A LATE FORMATIVE PERIOD STELA IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS

Norman Hammond

A plain stela has been identified at the site of Cuello, Belize. On the basis of stratigraphy and the accompanying cache vessels it has been dated to the latter part of the Late Formative, ca. A.D. 100. This date is approximately 200 years older than the earliest Initial Series dated stela so far known in the Maya lowlands, and comparable with some early dated monuments in the Pacific piedmont zone. Stela erection in the lowlands may antedate the secondary use of such monuments as vehicles for dynastic propaganda.

The tripartite division of Maya culture history into Preclassic (Formative), Classic, and Postclassic was predicated on the appearance at the beginning, and cessation at the end, of the Classic period of public monuments bearing dated hieroglyphic inscriptions. The Long Count in which these were expressed was precise to the day and has been correlated with the Christian calendar; the 11.16.0.0.0. or Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation, which is the most widely accepted, places the Classic period between approximately A.D. 250 and 900. The earliest dated monument currently known is Tikal Stela 29, with an Initial Series of 8.12.14.8.15, (A.D. 292), and the latest certain Initial Series is of 10.4.0.0.0. (A.D. 909), from Tonina.

Apart from the introduction of dated monuments, the beginning of the Classic was also often held to be marked by the appearance of polychrome pottery and vaulted architecture, but recent research has demonstrated that both are found in contexts which, on other grounds, are formally Late Formative. It may be questioned whether any Formative: Classic boundary in terms of either precise calendar years or cultural markers is still feasible (Thompson 1966:57), particularly since Late Formative Maya society is a complex organism that has most, if not all, of the major traits of a civilization.

The purpose of this report is not, however, to argue the point, but to suggest that the developed nature of the earliest known Classic monuments indicates still earlier antecedents for both the hieroglyphic script and the stela form in the Maya lowlands, and to advance some evidence in support of the latter contention.

Of the existence of earlier hieroglyphic inscriptions there is little doubt; several sites in the Pacific piedmont and continental divide have yielded inscribed and dated monuments of the second century A.D. or earlier, including Chiapa de Corzo, El Baul, and Abaj Takalik. The date in the third century B.C. for Abaj Takalik is the lower limit of justifiable speculation so far (John A. Graham 1977, and personal communications). Kaminaljuyu and Izapa have numerous monuments which, although lacking inscribed dates, are undoubtedly of Late Formative age. Other monuments using bar/dot place-notation dates which, it has been argued, counted from the same 3114 B.C. base as the Maya Long Count, come from as far west as Tres Zapotes. In this perspective the absence of Late Formative monuments from the Maya lowlands is striking.

The void is not absolute: Polol Altar 1 has long been recognized as stylistically early (Proskouriakoff 1950:110, Figure 36d); it is similar in design to the upper part of Abaj Takalik Stela 5, dating to A.D. 126. The inscription has recently been read by John A. Graham (personal communication) and Gary Pahl (personal communication) as being in Baktun 7, although examination of a plaster cast sent to me by courtesy of Pahl leaves me unconvinced. El Mirador Stela 2 and El Tintal Stela 1 are also both possibly earlier, on stylistic grounds, than Tikal Stela 29 (Ian Graham, personal communication).

More plausible is the date of ca. 25 B.C. advanced by William R. Coe (1965:19) for the painted figures on the exterior of Structure 5D-Sub. 10-1st at Tikal: Figure d bears an *Akbal* glyph in its

Norman Hammond, Archaeology Program, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903

0002-7316/82/020396-08$1.30/1

headdress, indicating knowledge of the calendar at least, if not of the Long Count. Coe points out that the figure has scrolled earplugs comparable with those on highland zone sculptures. The recovery of a pottery stamp bearing an apparent coefficient of 9, a bar and four dots, from a context dating to ca. A.D. 100 at Cuello, Belize, in 1979 suggests that both numeration and calendar glyphs were present in the lowlands in the latter part of the Late Formative. What has been lacking (and still is lacking) is evidence of the use of writing and numbers on stelae such as those which exist coevally in the highlands; further, the origins of the stela cult in the lowlands remain obscure prior to the late third century A.D.

A major part of the problem is that plain stelae, lacking dated inscriptions or a recognizable sculptural style, are difficult to place in time: numerous uncarved and uninscribed stelae are known in the Maya lowlands, and unless their context is unambiguous (as in the twin-pyramid groups of Tikal), their age is problematic. The discovery in situ of Cuello Stela 1 reported here, contributes somewhat to the resolution of the problem by demonstrating the introduction of the stela form in the central lowlands by about A.D. 100.

Cuello

The small site of Cuello lies on the interfluvial ridge between the Río Hondo and Río Nuevo, 5 km west of Orange Walk Town in northern Belize (Figure 1). Excavations since 1975 have demonstrated a long Formative sequence beginning in the early second millennium B.C. (radiocarbon years). A sedentary maize-farming population (Miksicek et al. 1981) produced technically competent pottery and chert tools and constructed plaster-surfaced low platforms to support perishable superstructures—all in styles ancestral to those of the Maya tradition of the Middle and Late Formative (Hammond et al. 1979; Hammond 1980).

During the Late Formative period at Cuello, the major locus of the recent excavations, Platform 34, was constructed over earlier buildings as a flat-topped elevation some 70 m × 70 m, standing up to 3.5 m high. At the end of the Formative, a small stepped pyramid, Structure 35, stood at its western end. A 1979 trench excavated by Carl P. Beetz detected three earlier platform phases, known only in section: the earliest of these stood less than 1 m high and supported a timber-framed superstructure. Burnt wood from one of the postholes (context 766) has yielded a radiocarbon date of 2180 ± 70 years (230 B.C., LJ-4916), concordant with the Late Formative construction date indicated by Cocos Chicanel ceramic complex sherds in the construction fill, and by the date of the succeeding structure.

The surface of this 1.5-m high structure was twice raised, after initial construction, by the addition of two thick plaster floors on rubble bases (contexts 448 and 444). Into the first of these raisings (context 449), on an east-west alignment at or near the centerline of the building, was cut a grave in which the decapitated body of an adolescent girl was laid, the head placed on the chest. This burial was accompanied by two Cocos Chicanel bowls; and the grave was sealed by an elongated red-painted plaster dome.

Over the subsequent raising, which still left the structure less than 2 m high, was later built the first phase of the stepped pyramid, 5 m in height. During this construction the fronts of the earlier buildings were ripped off down to the level of the coeval plaster surface of Platform 34, which formed an open plaza in front of the building. Such ceremonial demolition is common throughout the Formative at Cuello and has been encountered in the Formative and Classic periods at other sites to such an extent that it is not a remarkable occurrence.

1980 South Area Excavations

In the 1980 field season at Cuello, carried out by permission of the Government of Belize and the Cuello family and funded by the National Geographic Society, the British Museum, and Rutgers University, the area east of Structure 35 was excavated to the buried ancient land surface and to bedrock in places. The 10 m × 10 m excavation (comprising squares 20/30, 25/30, 20/35, and 25/35 of the site grid) was directed by Juliette Cartwright, supervised by Mark Horton, and recorded by Horton and Jan Morrison.

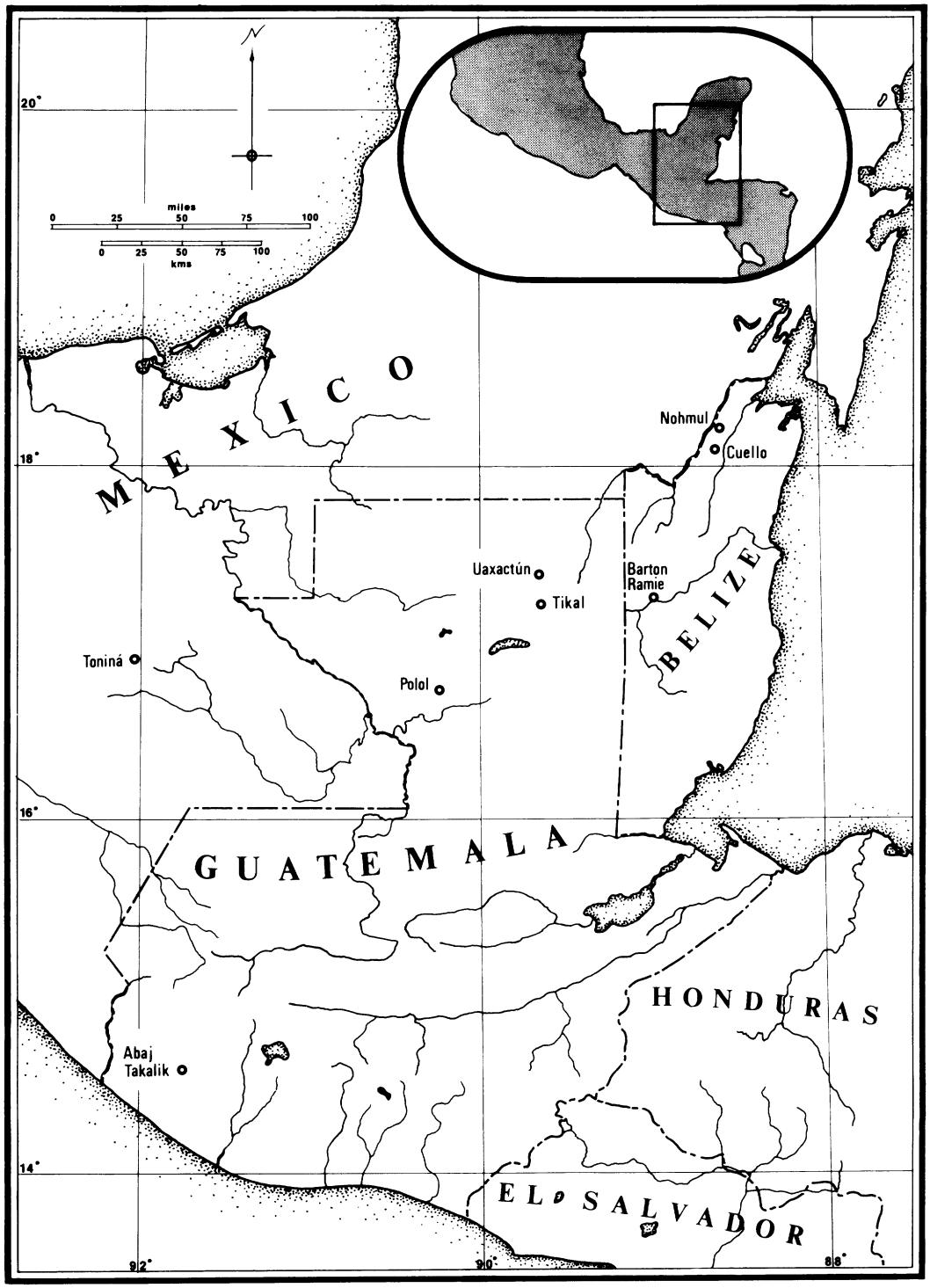

Figure 1. The Maya area showing relevant sites.

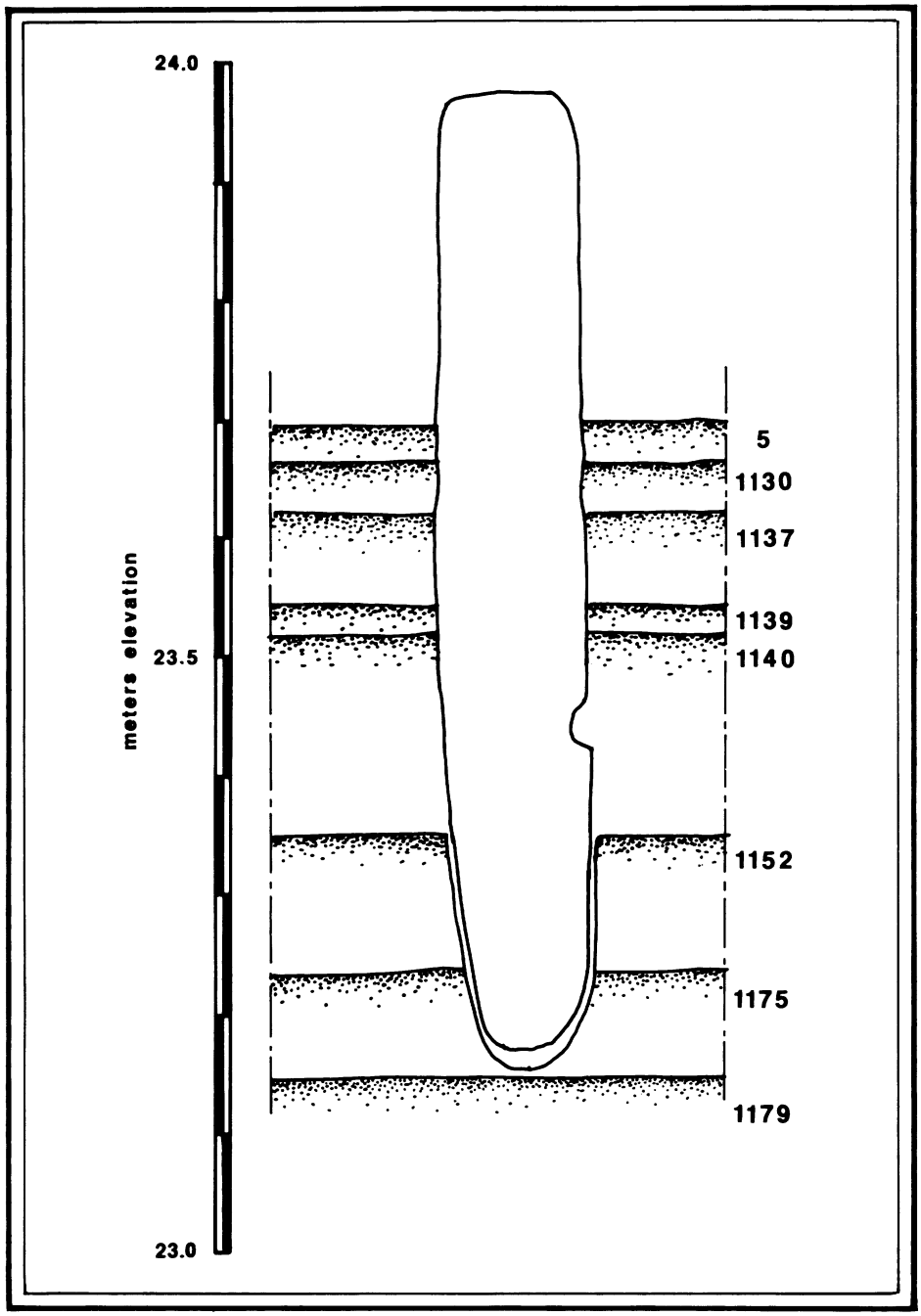

Figure 2. The stratigraphic relationship of Cuello stela 1 to earlier and later floors. The stela pit is cut into floor 1152 and sealed by floor 1140.

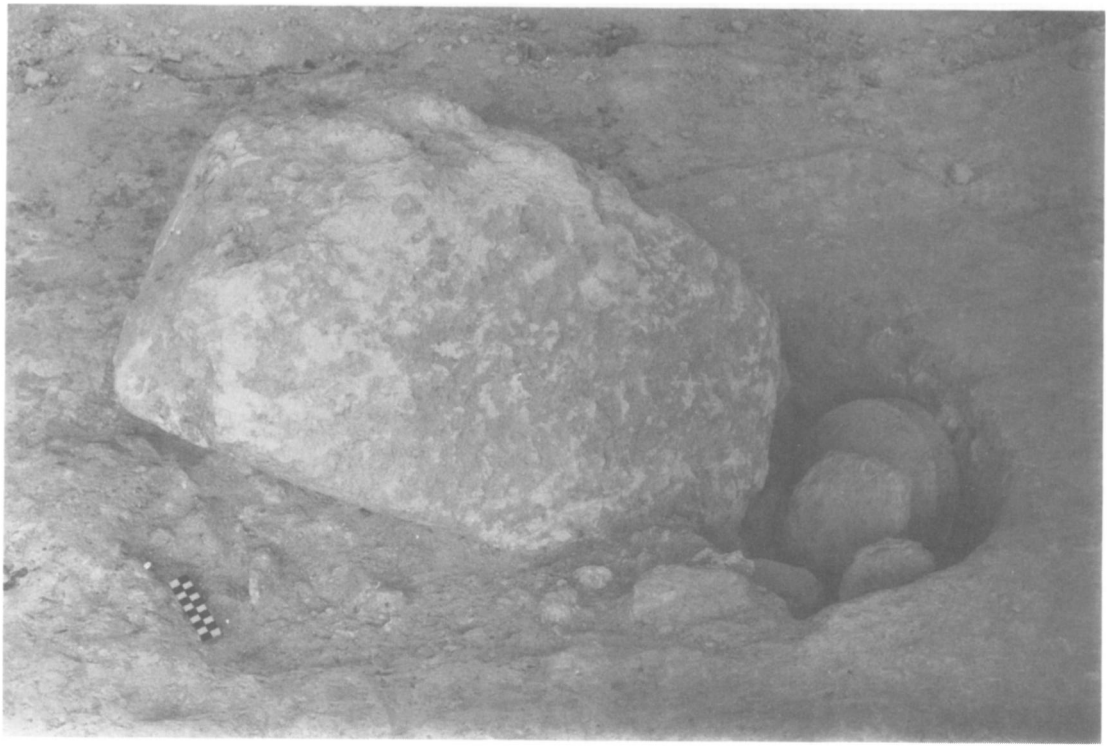

Figure 3. Cuello stela 1 in situ, from the east. Scale in centimeters.

Immediately below the topsoil (heavily plowed in recent years) a tolerably well preserved plaster floor (context 5) was found, demonstrably coterminous with the surfacing of a razed substructure, Feature 4, that had stood in front of the pyramid stair. Floor 5 was also shown to be part of the same construction program as the terminal Formative penultimate phase of Structure 35, since it underran the stair of the pyramid for a short distance. Floor, substructure, and pyramid all had associated caches of late Cocos Chicanel complex vessels, indicating a date probably in the third century A.D.

The construction of Feature 4 had carefully skirted a low protruding limestone block, Feature 136, which had been left in front of the southwest corner of the platform and had been buried by floor 5. As excavation proceeded, it became clear that Feature 136 was an originally upright slab, slumped to the south. It was abutted by the fills or surfaces of several floors, earlier in date than floor 5, including those numbered 1130, 1137, and 1139, and probably 1140 (Figure 2). Only at the level of floor 1152 below 1140 was a pit visible, in which the base of the slab stood (Figure 3). The area of the pit was clearly sealed by the plaster surface of floor 1139 above, but the surface of floor 1140 was not well enough preserved to confirm this for the earlier level. The lack of any pit in the fill of floor 1140 and its presence in 1152 are, however, convincing evidence that the pit was cut into the latter floor, and that the fill of 1140 was laid around the slab once it was in position. This floor was 17 cm thick; the subsequent floors, including 5, totaled 18 cm in thickness.

The pit, with its long axis north–south, was 1.1 m × 0.80 m, and 19 cm deep from the surface of floor 1152. It was filled with a packing of limestone rubble and earth and included several pieces of smoothed plaster facing from some presumably demolished structure. The fill had not been compact enough to prevent the slab (which is presumed to have originally stood erect) from slumping to the south until it came to rest at an angle of about 30° from the horizontal.

The slab (Figure 4) is 80 cm long, 50 cm wide, and 20 cm thick, rectangular in plan and sections. The upper corner that had protruded upwards after slumping has been broken off; it could have been removed as recently as the laying of floor 5, which finally concealed the protruding stone.

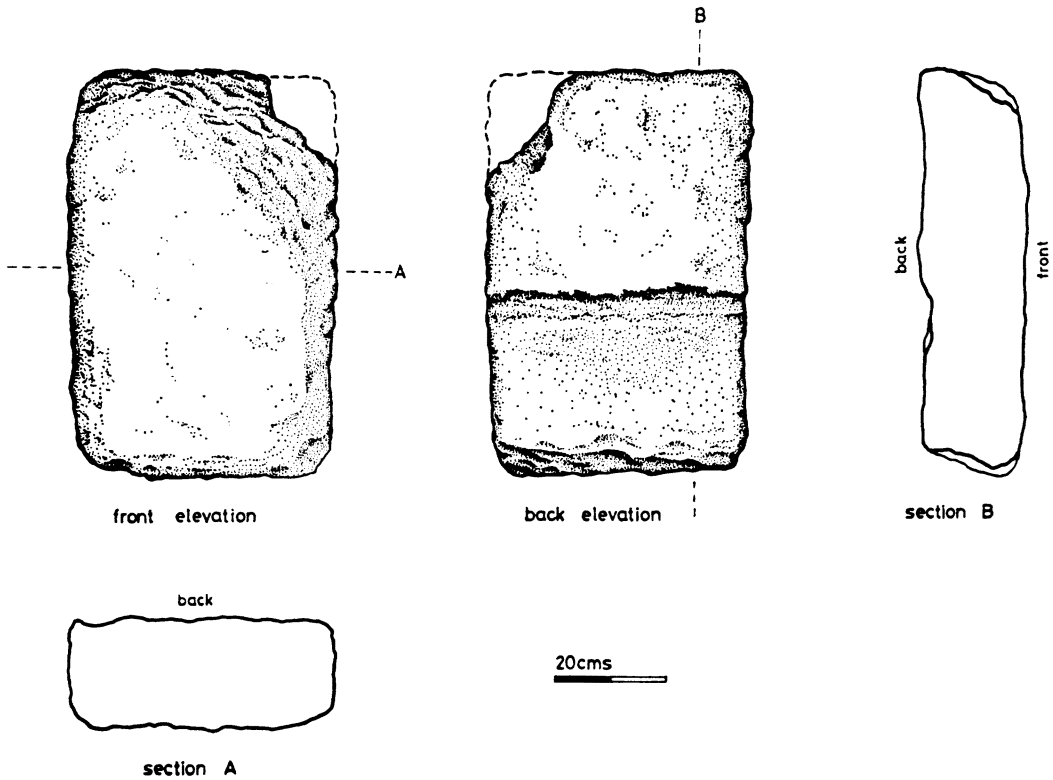

Figure 4. Cuello stela 1: elevations and sections.

The slab is of local limestone and was plain, except for a shallow horizontal groove across the western (apparently rear) face. No trace of painting, plastering, or carving can be seen, even on the portions that had been protected by the abutment of floors and their fills. We must conclude that from the time of its erection, the slab was a plain monument and that, despite its small size, its shape, mode of setting, and location in front of a public building all indicate that it should be designated as a stela.

The building with which the stela was associated was clearly one of the earlier phases of Structure 35. Floor 1140 has not been traced far enough west to establish physical correlation (and this might in any case prove impossible because of the removal of the frontages of these earlier building phases), but the most likely associated structure is the antepenultimate one, in either its final raising (context 444) or that immediately preceding and associated with the burial of the decapitated adolescent (449). The axes of the stela pit and the grave are on almost the same alignment.

The cache found in the stela pit consisted of a donut-shaped jade bead and three pottery vessels (Figure 5): a medial-ridged dish found on edge in the north end of the pit, a high-necked bowl resembling a spoutless "chocolate pot," and a hemispherical bowl which had been inverted and embellished with the modeled head, wings, and tail of a parrot or macaw. The two latter vessels were found below the stela butt and are typologically Sierra Red, although their slips have been badly eroded. The medial-ridged bowl, 29.5 cm in diameter, is a waxy-surfaced orange trichrome, with red medial bands and a blackish-brown lip. The visual effect is similar to the Guacamallo Red-on-orange: Camalote variety in the Aguacate ceramic group of the Floral Park complex at Barton Ramie (Gifford 1976:Figure 70 i–j). However, this vessel combined the slip texture characteristic of Chicanel wares with an innovative color combination that presages the experimental

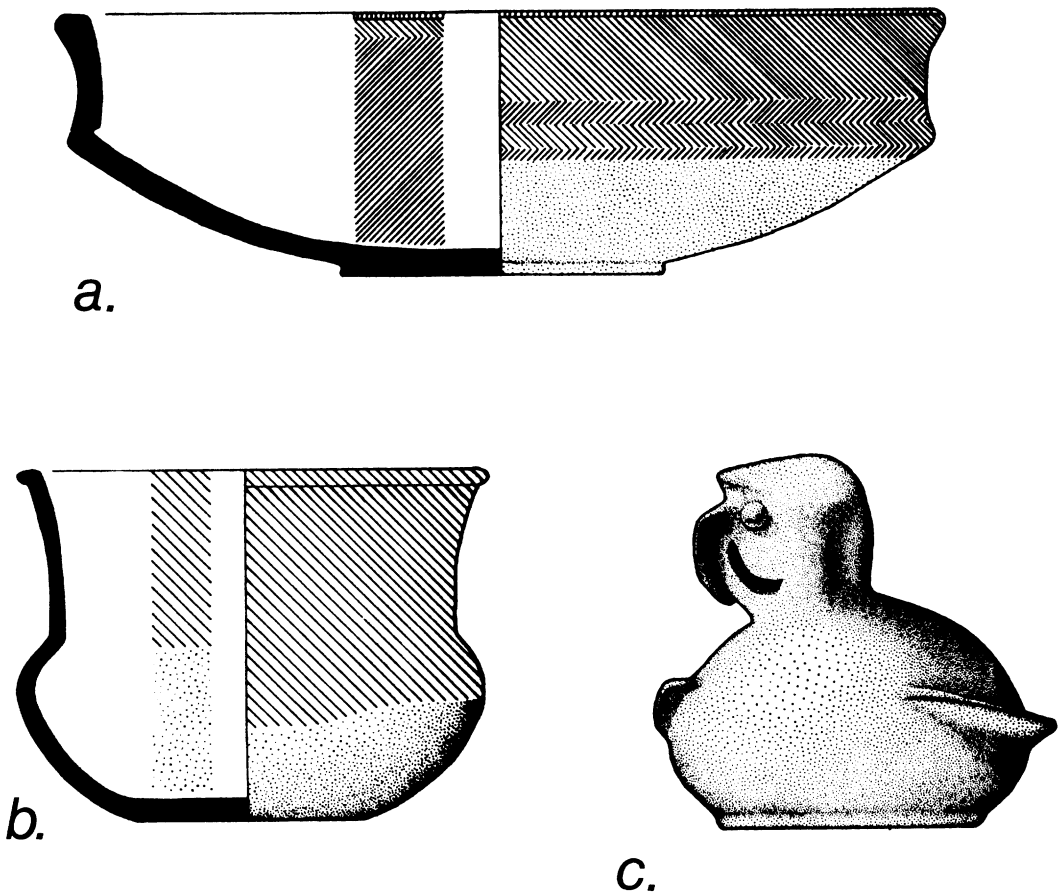

Figure 5. Cuello stela 1: substela cache.

polychromes of the Freshwater complex at the proximate major center of Nohmul (Pring 1977a, 1977b). Such innovation is found in other vessels from the final Late Formative at Cuello, where modes such as the quadruple mammiform support appear within a continuum of local ceramic development. This final segment of the threefold division of the Late Formative has been assigned an arbitrary but not implausible time span of A.D. 0–250.

Such a date for the vessels from the stela cache raises the problem of determining a date for the stela itself within this period, a date that can be more closely defined only on the stratigraphic evidence. All the floors sealing the pit are Late Formative in date, and the final floor, floor 5, on the basis of its association with the penultimate period of Structure 35, can be assigned to the third century A.D. Stela 1 must thus antedate A.D. 250 ± 50 by the length of time it took to lay, use, repair, and finally replace the four earlier floors. Over the entire Late Formative floor sequence of Platform 34, covering a period of some six centuries, a replacement rate of about 50 years is suggested by the evidence. This would give a date of A.D. 50 ± 50 for the erection of Stela 1. If we suppose that the speed of floor replacement doubled after the erection—purely for the sake of argument—then the stela would date to A.D. 150 ± 50. An estimated date of A.D. 100 ± 50, midway between the two, seems acceptable in lieu of more precise evidence and is in accordance with the ceramic dating. Although two guesses that agree remain two guesses, there seems a good chance that these are reasonably correct within close limits.

Cuello Stela 1 would then be some two centuries earlier than Tikal Stela 29, and of approximately the same date as Abaj Takalik Stela 5. This would place it later than some of the other dated monuments in the highland zone if we assume that the builders used the Maya Long Count base date. The smallness and plainness of the Cuello stela may indicate that the monumental form did not achieve great importance until the beginning of the Classic, and that prior to this, the vehicle for iconographic public statements was architectural embellishment, as has been suggested by Freidel (1979). It may be that in the earliest days of stela erection in the Maya lowlands, such practices did not entail the carving of official images and inscriptions, although such features were already present on Pacific Slope zone stelae. From at least the third century A.D. onwards, however, this combination of form and ornament flourished in the lowlands as the dynastic statue-stela, expressing both royal power and propaganda.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to E. Wyllys Andrews V, John Justeson, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments, to John Graham and Gary Pahl for discussion of Polol Altar 1, and to Michael Davenport (Figures 1, 2), Jan Morrison (Figure 4), and Paul Stempen (Figure 5) for their illustrations. Harriot W. Topsey, Archaeological Commissioner of Belize, arranged for the transportation of Stela 1 to Belmopan, where it is stored under his care in the Archaeology Department.

REFERENCES CITED

Coe, William R.
1965 Tikal: ten years of study of a Maya ruin in the lowlands of Guatemala. *Expedition* 8(1):5–56.
Freidel, David A.
1979 Cultural areas and interaction spheres: contrasting approaches to the emergence of civilization in the Maya lowlands. *American Antiquity* 44:36–55.
Gifford, James C.
1976 Prehistoric Maya pottery and the ceramics of Barton Ramie in the Belize Valley. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* 18. Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
Graham, John A.
1977 Discoveries at Abaj Takalik, Guatemala. *Archaeology* 30:196–197.
Hammond, Norman
1980 Early Maya ceremonial at Cuello, Belize. *Antiquity* 54:176–190.
Hammond, Norman, Duncan Pring, Richard Wilk, Sara Donaghey, Frank P. Saul, Elizabeth S. Wing, Arlene V. Miller, and Lawrence H. Feldman
1979 The earliest lowland Maya? Definition of the Swasey phase. *American Antiquity* 44:92–110.
Miksicek, Charles H., Robert McK. Bird, Barbara Pickersgill, Sara Donaghey, Juliette Cartwright, and Norman Hammond
1981 Preclassic lowland maize from Cuello, Belize. *Nature* 289:56–59.
Pring, Duncan C.
1977a *The Preclassic ceramics of northern Belize.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of London. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.
1977b Influence or intrusion? The "Protoclassic" in the Maya Lowlands. In *Social process in Maya prehistory: studies in honour of Sir Eric Thompson,* edited by Norman Hammond, pp. 135–165. Academic Press, London.
Proskouriakoff, Tatiana
1950 A study of Classic Maya sculpture. *Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publication* 593. Washington, D.C.
Thompson, J. Eric S.
1966 *The rise and fall of Maya civilization* (second ed.). University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.