Chapter 8

Feasting at Home
Community and House Solidarity among the Maya of Southeastern Mesoamerica

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While there is a considerable amount of information available relating to feasting in small-scale societies lacking permanent institutions of political authority (e.g., Kahn 1986; Kan 1989; Young 1971), and on how feasting could lead to the development of these institutions (Clark and Blake 1994; Hayden 1996), relatively few studies have focused on the role of feasting in complex societies whose members potentially had more varied options for signaling social status and prestige. In this paper, I examine archaeological evidence from the Late to Terminal Classic period Maya settlement in the Copan valley, Honduras (Figure 8.1) to determine how feasting may have figured in the politics of complex societies in Mesoamerica. I begin with a discussion of what is known of Mesoamerican feasting practices based on the ethnohistoric documentation, including the sixteenth-century writings on the Maya of Diego de Landa, Bishop of Yucatan (Tozzer 1941; see Restall and Chuchiak 2002), and the sixteenth-century compilation of information on Aztec culture known as the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1953–1982). I then move to a consideration of the ceramic and architectural data recovered from several elite patio groups in the Copan valley. After assessing vessel functions and reviewing the Copan assemblage’s functional groupings, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the spatial distribution of these groupings in the elite compounds as they
relate to feasting. The analysis highlights the importance of agency, practice, and the symbolic construction of value in deciphering the connections between power, social status, and feasting activity in the context of a Maya kingdom.

ON THE NATURE AND ROLE OF FEASTING

The repetitive and cyclical nature of feasting often appears to be structured in relation to an ordered socio-temporal framework, such as a religious calendar or the human life-cycle. But the true impetus behind much of its cyclicity is the reciprocal nature of the social relations created and reinforced through these events – one cannot be just a guest but must also be a host at some later time. Probably the best known cycles involving feasts in Mesoamerica are the elaborate state-sponsored festivals tied to the Mesoamerican calendars and dedicated to particular deities (see Durán 1971; Tozzer 1941; Sahagún 1953–1982, Book 2). But important events in the lives of people at all levels of society, such as birth, baptism, ear-piercing, marriage, pregnancy, death, and other life-stages, also required feasts to mark the occasion.¹

Figure 8.1. Map of Central America showing the location of Copan.