “by incorporating architectural or spatial elements observed at other locales, and then modifying them to meet local needs and ideals.” By the Terminal Classic period, Las Canoas had apparently developed a distinctive social identity in relation to other sites in the region. Stockett’s (2005) work implies that social identity in southeastern Mesoamerica was subject to a variety of influences, and could change considerably over time.

Stockett (2005) also describes ceramic artifacts at Las Canoas, in order to further explore regional stylistic influence. Ritualized artifacts discussed include figurines, ocarinas, candeleros, and incensarios. In addition, ceramic stamps used to decorate textiles with distinctive patterns may also have been important outward indicators of social affiliation. Stockett (2005) observes that many of these types of artifacts were either locally fashioned in a wider southeastern Mesoamerica style, or imported from other regions. Thus, Las Canoans participated in regional ritual practices through a shared belief system.

Figurines were often used in ritual activity, both in public and non-public settings. The presence of molds at Las Canoas indicates that figurines were manufactured there, though in styles reminiscent of those from Naco (i.e., “Napoleon Hat” figurines, as well as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations) (Figure 10). Stockett (2005) hypothesizes that most of the figurines at Las Canoas were produced at Naco and imported, connecting Las Canoas to a wider southeast Mesoamerican belief system.

Ocarinas and stamps recovered from Las Canoas also bear evidence for a common regional identity. A diverse array of ocarinas was found at Las Canoas, including anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms reminiscent of styles found elsewhere in the region, such as Copán, the Sula plain, and the Naco Valley (Stockett 2005:513). Flat ceramic stamps were most likely used to decorate textiles, and thus are an important artifact in determining social identity (Figure 11). The Las Canoas sample includes anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, the most prevalent being a row of monkeys linked by their tails. This design is most commonly found in the Sula/Ulua region, which provides further support for a regionally shared identity.



**Figure 10. Anthropomorphic figurine mold recovered from Las Canoas, indicating local production of a regional style.**



**Figure 11. Stamp recovered from Las Canoas depicting terraced hills.**

While figurines, ocarinas, and stamps suggest affiliation with southeastern Mesoamerica, candeleros recovered from Las Canoas were manufactured in a local style (Stockett 2005). Candeleros can be made by hand, and hence are simple in form and lacking in decoration. Some are incised with cross-hatched lines or dots, but most remained plain, and are reminiscent of Naco Valley styles (Stockett 2005).

Ritual practices across Mesoamerica are characterized by the use of incensarios. Thus, Stockett (2005) argues that they are the most indicative of regional affiliative links. All but one type (spiked censers) of Mesoamerican incensario forms were found at Las Canoas, including effigy, ladle, complex, and scored lid censers (Stockett 2005:516). The censers are lacking in decoration. However, Stockett (2005) argues that this means that function was more important than form, linking them to a wide-ranging pan-Mesoamerican belief system. The few incensarios that were decorated incorporate widely known Mesoamerican symbols, such as the foliated cross. One modeled incensario depicts an anthropomorphic face (possibly an effigy of a deity) with a knotted headband, large earspools, filed teeth, and a tattoo between the



eyebrows; all common body modification practices identified throughout Mesoamerica (Stockett 2005:516). Stockett (2005:517) stresses the ritual actions of which the incensarios were a part, over their stylistic qualities, “In this case, it was not the ritual vessel that created meaning, but the ritual action itself.”

In linking these objects to identity, Stockett (2005) argues that ritual artifacts referenced a shared and enduring system of beliefs that transcended regional economic and political ties. It is those artifacts that “directly mimic” regional styles that have the greatest effect on the construction of salient local identities. Evidence for this comes from imported necessities from the Naco Valley, such as obsidian and ceramics.

Naco-style ceramics constitute the largest group of imported artifacts found at Las Canoas, suggesting close ties to Naco that Stockett (2005) argues helped create an immediate, salient identity. “Used alongside locally made pottery, these wares would have reminded members of the Las Canoas community of their connection to the Naco polity in subtle and consistent ways” (Stockett 2005:519). Likewise, pottery produced at Las Canoas has been recovered in the Naco Valley, further illustrating their ties to the region. Because of this, Stockett (2005) argues that craft production played a central role in forming community identity at Las Canoas. The dependency of the people of Las Canoas on La Sierra for polychrome pottery and obsidian would have made a social affiliation with Naco very important. In addition, human interments from Las Canoas can also lend insights into the relationship between the two sites.

Six individuals were recovered placed in fill deposits associated with residential buildings at Las Canoas. None of the pits were specially prepared, and there were no grave goods included with the bodies. While there were similarities in the locations of the bodies, there was variability in their positioning. Some individuals were interred directly in a building's fill while some were interred outside of a building's walls. Some of the bodies were oriented north/south facing west. Other were bundled, and placed on their backs facing east. Probably because of the small sample size, Stockett (2005) does not explore the human interments as part of Las Canoas's social affiliation. However, when added to the larger sample from the Naco Valley, they could further illuminate patterns of social identity. The placement of the deceased within living spaces throughout the valley points to the importance of ancestors in the residents' worldview. The similarity in the placement of the burials serves as a baseline for comparing the anomalies; for example, the skull caches. A complete interpretation of the burial data from the Naco Valley (including Palmarejo) is discussed in Chapter 6.

Stockett's (2005) study has implications for change in identity over time as well. Most importantly, she finds parallels between the diminishing power of La Sierra during the Terminal Classic period and changes in material culture (primarily pottery production and exchange) at Las Canoas. The Terminal Classic was a time of florescence for Las Canoas, evinced by increases in pottery production and extension of trading networks to include exchange with El Coyote. The development of this trade relationship is contemporaneous with the rectilinear modifications made to Las Canoas's Main Plaza. In addition, an increased density of imported Ulúa polychromes

at Las Canoas further suggests the lessening of La Sierra's regional influence at the end of the Late Classic.

The identification of these patterns at Las Canoas has tremendous implications for this study of the Palmarejo Valley. One of the main goals of this paper is to elucidate the ties that Palmarejo maintained with regional sites, particularly La Sierra, and how those ties influenced their social identity. Stockett's (2005) description of how regional affiliations were expressed and changed over time will be enormously helpful in analyzing the material record of Palmarejo. The Palmarejo data presented in the next chapter will add to the previous works discussed in this chapter by adding another perspective on what was apparently a very complex series of economic, political, and affiliative interactions.

### *Expectations*

Based on the previous studies of social identity described in Chapter 2 (Barth 1969; Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005; Hodder 1986; Jones 1996, 1997; Shennan 1989; Stockett 2005) and the sociohistorical context described in this chapter, specific artifact categories can be used to assess different aspects of ethnic affiliation. Specifically, I examine site planning principles, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials of the Late Classic Naco Valley to infer elite social identity. In particular, one objective of this thesis is to assess to what degree Palmarejo's inhabitants identified with the rest of the Naco Valley. One method of doing this is to evaluate the visible styles of these artifact classes at Palmarejo against those styles portrayed at different Naco sites.

For example, site planning and the associated monumental architecture composing site centers are an important display of elite power in southeastern Mesoamerica. If the style and methods of their planning and construction are comparable between Palmarejo and the other sites, then it could be inferred that Palmarejo elites were directly identifying with the regional elite power structure. For example, if the Palmarejo site plan is similar to either the rectilinear plans recognized at El Coyote, or the circular plan present at La Sierra, then it could be inferred that the residents of Palmarejo were attempting to affiliate themselves with the residents of either of these sites. Furthermore, the changes observed over time at Las Canoas could have important implications for Palmarejo. For example, the presence of different construction styles at Palmarejo (i.e., an orthogonal Naco-style patio group as well as a rectilinear patio group) could indicate a change in affiliations over time.

On a more localized level, ceramic production and use (of plates and vessels, as well as figurines, ocarinas, and censers) typically signals a more personal attachment to a particular worldview (Plog 1992). A stylistic typology of ceramics produced in the Naco Valley has been well documented (Schortman and Urban 1986, 1994, 2004; Urban 1986). If ceramics recovered from Palmarejo were imported from certain Naco workshops (identified thus far at La Sierra, El Coyote, or Las Canoas), then it could be inferred that Palmarejo residents may have affiliated themselves with the site whose ceramics they were primarily importing. In particular, the presence of specific styles of ritually important ceramic artifacts (i.e., figurines and ocarinas) could suggest an affiliation with regional religious practices.

A regional worldview could be inferred from burial practices (Hegmon 1992). If the Palmarejo mortuary data follows the Naco pattern of placing burials within or adjacent to living spaces, then a shared worldview could be inferred. This pattern is also reminiscent of wider Mesoamerican patterns, which could suggest more distant affiliations. Each site displays unique facets to their mortuary program, for example, the extended positioning of bodies at El Coyote as opposed to the flexed positioning at Las Canoas and La Sierra. The positioning of bodies recovered from Palmarejo could suggest ties to a specific site. In addition, the presence of skull caches at both La Sierra and El Coyote seem to point to an affiliation in ritual belief systems between the two sites. The presence of caches utilizing human skeletal components could be indicative of a participation in this belief system by Palmarejo elites.

### *Summary*

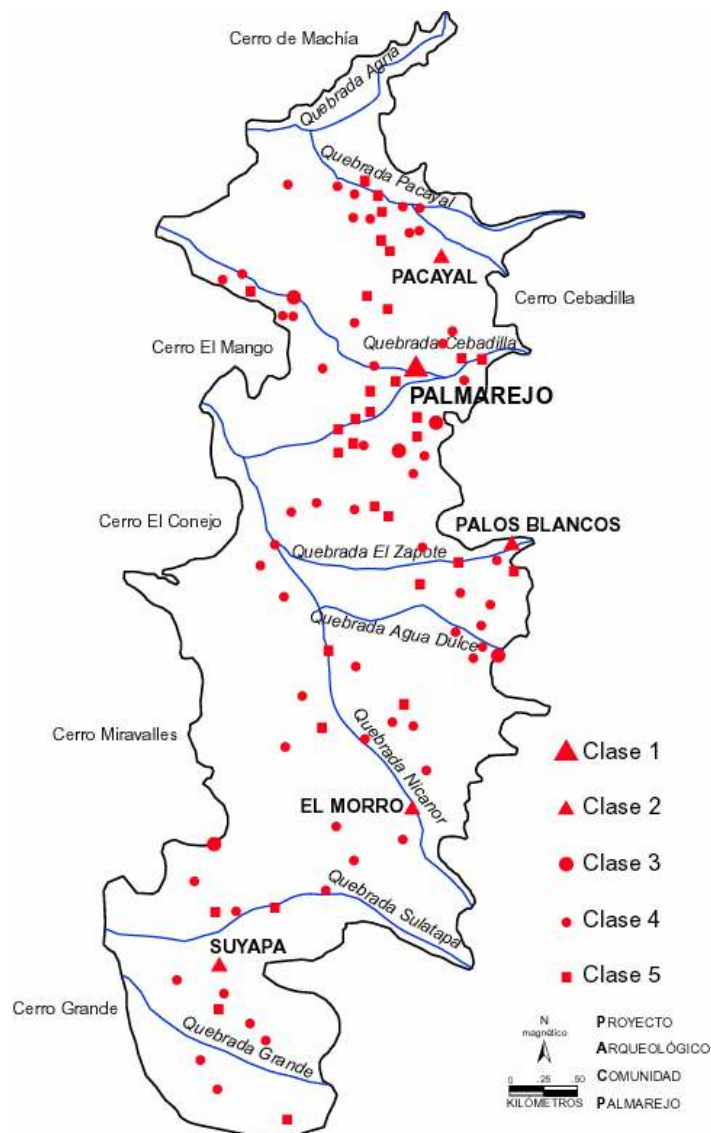
It has been demonstrated in this chapter that elite social identity took a variety of material forms at Late Classic La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas. Elite identity was signaled and materialized through site plans, monumental architecture, ceramic assemblages, and human burials. At each site there is evidence for affiliation with broader southeast Mesoamerican traditions, while incorporating these ideas into local styles. In addition, it is apparent that changes in the stylistic representation of these artifacts correlated with shifting regional relationships, principally the decline of La Sierra's influence during the Terminal Classic. However, little is known about how these relationships might have played out at the second largest site in the Naco Valley, Palmarejo. A closer archaeological analysis of site planning, monumental

architecture, ceramics, and human burials is needed to assess how social identity was formed and expressed at Palmarejo. Palmarejo provides an opportunity to further elucidate what was evidently a complex sociopolitical and economic interaction sphere influencing the formation of social identities in the Naco Valley. The next chapter describes the methods used for evaluating elite social identity at Palmarejo.

## **Chapter 4. Excavation and Laboratory Methods for Evaluating Elite Identity Formation at Palmarejo**

Up until 2004, little was known about Palmarejo and its relationship with the sites discussed in the previous chapter. It was identified as a tier 2 site by Schortman and Urban during their full-coverage pedestrian survey of the Naco Valley in 1988 (Urban and Schortman 1988). Consequently, exploratory test pits were dug at Palmarejo. Intensive excavations were initiated at Palmarejo by the Proyecto Arqueológico Comunidad Palmarejo (PACP) under the direction of E. Christian Wells, Karla L. Davis-Salazar, and José E. Moreno-Cortés in 2004. During the course of three field seasons, excavations have been conducted at the Palmarejo Main Group and elite residential zones. In addition, the entire valley has been surveyed and mapped, with test units being dug at other locations throughout the valley (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Wells et al. 2004, 2006). These investigations, though preliminary, immediately raised questions as to Palmarejo's economic, sociopolitical, and cultural connections with La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas.

Palmarejo is the largest settlement in the Palmarejo Valley, which includes 96 smaller sites dispersed according to resource zones throughout the valley (Hawken 2007; Wells et al. 2004). A full-scale pedestrian survey of the valley recorded these 96 sites and subsequently categorized them into five different classes based on the number of monumental structures included in each site (Figure 12).



**Figure 12. Map of the Palmarejo Valley detailing the site classification system (from Wells et al. 2004).**

Class 1 consists only of Palmarejo (#80), which is composed of 93 surface visible structures, including 15 monumental buildings (over 1.5 m in height, several over 3 m), two elite residential groups, two formal plazas, and a ball court. Class 2 sites include the sites of Pacayal (#30), Palos Blancos (#58), El Morro (#66), and

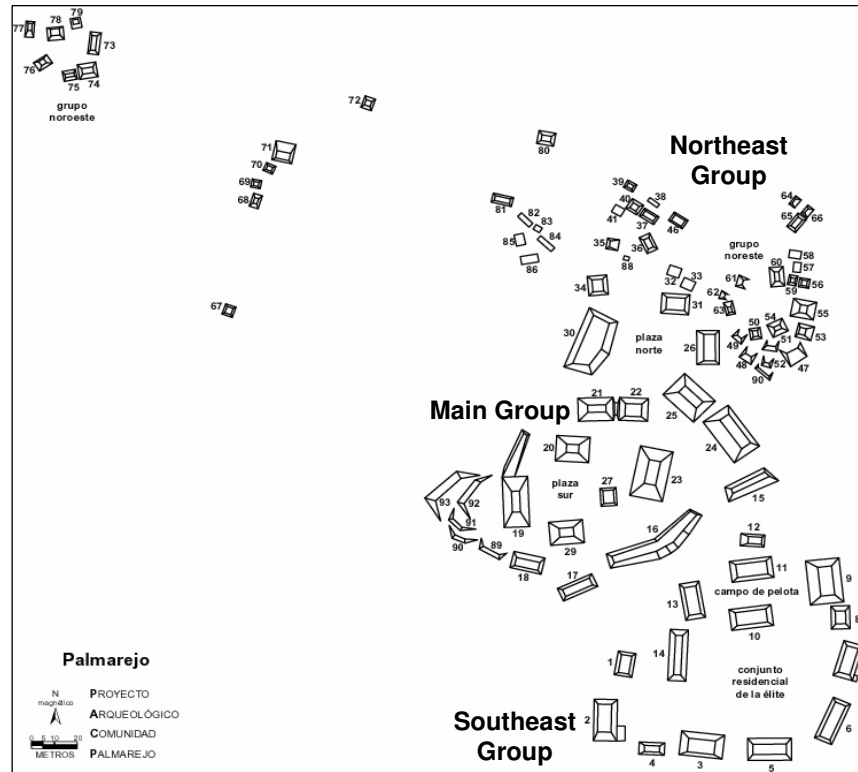


Suyapa (#68). These sites are characterized by more than 25 surface visible structures, including ceremonial, administrative, and residential buildings, as well as one or more formal plazas. There are five Class 3 sites, which are characterized by residential patio groups with buildings greater than 2 m in height. Class 4 includes 56 sites, which are identified by residential groups with buildings less than 2 m in height, with either an irregularly shaped patio or no patio at all. Finally, Class 5 includes 30 field houses, individual buildings constructed independently from habitation zones that were most likely used for agricultural purposes such as tool storage, or for ritual purposes (Wells 2007). It has been suggested that Palmarejo elites were in political and economic control of this entire valley during the Late Classic, though recent research suggests that the Class 2 sites were not dominated by Palmarejo, but were in control of their immediate resources (Hawken 2007; Wells et al. 2004).

Palmarejo itself is an anomaly in the site classification system established by Schortman and Urban for the Naco Valley (1986). In this system (described in Chapter 3), La Sierra is the only tier 1 site, with 468 surface visible structures. While smaller than La Sierra and classified as a tier 2 site, Palmarejo is significantly larger than other tier 2 sites in the valley, which are characterized by at least 45 structures that include monumental architecture delineating plaza spaces. This suggests that Palmarejo was an extremely successful tier 2 site that may have been competing with La Sierra for resources (Wells et al. 2004). Archaeological excavations were conducted in order to evaluate the degree to which Palmarejo's residents were able to maintain economic and political self-sufficiency.

The 93 structures that make up the site of Palmarejo include three distinct zones: a Main Group characterized by two formal plazas (the North Plaza and the South Plaza), and two residential groups (the Southeast Group and the Northeast Group) (Figure 14). The North Plaza includes five range structures (# 21, #22, #26, # 30, and #31) organized around a formal plaza. The South Plaza is characterized by four structures over 3 m in height (#20, #23, #29, and #19), which also delineate a formal plaza. The Southeast Group includes 14 low-lying range structures (#1 - #14) about 1.5 m in height, two of which form a ball court (#10 and #11). This group surrounds a wide, formal patio. The Northeast Group includes 17 small structures and terraces (#47 - #63), two of which are about 1.5 m in height (#54 and #55), clustered in a circular shape around a patio.

As a field school student with PACP during the 2005 field season, I conducted excavations of Structures 20 and 29 in the South Plaza of the Main Group. Excavations were also undertaken by field school students at Structure 93, a terrace west of the South Plaza, and Structure 5, the southernmost building in the Southeast Group. In 2006, with the assistance of PACP field school students, I directed excavations of Structures 54, 55, and 60, in addition to test pits performed in the North Plaza and Northeast Group. The subsequent sections in this chapter will outline the methodology employed in the excavation of these structures in order to evaluate the economic and sociopolitical relationship between Palmarejo and other sites in the region, and how material manifestations of elite identity developed relative to these interactions.



**Figure 13. Map of the Palmarejo site center, including the Main Group and two elite residential neighborhoods (modified from Wells et al. 2004).**

PACP maintained four objectives for the site of Palmarejo over the course of the 2005 and 2006 field seasons: 1) to establish a cultural chronology for the site, 2) to analyze soil samples from the Main Group and Southeast Group plazas in order to identify activity areas, 3) to investigate elite political and economic activities at Palmarejo, and 4) to evaluate interaction between Palmarejo and other regional sites, principally La Sierra. To reach these goals, excavation locations were selected from zones assumed to be associated with elite activities. In order to obtain a meaningful sample, excavations of various types of structures were carried out. Range, pyramidal, and terraced structures were excavated in the Southeast Group, Main Group, and Northeast Group. Specifically, Structures 5, 20, 29, 93, 54, and 60 were

each chosen for excavation. The South Plaza, Southeast Patio, and Northeast Patio were chosen for archaeological testing and soil sampling (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Wells et al. 2004, 2007).

The Southeast Group was selected for testing and excavation to evaluate the assumption that this was an elite residential patio group. Structure 5 was selected because it was among the most well-preserved buildings in the Southeast Group, and thus held the best probability of containing intact artifact deposits (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). Excavations were conducted here in order to garner information that might help us infer the kinds of exchange systems that elites were participating in during the Late Classic.

Likewise, Structures 20 and 29 were among the best preserved (as well as the tallest) buildings at Palmarejo, and thus were also selected for excavation. By excavating a portion of the Main Group we hoped to determine the specific functions of the two buildings (i.e., ritual versus administrative) and their plaza, which could illuminate the ways that elites garnered and maintained power at Palmarejo during the Late Classic. The propensity for specially produced ritual artifacts to be found in ceremonial contexts was a second motivation for these excavations. These kinds of assemblages could offer further insights into elite participation in regional economic and political interaction spheres. Additionally, as described by Stockett (2005), the style of artifacts used in ritual contexts can indicate what kind of belief system people were affiliating themselves with through ritual practices.

In order to establish a cultural chronology for the site center, and to gain insight into elite ritual and sociopolitical life at Palmarejo, a 76 m x 1 m long trench

was excavated through the center of the South Group from the northern side of Structure 20 to the southern side of Structure 29. Due to time constraints, the trench was not continuous; test pits were dug every other meter in the plaza.

A third distinct zone was selected for excavation and testing at Palmarejo, the Northeast Group. This group was chosen because it seemed to occupy a similar area in the Palmarejo site plan as did the multiple craft workshops in the La Sierra site plan. Excavations were conducted here in order to test the idea that Palmarejo was participating in localized craft production activities (most likely ceramic production), offering a rationale both for Palmarejo's anomalous ceramic assemblages and apparent economic success within the Naco region. Structure 54 was selected because of its good state of preservation, as well as being one of the tallest structures in the group. Structure 60 was slated for excavation because of its location directly north of Structure 54. Most of the structures composing the Northeast Group are low-lying terraces or platforms similar to Structure 60, and so I wanted to excavate there in order to ensure that my sample was representative of the group. Lastly, at La Sierra, production activities occurred both on platforms and in specially delineated patio areas. Thus, wide test pits (2 m x 2 m) were dug intermittently across the group's plaza.

A unique feature of the Palmarejo site center documented during the 2004 season was the presence of terraces stepping down into a deep, artificial depression on the western side of the site. Trenches were laid perpendicular to these constructions (Structure 93) in order to determine their function in relation to the artificial depression as well as to the Main Group immediately to the east.

In addition to testing the visible architecture at Palmarejo, sampling methods were designed to specifically evaluate prehistoric activity areas within the plazas (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Wells et al. 2007). Open spaces are often ignored in archaeological research designs under the assumption that the absence of visible artifacts indicates a lack of human activity. Recent research in archaeological soil chemistry suggests that researchers have been missing vital sources of prehistoric information by making this assumption (Wells et al. 2007). Thus, 324 soil samples were collected from the South and Southeast Group in order to evaluate elite activities performed in these areas during pre-Hispanic times. Though most PACP research involves studying Palmarejo's connections to the outside world, soil chemistry is one method of evaluating intrasite community interactions. Perhaps most importantly for this study, studying the chemical make up of the open spaces can expand on the spatial analysis of monumental architecture by focusing the purposes of the space, not just its boundaries.

#### *Excavation and Notation Procedures*

PACP excavation and notation methods follow those initiated by Urban and Schortman at both the Proyecto Valle de Naco (PVN) and the Proyecto Valle de Calcaulapa (PVC). This is especially beneficial for this study, which compares sites excavated under all three projects.

This work was performed as a part of the PACP field school, under the supervision of E. Christian Wells, Karla L. Davis-Salazar, and José E. Moreno-Cortes during two six-week field seasons in 2005 and 2006. Excavations at Palmarejo were

directly supervised by Wells and PACP staff members, including myself, Jolien Verdaasdonk, and Nichole Davenport of the University of South Florida, and Anna C. Novotny of Arizona State University. Field crews consisted of undergraduate field school students, who were responsible for overseeing the efforts of several local workmen and accurately recording excavations as they progressed. Archaeological research in the Naco Valley would not be possible without the labor and skill of the local Hondurans. These men work with the field crews in groups of four to six, and are responsible for the majority of the physical tasks involved in excavating.

At the beginning of each season, areas selected for archaeological investigation were cleared of brush and small trees, enabling clear views of plazas and surface visible structures. Detailed preliminary notes were taken including the rationale for excavating, preservation of the selected structure, its location within the site, geographical orientation, and possible function.

The notational method employed throughout the Naco Valley used an Operation/Sub-Operation/Lot system. Every site has a number (Palmarejo is site #80, Palos Blancos is site #58) to identify it within the larger valley. Smaller sites were generally not named, but were referred to by their site number. At these sites, this number is also used for the operation number. At a larger site such as Palmarejo, several operations were necessary in order to differentiate between clusters of structures within the site. Operations were designated sequentially as excavations expanded to different areas of the site. Palmarejo has a total of 13 operations, numbered sequentially from 100-113. Over the course of the excavations, operations included several trenches and sub-operations.

Sub-operations were used to designate segments of trenches that had a specific rationale or purpose behind their excavation. For example, a new sub-operation was assigned to the extension of a trench following a wall or other construction unit. Sub-operation letters were noted on artifact bag tags and in field notes by a capital letter (given sequentially from A to Z) placed after the operation number.

An informal (i.e., not an official part of the Operation/Sub-Operation/Lot system) but very helpful method of identifying specific portions of a trench was the Excavation Unit. Written in shorthand as EU, these are the 1 m x 1 m square sections that divided a trench. These were sequentially numbered within the given sub-operation.

The third spatial designation of this notational system is the lot. Lots referred to the actual stratigraphic position of excavated soil dug in an excavation unit. Typically lots were excavated in 10 cm increments, however once a reliable stratigraphic profile was established, excavators dug according to those depths. Lots were numbered sequentially from 001 until the closure of the sub-operation. Included on the artifact bag tags and on excavators' field notes, a typical designation from Palmarejo (site 80) might look like this: Sitio 80 (Palmarejo), 100A/001, Excavation Unit 1.

Once preliminary notes were taken on the structure and the notational system clarified, axial trenches were laid across the chosen structures. The position and length of the axial trench was determined by the size and shape of the building. The goal of the axial trench was to approach the basal walls from a perpendicular point of



view so that tumbled rocks can be identified and cleared, working towards the inner, preserved portions of the building. Thus the trenches started several meters away from perceived tumble. Workmen fashioned wooden stakes with their machetes, which were used to define the limits of the axial trench, as well as mark off excavation units every meter.

A datum point in the form of a stake with a string attached 10 cm beneath its top was placed in a raised location, and initial measurements were taken before sub-surface excavations began. On some of the steeper structures, multiple datum points were established. These were measured in relation to one another, utilized when scale drawings were made of the trenches, and then mapped with an EDM transit at the completion of the field season, in order to preserve the integrity of the measurements.

Initial lots were dug in 10 cm increments until the soil's stratigraphy can be identified, after which lots were excavated according to the natural (or anthropogenic) levels of deposition. Each lot was screened with 1 cm wire mesh screens, in order to identify smaller artifacts. Excavations were physically conducted by the Honduran workmen, who used large picks and shovels to remove large amounts of soil and tumbled rocks, as well as smaller hand picks and trowels for more precise excavation. Artifacts were collected in the screen and bagged at the close of each lot. Lots were measured from the datum point at the four corners (labeled in the field notes as geographical locations, i.e., northwest, southwest, northeast, southeast) of the unit and in the center. In addition to field notes, lot sheets were filled out upon the completion of each lot, specifically detailing the location of the lot, datum measurements, types and amounts of artifacts recovered, type of cultural deposition, soil description, and

Munsell number. In addition, numbers of scale drawings, photographs, or samples taken (i.e., carbon or soil samples) were included on the lot sheets. These details were also recorded in the excavator's field notes.

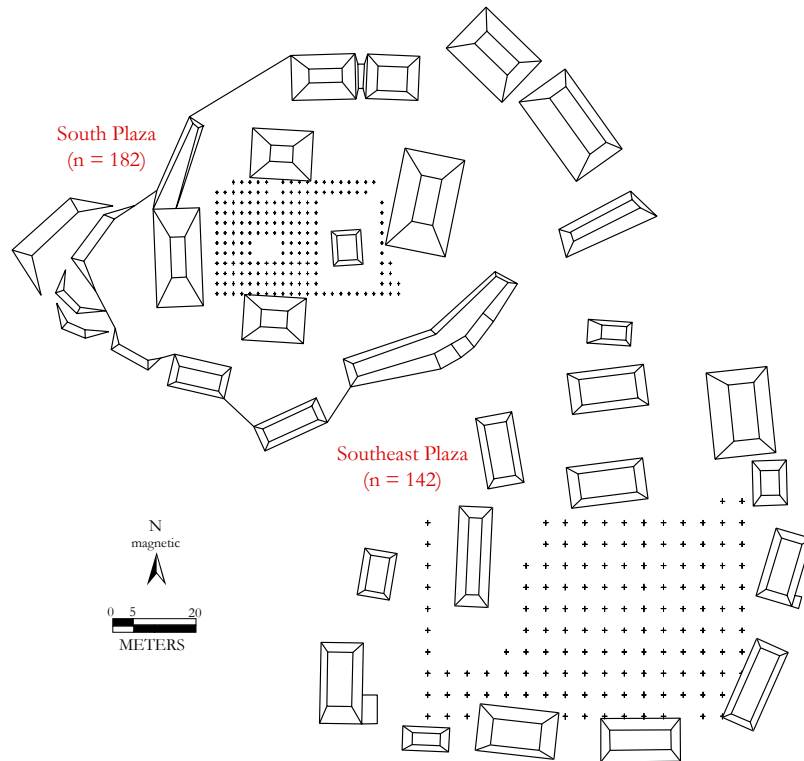
After excavation of the axial trench was completed, a scale drawing was made of one side of the trench wall, and additional units were laid out based on information gathered from the South trench. For example, if the trench revealed construction units that can be followed, new sub-operations consisting of 1 m x 1 m units were established in the perceived direction of the construction unit. The basal walls of platforms were typically pursued upon completion of the axial trench, in order to determine the size and dimensions of the building, as well as any additions to the original structures, such as terraces. Subsequent lateral extensions were pursued on the summit of the structure. Due to time constraints (and the nature of some of the buildings) at Palmarejo, basal walls were not always followed or cleared. For example, Structures 20 and 29 were each over 3 m in height, and the length of the field season did not allow for complete clearing of the basal walls. However, these are the techniques adhered to by PACP.

As excavation progressed, architecture and other cultural aspects of the building (such as hearths or summit benches) were labeled as features. Other artifacts typically recovered from structures in the Naco region include bajareque (or wattle and daub), ceramic sherds (including bowl, jar, plate, figurine, ocarina, stamp, or censer fragments), lithics (obsidian, perlite, chert), marine shell (land snails or the exotic imported *Spondylus* shells), groundstone manos and metates, faunal remains, charcoal, and human bone. One bag was used for all durable artifacts, with a detailed

inventory of the bags' contents listed on its tag as well as in the field notes and lot sheets.

Fragile artifacts such as human bone or charcoal were bagged separately. Charcoal samples were carefully collected with a metal trowel to avoid contamination and wrapped in precisely folded aluminum foil. Human bone was also wrapped in foil, and placed in paper bags (when available, untied plastic otherwise) in order to discourage humidity. Tags were written with the site number, operation/sub-operation/lot information, excavation unit, excavator number, date, and artifact inventory.

Soil samples were taken from the Main and Southeast Group. Using a lattice grid matrix samples were taken at regular 2 m intervals in the Main Group and at 5 m intervals in the Southeast plaza (Figure 14). Samples were collected with a metal trowel from approximately 15 cm beneath the modern ground surface, which is where the ancient plastered plaza would have been. These samples were bagged, tagged, and stored at the lab house in Cofradía until they could be taken to the University of South Florida for chemical analysis.



**Figure 14. Map indicating soil sample locations in the Main Group and Southeast plazas (modified from Wells et al. 2007).**

All exposed architecture and excavated trenches and test pits were backfilled at the end of the field season, after detailed scale drawings are made of all exposed walls and features. Layers of rock and soil are intermixed to provide a sustainable matrix that will not sink drastically after the first rain. Several non-biodegradable objects such as foil chip wrappers or Coke cans are placed in the backfill to verify our modern intrusion. This is an important aspect of excavation, since the land on which Palmarejo sits is also a modern field used in part for agriculture as well as grazing land for cows.

### *Laboratory Methods*

Artifacts were taken to the PACP laboratory in Cofradía at the end of each work day for cleaning and cataloging. Ceramic sherds were washed in basins of water with soft toothbrushes and dried on planks and screens in the sun. Local Honduran women were hired to help us with this task. Field school students supervised by a staff member assisted the women in cleaning the sherds, which were then counted, weighed, re-bagged and stored in the lab. This information was then entered into the project laptop in an MSAccess database. At this point, no detailed ceramic analysis has been performed on the Palmarejo data. This analysis is currently planned for the 2007 field season. While only generalizations can be made based on field and laboratory observations, this study emphasizes the style and form of ceramic artifacts. In this way, preliminary information on the presence or absence of certain styles can be used.

Other artifacts such as faunal remains, lithics, and marine shell were gently washed, dried, and catalogued as well. To date, no detailed lithic analysis has been performed on the Palmarejo dataset. Human bone was washed very carefully, dried in a protected place, and analyzed by PACP osteologist, Anna C. Novotny (analysis described below). No faunal analysis was done on the animal remains.

All artifacts collected during PACP field seasons are delivered to the IHAH (Instituto Hondureño de Anthropología e Historia) department of Cortés storage facility in La Lima. Field notes, lot sheets, and scale drawings are copied and given to IHAH, along with a report (informe) detailing the season's results.

### *Osteological Methods*

In order to take a bioarchaeological approach in evaluating the issue of social identity in the Naco Valley, mortuary patterns need to be carefully considered in light of the archaeological context. Because of cultural patterns in Mesoamerica, burials are found during the pursuit of other research questions (Whittington and Reed 1997; Webster and Gonlin 1988) most commonly in household plaza groups or terraces. This is the case throughout the Naco Valley. Despite the accidental nature of their recovery, these burials can offer insights into social affiliation and identity.

Osteological analysis was performed by Anna C. Novotny of Arizona State University (Novotny 2006). All data were collected in accordance with the *Standards for Collection of Data from Human Skeletal Remains* (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994). *Standards* is a compilation of techniques used in osteological analysis which outlines methods of determining age, sex, pathological conditions, and cultural modification. As much of these data were collected for each individual as possible. Age was estimated for most skeletons by dental wear or dental eruption, though where preservation was good enough epiphyseal closure, cranial suture, and pelvic morphology were also used. Sex was determined by a combination of cranial traits, pelvic morphology, and long bone measurements as preservation allowed (Novotny 2006). Analysis of the dentition was done according to *Standards* and supplemented by Simon Hillson's text *Dental Anthropology* (1996) and Timothy D. White and Peter Folkens' text *The Human Bone Manual* (2006). Pathologies were identified with reference to *Identification of Pathological Conditions in Human Skeletal Remains* (Ortner 2003). Age at death for juvenile skeletons was estimated using *The Osteology*

*of Infants and Children* (Baker et al. 2005). Archaeological contexts were described in various field notes, reports, and publications, and are cited as such (Novotny 2006).

### *Soil Chemistry Methods*

Chemical analysis of the soil samples was performed at the University of South Florida by myself and fellow graduate student James R. Hawken. First, 2 g of soil was measured from each sample and mixed with an extractant (20 ml of dilute 0.60-molar hydrochloric acid and 0.16- molar nitric acid) in a polyethylene vial, which was then shaken for 30 minutes on a platform shaker at 200 RPM. The resulting solution was then filtered using ashless filter paper and transferred into a clean polyethylene vial. Then the samples were diluted with Type II deionized water, which brought the concentrations of the elements into the optimal measurement range of the analytical instrument. All samples were then taken to the Paleoclimatology, Paleoceanography, and Biogeochemistry Laboratory in the College of Marine Science at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg campus, for analysis using a Perkin-Elmer 4300DV ICP-OES with Echelle-type grating (Wells et al. 2007).

Statistical methods were used to analyze the results. Principal components analysis is an exploratory data analysis that groups highly correlated variables into factors that explain as much variation in the data as possible. This method was employed to examine correlations between the variables and to account for those variables responsible for most of the variation in the dataset (Wells et al. 2007). The results and analysis are detailed below in the Chapters 5 and 6.

### *Summary*

The methods described in this chapter were designed to pursue the research objectives laid out by PACP during its 2005 and 2006 field seasons. Evaluating Palmarejo's elite regional interactions necessitated horizontal excavation and testing procedures in several different parts of the site in order to gain a representative sample of elite activities and extra-site economic and sociopolitical connections during the Late Classic. Excavations proceeded under the suggestion that Palmarejo was able to subsist independently from La Sierra to a certain extent because of localized crafting, most likely ceramic production (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). With research designed to assess this possibility, the comprehensive archaeological methodology employed enabled different questions to be asked of the resulting dataset. Excavation and testing at Palmarejo revealed material categories useful for evaluating prehistoric social identity, such as monumental architecture, ceramic styles, and a mortuary program, in addition to ritual deposits. Using these data in a comparative analysis with known regional patterns from the sites of La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas, will enhance our knowledge about the ways that people in small-scale societies choose to identify themselves and their communities. In the following chapters, the results from the excavations at Palmarejo are evaluated in light of this issue, allowing preliminary inferences to be made as to material signifiers of elite identity at Palmarejo. Additionally, possible motivations behind these stylistic choices will be discussed.



## **Chapter 5. Archaeological Evidence for Elite Identity Formation at Palmarejo**

### *Excavations*

The objective of the 2005 and 2006 field seasons was to assess elite activities at Palmarejo and their relationship with the regional economic and sociopolitical interaction sphere. In order to reach these goals excavations were undertaken at the Main Group, the Southeast elite residential zone, and a series of terraces extending west from the site center. Test pits were also conducted in the south and southeast plazas, and soil samples were taken to evaluate activity areas (Figure 15) (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).

### *The Main Group*

Palmarejo's Main Group is located in the southwestern zone of the site, and incorporates four monumental structures arranged around a rectangular plaza (Figure 16). The buildings at the northern and southern ends of the plaza are pyramidal in shape (Structures 20 and 29), with square bases and restricted summits. Pyramidal buildings have been demonstrated to serve ritual purposes at other Naco sites (i.e., El Coyote and La Sierra). Therefore, it was assumed that they served a similar purpose for the pre-Hispanic residents of Palmarejo. The structures bordering the eastern and western sides of the plaza are broad range structures (Structures 19 and 23), with long rectangular bases and platform summits. At La Sierra (Schortman and Urban 1994), Las Canoas (Stockett 2005), and El Coyote (Wells 2003), range structures have been

identified as administrative buildings utilized by elites for sociopolitical purposes. Thus, based on their size and shape it is thought that these structures may have had an administrative function at Palmarejo as well.

In order to establish a cultural chronology for the site center, and to gain insight into elite ritual and sociopolitical life at Palmarejo, a 65 m x 1 m long trench was excavated through the center of the Main Group from the northern side of Structure 20 (Operation 102/A, B, D, E) to the southern side of Structure 29 (Operation 102/C, F). The trench was not continuous; test pits were dug every other meter in the plaza (Operation 102/G, H, I, J). In addition, four test pits were dug in each corner of the plaza (Operation 103/A, B, C, D). In sum, 367 lots were excavated in 81 excavation units in the Main Group, covering a total surface area of 81.0 m<sup>2</sup>, and approximately 44.1 m<sup>3</sup> of excavated soil (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).

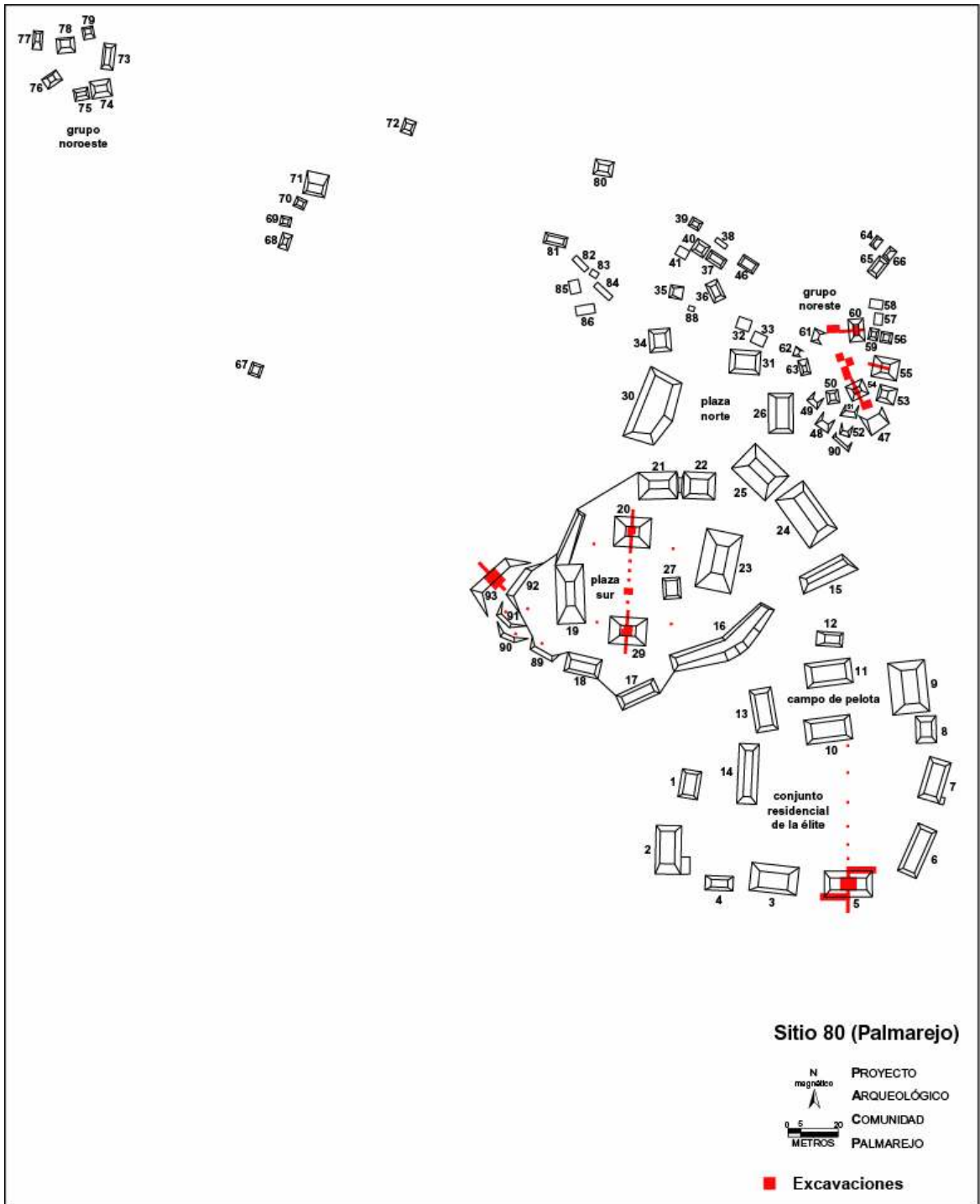
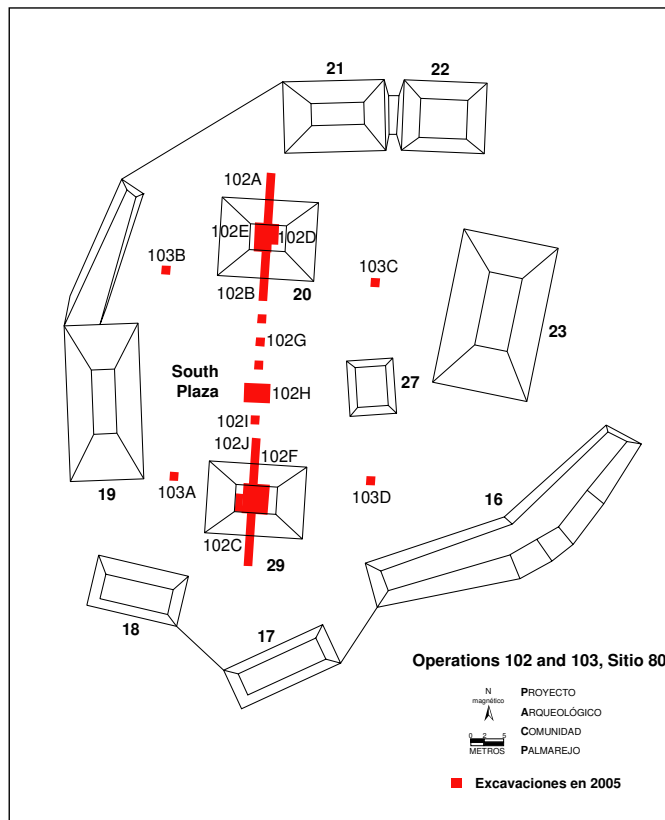


Figure 15. Map indicating structures that have been excavated at Palmarejo (modified from Wells et al. 2006).



**Figure 16. Map indicating structures excavated in the Main Group during the 2005 season (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

*Structure 20*

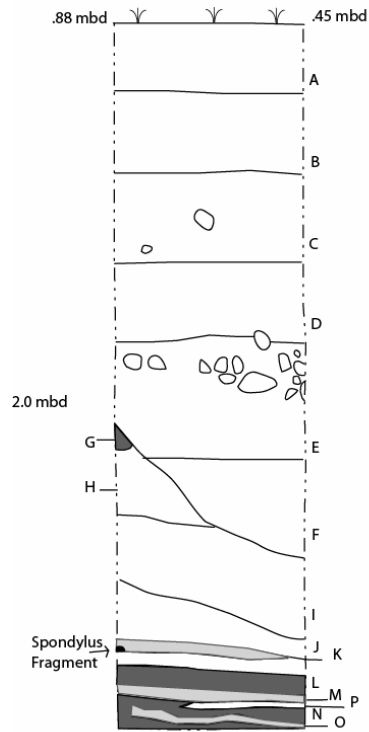
Structure 20 delineates the northern border of the Main Group. It was constructed in two phases, the first of which was during the Early Classic (AD 300-600). Due to time constraints, only the axial trench and the summit were cleared; therefore our knowledge of the Early Classic structure is limited. Evidence includes the dimensions of the building, the date of its termination, and its use as a ritual structure.

The basal wall was identified, as well as an early plaza paved with limestone plaster, and a ritual deposit on the summit. During this period, Structure 20 was

pyramidal in shape, with a height of 3.9 m, a basal perimeter of approximately 18 m, and a summit of approximately 4 m x 4 m. This phase was terminated towards the end of the Early Classic, when a termination ritual deposit was found similar to the one discovered between Structures IA-16 and 17 at La Sierra (Schortman et al. 2001). Interpreted as a termination ritual upon the decommissioning of the La Sierra site center by Schortman and Urban (1994:410), this cache contained 25 percent of the censer fragments from the entire Naco Valley, along with *Spondylus* shells (including entire bivalves along with broken and burnt fragments), as well as a cache of six small ceramic cups. These ritual deposits were purposefully buried with a white soil or ash.

The Palmarejo cache was recovered 2.1 m beneath the ground surface (Op. 102/Sub-Op. A/ Lot 59), and included a *Spondylus* that was broken and placed on the remains of a fire, evidenced by layers of extensive charcoal staining, which was then buried beneath a layer of fine, compacted white soil (Figure 17). In addition, burned bajareque fragments indicated that the earlier perishable superstructure may have been ritually destroyed as well. Comal and censer fragments found in close proximity (Lots 58 and 59) to the formal cache suggest the performance of ritual actions as well as feasting.

Sitio 80 (Palmarejo)  
 Op.80/102A Unidad 10  
 Estructura 20  
 Perfil Sur  
 Escala 1:20  
 16 Junio 05  
 Exc. #25



- A: 10YR3/3 Dark brown sandy topsoil with root inclusions
  - B: 10YR5/6 Yellowish brown fine sand with few inclusions
  - C: 10YR 5/3 Brown very fine silty clay with no inclusions
  - D: 10YR5/4 Yellowish brown fine silty clay with 3% white and orange fleck inclusions
  - E: 10YR6/3 Pale brown silty clay with 5% gray, orange, and white mottling (rock fill)
  - F: Light yellow tan silty clay matrix with 5% mottled gray and orange clay
  - J: Light yellow brown fine silty clay matrix with gray and orange clay mottling, 40% plaster and charcoal inclusions
  - H: Mottled gray and orange clay in 25% light brown/white silty matrix (Ash)
  - I: Mottled gray and orange clay in 40% dark brown/black clayey burn matrix
- K, M, O: Ash Horizons  
 G, L, N: Charcoal horizon with orange, gray, and brown clay inclusions (3%)
- P: Brown silty clay with charcoal inclusions (40%)
  - Orange clay: 7.5YR5/5 Strong brown
  - Gray clay: 5YR6/3 Pale olive
  - Mottled white and yellow clay: 2.5Y7/6

E PROYECTO  
 ARQUEOLÓGICO  
 COMUNIDAD  
 PALMAREJO

0 1  
 METROS

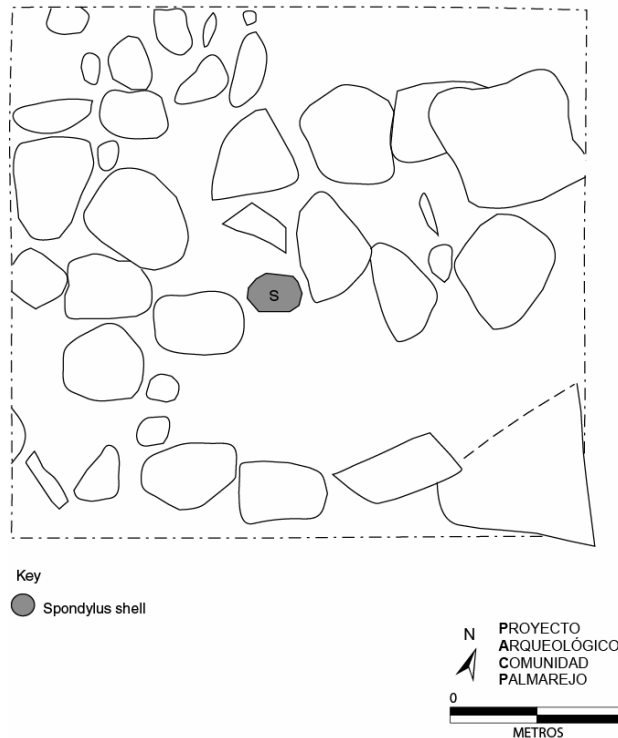
**Figure 17. Soil matrix from the summit of Structure 20, showing the fill, *Spondylus* fragment, and layers of burned earth (from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

The remodeling of Structure 20 seems to have occurred during the Late Classic period, based on the recovered ceramics, and the radiocarbon date of the first construction phase. The termination ritual in Lot 59 was covered over with layers of yellow/brown sandy fill that included a minimal amount of cultural materials. The

ceramics that were recovered were finely made and painted. Censer fragments were also present in these lots (Op. 102/Sub-Op. A/ Lots 49-59). Additions made to Structure 20 during this time resulted in the expansion of its height, base, and summit dimensions. In its final form Structure 20 reached a height of 4.8 m, with a basal perimeter of 20 m. The summit retained its 4 m x 4 m size. The building reached this size through the raising of terraces stepping to the summit. The architects utilized the natural north-south slope of the land in order to make Structure 20 taller with less construction labor and materials.

The north side of the structure is composed of three relatively wide terraces spaced about 0.5 m apart. The basal wall measured 2.5 m wide and 1.6 m tall. The second was 1.3 m wide and 1.5 m tall. The third wall was 0.5 m wide and 0.4 m wide and most likely served as the foundation for a perishable superstructure. The south side (facing the plaza) included a total of seven terraces spaced about 0.5 m apart, and measuring about 0.75 m in height. Construction materials included both modified and unmodified limestone cobbles. The modified blocks were recovered from the south side of the structure, which would have been the most prominently viewed side by individuals in the plaza.

Sitio 80 (Palmarejo)  
Op. 80/102E/ Unidad 3 Lote 11  
Estructura 20  
Vista superficial del plano  
Escala 1:20  
21 junio 2005  
Exc. #25



**Figure 18. Plan drawing of the altar feature encountered on the summit of Structure 20 (from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

Structure 20's function as a ritual building was supported by the excavation of the summit. A square-shaped construction unit was recovered on the west side of the summit, measuring 0.8 m x 1.0 m (Figure 18). This could be interpreted as either a bench or an altar. The idea that this unit is an altar is supported by the discovery of an intact *Spondylus* valve that was intentionally placed on its surface.

In addition, a completely intact *Spondylus* bivalve with a piece of unworked jade inside of it was found on the surface of Structure 20 just after the completion of the 2004 survey and mapping season. While the landowner has possession of this



artifact, our knowledge of its presence is very important in determining the function of Structure 20. Artifacts recovered in this Operation numbered 2,695 (see below for a discussion of the ceramic evidence). Most of these were ceramics were located in terminal debris deposits on the summit of the structure.

### *Structure 29*

Structure 29 delineates the south boundary of the Main Group. Two phases of construction were identified for Structure 29 as well, supporting the idea that the entire Main Group may have been remodeled during the Late Classic. The natural northern rise of the landscape was used in the construction of Structure 29, for similar reasons as Structure 20 (increased height and prominence), but with different methods. A substantial amount of large rocks were used to fill in the south foundation of the building, evening it to the level of the plaza. Cultural material such as discarded pottery, groundstone, and exhausted lithic cores and flakes are usually employed as fill in the construction of new buildings in the Naco Valley. The complete absence of cultural material in this fill indicates either that it was done very rapidly, or by individuals that had not lived in the area long enough to accumulate much garbage. This evidence could play a crucial role in establishing the cultural chronology of the site, as well as offer insights into the sociopolitical climate of the valley during the Late Classic. In total, the first phase of Structure 29 resulted in a basal perimeter of 18 m, a summit measuring 4 m x 4 m, and a height of 2.4 m. An unknown number of terraces would have supported the summit, which appears to have been a platform with a perishable superstructure.

The building was remodeled sometime during the Late Classic, adding 0.9 m to its height, and extending the basal perimeter by more than 4 m. In its final phase, Structure 29 reached a height of 3.3 m, with a basal perimeter of 22.2 m, and a summit measuring 4 m x 4 m. This renovation was preceded by the destruction of the perishable superstructure from the first phase. Evidence supporting this comes from layers of burnt bajareque and burnt soil covering fragments of a stucco floor (0.3 m thick).

The second phase saw the construction of four terraces on both the northern and southern sides of the building. These terraces are separated by about 0.5 m of soil, and are between 1.5 m to 2.0 m wide and 0.5 to 0.75 m tall. Construction materials consisted of local limestone cobbles.

During the second construction phase, the summit of Structure 29 was divided into three distinct chambers by walls constructed of local limestone cobbles. These walls extended across the summit of the building from north to south. They measured 3.0 m to 3.75 m long, 0.6 m to 0.9 m wide, and 0.8 to 1.0 m high, and their exact function is unknown. On the unexcavated ground surface adjacent to the easternmost room, a complete *Spondylus* bivalve was recovered.

The complete absence of bajareque in the summit lots suggests that there was no perishable superstructure associated with the second phase of this building; it seems to have been an open-air platform sub-divided by three walls. This architectural style is very unique, and extremely different than the preceding structure. The difference suggests a shift in the function of the building, which would also have changed the built character of the Main Group. The presence of the

*Spondylus* bivalve suggests that Structure 29 was used as ritual building through its abandonment, though the shift in construction styles could indicate changing ideas about religiosity during the Late Classic. In total, 5,965 artifacts were recovered from Structure 29, most of which were ceramics found in terminal debris contexts on the summit of the building.

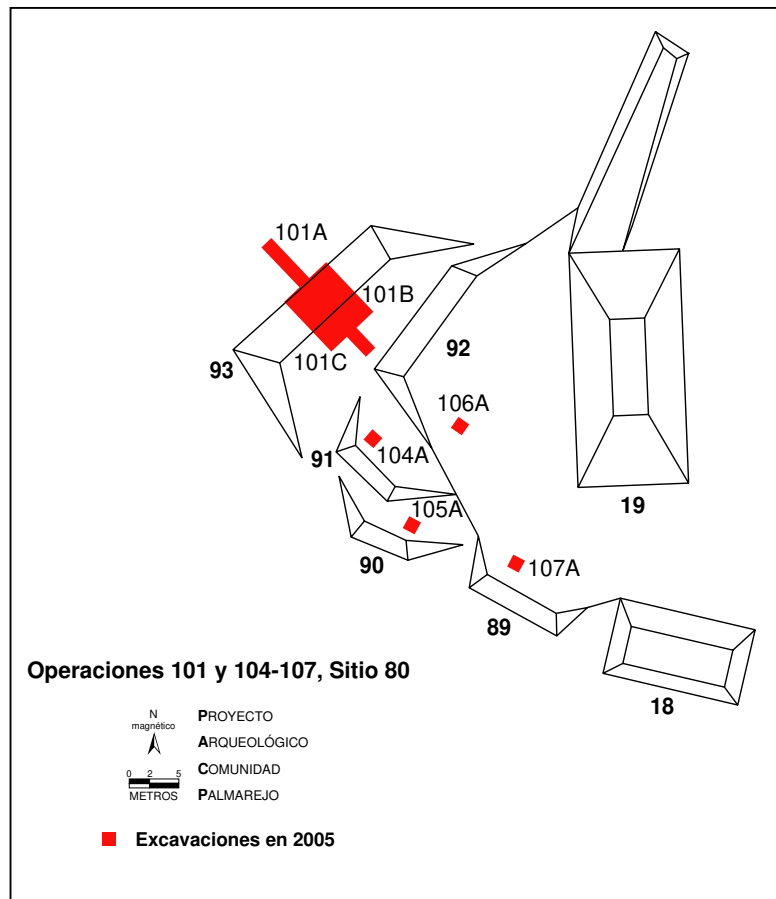
Test pits were dug as an extension of the trench bisecting the axes of Structures 20 and 29. Due to time constraints, only every other meter of the axial trench was sampled, for a total of five pits. In the center of the plaza, a 2.0 m x 2.0 m platform composed of one course of semi-worked limestone blocks was uncovered during the test pit excavations. It has been suggested (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005) that the blocks were removed from Structure 19, since worked blocks have been observed on the ground surface of this building. However, no associated artifacts were recovered and the purpose of the platform remains unknown.

In addition to the axial trench, four test pits were excavated in each corner of the plaza (Operation 103/Sub-Ops. A-D). These excavations revealed that the plaza was built in one phase during the Late Classic. A layer of medium- and small-sized rocks incorporating very little garbage material served to level the plaza. This fill layer does not stay consistent throughout the plaza, but grows no thicker than 0.4 m. Operation 103 yielded a total of 392 artifacts, mostly ceramics from the plaza fill.

### *Artificial terraces*

The artificial terraces are located to the west of the Main Group. Specifically, the architects manipulated the slope immediately west of Structure 19 into a series of

five terraces (Structures 89-93). Excavations were planned at Structure 93 in order to assess their cultural chronology, architectural history, and the different activities that may have characterized this part of the site (Figure 19). Structure 93 (Operation 103/Sub-Ops. A-D) was chosen because it is the lowest-lying terrace, and borders what appears to be an artificial depression built to store water. In addition, test pits were dug in each of the other terraces (Operation 104-107). In total, 220 lots were excavated from 38 excavation units, covering a surface area of 38.0 m<sup>2</sup>, with a total volume of 24.7 m<sup>3</sup> of soil removed (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).



**Figure 19. Map indicating the excavated portions of Structure 93 and associated test pits (modified from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

### *Structure 93*

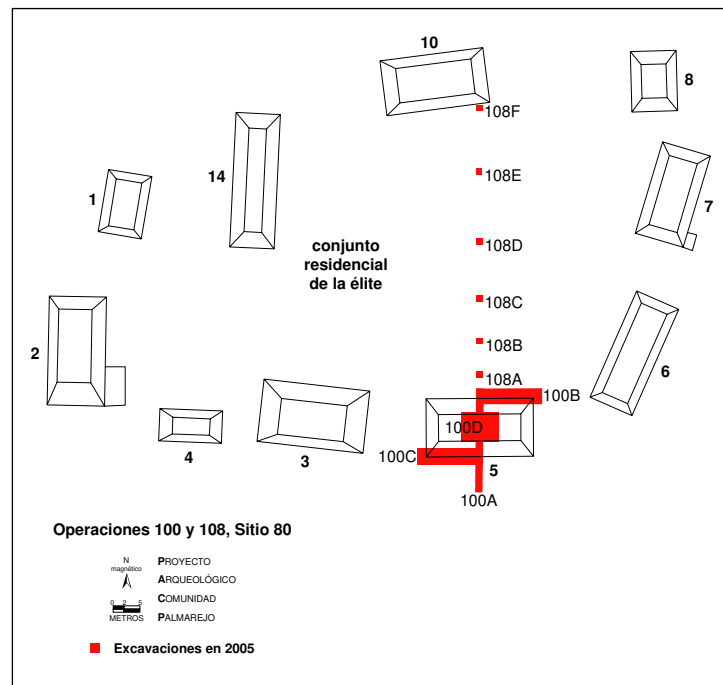
It is estimated that Structure 93 was 15 m long (southwest/northeast), 7 m wide (southeast/northwest), and 0.7 m tall. Excavations revealed that it was extended from a 5 m wide, naturally level plane with a massive layer of fill. This fill layer was composed of 15,879 ceramic sherds and 5,439 other artifacts including groundstone manos and metates, clay figurines, obsidian, chert, faunal remains, marine shell, land snail shells, and bajareque (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). Included in the ceramic assemblage were fragments of finely made plates and vessels from around southeastern Mesoamerica, including Copán, La Entrada, and the Naco and Ulúa Valleys. Initial analysis indicates that there was a shift over time in the ceramic assemblage; Early Classic Naco wares are replaced by more local and Ulúa wares during the Late Classic (Wells, personal communication 2007). The volume of artifacts and their high quality indicate that Palmarejo elites maintained economic ties with regional sites, and identified with a regional social sphere materialized through ceramic styles. The close proximity of these artifacts to Structure 19 and the Main Group suggests that the material residue found within the terrace fill came from ritual activities (such as feasting) occurring in the south plaza (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). The quality of the artifacts suggests that elites were primarily participating in these activities.

Another important aspect of the terrace fill was the presence of four adult human burials of unknown sex. These individuals were interred 0.5 m below the ground surface, probably in a secondary context, and facing to the east (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). Human interments constitute an important line of evidence for discerning

social identity. For this reason, special attention will be paid to the human remains recovered from Palmarejo later in this chapter.

### *Southeast Elite Residential Zone*

The southeast elite residential zone was excavated in 2005 in order to assess the cultural chronology, construction history, and activities associated with elite residences at Palmarejo. The southeastern zone is characterized by a group formed by 11 structures (Structures 1-10, and 14) bordering a square patio. Structure 5 (Operation 100/Sub-Ops. A-D) is located along the southern end of the group, and was chosen for excavation because of its good preservation (Figure 20).



**Figure 20. Map indicating the excavated portions of Structure 5 and associated plaza test pits (modified from Davis Salazar et al. 2005).**

A trench was laid across its central axis, and lateral excavations were cleared based on walls encountered in this initial trench. In addition, six test pits were excavated in a north/south line across the plaza. A total of 305 lots were excavated from 90 excavation units, covering a surface area of 90 m<sup>2</sup>, with an excavated volume of 34.7 m<sup>3</sup> of soil (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).

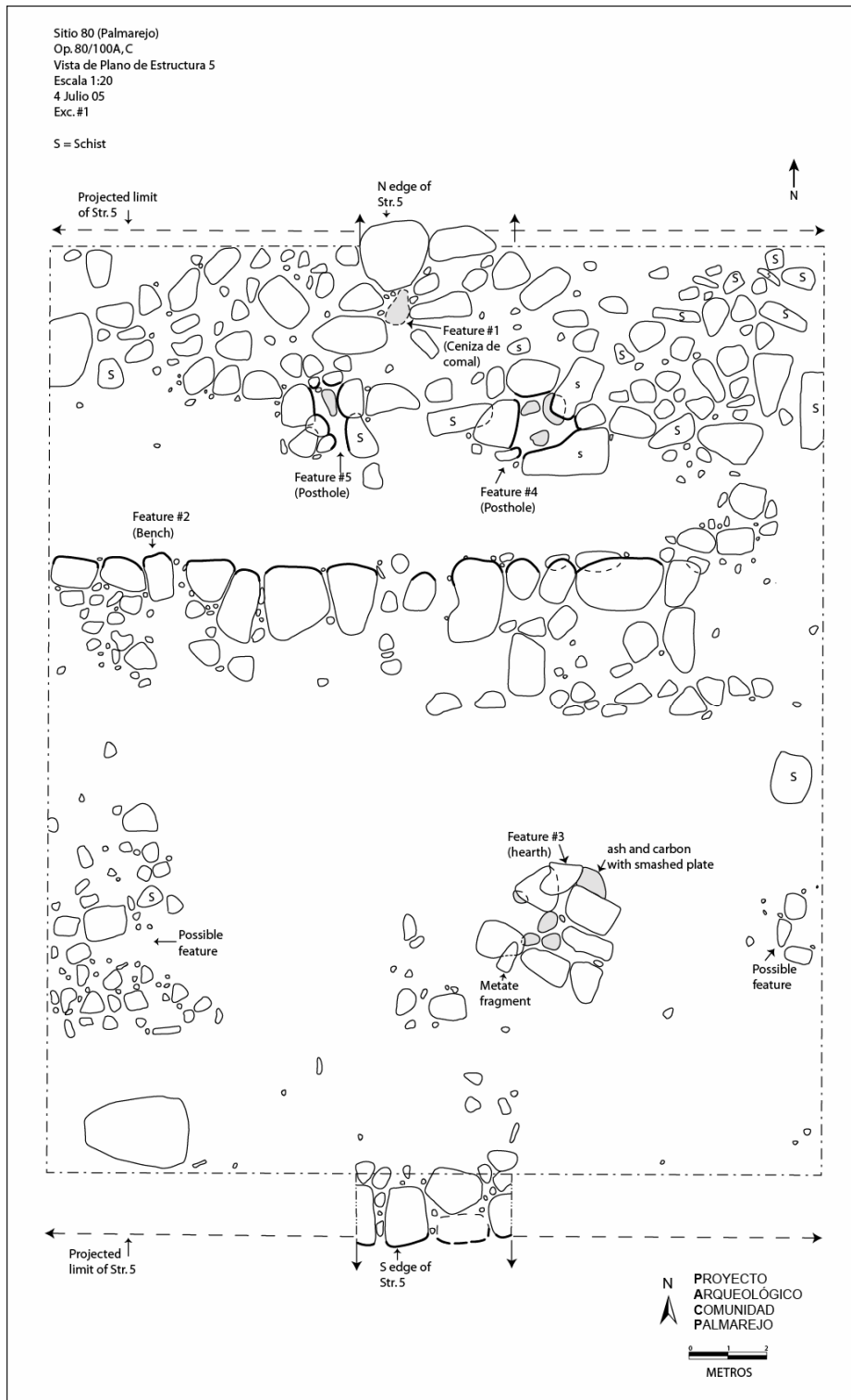
### *Structure 5*

Structure 5 is oriented east/west, and is composed of four terraces built consecutively on top of one another in one construction phase. The first terrace measures 40.0 m in length, 0.6 m wide, and is 0.40 m high. The second terrace is 2.1 m wide and 0.40 m high, however, excavations were not extensive enough to determine the length of this terrace. The same shortfall applies to the third terrace, its length is unknown, but it is 1.4 m wide and 0.80 m high. The last terrace, which most likely supported a perishable superstructure, is 15.0 m long, 6.35 m wide, and rises 0.25 m above the third terrace (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). Interestingly, a paucity of bajareque indicates that the structure might have been roofed, but lacked walls. Construction materials for Structure 5 included the standard local limestone cobbles, but also a notable use of schist, especially along the terrace edge facing the plaza. The broad platform created by the fourth terrace was the level of occupation, though excavations did not completely clear the summit of the structure, five distinct features were revealed (Figure 21) (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).

Feature #1 is located on the second terrace, and consists of an ash deposit and several large comal fragments, suggesting that cooking was performed on this

structure. Feature #2 is a bench facing north towards the plaza (running east/west) that is 4.4 m long and 1 m wide. Feature #3 is a hearth (0.90 m east/west and 0.80 m north/south) with carbon, ash, mano and metate fragments, and pieces of a large smashed plate. Features 4 and 5 are two post holes located in the front/central part of the platform, measuring 0.35 m wide and 0.30 m deep. Their location at the front of the building and the edge of a passageway indicates that they provided support for doorposts (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). Other artifacts came from a thin sheet midden located at the back of the structure (south). This midden and the other associated artifacts support the idea that Structure 5 was built during the Late Classic and not modified. No sherds from the Early Classic or Terminal Classic periods were found. In total, only 6,620 artifacts were recovered from Structure 5, including fragments of ceramic plates, bowls, comals, and vases, groundstone manos and metates, obsidian, chert, faunal remains, and marine and land shells. This assemblage points to its function as a residence. Evidence for the elite status of its residents include the high quality of the ceramics, a finely made earspool, a clay figurine, a clay bead, and a greenstone (possibly jade) bead (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). The six test pits extending north from Structure 5 indicate that the patio was also built in only one construction phase. Bajareque, burnt soil, and small rocks were used to level out the plaza, whose surface consisted of stamped earth. A total of 675 ceramic sherds and bajareque fragments were found in the test pits, most of which were deposited in the fill layer (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).



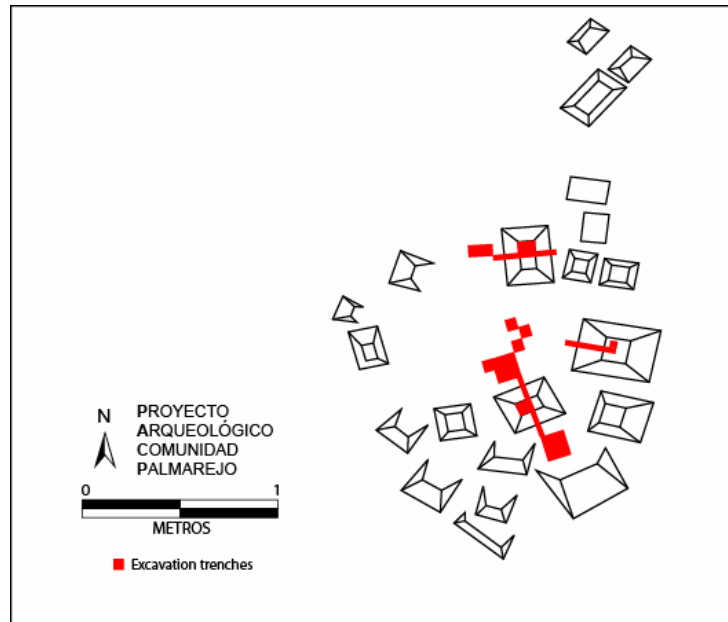


**Figure 21. Plan drawing of the summit of Structure 5, showing Features 1-5 (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

### *Northeast Elite Residential Zone*

The northeast elite residential zone occupies the northeastern portion of Palmarejo. Research was initially conducted in this zone in order to evaluate the idea that the northeast group functioned as a center of craft production. It was thought that craft production could have formed the basis for the florescence of Palmarejo during the Late Classic. In addition, excavations were undertaken to illuminate the role Palmarejo played in the economic and political interaction spheres of the Late Classic Naco Valley. As discussed in Chapter 4, these goals were not met, but our excavation methods revealed information useful in assessing social identity and regional sociopolitical ties at Palmarejo.

The northeast group includes eight platforms varying from .5 m to 2.5 m in height, a central plaza, and artificial terraces that utilize the natural hill slopes (Figure 23) (Structures 49-63 and 90). These structures and terraces are grouped in a distinctly circular fashion around the plaza. Structure 54 (Operation 109/Sub-Ops. A, B, E, F) and Structure 55 (Operation 112/Sub-Op. A) are the tallest buildings in the group, extending to about 2.5 m each, while Structure 60 (Operation 111/Sub-Ops. A, B) is a .5 m high structure consisting of a hill slope modified by terraces to level out an activity area. They were chosen for excavation because of their good preservation, and in order to determine their functions and relationships to the other buildings in the group.



**Figure 22. Map showing excavations conducted in the northeast group and north plaza (modified from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

In addition to excavating the structures associated with the northeast plaza, six 2 m x 2 m trenches (Operation 109/Sub-Op. C) were excavated in the plaza itself as part of an adaptive sampling strategy performed in order to follow any important features encountered. A total of 92.58 m<sup>3</sup> of soil were excavated from 629 lots from 97 units, over a total surface area of 98.4 m.

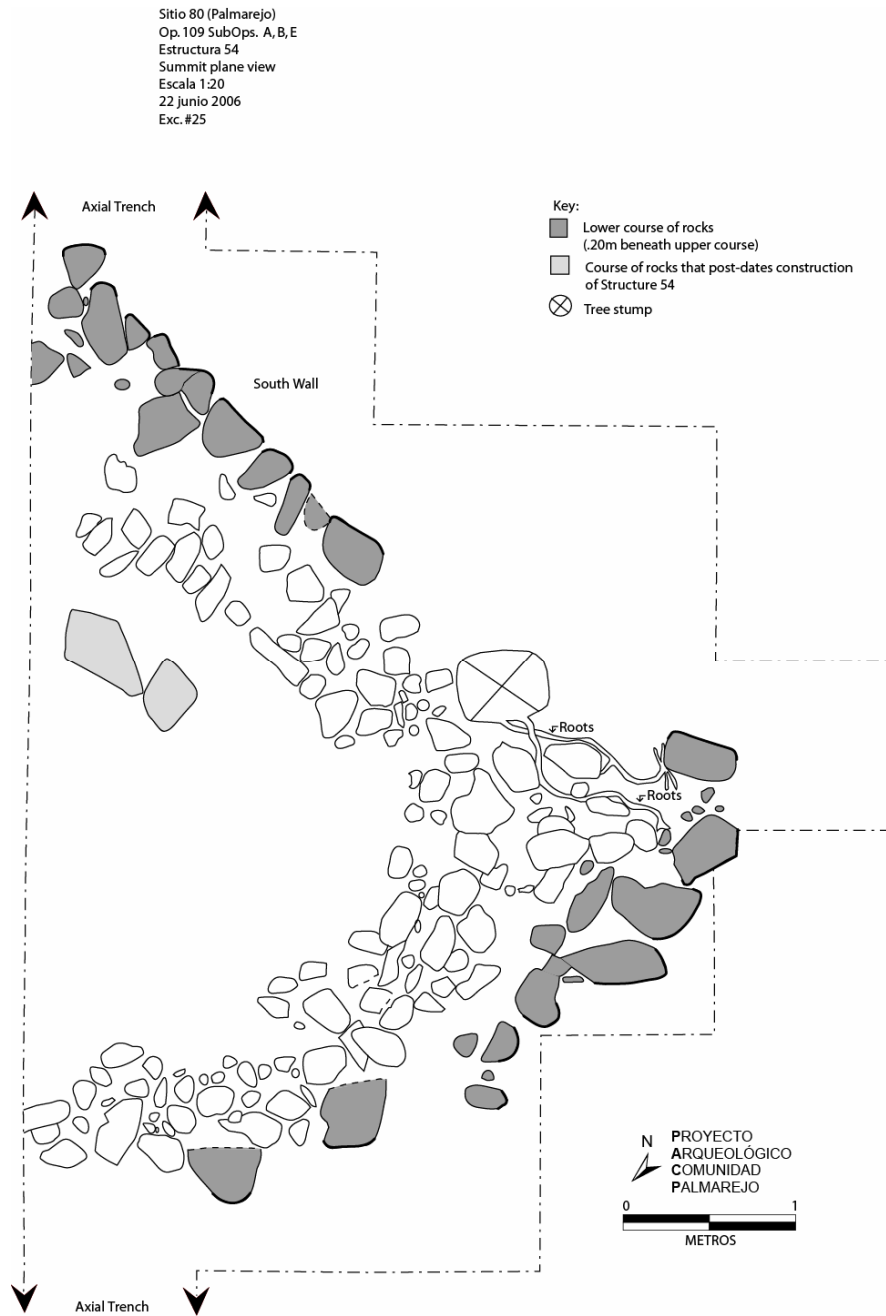
#### *Structure 54*

Operation 109 included Sub-Operations A and B, which were established as part of an axial trench running northwest/southeast across Structure 54, and Sub-Op C, which encompassed the test trenches in the plaza. Structure 54 has a basal perimeter of 16 m, a height of 2.5 m, with a summit of approximately 4 m x 4 m. The axial trench was 1 m wide and 12 m long. The southeastern basal wall of the platform

was followed laterally to the west in Sub-Operation E, exposing the basal wall and the summit architecture. The basal wall is 4 m long, and constructed of modified limestone cobbles. The four preserved courses extend 0.90 m from the limestone bedrock on which they were built. The excavated architecture indicates that Structure 54 reached its final form in one construction phase.

The summit wall was also cleared along the southeast side of Structure 54, and consists of one course of modified limestone blocks that rest on the basal construction. It follows the basal wall the full 4 m, and rises to a height of 0.15 m. The walls both corner at the western edge of the structure, turning to the northeast. One and a half meters from the west corner the basal wall seems to turn back towards the southeast again before cornering again to the northeast, giving the summit structure a “T”-shape (Figure 23). This construction style is found frequently at La Sierra (Wells, personal communication 2006). The summit architecture forms a retaining wall for the soil fill leveling out the summit. There are four terraces constructed on the northwest side of the building that step down into the plaza. The construction of Structure 54 utilized the natural southeast/northwest trending hill slope by building terraces facing the plaza. These terraces included one course each of unmodified cobbles. The first, constructed on a layer of fill directly on the bedrock, was 0.5 m wide and 0.25 m tall. The second terrace was 1 m wide and 0.5 m tall. The third terrace measured 0.75 m wide and 0.5 m tall. The fourth terrace functioned as a retaining wall for a layer of dirt fill that leveled out the platform of the structure. The presence of bajareque indicates that this terrace could also have been used as a

foundation for a perishable superstructure. Only the fourth terrace that forms the summit boundary was followed with lateral excavations.



**Figure 23. Plan drawing of the summit architecture of Structure 54 (from Wells et al. 2006).**

A bench feature consisting of three very large rocks was placed on the summit platform, most likely after it was abandoned. This is suggested by the slightly higher elevation of the rocks (about 0.30 m above the Late Classic living surface), and the lack of cultural material directly beneath them.

A substantial midden deposit on the back side of Structure 54 seems to point to a long occupation history based on the observed stratigraphy. These included both finely made ceramic fragments, as well as undecorated utilitarian vessels. Beneath the midden was an impressive wall built of slightly modified cobbles, rising four courses above the bedrock. The presence of such a well-built wall seems to point to both the elite status of the residents and their longevity at Palmarejo. As elites they apparently could afford to construct an extremely durable wall that speaks to the permanence of their community. In total, 10,561 artifacts were recovered from Structure 54, including manos, metates, obsidian, chert, ceramics (vessels, candeleros, incensario fragments, ocarinas, and figurines), and faunal remains. This assemblage suggests that a number of household activities were carried out here, such as food preparation and serving, and ritual devotion. The finely made polychrome ceramics, figurine fragments, and sizable architecture indicate that it was an elite residence.

#### *Patio Excavations*

Operation 109 consisted of several 2 m x 2 m trenches excavated in the plaza (Sub-Op. C) at the front and on the terrace at the back (Sub-Op. D) of Structure 54. The terraces at the back of the building were characterized by a small paved activity area, whose specific function remains unknown. The trenches in the plaza indicated a

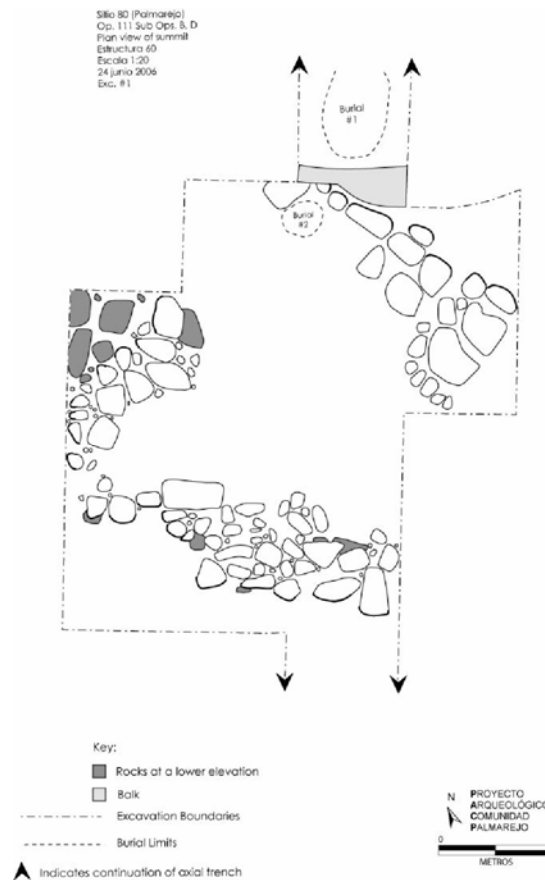
single construction phase, capped by an unpaved, packed earth plaza floor. Beneath this was a fill deposit composed of small stones mixed with approximately 3,120 artifacts. This cultural fill material included finely made Late Classic ceramic dishes and plates, two figurine fragments, a candelero, two stamps, obsidian and chert fragments, several manos and metates, faunal remains, and a charred deposit that was probably a hearth. The hearth feature was located directly in front of Structure 54, indicating that its use was associated with the residents of this building. The architectural and artifact evidence seems to indicate a long-established elite family residence.

#### *Structure 60*

Excavations of Structure 60 (Operation 111/Sub-Ops. A, B, C, D) were laid out in order to determine its function in relation to Structure 54. Structure 60 is located directly north of Structure 54, on the opposite side of the plaza, and seems to have been built in one construction phase. These excavations revealed that it was not a residence but a series of two east-west oriented terraces rising from the northeast plaza floor, supported by a considerable (approximately 2 m deep) fill deposit. The terraces are estimated to extend for about 4 m in a north/south direction, and to about 0.5 m in height. The two terraces that were encountered were low-lying constructions made of one course of unmodified medium-sized limestone river cobbles (Figure 24). They retained a packed soil activity surface, whose specific function is unknown. There were very few artifacts recovered from the surfaces of the terraces. A series of

flat stones set into the packed earth terrace surface was the only distinct feature encountered on the summit. Its specific function is unknown.

The fill layer on which these terraces were built consisted of a light brown sandy soil mixed with a high amount of ceramic and lithic artifacts. A total of 18,222 artifacts were recovered from Structure 60 and its underlying fill deposit. These included finely made imported polychrome ceramic sherds, figurine fragments, ocarinas, obsidian, chert, groundstone, and land snail shells. The fill here was of the same variety as elsewhere in the plaza, but in much denser quantities.



**Figure 24. Plan drawing of the summit architecture of Structure 60 (from Wells et al. 2006).**



The most interesting feature of Structure 60 was the burial of an adult male encountered in the west side of the terrace, who was interred as the shallow end of the terrace was filled to level it with the deeper deposits on the east side. While there were no formal grave goods included, Late Classic pottery found in the associated stratigraphy dates his interment to this time period. In addition, the fragmented bones of a sub-adult were recovered from the summit of Structure 60.

### *Structure 55*

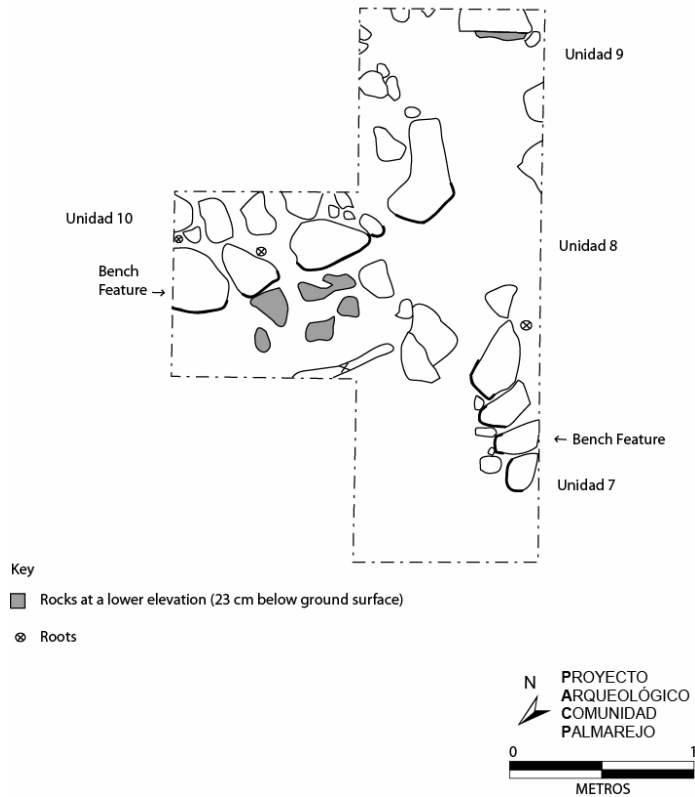
Structure 55 (Operation 113/Sub-Op. A) is located northeast of Structure 54 and is oriented northeast/southwest, forming the southeastern boundary of this plaza group. It is also a monumental structure, reaching 2.5 m in height, with a basal perimeter of approximately 16 m (this is an estimation because the south side is very poorly preserved, and it is unclear where the basal walls of the building would have been), and summit platform of about 3 m x 3 m. Structure 55 was chosen for excavation in order to clarify its function in relation to Structure 54, that is, to test the idea that this was in fact an elite residential group. A 9 m x 1 m long trench was excavated along the building's northwest/southeast axis. Due to time constraints, only the front half of the axial trench was excavated, in addition to a small lateral extension (1 m) on the summit.

Structure 55 was built in a similar style to Structure 54. That is, by utilizing the natural landscape through terrace construction. A sequence of three terraces was encountered in the axial trench, separated by about 1 m of packed earth between them. They accomplished a gradual inclination by being built and spaced rather

evenly; each terrace was about 0.5 m wide and 0.5 m tall. The walls were made of unmodified limestone cobbles, though it was notable how large the rocks were compared to those comprising Structure 54. Construction phases of Structure 55 remain unknown due to the small percentage of the building that was excavated.

A possible bench feature was encountered on the summit, and subsequently followed in lateral excavations (Figure 25). Consisting of two rows of medium limestone cobbles (average size: 0.20 m x 0.10 m), this feature seemed to extend further to the east, but time constraints prohibited its complete excavation. However, benches are common features of southeastern Mesoamerican residences, so its presence tentatively suggests that this building could have functioned as a residential platform. The small scope of excavations at Structure 55 resulted in a low number of recovered artifacts – in total, only 973 artifacts were found. The types most frequently encountered were obsidian fragments and ceramic sherds, further supporting the argument that this building was used as a residence.

Sitio 80 (Palmarejo)  
Op. 113A Unidades 7-10  
Estructura 55  
Summit plan view  
Escala 1:20  
Exc. # 27, y #29  
23 Junio 2006



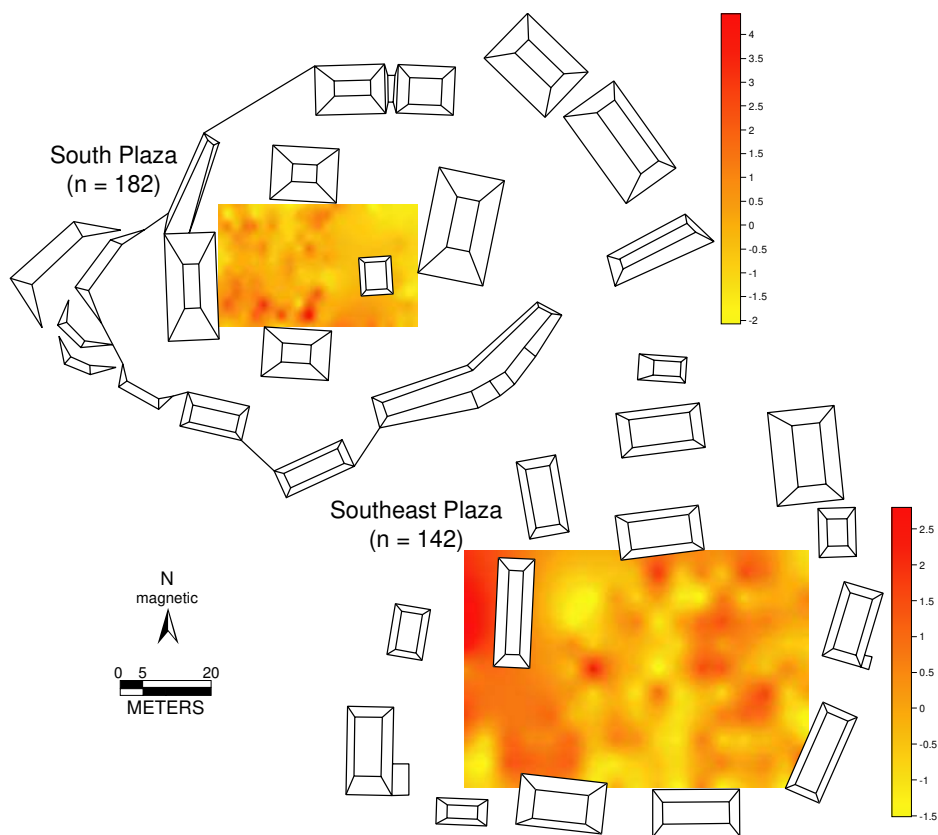
**Figure 25. Plan drawing of uncovered summit architecture of Structure 55, including two possible bench features (from Wells et al. 2006).**

### *Soil Chemistry Results*

The results of the soil chemistry analysis from the Main Group plaza and Southeast Group patio are detailed in a recent article by Wells et al. (2007). The analysis of these data showed an interesting pattern in the use of the two spaces (Wells et al. 2007). The phosphate (P) levels are highly variable in the Main plaza, but are homogenous across the Southeast patio, indicating that these spaces were used for similar activities (cooking and eating) but in different ways. The results of the

principal components analysis suggest that different chemicals vary by location in the Southeast patio and the Main plaza. Main plaza soils in the northern zones have varying phosphate levels, while the southern areas vary by barium (BA) and magnesium (Mg). The opposite is true for the western and eastern zones; western soils vary by barium and magnesium, while the eastern soils vary by phosphates. For the Southeast Group, most of the variance in the dataset is accounted for by aluminum (Al), barium (BA), iron (Fe), and manganese (Mn). This suggests that activities carried out in these two spaces vary by quadrant (Wells et al. 2007).

Next, a discriminant function analysis was conducted on the two datasets to evaluate the results of the PCA (Wells et al. 2007). The results of this analysis provide further detail as to which activities were conducted in each quadrant of the Main plaza and Southeast patio. In the Main plaza, the northwest and northeast corners (quadrants) have differing chemical signatures, while in the Southeast patio the chemical signatures are differentiated by east and west. A spatial analysis of these results using an interpolation technique called kriging results in a visible probability plot of the phosphate level as it changes over space (Figure 26) (Wells et al. 2007). From this figure, we can see how phosphate levels are distributed across each space. In the Main plaza, the distribution of phosphate varies over space, while there is a more even distribution of phosphates in the Southeast patio.



**Figure 26. Kriged map of the soil analysis results from the Main and Southeast spaces, showing the distribution of P over the two plaza spaces (modified from Wells et al. 2007).**

These results suggest that there was a greater diversity and intensity of activities undertaken in the Main plaza, while the Southeast plaza was used less intensely for fewer tasks. The implications of these results for elite interactions at Palmarejo will be discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 6).

### *Burial Data*

The MNI for the Palmarejo Valley is nine, with six individual interments and three commingled burials. Seven were determined to be adults, and two were classified as sub-adults. The preservation of this sample was generally poor, and

consequently sex could only be determined for three individuals, who were all males (Novotny 2006).

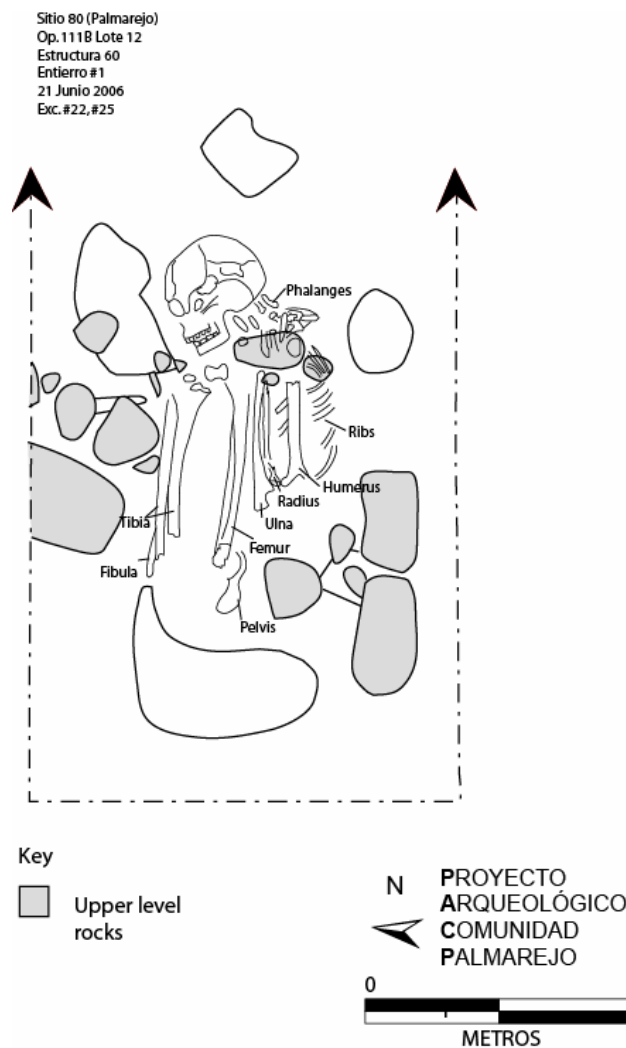
The individual burials were recovered from the sites of Palmarejo and Palos Blancos, a sizable settlement south of Palmarejo. The fact that they were single interments is where the similarities end. At Palos Blancos there were two individuals recovered during a salvage project on a residential building (Structure 9) dating to the Late Classic. One individual was interred under a floor during the first phase of construction. He was flexed and oriented east/west, with the cranium facing south. An Ulúa marble vase was placed near the cranium at some point after the original burial, which was evidenced by several instances of burning beneath the vase, and the slightly higher elevation of the vase in relation to the skull. Preservation was so poor that no pathologies could be identified, and the individual was tentatively sexed as a male.

The presence of the marble vase suggests that this person was someone of importance for the inhabitants of the building, if not the entire site of Palos Blancos (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Novotny 2006). Ulúa marble vases are rarely found in an intact archaeological context; the presence of one in a burial gives archaeologists the chance to investigate the motivations behind placing a socially valued good in a burial. This is also an important indicator of social identity and affiliation. Most likely manufactured at the site of Travesia in the neighboring Ulúa Valley, this vase suggests that the residents of Palos Blancos were connected not only to important economic resources, but also to regional ritual practices and iconography.

A second individual was recovered from Structure 9, and was associated with the second phase of construction. The skeleton was interred beneath the lower terrace floor in front of the north wall of the upper terrace, in a flexed position, oriented east/west, with the cranium facing north. Preservation was considerably better for this skeleton, which was identified as a male aged 20-34 years at the time of death. He had survived iron-deficiency anemia, as well as several infections. His teeth showed a predictable amount of calculus build up and caries for his age. His interment in position in Structure 9, just above the individual with the Ulua marble vase, could indicate his importance to the community. In fact, his burial could have been a commemoration of the interment of the previous individual. This could suggest that kinship ties and ancestor worship were important parts of the ritual life of Palos Blancos residents (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005; Novotny 2006). Two more individuals were recovered from structures at Palos Blancos, but their preservation was poor and archaeological contexts ill-defined. Therefore, no information could be recovered concerning their age, sex, or burial position (Novotny 2006).

The individual burial at Palmarejo was recovered during the 2006 field season, and was located in the fill of Structure 60, a terrace construction associated with a household group whose exact function is unknown (Figure 27). This individual was a surprisingly well-preserved, primary interment, and had been placed in a tightly flexed position, oriented east/west, with the cranium facing north. He was an older male, aged 40-50 years at the time of death, when he was laid directly on the bedrock beneath a layer of angular rocks and fill that would comprise the eastern end of the terrace. There were no grave goods associated with this burial. He seemed to be in

good health during his life, since his skeleton only displayed conditions that are associated with age such as calculus, dental wear, and osteoarthritis. This suggests that he could have been a member of an elite family at Palmarejo. His association with a residential group is indicative of ancestor veneration, and adds to the idea that the presence of ancestors contributes to social legitimacy and land claims, as argued by other archaeologists working in Mesoamerica (McAnany 1995).



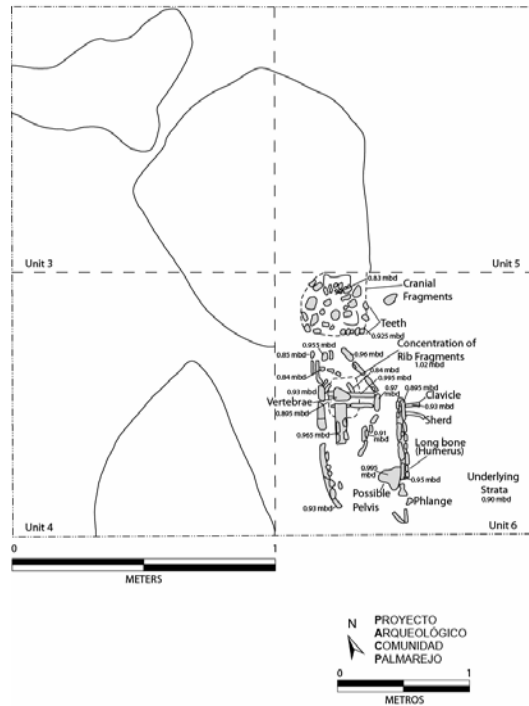
**Figure 27. Burial #1 recovered from Structure 60 at Palmarejo (Wells et al. 2006).**



A second burial was found associated with Structure 60. Fragmented long bones and cranial fragments belonging to a perinate were recovered from the uppermost terrace. No information was recovered beyond this, due to the poor preservation of the bones and the ill-defined archaeological context (Novotny 2006).

The commingled burials recovered at Palmarejo were similar to the individual in that they were placed in a terrace construction (Figure 28). These four individuals were found in terraces constructed west of the civic-ceremonial plaza. They were found associated with an artifact assemblage most likely reflecting activities performed in the nearby plaza – mano and metate fragments, finely made ceramic serving plates, lithics, faunal remains (including an entire deer carcass), and bajareque. Sex could not be determined for any of the individuals, but all were aged as adults (Novotny 2006). They were mostly flexed and placed facing east, but preservation prevented the excavators from determining this unequivocally. Pathologies were difficult to identify, also because of the preservation. These individuals were most likely in a primary context, since most of the bones of the hands and feet were present. Usually when bones were curated in a secondary interment, the smaller bones (phalanges and metatarsals) were left behind (McAnany 1995).

Plan View - Burial #3  
101 C - Units 3, 4, 5, 6  
Exc. #4  
6/14/05 & 6/15/05  
Scale 1:10



**Figure 28. Burial # 4 from Structure 93 at Palmarejo (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

### *Summary*

Excavations at Palmarejo revealed evidence that falls under the previously discussed categories for evaluating social identity: site planning, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials. Additional information, such as the use of plaza spaces garnered from soil chemistry data, further elucidates elite activities.

The Palmarejo site plan includes a Main Group and associated elite residential neighborhoods. It is more rectilinear than spherical in overall shape. The monumental buildings of its Main Group and southeast elite residential zone are arranged around rectilinear plazas. The anomaly in the site plan seems to be the northeast elite

residential zone, whose buildings and terraces are arranged around a more spherical plaza space.

Monumental architecture was encountered in the Main Group, southeast and northeast elite residential zones, including Structures 20, 29, 55, 54, and 5. Trenches excavated across the central axes of these buildings revealed their construction phases, functions, architectural styles, and dimensions. Artifacts recovered enabled an approximate understanding of the buildings' function and time periods when the structures were built and occupied.

The earliest occupation of Palmarejo dates to at least the Early Classic (AD 300-600), based on the radiocarbon dates from Structure 20. Our knowledge of this time period is extremely limited, but it is evident that there was an earlier ritual structure built and destroyed previous to the construction of Structure 20 during the Late Classic (AD 600-900). The two construction phases of Structure 29 indicate that it could possibly have been remodeled at the same time as Structure 20, but without reliable dates this remains speculative. The architectural styles of these buildings are typical of Naco Valley ritual structures.

The excavation results from Structure 5 in the southeast residential zone are somewhat surprising. Structures in southeastern Mesoamerica (especially residential structures) are continuously modified and expanded as the needs and numbers of their residents change (Schortman and Urban 1994; Stockett 2005; Urban 1986). The single construction phase of Structure 5 and the thin sheet midden consisting only of Late Classic ceramics on its south side suggest that this residence was sporadically

occupied only during the Late Classic. In contrast, the monumental architecture in the northeast zone seems to have been occupied for a much longer period of time.

Monumental architecture excavated in the northeastern elite residential zone included Structures 54 and 55. The results indicated that the architectural styles of the buildings were also similar to those typical of La Sierra, including T-shaped summits and the use of the natural landscape. The deep midden and fill beneath the terraces and plaza floor suggest a long occupation history for this group.

Ceramics and other artifacts recovered from all zones of the site lend further insight into social identification. Artifacts found throughout the northeast group, including obsidian, manos and metates, a hearth feature, faunal remains, and both utilitarian ceramics and serving plates and vessels, suggest that this was a residential patio group. The high quality and imported nature of the ceramics further indicates that the residents were an elite group, most likely a family. In addition the terrace and plaza fill included such ritual items as ocarinas, figurines, and imported polychrome serving plates and vessels. Their presence is suggestive of an affiliation with regional social and ritualized practices. Their use as construction fill indicates that this identification was sustained through the Late Classic period.

In the Main Group, censer fragments, ritual deposits and *Spondylus* shells are used to signify it as a place of ritual importance (Joyce 1986). Joyce (1986:324) identifies *Spondylus* shells with a regional pattern that included Travesia and Cerro Palenque in the Ulúa Valley, Copán, and the Guatemalan Highlands. In total, five *Spondylus* shells (whole and broken) have been recovered from the Palmarejo Main Group. This suggests that Palmarejo elites may have affiliated themselves with a

regional socioreligious identity. Their regional connections are further evinced by the amount of finely made imported polychrome ceramics present in the fill of Structure 93, which are also from zones such as the Ulúa Valley and Copán.

The mortuary data from the Palmarejo Valley includes evidence of individual as well as commingled interments. In general, individuals were flexed and interred oriented east/west, with crania facing either north or south. No grave goods were found, except for the Ulua marble vase, which is an extraordinary circumstance for which further analysis is needed. Health in the Palmarejo Valley seems to have been good, as limited pathologies beyond those attributable to age have been recognized. This is very tentative, however, since preservation prohibited the sample from being truly representative.

The individual interments at Palos Blancos and Palmarejo can be interpreted as associated with ancestor veneration, evidenced by their burial within residences and residential groups, generally in the northern areas. The individual interment at Palmarejo is interesting because while the burial could demonstrate the importance of ancestors, it also is an example of a pattern unique to Palmarejo so far – interments in public terraces instead of private residences. The commingled and individual Palmarejo burials were placed in terraces located in public spaces. This is an interesting trend that deserves further inquiry. Further excavations of residential neighborhoods at Palmarejo will support or refute this emerging pattern.

The presence of monumental architecture (and its renovation), imported luxury items such as *Spondylus* shells, greenstone, obsidian, and polychrome pottery indicates a certain degree of regional connectedness. The style of the imported items

points not only to economic prosperity, but also to an awareness of regional manifestations of social identity, and the active incorporation of that into ritual and quotidian practices. In the next chapter, these data from Palmarejo will be synthesized and analyzed within the context of the Naco Valley dataset. Regional elite interaction and social identity will be assessed for the Palmarejo dataset presented here.

## **6. Discussion: Elite Interaction and Identity Formation at Late Classic (AD 650-900) Palmarejo**

As discussed in Chapter 2, site plans and the architecture that comprise them are at once representations of a society as well as active participants in constructing it (Ashmore 1991, 2002; Houston 1998; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994). The organization of a community can be emblematic of its worldview and belief system (Preucel 2001). In general, Palmarejo's site plan fits the site planning model outlined by Urban (1986) for the Naco Valley (reviewed here in Chapter 3). However, certain characteristics such as the style and placement of elite residential zones and the orientation of the ball court, set the site apart.

The site planning traits common to the Naco Valley include 1) proximity to resources, most importantly water, stone for construction, and agricultural land, 2) terraced structures that utilize the natural topography in the construction of buildings, 3) irregular, non-orthogonal site plans, and 4) organization of structures in a circular shape around a central patio (Urban 1986:672). Following Wobst (1977), visible material culture can be used as a means of information exchange. Site planning is one of the most visible and immediate ways of conveying a social identity (Preucel 2001; Schortman and Nakamura 1991). In this case, the presence of Naco-style characteristics at Palmarejo could imply that Palmarejo elites were attempting to affiliate with La Sierra elites through the use of similar site planning principles, or that the individuals who built these buildings were from La Sierra originally (Ashmore 1987; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman and Urban 1994). In the Naco region, site planning and construction

techniques generally follow the characteristics outlined by Urban (1986). However, I would argue that each site takes this Naco pattern and expresses it in a distinctive way. Specifically, the arrangement, orientation, and function of the site centers and surrounding patio groups vary by site.

For example, El Coyote and La Sierra maintained D-shaped main plazas located at the northern end of the site (Schortman and Urban 1994), formed by rectangular and pyramidal platforms faced with cut-stone blocks (Schwartz 2002), and featuring ritual buildings in their limestone-paved central plazas (Stockett 2005; Wells 2003). Elites resided in some of the monumental platforms in the site centers, though there were elite patio groups directly adjacent to both main plazas, featuring ball courts. However, La Sierra's D-shape is oriented east to west, while El Coyote is oriented north to south. La Sierra's range structures form the boundary of the main plaza, while the tall pyramidal temple structures are located in the center of the plaza. The ritual structures in El Coyote's main plaza are small platforms, with the tall temple structures located along the eastern border and the range and palace buildings forming the western border. Evidence of communal ritual feasting was recovered from El Coyote's main plaza (Wells 2003), which suggests that El Coyote's plaza was an integrated community space. This is distinctly different from La Sierra's site core, which was evidently limited to elite sociopolitical and religious activities (Schortman et al. 2001; Schortman and Urban 1994). Therefore, while La Sierra and El Coyote share the same spatial plan and incorporate the same types of buildings into their site centers, they each display unique characteristics that could be emblematic of local identities.



Las Canoas displays distinctiveness in its site plan as well. While considerably smaller in size than either El Coyote or La Sierra, Las Canoas's site plan incorporates the same types of monumental range and temple structures surrounding a Main Plaza in its site center. However, these buildings are arranged in a rectilinear fashion as opposed to the D-shape exhibited by La Sierra and El Coyote. Furthermore, Las Canoas's Main Plaza was not paved with limestone but seems to have been covered in orange clay, and was free from the ritual structures that were included in the otherwise open plazas at the other two sites (Stockett 2005). In addition, the Main Plaza at Las Canoas included an elite residential component in addition to serving ritual functions. While some monumental buildings in the La Sierra and El Coyote site centers could have served as elite residences, those at Las Canoas were unequivocally identified as domestic households (Stockett 2005).

Interestingly, Stockett (2005) argues that renovations of the Las Canoas site plan and monumental architecture may indicate a shift in affiliations from the Naco to Cacaupala valleys by the end of the Late Classic. Over the course of three construction phases, buildings in the Las Canoas site center were transformed from low-lying cobble structures bordering an unpaved, irregularly shaped patio. This style is similar to a typical Naco-style household group. Stockett (2005:507) suggests that the individuals who settled Las Canoas could have come from the Naco valley and constructed their patio group in what would have been a familiar style.

Subsequent renovations added terraces and bolstered stairs made of cut-stone blocks, which resulted in a more rectilinear Main Plaza that was then paved with orange clay. Stockett (2005:508) suggests that the ability of Las Canoas elites to make these

additions points to an increase in their economic prosperity and political strength. By the final phase of construction, the Main Plaza buildings had increased in height and exhibited elaborate architecture in the form of cut block bolstered stairs.

In terms of style, Stockett (2005:509) sees no regional parallels between the orange clay, bolstered stairs, and rectilinear plaza, suggesting instead that “Las Canoas’ plaza became a relatively distinctive space when compared to others in the region. This was achieved, I suggest, by incorporating architectural or spatial elements observed at other locales, and then modifying them to meet local needs and ideals.” As Las Canoas prospered, its early ties to the Naco Valley were visibly transformed into a distinctive local style indicative of increased independence. One influence seems to have been the Cacaupala Valley, seen in the tall, square, temple-style buildings at Las Canoas that reference the style of the eastern temples at El Coyote. Stockett’s (2005) study lends fascinating insights into regional interactions between Naco and Cacaupala elites over the course of the Late Classic. The implications of this observation are significant for Palmarejo because it provides a model for the stylistic manifestations of regional elite interactions.

Palmarejo’s site plan seems to adhere to the Naco standard as outlined by Urban (1986). Following Weissner (1983) Palmarejo’s site plan could be referencing a regional social identity embodied in the built environment. The settlement is located close to the best agricultural soils in the valley, which suggests that elites inhabiting Palmarejo had control over important agricultural resources and could have translated economic success into political power (Verdaasdonk 2007). Stone for construction materials is also locally available and may also have been controlled by Palmarejo elites. Use of these materials

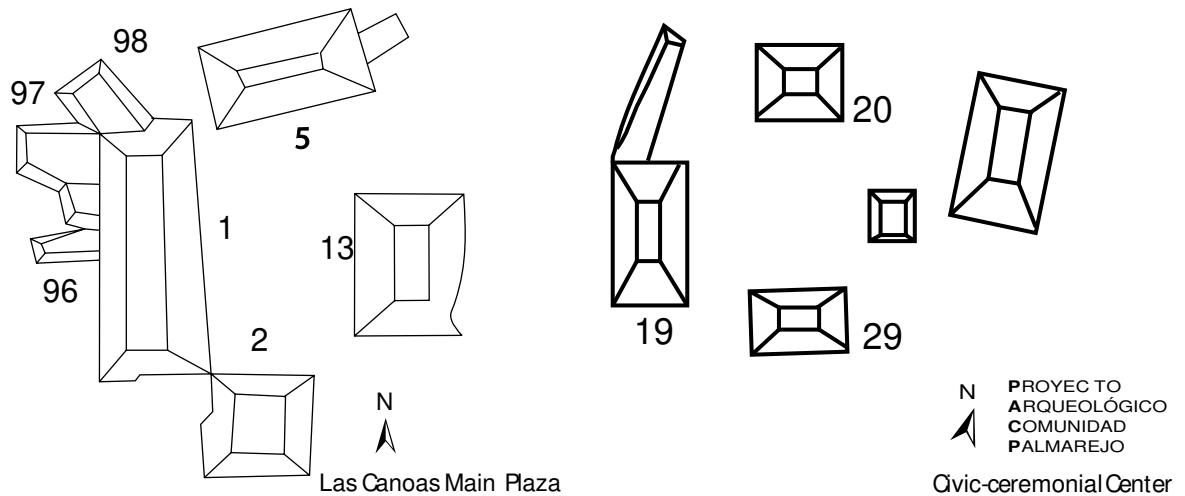
in constructing the monumental site core reinforced elite control over local resources and marked the landscape with stone representations of their power.

The second principle of Naco site plans outlined by Urban (1986:672) is the use of the natural topography in the construction of buildings. At Palmarejo, this principle is used in two places in order to elevate important structures. The Main Group is built on a north/south trending slope that was raised and leveled with a considerable amount of large limestone rocks. Structure 20 rests on the north summit of this slope, while Structure 29 is supported by a 2 m deep deposit of rocky fill. In this case, it is possible that this was done in order to elevate this important religious and administrative zone above the rest of the site, perhaps as a symbol of dominance or power. In addition, several levels of terraces were used to grade the western side of this slope (i.e., Structure 93) as it descended to a possible reservoir.

The other area where this technique was used was in the northeast elite residential zone. Here, the entire group rests on a natural rise whose slopes were terraced and modified to suit the needs of the residents. Structure 54 includes several terraces on its northern side that enhance the natural rise of the land, bolstered by a 4 m high basal wall on the southern edge. While investigations did not probe beneath the platform floor, it is likely that there is a significant amount of fill retained by the southern wall to form the platform. Structure 55 seems to have been constructed in this way as well, but excavations were not extensive enough to confirm this unequivocally.

The third (and most distinctive) standard of a Naco-style site plan is an irregular or circular arrangement of buildings. This can be seen in the D-shaped main plazas of El Coyote and La Sierra, which include administrative, ritual, and elite residential buildings.

Palmarejo's Main Group adheres to the regional standard of including administrative and ritual buildings, but there is no evidence that either of the range structures were used as domestic residences. Furthermore, the Palmarejo Main Group does not exhibit an irregular or semi-circular form similar to that of La Sierra or El Coyote, and the plaza floor, while made of limestone, is not a solid pavement but a loose dispersion of small pebbles. In addition, the placement of the Main Group is not in the northern portion of the site, as seen at each of the other three sites, but in the west-central area. In fact, the spatial form of Palmarejo's Main Group most closely resembles the rectilinear layout of Las Canoas' main plaza (Figure 29).

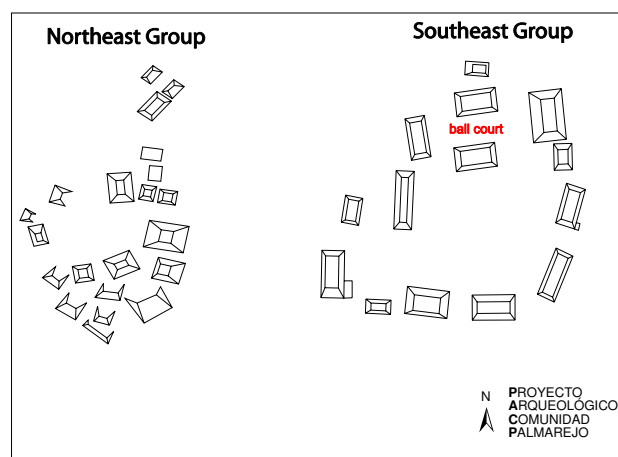


**Figure 29. Las Canoas Main Plaza (modified from Stockett 2005) and Palmarejo Main Group (modified from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005) showing a similar rectilinear form.**

Another significant difference in site planning is the placement of elite residences. At La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas elites inhabited some of the monumental platforms comprising the Main Groups, directly adjacent to administrative and ritual buildings. At La Sierra, this resulted in a very inward-facing placement of buildings suggesting the consolidation of political and religious power in the hands of the elites. The main plazas at La Sierra Las Canoas showed evidence for elite residential occupation of certain structures, though the evidence for ritual events such as feasts and the lack of structures in the center of the Las Canoas plaza point to more social integration at these sites. In addition, most elites inhabited patio groups outside, but in close proximity to, the Main Group. This is how Palmarejo's site plan is organized. Elite residences at Palmarejo were built in the southeastern and northeastern zones, close to the Main Group but not within it. Their close proximity indicates importance and control, but the separation between dwelling and governing points to a slightly different social organization.

In the case of Palmarejo, the basic site planning principles outlined for the Naco Valley seem to fit very well. Therefore, we could infer that in constructing a Naco-style site Palmarejo elites were affiliating themselves with Naco, principally La Sierra (e.g., Weissner 1983). This interpretation would support Schortman and Nakamura's (1991) argument that an elite identity was made salient in southeastern Mesoamerica in the form of site plans and monumental architecture in order to reinforce hierarchical control of important economic resources. Palmarejo's site plan has all the necessary pieces (Main Group, elite residences, ball court) that identify it as an elite community connected stylistically to others in the region.

However, as Stockett (2005) points out, while each site in the Naco Valley constructed administrative and ritual centers around open public plazas, they tended to take these principles and make them their own. At Palmarejo, these principles include the location of the Main Group, the placement of the elite residential patios, the orientation of the ball court, the limestone pebbled plaza floor, and the rectilinear form of the main plaza. Therefore, in constructing their community, Palmarejo elites may have been attempting to affiliate with a regional social identity while maintaining local distinctiveness. Stockett (2005) links the expression of a localized identity with increasing economic success and independence, which then resulted in a shift way from Naco style architecture over time. I would argue that this could potentially hold true for Palmarejo as well, though I acknowledge that the data from Palmarejo needs to be refined before this can be argued definitively. However, an examination of the architecture and artifacts from the Northeast and Southeast groups support this argument (Figure 30). My interpretation assumes that these groups were both occupied during the Late Classic, based on preliminary ceramic analysis.



**Figure 30. Northeast and Southeast Groups at Palmarejo (modified from Davis-Salazar et al. 2005).**

Evidence for elite occupation included imported polychrome pottery and figurines, and monumental architecture, but their dissonance in planning suggests distinct kinship groups, social strategies, or changes in social affiliation over time. Furthermore, their associated artifact assemblages suggest different occupation histories and social functions.

The northeast zone shares Naco-style planning principles in its terracing of the natural topography, irregularity of its plaza, and semi-circular organization of its buildings. The style of this group is unique among the other Palmarejo plazas, which take a more rectilinear shape. In addition, the summit architecture of Structure 54 seems to take a “T”-shape, which is characteristic of some buildings at La Sierra (Wells, personal communication 2006), while a single construction phase suggests a sustained function over time. Serving vessels, manos and metates, obsidian, faunal remains, and a possible hearth feature identify Structure 54 as a residence. A long period of occupation is supported by the continuous stratigraphic record.

The interment of an adult male in the fill of Structure 60 could possibly point to a long occupation history, but also indicates a sense of permanence. If this individual was a resident of the Northeast Group, then his burial within the residential compound could be interpreted as a demonstration by his relatives of their permanency. Following McAnany (1995:100), interring family members in residential patio groups worked to build a “genealogy of place” that legitimized local land claims and linked people to their community in a permanent way. His apparent good health suggests a successful social standing. The flexed position and placement of this burial on the outside of foundation walls is emblematic of what seems to be a broader Naco valley mortuary pattern.

The association of the individual with terrace architecture seems to be an emerging burial pattern at Palmarejo, based on the extant dataset. In order to fully test this idea, excavations need to be carried out in terraces at other regional sites. The four burials (three adults and one sub-adult, all of unknown sex) recovered from Structure 93 were also flexed and placed in the fill of a terrace without specific associated grave goods. Burials are suggestive of personal, non-public affiliations (Hegmon 1992) and add another dimension to the construction of a social identity. At Palmarejo, people seem to have been interred in rather public places. Burial #1 from Structure 60 is most likely part of a kin group that inhabited that area, but he is not associated with a residential structure. Likewise, the individuals in the fill of Structure 93 were interred away from residential contexts. While the flexed positioning of the bodies is similar to other sites in the Naco Valley, their placement in terraces is not. This pattern may illustrate some maintenance of local character among other regional influences such as site planning and architecture.

Further evidence supporting a regional social identity includes the frequent occurrence of southeast Mesoamerican ceramic ritual items in the plaza and Structure 60 fill. Ceramic ritual paraphernalia common to southeastern Mesoamerica include zoomorphic ocarinas, candeleros, incensarios, and figurines. Ocarinas recovered from Palmarejo's northeastern group depicted turtles, birds (perhaps vultures), and monkeys (Figure 31). These styles directly resemble those found in both the immediate Naco Valley (Las Canoas, El Coyote, La Sierra) and in the greater region (Sula Plain and Copán Valley) (Stockett 2005). The figurines recovered from the same fill are also formed in a southeast Mesoamerican style. Most notable is the presence of several "Napoleon hat" figurines, which are common in all southeast Mesoamerican



assemblages, including Las Canoas, the Naco Valley, Sula Plain, and the Ulúa Valley (Joyce 1991; Stockett 2005; Tercero 1996; Urban 1986).



**Figure 31. Monkey, bird, and turtle ocarinas recovered from the Northeast group.**



**Figure 32. “Napoleon Hat” figurines recovered from the Northeast group.**



**Figure 33. Example of an undecorated candelero recovered from the Northeast Group.**

Molds have been recovered from Las Canoas, the Naco Valley, and Suyapa, a Class 2 site in the Palmarejo Valley. Palmarejo elites could have imported figurines from surrounding sites, however local production can not be ruled out. Nevertheless, the widespread occurrence of these figurines suggests that Palmarejo residents participated in a regional belief system (Figure 32).

Candeleros are also used in ritual practices, and are found in all southeast Mesoamerican assemblages (Figure 33). They are sometimes decorated with perforated dots or lines, but are more commonly left unadorned. The ones recovered from the Northeast Group at Palmarejo were unembellished and seemed to have served a more quotidian function, perhaps within this household group.

The presence of these forms at Palmarejo is suggestive of an affiliation with the broader southeast Mesoamerican belief system and ritual practices. Their recovery from fill deposits beneath the plaza and Structure 60 suggests that this connection was sustained through time. Ceramic production evidence is so far absent at Palmarejo, suggesting that these items were imported from surrounding areas. This suggests that Palmarejo elites were not only connected to other sites through common ritual practices, but that they had the economic means to trade for these important symbols of social identity.

Though these items were found in the Northeast Group, I hesitate to link their use directly to the occupants of the group. While this may be the case, it is almost impossible to identify their specific use and function before they were discarded into the construction fill. However, based on their presence at Palmarejo, I infer an affiliation in belief systems between Palmarejo and southeastern Mesoamerica. In addition, the quality and imported

nature of the ceramics (those found in terminal debris contexts, not in the construction fill), monumental architecture, and the good health of the individual buried in Structure 60 indicate that the residents of these structures held a relatively high social position. The prolonged occupation and intensive use of the buildings suggests a prominent, established group at Palmarejo who was connected through trade and a shared belief system to the rest of the Naco Valley and southeastern Mesoamerica. Evidence recovered from the Southeastern Group also suggests a regional social identity, but provides a contrast to the data from the Northeastern Group in terms of its occupation history.

The planning of the Southeast Group is the most noticeable difference distinguishing it from the Northeast Group. It includes a wide, rectangular patio bordered by monumental range structures with a ball court at its north end. The ball court is an important addition to the community in that it represents a strong identification with a pan-Mesoamerican ideology. A distinct lack of Early Classic ceramics in the patio test pits close to the court's southern building suggest that its construction took place concomitantly with the rest of the plaza during the Late Classic. The patio's rectilinear shape is an anomaly for typical Naco-style patio groups (discussed above). Only one structure has been investigated in the Southeast Group; the results of this excavation may shed light on changes in Palmarejo's sociopolitical organization over time.

Excavations of Structure 5 revealed one construction phase, which ceramic evidence dates to the Late Classic. Artifact types identify this building as an elite residence, but the thin sheet midden recovered from the back of the structure suggests episodic occupation. Test pits extending across the plaza produced burnt bajareque and rock fill with limited ceramic inclusions (675 total sherds and bajareque fragments from 6

m<sup>3</sup> of excavated soil), as opposed to the high occurrence of ceramic and lithic debris used to construct the northeast group. The construction of the southeast elite residential zone suggests economic prosperity and a transformation in sociopolitical organization during the Late Classic.

One possible scenario is that the Southeast Group was constructed at the same time as the additions that were made to Structure 20 and 29 in the Main Group. If this was the case, then there was a fairly sudden and unequivocal increase in immediately recognizable southeast Mesoamerican referents, including the ball court, an additional elite plaza, and more prominent ritual buildings. The scale of this construction project indicates considerable elite control over local labor and resources (Schortman et al. 2001). This refurbishment could be interpreted as a result of economic prosperity for Palmarejo elites, or as demonstration of power made by a new elite group originating elsewhere in the Naco Valley, upon their incursion into the Palmarejo Valley.

The data recovered from Structure 5 could support either argument. The style of the buildings and the presence of a ball court are consistent with regional features of an elite zone. The postholes on the upper platform suggest that it was roofed, but the paucity of bajareque recovered from the building suggests that it lacked standing walls (Davis-Salazar et al. 2005). While this may have been sufficient for certain times of year, surely a more substantial shelter would have been required during other seasons. The artifact assemblage, though scarce, is suggestive of an elite residence; therefore it would seem that the southeast elite residential group was only utilized during certain times of the year. Whether it was an outside group or a local group that lived elsewhere for most of

the year is open to debate. However, this interpretation has interesting implications for the sociopolitical organization of Palmarejo.

Regardless of where they originated, as elites the inhabitants of the southeast group would have controlled the economic and political fortunes of Palmarejo, but it seems as though they administered the community through visits during certain times of the year. This could have been accomplished by elites living at another site, but a more probable explanation lies within the Palmarejo Valley. A full-scale survey of the valley identified four Class 2 sites that seem to be situated in close proximity to natural resources (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the site classification system of the Palmarejo Valley) (Wells et al. 2004; Hawken 2007). It is plausible that in order to maintain control over these resources Palmarejo welcomed elites from Pacayal, Suyapa, Palos Blancos and El Morro to reside in the southeastern group for parts of the year.

The idea that this patio was only used periodically is further supported by the soil chemistry results. Soil chemistry combined with artifact analysis can help us infer where elites found it important to conduct certain activities. Uniform levels of phosphates (organic materials indicating food processing or preparation) were found across the southeast patio. This suggests that though the space is the largest open space at Palmarejo, it was not used to host large gatherings of people (Wells et al. 2007).

In contrast, the soil chemistry results from the Main Group show higher levels of phosphates, but varying by location or quadrant. This suggests that certain activities undertaken by a large group of people, such as ritual feasting, were taking place in the civic-ceremonial plaza. Differing chemical signatures in certain areas of the plaza indicate that specific activities took place in different locations (Wells et al. 2007). This is

supported by the artifact assemblage from Structure 93, which included polychrome serving plates and vessels, censer fragments, lithic blades, and an entire deer carcass. These material residues are thought to be refuse from activities taking place in the Main Group.

The more frequent use of the Main Group reinforces its centrality to the social life of Palmarejo residents. The style of its temple buildings and artifact assemblages reference not only a Naco valley belief system, but a Mesoamerican one as well. An important representation of this affiliation is the presence of *Spondylus* shells on the summits of each building in the Main Group, and cached in two places within Structure 20. This practice has been identified at Travesía and Cerro Palenque in the Ulúa Valley, at Copán, and as far away as Guatemala and Belize (Joyce 1986:324). The concentration of these devotions at the Main Group indicates that these rituals were essential in maintaining the elite power structure. The Southeast Group could have been constructed as a way to bring individuals from Class 2 sites to participate in communal ritual practices controlled by Palmarejo elites. Thus, southeast Mesoamerican-style site planning, architecture, and artifacts such as imported polychrome vessels, ceramic censers, and *Spondylus* shells might have conveyed a powerful affiliative message to the outlying population. In this way, the power garnered by Palmarejo's elites might have stemmed from the ability to access the potent charisma of recognized but distant ritual practices (Helms 1998).

### *Summary*

Elite social identity was formed at Palmarejo through the use of material styles that were familiar to the greater Naco Valley. Much like the residents of other communities in the valley, the resident elites took these commonalities and made them their own. Thus we see both similarities and idiosyncrasies in the style of artifacts throughout the valley. At Palmarejo, it seems to have been the style of ritual objects and practices tying elites to a broader southeast Mesoamerican affiliation.

Site planning techniques and monumental architecture at Palmarejo parallel the styles seen in the Naco Valley in terms of 1) close proximity to resources, most importantly water, stone for construction, and agricultural land, 2) terraced structures that utilized the natural topography in their construction, 3) irregular, non-orthogonal site plans, and 4) the organization of structures in a circular shape around a central patio (Urban 1986:672). However the non-orthogonal site plan and circular patio group at Palmarejo are limited to the Northeast Group. The long occupation history of this group could suggest that it was established earlier in the site's history, perhaps indicating an early affiliation with the Naco Valley. Other distinctions include the limestone plaster plaza in the Main Group, and the placement of elite residences away from the ritual and administrative locus. These aspects of site construction seem to be unique to Palmarejo.

The rectilinear style of the Southeast Group and the Main Group seems to have been achieved through renovations conducted during the Late Classic. It has been argued (Stockett 2005) that similar renovations at the Las Canoas site center correspond to a decline in elite power at La Sierra during the Late Classic. This could be emblematic of increased economic and political independence at both Palmarejo and Las Canoas.

This is further supported by the lack of La Sierra produced ceramics present in the Palmarejo dataset. Field observations indicate that the majority of ceramic forms, while distinctly southeast Mesoamerican in style, do not correspond to specific La Sierra styles. This suggests that Palmarejo elites were part of a much broader affiliative system and not dominated in a political, economic or ideological sense by any one polity.

Burial data is also indicative of a fusion of local and regional styles. The positioning and orientation of the bodies corresponds to patterns throughout the valley, but the placement of individuals in terraces seems to be unique to Palmarejo. The presence of the Ulúa marble vase in a presumably elite residential context at Palos Blancos illustrates the complexity of elite interactions within the Palmarejo Valley itself, and reinforces the idea that elites possessed enigmatic symbols of their power.

The combination of these datasets lends insights into the ways that identity was expressed visibly in southeast Mesoamerican site planning, architecture, and ritual ceramic styles, while distinctiveness was maintained by modifying regional styles with local techniques. Ritual objects and spaces seem to have held the most importance in maintaining a regional social identity, and perhaps in consolidating local power.



## 7. Conclusion

The forging of a social identity necessitates material signifiers that designate group boundaries and affiliations (Barth 1969). Without these physical referents distinctions could not be made between groups, rendering self-ascribed affiliations virtually useless. The material component of affiliation makes archaeological studies of social identity particularly relevant in illuminating connections between populations.

The goals of this thesis were, 1) to consider how and why social identity is linked to material culture, 2) to explore how identity is manifest between communities in a specific region, and 3) to evaluate this anthropological issue using an archaeological dataset from the site of Palmarejo, northwest Honduras. In order to reach these goals, I considered the Palmarejo dataset from a communicative (e.g., Wobst 1977) and emblemic/assertive (e.g., Weissner 1983, 1985) perspective. Following Wobst (1977) I argued that information is exchanged by the chosen style of an artifact. In this sense, style plays a functional role in social relationships. While style can play an important role in social relations, Wobst's (1977) functionalist approach relegated style to a passive position by stating that an artifact must be visible to relay its information. Following Weissner (1983, 1985) I argued that style can still convey certain kinds of information when it is invisible. Emblemic style accounts for outwardly visible, public messages. Assertive style occurs in a private venue, and is most often used to convey personal or ritual messages. By identifying two features of style, emblemic and assertive, Weissner confers a participatory role to material culture, while emphasizing the context and conditions that make style relevant at any given time.

Following archaeological applications of the emblemic/assertive approach, several lines of evidence were identified as contributing to the formation and maintenance of an elite social identity: site plans, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials (e.g., Bartlett and McAnany 2001; Hegmon 1992; Plog 1992; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman and Urban 2001; Stockett 2005). Each of these categories conveyed different affiliative messages; site plans and monumental architecture embody the emblemic view of style, while ceramics and human burials personify the assertive aspect of style.

Contextualization is an important component of the emblemic/assertive approach. Weissner (1983) argues that a certain style and the messages it conveys are contingent upon sociohistorical context. In order to develop expectations for what elite style would look like at Palmarejo, I described the site plans, monumental architecture, ceramics, and human burials for three other sites in the Naco region: La Sierra, El Coyote, and Las Canoas. At each site there is evidence for affiliation with broader southeast Mesoamerican traditions, while incorporating these ideas into local styles. In addition, it is apparent that changes in the stylistic representation of these artifacts correlated with shifting regional relationships, principally the decline of La Sierra's influence during the Terminal Classic. Thus, I expected elite identity at Palmarejo to be manifest through these same lines of evidence, and to display both local and regional characteristics.

I argued that a regional elite affiliation at Palmarejo was conveyed outwardly by the southeast Mesoamerican style of its site plan and monumental architecture (i.e., emblemic style). However, modifications to standard Naco styles suggests a local influence. A localized identity was also represented by the location and placement of

human burials, which seems to be a pattern unique to Palmarejo. The style of ceramic ritual artifacts (i.e., figurines, ocarinas, incensarios, and candeleros) suggests an incorporation of ritual practices that are found throughout southeast Mesoamerica. Further evidence for this is the style of the temple structures (Structure 20 and 29) and the caching of *Spondylus* shells through the civic-ceremonial center. I argued that ritual practices referencing a wider belief system could have been a distinct stylistic communicative strategy by Palmarejo elites to affiliate themselves with regional elite populations.

This study represents a preliminary comparison of the material residues of social identity at Palmarejo with similar signatures at other sites in the Naco region. In order to refine the ideas presented here, further archaeological investigations need to be undertaken at different locales within Palmarejo, as well as additional laboratory analysis. Future excavations of other structures in the Southeast Group would help clarify elite use of the group and how it changed over time. This could lend insight into shifts in elite power or regional affiliation. A thorough assessment of the ceramic data from Palmarejo would also elucidate elite regional connections, as well as offer considerable information as to the function and occupation history of the Northeast Group. Clarifying the relationship between these two groups will add to our understanding of elite social identity within Palmarejo.

In order to further evaluate the idea that Palmarejo elites identified with a regional belief system, excavations need to be conducted at the Palmarejo ball court. Ball courts are important signifiers of political and ritual power throughout Mesoamerica (Fox et al. 1996). Excavations of the Palmarejo ball court would contribute important information

concerning the date of its construction, and the length and intensity of its use. Comparing these data to those from the ball court excavations at La Sierra and El Coyote would help refine our understanding of ritualized elite interactions, and how these may have contributed to a regional social affiliation.

Finally, archaeological inferences of social identity and ethnicity reach beyond prehistoric populations. In fact, this study has important implications for the modern people of the Palmarejo Valley. By incorporating an applied perspective in the interpretation of archaeological findings, contemporary issues such as globalization and elite/non-elite interactions can be addressed.

The aim of an applied, community archaeology is to develop new research strategies in which descendant communities (as well as other stakeholders) play an active role in the ways that their history is researched and interpreted (Ardren 2002; Moser et al. 2002). Strategies for including the local people in reconstructing the history of their area include collaboration employment and training, public presentations, and providing educational resources, oral histories, and photographic and video archives (Moser et al. 2002). In this way, archaeologists are working to replace colonial attitudes traditionally associated with archaeology by identifying and including multiple stakeholders. At Palmarejo, there are stakeholders at the household, community, national, and international levels (Davis-Salazar et al. 2007). From an applied perspective, social identity plays a significant role at the community level for local inhabitants of the Palmarejo Valley.

Palmarejo is located 15 km from the fastest growing industrial city in Honduras, San Pedro Sula. The presence of this encroaching urban environment has impacted the

rural, subsistence based agricultural pursuits of the valley. Non-local elites have established large cattle ranches, and consequently much of the farming in the valley has shifted from subsistence goals to providing *zacate* destined for the *hacienda* cattle. Thus food and water insecurity in the Palmarejo Valley have been directly affected by the process of globalization (Davis-Salazar et al. 2007). As they increasingly become part of the global market economy, any sort of community identity is in danger of eroding away.

Furthermore, the modern residents were drawn from various highland locations in Honduras to the valley's fertile land and water resources only 60-75 years ago (Davis-Salazar et al. 2007). Therefore, there is no direct descendant community associated with the pre-Hispanic ruins in the valley. However, placing an emphasis on community involvement in archaeological resources has fostered a certain degree of stewardship and pride among the residents. Though local prehistory is an adopted one for many of the modern residents, it has the potential to be a unifying principle in communities adversely impacted by the modern world.

Social identity plays a significant role in both past and present cultures. The ascription of a social identity informs cultural interactions within a specific sociohistorical context. This study contributes a preliminary analysis of elite social identity in northwest Honduras, and suggests that communities utilized material styles and symbols as a means of communicating with one another. I additionally acknowledge the possibility that these social affiliations responded to shifting sociohistorical contexts (i.e., the decline of La Sierra during the Terminal Classic resulted in more visible local styles). The prehistoric perspective of a complex and fluid social identity reinforces modern observations of the "contingent nature of ethnicity" (Díaz-Andreu and Lucy

2005:110). These studies highlight the need for greater consideration of the role of social identity in anthropological investigations of ancient and modern cultural interactions.

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