

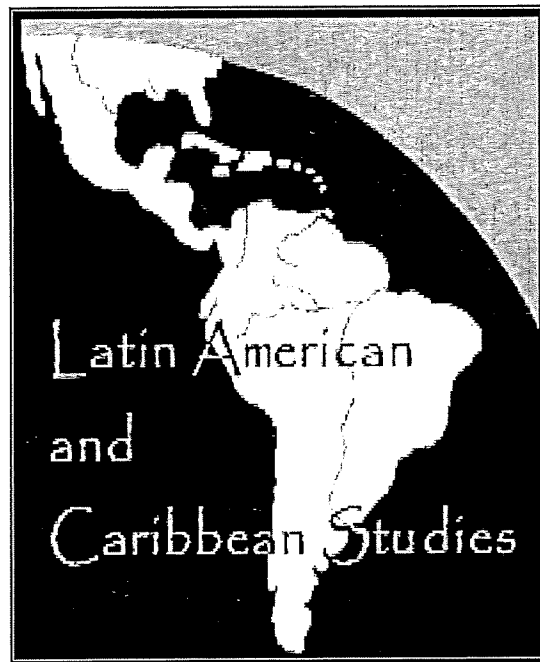
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SITUATIONAL SACREDNESS:  
TEMPORARY RITUAL SPACE AND AUTHORITY IN  
ANCIENT AND MODERN HONDURAS

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Karla L. Davis-Salazar*

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## Foreword

### “Structural Power”, Elites, Surplus Extraction and Micro-politics

The work by Drs. Wells and Davis-Salazar appearing in this first issue is an example of field research that bridges the disciplines of Archeology, Anthropology, History and Economics. It offers a comprehensive and deep explanation and understanding of the linkages between past and present as well as between culture, ritual, power and accumulation. It centers on collectivist pre-capitalist labor practices and religious ceremonies among both Lenca and Mayans in contemporary Honduras: the *compostura* (literally the “fix”) and the *k'in krus* (Sun cross). These practices utilize situational authority through the manipulation of symbols and tradition by native local elites to extract surplus by obtaining free labor from the communities. Sacredness here defines the rules of the game and thus the capacity of the leaders to exercise a form of structural power, or meta-power, leading to the compliant transfer of effort for private accumulation.

The authors explore beyond the logic of a contemporary peasant economy and engage into archeological research heavily reliant in the systematic analysis of chemistry, pre-historical archeology and sediments to give us a vision of the past, where current practices effectively connect. Power, authority, control of the symbols, and wealth articulate in an intricate but intelligible way, suggesting a complex pattern with deep historical roots in an otherwise seemingly “simple” traditional society. The study is challenging, nuanced and provocative, generating new questions and avenues for exploration and forcing us to think “outside the box”.

It is our expectation that this publication initiates a practice of open and ongoing virtual forum where ideas, experiences and critiques could be shared and where knowledge could be constructed in a multiplicity of interconnected discussions. I would like to invite all of you to partake in this multi-sided conversation.

Jorge Nef, Ph.D.  
Director, LACS

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# SITUATIONAL SACREDNESS: TEMPORARY RITUAL SPACE AND AUTHORITY IN ANCIENT AND MODERN HONDURAS

E. Christian Wells and Karla L. Davis-Salazar\*

## Introduction

A key goal of archaeological research, indeed, of social science research in general, is to determine the ways in which political and economic processes articulate in the creation and recreation of cultural norms. In a broad sense, we ask questions about how and why people do what they do, and why some people in different parts of the world do it differently. We ask these sorts of questions in order to discover and explain the varied outcomes within and between societies of different size and organizational structure. Archaeology is unlike other social science disciplines, however, in that the datasets created for addressing these research questions often are bound by the limits of the cultural material record of past societies. As a result, archaeologists constantly must develop and evaluate new (and sometimes competing) lines of evidence that can be used for inferring the behavioral significance of material patterns. This paper is a step in that direction. Here we explore the limits of some of the evidence for ritual practices aimed at mobilizing and capturing the surplus labor of individuals in small communities where we have done research in Central America.

The highland Maya *k'in krus* ("Sun Cross") and the Honduran Lenca *compostura* ("fix") represent complex sets of ceremonial performances that imbue everyday mundane spaces with temporary sacredness through ritual action (Figures 1 and 2). In this paper we discuss the implications of these practices for archaeological research along with two archaeological cases from western Honduras, residential lagoons at Copán and the main plaza at El Coyote, where evidence suggests that the *k'in krus* and *compostura* may have pre-modern antecedents. We argue that ritual activities carried out in these locales created temporary sacred spaces along with opportunities for certain individuals to experience, and possibly exploit, situational authority.

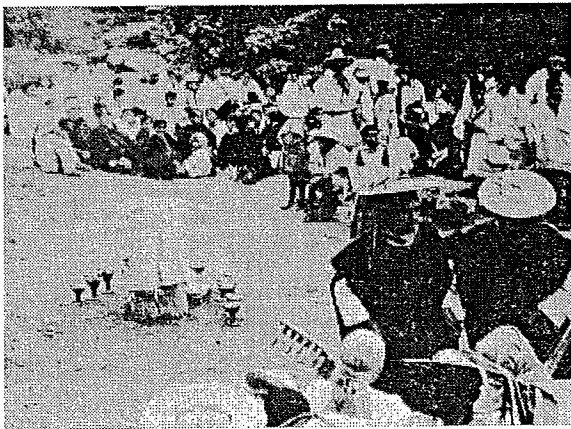


Figure 1. Guatemalan Maya *k'in krus*, ca. 1960 (recomposed after Vogt 1969).



Figure 2. Honduran Lenca *compostura*, ca. 1960 (recomposed after Chapman 1985).

### “Situational Sacredness” among the Modern Maya and Lenca

Among modern Maya and Lenca groups, ritual practices with cosmological significance often accompany many kinds of collective work projects—especially those that deal with extracting, managing, and allocating subsistence resources—carried out in everyday utilitarian or quotidian spaces in and around communities. For example, the relationship between religious ritual and communal labor is sometimes manifest in *faenas*, corvée labor projects involving ceremonial performances that embody socially shared values and beliefs (e.g., Chapman 1985; Kennedy 1978; Redfield and Rojas 1934; Vogt 1969; Wisdom 1940). In the highland Maya town of Zinacantan, Evon Vogt (1969:448) describes the mix of group labor required to clean communally shared waterholes (*bajos*) and accompanying ritual practices, which are embedded in the *k'in krus* ceremony:

Advanced preparations were made by the Señor Mayordomo, appointed yearly from among the families using the waterhole, and the ceremony took place at the end of his term of office. Preparations involved recruiting ritual specialists and other helpers and collecting money for and assembling the requisite paraphernalia for the cleaning of the waterhole; the decoration of waterhole crosses with flowers, pine needles, and pine boughs; a ceremonial meal at the house of the Señor Mayordomo; a second sortie to the same several crosses to place and light candles; and a long dancing and drinking session at the waterhole, followed by a final ceremonial meal... The paraphernalia, assembled by nonritual as well as ritual specialists within the waterhole group, included: hoes, rakes, pitchforks, and wheelbarrows for cleaning the waterhole; plant materials (roses, red geraniums, pine needles and boughs, and *ch'ib*); incendiaries, including 1-peso sized white candles, incense (wood chips and resin nodules burned in footed clay censers), and fireworks (gun powder and skyrockets) for venerating the cross shrines; and food (*atole*, meat in *chile* broth ingredients, and maize for tortillas) and drink (coffee and large amounts of rum liquor) for sustaining the participants.

The *k'in krus* ceremony expresses and reinforces rights to resource access in the community (Vogt 1976:111-115). As such, the ceremony revolves around the recognition and celebration of important communal ancestors who once played—and continue to play—a significant role in maintaining and protecting critical resources. To the extent that ritual elaboration corresponds to ancestral potency, large-scale *k'in krus* ceremonies may be seen as successful strategies to energize supernatural powers. In other words, pairing work with ritual activates temporary sacred space in which the spiritual realm can be tapped for ancestral largesse.

A similar set of practices is manifest in the *compostura* of the modern Lenca of central and western Honduras. *Composturas* are periodic work-party feasts that provide important opportunities for individuals to recruit labor in ritual contexts (Chapman 1985:109-122). During the planting and harvesting seasons, for example, sowing and weeding need to be accomplished within a relatively short time. When workers are needed for such agricultural tasks, the sponsor who requests help will almost always provide maize beer and cigarettes as an incentive to recruit labor. The work project is followed by feasting, music making, and dancing, at the expense of the host. Before the *compostura*, the host builds an altar near the field and prepares for the rituals and feasting that accompany the event. It is the obligation of the host to ensure that all of the appropriate rituals are undertaken at the precise time during the *compostura*, which include chanting, burning *copal* incense and candles, preparing *chicha* and *cacao* drinks, and sacrificing

a *guajolote* bird (Chapman 1985:97). As Anne Chapman (1985:88) describes for the *compostura de maíz*:

For the *composturas* an altar is built, formed by a frame of branches, of rectangular form and approximately a meter and a half tall, in which they insert green pine branches. The blessed cross, belonging to the family of the owner, is indispensable for these rituals; at times also a second cross made of branches then is left in the site of the ritual. On top of the altar are placed parasitic plants called *zomos*, which grow in the trees in the upper mountains. These plants symbolize the spirits to which the ritual is dedicated. At the foot of the altar burn candles numbering 2, 4, 9, or 18. Two jars of *chicha*, birds destined to be sacrificed, *copal*, a *metate* to grind the *cacao* seeds that are used during the ritual, cups, small clay vessels, etc. are also placed here.

As in the example of the Maya *k'in krus* ceremony, performance of the Lenca *compostura* results in the creation of temporary sacred space—in this case an altar accompanied by ritually significant objects and implements to which only the host has access (Chapman 1985:17). In both ceremonies, once the work project and corresponding ritual actions have been completed, the altars, crosses, feasting remnants, and other physical remains of the ceremony are dismantled and removed, leaving little material evidence of the activity.

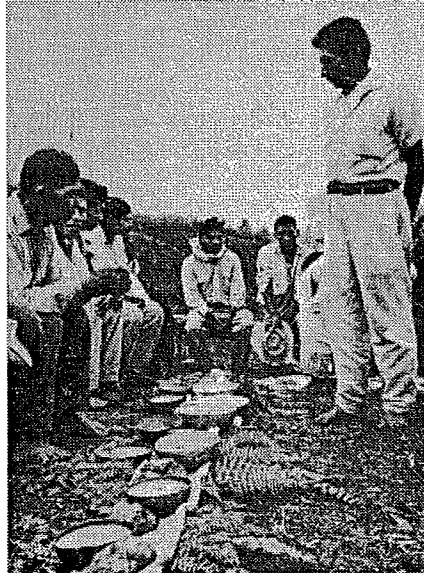
### **Material Indicators of Temporary Ritual Space**

Ritual practices that accompany collective work events and produce temporary sacred spaces appear to be widespread in Mesoamerica according to colonial and conquest-period accounts (Anderson and Dibble, eds. 1950-1960; Chapman 1978; Durán 1994; Farriss 1984; Herrera y Tordesillas 1944; Lara Pinto 1985; Tozzer 1941). Yet, given their impermanence, how do we investigate these kinds of spaces in the archaeological record? One way might be to investigate the conditions, contexts, and practices by which ritual paraphernalia are endowed with symbolic or sacred characteristics (e.g., Godelier 1999). Sources of value and meaning for symbolic objects include their unique histories of ownership and exchange (Weiner 1992), the sacredness of their component materials (Bradley 2000), and their direct association with ritual practitioners or sacred individuals, ancestors, and deities (Helms 1993). Such objects may have high intrinsic worth, based primarily on the ideological context of manufacture or use, independent of their production costs. In other words, items derived from inexpensive materials can be considered “socially valued goods” (Spielmann 2002), which gain ritual power through the history of their use. Similarly, skillfully crafted objects may have great value in a particular context, but in absolute terms may cost little more than the food required by the artisans who produce them (e.g., Appadurai 1986). Mary Helms (1998:164-173), for example, argues that “durable tangible objects” embodying mystical powers often are manifest as crafted heirlooms associated with ancestors, utilitarian goods or exotic raw materials obtained from distant sources, and animal remains that materialize cosmic forces (especially bones, teeth, claws, pelts, skins, and feathers).

This last point deserves further attention. In the *k'in krus* and *compostura* examples, many of the ritual components consist of ordinary, everyday objects—plain ware pottery, grinding stones, candles—that come to materialize socially shared values and beliefs in the course of their use during ritual practice, especially when combined with special materials usually reserved to mark “extra-ordinary” occasions, such as *copal*, *cacao*, and *chicha*. Here we

focus our attention on one class of objects that we have found to be particularly informative with regards to identifying temporary ritual spaces: plain ware pottery.

Ethnographic and ethno historic descriptions of Lenca *composturas* indicate that one distinguishing characteristic of these kinds of practices is that all participants are treated equally in terms of the distribution of foodstuffs and beverages (Figure 3). This system of “equal reciprocity” is markedly different from most other types of ritual feasts where the public distribution of food in differential quantities creates opportunities for certain individuals or groups to signal prestige (e.g., Drucker 1951:370-372; Junker 2001:277-279; Wiessner 2001:126).



**Figure 3. Honduran Lenca *compostura*, ca. 1960 (recomposed after Chapman 1985).**

Equal reciprocity is difficult to measure archaeologically, but can be manifest in the absence or lack of fancy serving dishes that would otherwise mark social status and differential treatment, in other words, the exclusive use of plain ware pots. Alternatively, equal reciprocity can be marked by the exclusive use of fancy serving dishes for all participants. Either of these situations distinguishes temporary ritual spaces from other kinds of spaces, which would be expected to employ different proportions of decorated and undecorated serving wares, indicating different social statuses.

As the number or required skill of workers increases for *composturas*, it might be expected that greater material inducements would be required to attract the desired number or expertise of workers, such as abundant foods and high-quality dishes and/or other types of entertainment or services. However, while other kinds of “economic feasts” (e.g., competitive or tribute; Dietler 2001) make use of large amounts of food and elaborately decorated serving vessels to underscore and augment social status and prestige (e.g., Clark and Blake 1994; Hayden 1996; LeCount 2001; Pauketat et al. 2002; Reents-Budet 2000), *composturas* often involve undecorated serving wares, which serve to de-emphasize expressions of social hierarchy created by the exploitation of labor (e.g., Dietler and Herbich 2001). In addition, *composturas* and other kinds of work feasts often involve the use of special non-subsistence foods (e.g., Lau

2002) instead of large quantities of food, as are consumed in competitive or tribute feasts (see Hayden 2001; e.g., Pauketat et al. 2002). During *composturas*, for example, the focus of consumption is on ritual beverages, namely *chicha*, distributed from large storage and serving jars (Figure 4). Therefore, work feasts carried out in temporary ritual spaces can be distinguished from other forms of economic feasts in the archaeological record by the character of serving vessels and feasting foods (relative to that expected for domestic consumption), the former employing plain ware dishes and specialty (i.e., non-subsistence) foods and the latter relying on fancy dishes and large amounts of subsistence foods, some of which may be specialty fare.

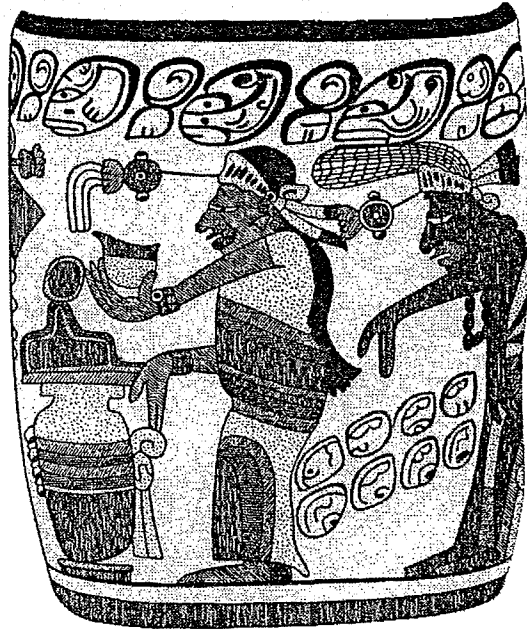


Figure 4. Classic period Ulúa polychrome vase reported from the region of Playa de los Muertos in the Ulúa Valley of northern Honduras, showing a scene of ritual drinking (recomposed after original drawing published by Strong et al. 1936: Figure 19).

### Two Archaeological Examples: El Coyote and Copán

Recent excavations in the main plaza at the Late Classic (ca. A.D. 650-850) site, El Coyote (Figure 5), situated in the Cacaupala Valley in northwestern Honduras, have yielded abundant evidence for food production and consumption from the plaza floor (Wells 2003, 2004). Plain ware pottery dominates the ceramic assemblage from the plaza (Figure 6), with large jars composing nearly 90 percent of vessel remains. This pattern is unlike that observed in residential areas at the site, where plain ware jars compose no more than 20 percent of ceramic vessel assemblages; the remainder of the assemblages consists of small, plain ware bowls and decorated pottery. Jar forms from the plaza are similar to those documented for the Lenca, including specialized, undecorated vessels for the cooking (*cugula*, *jarro*, *nixtamalera*), storage (*apaste*, *cumba*, *tinaja*), transport (*calabazo*, *cántaro*, *porrón*), serving (*pato*, *pichel*, *cajete*), and drinking (*pocillo*, *porra*, *taza*) of maize beer (Castegnaro de Foletti 1989:141-143). Given the similarity in form between the El Coyote jars and those documented as part of Lenca *composturas*, it is possible that the archaeological examples functioned in a fashion similar to

those of the Lenca, that is, for dispensing *chicha*, *cususa* (a fermented maize drink sweetened with pineapple or *anona*, a local fruit), or other fermented beverages during *composturas*. Similarly, Rosemary Joyce (1991:124) has suggested that certain decorated, wide-necked jar forms in the Terminal Classic at the nearby site of Cerro Palenque may have been receptacles for brewing and serving drinks, and John Fox (1994:198-201) has made similar suggestions for plain wide-necked and collared jars at sites in the Cuyumapa drainage to the east of El Coyote.

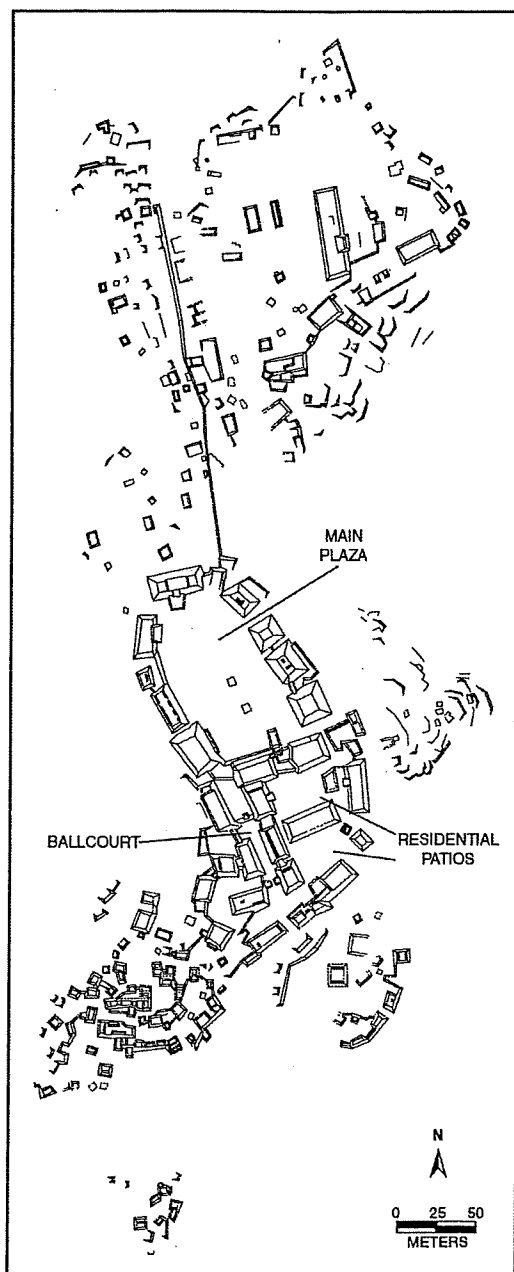
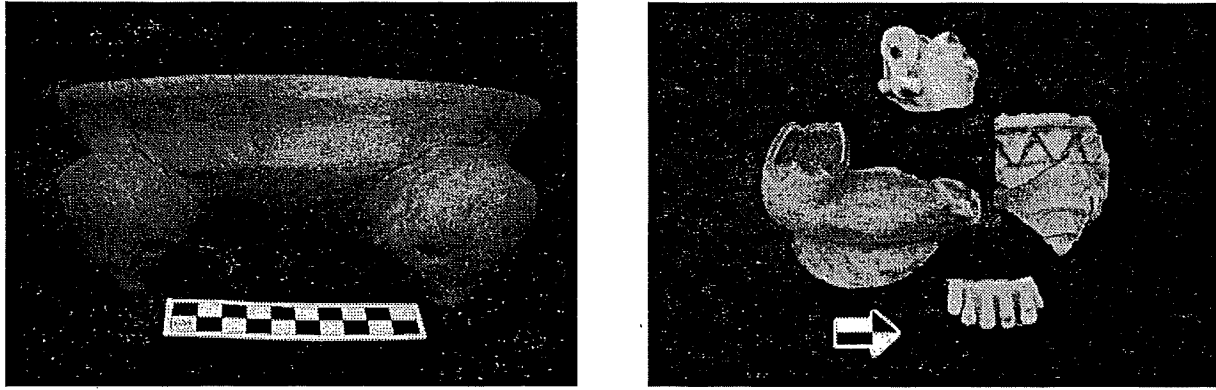


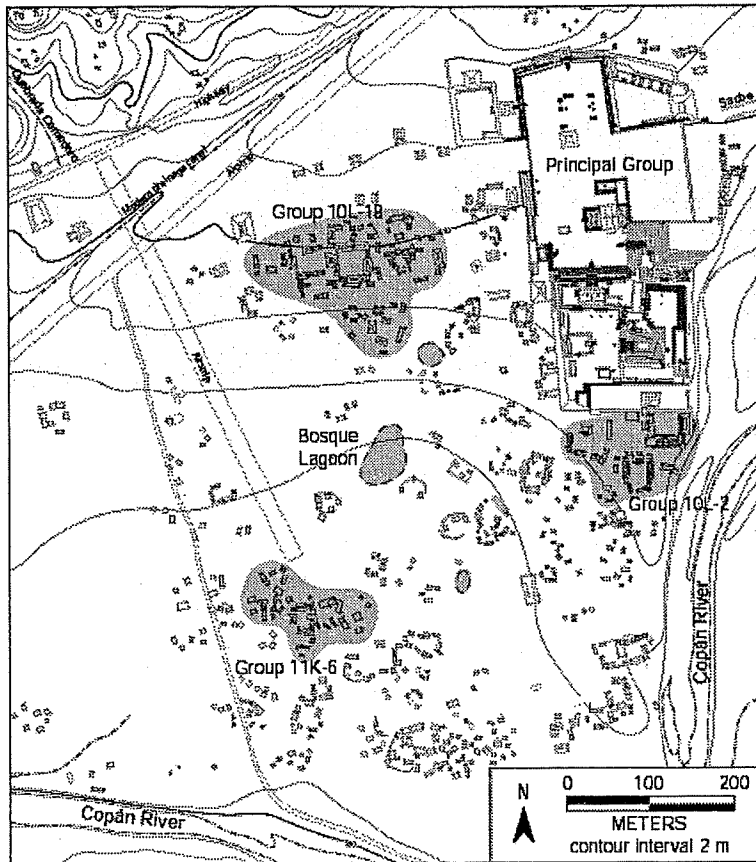
Figure 5. Plan view of the site of El Coyote, showing the location of the main plaza, ballcourt, and elite residential patio groups.





**Figure 6. Examples of plain ware pottery excavated from the main plaza at El Coyote: serving bowl (left) and fragments of a large figural censer (right).**

Another example comes from the Late Classic residential wards of Copán (Figure 7) in western Honduras (Davis-Salazar 2001, 2003). Excavations around now dry lagoons situated among residential patio groups have revealed that these features were waterholes (*bajos*) that once served as sources of potable water for neighboring residents. Some of these features appear to have been modified artificially to enhance their water storage capacity or their functionality. Compared to the ceramic assemblages from nearby habitation areas at Copán, the pottery recovered from the edges of the lagoons consists almost entirely of plain ware vessels—mostly representing either utilitarian serving dishes (open bowls and short-necked jars) and cooking implements (comals and braziers) or objects reserved for ritual practices, including censers, cache boxes, and tall lidded urns (Figure 8). This evidence again points to the use of plain ware pottery and other types of plain ceramics, as well as specialized vessels, in creating temporary ritual spaces in conjunction with collective work events, in this case along lines similar to the *k'in krus* ceremony described by Vogt for the highland Maya.



**Figure 7: Plan view of the site of Copán, showing the location of the lagoon and elite residential patio groups.**

## **Discussion**

At El Coyote and Copán, ritual practices indicated by the material remains suggest the creation and subsequent termination of sacred spaces in otherwise everyday places. Critical to the identification of temporary ritual space in these cases was the collection and study of plain ware ceramics. Our studies at these sites suggest to us that the explanatory value of plain pottery has been severely underestimated in Mesoamerican archaeology, where studies of decorated pots often are used to draw inferences about ritual practices and social power (e.g., LeCount 2001; Reents-Budet 2000). This observation is important at the very least because plain wares often dominate the pottery assemblages of Classic Lenca and Maya sites.

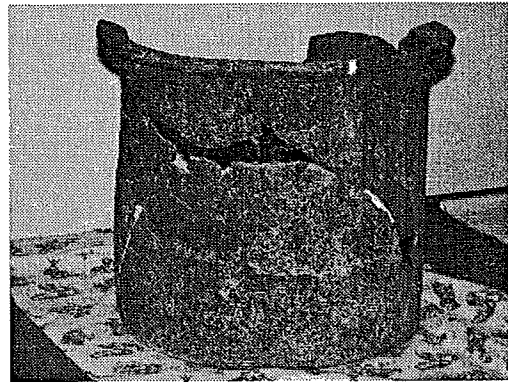
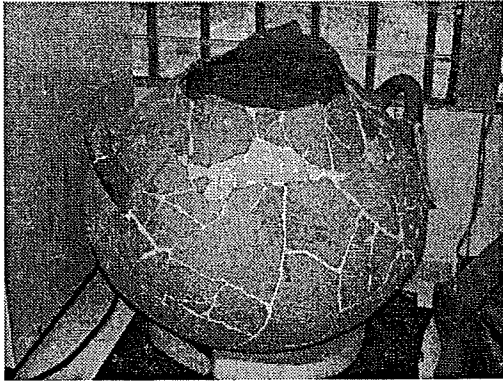


Figure 7

Examples of plain ware pottery excavated from residential lagoons at Copán: storage jar (left) and a tall lidded censer (right).

A broader implication of this study is that, over long periods of sustained practice, the material requirements and consequences of rituals that create temporary sacred spaces can create some of the conditions conducive to the development of wealth imbalances and inequities in access to resources in small-scale societies. For example, *composturas* can be exploited to generate social power by permitting their hosts to manipulate ritual contexts to engender ceremonially inequality and hierarchy, in addition to providing contexts in which production and compensation can be controlled by the feast host. In this way, *composturas* have the potential to be politically transformative events where ritual and economic activities intersect to create catalysts for social and cultural change. Thus, individuals and certain social segments (usually those with greater access to a wide network of resources, such as elites) can derive a significant degree of situational, and in some cases, sustained (and possibly multigenerational) authority by organizing and managing situations in which symbols critical to legitimizing power are created and manipulated in public settings (e.g., Brandt 1980; Dillehay 1992; Helms 1979; Siegel 1999). Communal work feasts such as the *compostura* and *k'in krus* function especially well in this regard because, as Michael Dietler and Inga Herbich (2001:257-258) argue, they represent "finite exchange transaction[s] with no reciprocal labor obligations, [which] can result, in the course of practice, in asymmetrical labor flows, such that some individuals or households derive wealth and prestige from the labor of others." As a result, work feasts permit their hosts to compromise egalitarian ethics in a socially acceptable manner (Mitchell 1988; Wiessner 2002).

Creating and expressing social power through ceremonialism in temporary ritual spaces where sacred knowledge is controlled, along with the organization of rituals that operationalize it, may characterize one pathway to power for cultural agents. Consequently, we argue that temporary ritual spaces are just as important as more permanent stages, such as temples and plazas, since both can be viewed as sites in which larger and more dynamic fields of discourse, and larger and more powerful hegemonies, are constituted, contested, and transformed (Lefebvre 1991; Low 2000).

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