Networks of Power

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The assets involved in power struggles range from tangible items employed in the quest for survival to those concepts and symbols used to create and convey a sense of the world and a person's place in it (Giddens 1984: 38, 258–261). In chapter 7 we considered how resources ranged toward the material end of that continuum, specifically craft products, might have figured in processes of hierarchy building and political centralization. Here we turn to the ways abstract premises and their means of expression in physical forms were employed in political contests. Specifically, we argue that those seeking power face several problems: the creation of a network that transcends preexisting loyalties to extant webs and links their members within a single affiliation, a way of expressing that identity in emotionally compelling ways, and the provision of common projects through which the web is enacted and enlivened—all while ensuring that discourses of identity and network are firmly centered on, and privilege, the rulers. Failure to accomplish the first three objectives results in a realm divided among factions whose primary loyalties to specific domestic nets undermine any sense of unity. Further, unless elites can define for themselves exalted positions within this newly defined network, their claims on power are open to question regardless of whatever physical assets they might
control (Giddens 1984: 38, 258–261). Naco valley magnates during the Roble phase, like their brethren elsewhere in other times, had to create the entity they sought to lead and make that creation believable to its members (Brumfiel 1992, 2000a: 133; Preucel 2000; Van Buren and Richards 2000). Success in this endeavor required manipulating symbols that conveyed novel affiliations in ways that resonated with past understandings.

The localized networks that had to be encompassed within the new web consisted of house groups and households. The common projects by which these domestic nets were enacted included, among others, food sharing and participation in religious devotions. Commensality expressed more than intra-web generosity; it also stood for those processes of food production and distribution so essential to the materialization of network membership as well as to the participants’ physical survival. Any effort by Roble phase Naco valley leaders to co-opt these nets within a wider affiliation would have had to accommodate and transform these networks and the processes by which they were embodied.

We will focus on two aspects of this process: how the feelings of common purpose and affiliation underlying inter-household webs were instantiated, and the steps local notables took to ensconce themselves at the center of such nets. The first process involved the manipulation of designs painted on ceramic vessels. These motifs, it is argued, helped reinforce feelings of intra-site cooperation while linking the residents of Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco to each other. They may also have tied, albeit indirectly, the valley’s inhabitants to people who lived considerable distances from them.

Meeting the second objective involved the strategic deployment of concepts expressed through the form, decoration, and placement of special-purpose ritual architecture in Site PVN 306’s western principal plaza (WPP) and Naco’s southwest principal plaza. Here, the goal was not to create a body of styles widely shared across the settlement and region. Instead, these architectural symbols are limited to one portion of each center. Their close juxtaposition with elite households suggests that the buildings in question were commissioned by the center’s rulers as part of their efforts to gain and secure power. The use of the WPP and the southwest principal plaza for large-scale public gatherings may have supported, and complicated, these efforts.

**Creating Unity with Style**

The Naco Viejo Ceramic Complex is dominated by unslipped and red-slipped jars and bowls (chapter 1; see also Urban 1993a; Wonderley 1981, 1986, 1987). Fabrics are characterized by large numbers of often sizable aplastic inclusions that comprise 40–50 percent of paste volume, and decoration of any sort is
generally rare. The principal exceptions to this pattern are the Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes (figures 8.1 and 8.2). Members of this class are generally open bowls, usually with out-curving or out-slanting walls and pronounced basal breaks. Surfaces are slipped white and decorated on their exteriors and interiors with red-painted geometric and zoomorphic designs. The bowls are commonly supported by three hollow feet that usually make reference to birds; some are identified as stylized bird feet, while others appear to be abstract renditions of avian heads, the beaks of which point downward (Urban 1993a: 58; Wonderley 1981, 1986). This taxon was originally designated as Nolasco Bichrome by Anthony Wonderley (1981), who defined it based on the Naco assemblage (where it comprises 18% of the Roble phase collection; Urban 1993a: 57; Wonderley 1985; this figure includes incense burners decorated in the characteristic red-on-white style). At Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144 a distinction was made between two wares that appeared in the same forms and with very similar decorative motifs; Nolasco Bichrome has a paste characterized by high quantities of quartz temper, while La Victoria Bichrome fabrics are finer textured and dominated by very small inclusions of gold and silver mica (Urban 1993a). This division implies that at least two major workshops,
employing different paste recipes, were involved in fabricating vessels that, on the surface, are essentially identical.

Together, the Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes make up 5 percent of the combined Site PVN 144 and PVN 306 Roble phase collections. As noted in chapter 6, these painted wares are found in domestic contexts at all three sites, ranging from elite households to trash deposits associated with humble residences. There are few other decorated ceramics of any sort in the assemblages. Wonderley (1981) reports four other white-slipped taxa decorated with designs painted in black (Forastero Bichrome) and red and black (Posas Polychrome, Cortes Polychrome, and Vagabundo Polychrome) that make up less than 0.001
to 0.6 percent of the Naco assemblage; examples of Forastero, Cortes, and Vagabundo together comprise 0.002 percent of the analyzed Roble phase ceramics from Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306. These latter bichromes and polychromes are sufficiently rare that a study of their distribution within the last two sites is meaningless. They likely represent the remains of a few imported vessels, and their sociopolitical significance to the basin’s population is unclear. The much greater prevalence and wider distribution of red-on-white–painted bowls, however, indicates that they were fabricated locally. Their manufacture, distribution, and uses, therefore, were determined at least in part by the needs and objectives of the valley’s varied inhabitants.

The open bowls in which Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes most commonly appear suggest that they were used primarily to serve food (Wonderley 1986). The tripod supports attested to in numerous cases indicate that the comestibles were often elevated above the serving surface by 0.03–0.08 m, possibly as part of a display. The significance of the vessels’ contents is further heightened by the locally unusual decorations that adorn them. Within the generally monochrome pottery assemblage of the Roble phase Naco valley, Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes stand out. These decorated containers, therefore, were parts of the food-sharing activities through which house, household, and settlement-wide networks were materialized and enlivened.

Interpreting the red-painted designs poses certain problems. Primary among these is the fragmentary nature of most of the finds. It is difficult to extrapolate from these small pieces to the motifs that once covered complete vessels. Interpreting the Site PVN 306 and PVN 144 designs depends heavily on comparing them with larger, more complete Naco examples. To date, we have not identified any motifs that are unique to any one of these three settlements, although such distinctions cannot be precluded. Only a larger sample with clearer designs from areas outside the Naco site will help clarify the situation. At present, however, it seems reasonable to extrapolate with care from better-known Naco fragments to the general Nolasco–La Victoria design repertoire.

By and large, the motifs attested to on Nolasco and La Victoria bowls occur within a single design band that runs horizontally along the vessel’s interior and exterior and is divided into panels. Motifs include crossed diagonal lines making an X, the background filled in with dots; a guilloche appearing between two horizontal lines; an elongated triangle or ellipse; concentric semicircles; and some less common elements, including S curves, balls, and step-frets (Urban 1993a: 58; Wonderley 1981, 1986). Wonderley, among others (Rice 1983: 868, 871; 1987: 101, 238), sees in the combination of these features the rendering of reptilian figures with long, sinuous bodies, most likely snakes (figure 8.2). The creature is often decorated with what appear to be feathers (the elongated triangle or ellipse alluded to earlier).
One obvious feature of these designs is their dramatic quality. The red paint stands out starkly against the white background, making the motifs difficult, if not impossible, to ignore. The contrasting colors catch the eye and direct attention to the design field. By raising the container on three legs, the creators enhanced the legibility of these painted symbols while adding yet another decorative element to the picture. By placing the decorations on the bowl’s exterior, they also guaranteed that the motifs could be seen even when the vessel was full. The intention seems to have been to draw an unambiguous, explicit connection between those contents and the meanings conveyed by the designs.

As several authors have noted (Rice 1983: 868, 871; Wonderley 1981, 1986), the general form of Nolasco Bichrome vessels and the decorations that adorn them resemble examples from the contemporary highlands of Guatemala and the Peten Lakes area of the Maya lowlands. Wonderley has identified examples of this type in the nearby Sula Plain (1985), where it comprises about 4 percent of the Late Postclassic assemblages at two small domestic sites. Overall, Nolasco and La Victoria motifs are part of a general symbolic system widely spread throughout large parts of late prehistoric southern Mesoamerica. The feathered serpent design in particular has been singled out as an expression of a belief system tied to the “Quetzalcoatl cult,” which originated during the Terminal Classic in northern Yucatan (Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998; Rice 1983: 875–876; Wonderley 1981).

Even though their decorations were inspired by foreign motifs, Nolasco and La Victoria were very likely made in or near the Naco valley (a point made originally in Wonderley 1986). Their general prevalence in local collections supports this view, as does the existence of undecorated ceramics in the same wares as the bichromes. In addition, the drop in the frequency of red-on-white–painted ceramics outside the basin (see the discussion of chronology in chapter 1) implies that these vessels were fashioned in the Naco valley, from which a few were exported to neighboring peoples.

Although the mechanisms of distribution are unclear, there is little doubt that these ceramic containers were widely used by all segments of the population, as Wonderley first suggested (1986). They comprise 1–14 percent of the midden assemblages outside Site PVN 306’s main plazas, 1 percent of the analyzed eastern principal plaza (EPP) collections from terminal debris contexts, and 4 percent of the studied materials from the WPP, including the Str. 306-83 trash deposit. Seven of the middens unassociated with the Site PVN 306 plazas yielded proportions of bichromes between 5 and 9 percent. At Site PVN 144, Nolasco and La Victoria together make up 2–8 percent of the five analyzed midden collections from outside the principal plaza and 4 percent of the assemblage from the plaza. At Naco the proportions are even higher, rang-
ing from 7 to 21 percent across excavated middens beyond the architectural core. The ubiquity of these sherds points to the central importance of red-and-white–painted bowls in activities pursued by members of house and household networks, regardless of their location or size. Everyone needed these containers, and no one seems to have lacked for them. Recovery of red-on-white–painted vessel fragments in fairly high proportions among debris associated with public gatherings at Sites PVN 306 (Str. 306-83) and PVN 144 (Str. 144-19) also indicates that these serving vessels figured in celebrations that encompassed sizable proportions of the populations residing at both settlements. The figures for bichromes in Naco’s southwest principal plaza (47% from Str. 4F-14) are unusually high and most likely reflect the inclusion of large numbers of decorated incense burners in the total. In all cases, however, it appears that Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes were called for wherever food was served, at scales ranging from the house to the site.

Through their common use, a set of distinctive, dramatically rendered symbols was consistently associated with socially significant processes of food presentation and consumption at varying scales of inclusivity. We may never know the full array of meanings those red-painted designs had for the people who engaged with them in the Roble phase Naco valley. In general, however, they were almost certainly infused with whatever significance was attached to the consumption and sharing of food among network participants in both intimate and public settings (Bartlett and McAnany 2000; Dietler 1996; Dietler and Hayden 2001; LeCount 2001; Vaughn 2004). Insofar as the comestibles themselves were symbols of network unity, they would have reflexively acted back on, and enriched the meanings of, the red-painted designs that adorned the serving vessels. Both sets of symbols, in short, were powerfully fused, forming in that synthesis a complex set of emotions viscerally linked to network identities embodied in part through food sharing (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001; Van Buren and Richards 2000; Yaeger 2000). The widespread distribution of these bowls strongly suggests that this sense of affiliation permeated entire sites. In fact, the pervasiveness of this symbol system at all three investigated Roble phase Naco valley settlements implies that the designs and the activities in which they figured united the basin’s populations in a sub-regional network associated with a distinctive identity.

The symbols used in fashioning this affiliation are of both foreign and local derivation. Strictly speaking, the serpent has no known precedent in Naco valley design traditions stretching back to the Middle Preclassic (1200–400 BC; see Urban 1993a; Urban and Schortman 2002). In the same vein, although white slipping very occasionally appears as a surface treatment at several points in the valley’s prehistoric sequence, it is never common; nor was it often used as a background for red-painted designs (Urban 1993a). In these ways, Nolasco
and La Victoria Bichromes represent a marked change from past practices. The general resemblance of the motifs to those attested to in the Maya lowlands and highlands further points to populations in these areas as sources of inspiration for the distinctive Naco bichromes.

On the other hand, Nolasco and La Victoria evince continuities with the past. The elements that comprise and bound the serpent form, for example, resemble curvilinear rope or braid designs painted in red on the unslipped light tan surfaces of jars during the Late and Terminal Classic (Ausec 2001; Wonderley 1986; figures 8.3 and 8.4). Bird images are drawn in black and red on the orange-slipped interiors of open bowls during the latter intervals (figure 8.5). We have argued elsewhere that these avians may have been defining symbols of an identity that encompassed the domain ruled from the Late Classic Naco valley center La Sierra (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). These Late and Terminal Classic birds are rendered very differently from their Roble phase counterparts, appear almost always on the interiors of bowls, and are never used as supports. Avian representations may therefore have continued from the Late Classic but with a twist, appearing now as legs and mixed with other elements to render “feathered serpents” (Ausec 2001). At least some of the geometric forms that adorn Nolasco and La Victoria bowls also have deep roots in the Naco valley. Painted Xs, step-frets, and the use of dots as “filler” find analogs in the red-painted designs that appear on the vertical necks and shoulders of large, unslipped jars commonly found in Late and Terminal Classic valley assemblages (Ausec 2001; Wonderley 1986).

The Nolasco and La Victoria symbol set, therefore, couches the foreign and strange within the local and familiar (Wonderley 1986; see also Rice and Cecil 2009 for a parallel case). The dramatically rendered designs would have been recognizable to both visitors conversant with the general themes conveyed by serpent imagery and those who had never left the valley and could see in the birds sinuous lines, Xs, and step-frets motifs that harkened back to earlier periods in the basin’s history (see also Wonderley 1986). By uniting the parochial and the exotic, the Naco valley’s Roble phase occupants linked notions of commensality to broad-ranging and highly localized symbolic systems. Immediate concerns of house and household converged with whatever universal themes were conveyed through serpents rendered in the starkly contrasting colors of red and white. In this way, even a meal celebrating the unity of an individual house was contextualized within a set of understandings simultaneously tied to a specific past and untethered to any particular place or time.

Until the workshops in which the red-on-white–painted bowls were fabricated are found, we cannot say who sponsored this design program. One way to begin addressing the problem is to ask who would have significantly benefited from the successful dissemination and adoption of these motifs. The
most likely candidates are the local elites (see also Wonderley 1986). There are several reasons to infer that these notables were instrumental in promoting the syncretic symbol system outlined earlier. First, this segment of the population is the one most likely to have been in contact with representatives of foreign realms where symbolic systems expressed through serpent motifs and red-on-white painting were found. Naco valley elites were therefore in the best position to appropriate the relevant symbols and ensure their execution on locally made bowls. Second, elites had the most to gain from promoting feelings of unity among their subjects. The domain they sought to rule, as is the case in
most hierarchically structured realms, encompassed networks that linked individuals to specific places and the people who occupied them (Brumfiel and Fox 1994; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). Fashioning an identity that transcends these local differences and forges a sense of commonality where none existed before is crucial to the creation of unified polities. This does not mean earlier loyalties must be replaced or eradicated. Rather, a commitment to the realm and to those who rule it must be added to the set of affiliations each person who lives in the domain at least occasionally actualizes.

Promotion of a network that encompassed a wide array of adherents, therefore, was central to the project of notables seeking to fashion a unified polity out of people with diverse, localized affiliations (Pugh and Rice 2009: 142). This web could not simply be imposed from above. Rather, its nature and meanings had to be negotiated with the members of the numerous localized webs that comprised it (Brumfiel 2000a; Yaeger 2000). Every participant would have to feel some solidarity with his or her compatriots in the network. Part of the solution in this particular case involved linking a distinctive set of painted motifs representative of the novel, inter-house affiliation with food sharing and displays conducted in every house and household. In this way,
the new identity was infused with powerful emotions tied to the immediate domestic unit that was itself created and re-created each day through recurring interactions that included commensality (Dietler 1996; Dietler and Hayden 2001; LeCount 2001; Vaughn 2004; Wonderley 1986). The new affiliation’s power to unite members of different houses, therefore, depended on the continuing vitality of the domestic webs to which it made reference. Thus preexisting ties to house, household, and place were not eradicated but instead were deployed in the service of fashioning an identity that encompassed them and situated these nets within a broader context. Certainly, there was more to the creation of an extensive network than the promotion of new ceramic designs. Still, we argue that these motifs played important roles in forging a novel identity that brought together those who heretofore had not explicitly expressed enduring connections to each other.

The resulting web did not overtly privilege the political aspirations of any one faction. Everyone, to some extent, partook in the shared affiliation regardless of rank. Ensuring that this network was organized hierarchically required

Figure 8.5 Examples of Late and Terminal Classic bichromes (a) and polychromes (b) from the Naco valley
the manipulation of another set of symbols expressed through special-purpose buildings associated with large-scale rituals.

**BUILDING EXPRESSIONS OF UNITY AND DISTINCTION**

Structures 306-17, 306-19, and 306-174 in the WPP and Str. 4F-1 in Naco’s southwest principal plaza constitute marked breaks in the valley’s architectural tradition. Specifically, these edifices’ round forms; the extensive use of plaster on Strs. 306-19 and 4F-1; the latter two’s cogwheel shapes; the lower sloping zones that bordered Strs. 306-17, 306-19, and 4F-1 late in their use-lives; and the inferred presence of monuments atop the first two buildings singly and in combination set these constructions apart from their predecessors.

There is no good reason to believe these special-purpose constructions were inspired by local prototypes. Rather, they appear to have been salient architectural symbols that figured within the Quetzalcoatl cult (Demarest, Rice, and Rice 2004: 552; Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 33; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2003: 23; Pollock 1936; Pugh 2001: 251; Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998: 186, 203, 222; Rosenswig and Masson 2002: 217; Sidrys and Andersen 1978: 648). Prominent among the symbols related to this movement are round and C-shaped buildings, the former similar to those seen in the WPP and the southwest principal plaza of Naco (Chase and Chase 1988: 43–44; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2003: 4, 23; Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998). Who instigated these architectural changes, and what might their objectives have been? We argue here that it was members of the paramount households at Naco and Site PVN 306 who were largely responsible for the erection of Strs. 306-17, 306-19, 306-174, and 4F-1. The buildings are located adjoining these elite households. Those who lived in the neighboring plazas had a sufficient command over labor to raise substantial platforms for their own uses. They would therefore have been able to marshal the productive efforts of their supporters to fashion the circular buildings listed here. In addition, as noted in the previous section, notables who resided at Site PVN 306 and Naco also likely enjoyed privileged access to representatives of distant realms from whom they could obtain information about other religions and the symbols through which their precepts were materialized (Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998). In short, magnates at these two centers had the opportunity to learn about foreign belief systems and the means to put that knowledge into practice.

We suggest that the motivations underlying the observed architectural shifts were complex, born out of a tension between conflicting aims that were essential to elite political projects (Brumfiel 1992, 2000a: 133). On the one hand, as argued previously, would-be leaders had to define a network coterminous with the group of adherents they sought to rule. Preexisting allegiances were
supplemented with a new affiliation that transcended their parochial boundaries. Such novel webs required a new identity enacted through unprecedented forms of cooperative behaviors and conveyed through symbols that, regardless of their sources, were charged with new meanings. At the same time, these magnates had to distinguish themselves from those they would lead (Brumfiel 2000a: 133; Preucel 2000: 73). Insofar as their preeminence relied on securing goods from afar, elites also had to forge alliances with interaction partners capable of supplying those items. Even if imports were not crucial to their political aims, rulers could benefit from associations with distant lords who might provide support against local uprisings and attacks from beyond the valley, as well as some of the charisma associated with physically distant realms (Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 192; Helms 1979, 1988, 1992; Masson 2001: 164; Renfrew 1982; Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Rice 1983: 876). Naco valley leaders were thus faced with a conundrum all elites must confront: to be simultaneously part of and above those they rule, equally linked to far-off domains and local adherents (Brumfiel 2000a; Pauketat and Emerson 1999; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). Associating themselves with a foreign religion was one means of resolving this tension.

By selectively adopting elements of the Quetzalcoatl cult, notables at Naco and Site PVN 306 insinuated themselves within a network that crossed multiple societies located at varying distances from the valley (Boone and Smith 2003; Masson 2000b: 249–263, 2001: 164, 2003a: 200; Pohl 2003a: 62–63; Smith 2003b). This web was apparently enacted in part through its members’ occasional participation in religious practices that involved the manipulation of a shared symbol set freed from associations with a particular place and time (Berdan 2003c; Pohl 2003b). The “universal” quality of the Quetzalcoatl cult enabled its members to forge an “imagined community” that spanned territorially distinct realms (Canuto and Yaeger 2000; Isbell 2000; Preucel 2000). The bonds of trust and mutual understanding that linked participants would thus have enabled the exchange of ideas, personnel, and goods over potentially great territorial expanses (Braswell 2003c; Cohen 1969; Curtin 1984; Smith 2003b). Such inter-societal transfers may have been crucial to secure the imports, support, and charisma needed to maintain and reproduce hierarchical relations at home.

Interactions among members of this “universal” religion were apparently conducted on an equal footing. Although the “cult” may have originated at Chichen Itza and later been associated with Mayapan, the rulers of these northern Yucatan capitals did not exercise political hegemony among all their co-religionists by the Late Postclassic (Masson 2000b: 249–263; Pollock et al. 1962; Pugh 2003). This is certainly the case for the Naco valley, which shows no sign of ever having been incorporated within a foreign domain. The web
enlivened through participation in the Quetzalcoatl cult thus spread beyond the political boundaries, and outside the control of, any one state. Rulers at Site PVN 306 and Naco were among the participants in this net.

How was this foreign religion integrated within Naco valley networks? On the one hand, there is good reason to believe the Quetzalcoatl cult was modified in the course of its incorporation into Naco valley beliefs and practices. As noted in the discussion of Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes, representations of serpents linked to the “cult” were merged with local symbols to fashion what was likely a synthesis of the foreign and the familiar. Similarly, while circular buildings with no clear local precedents were raised, other aspects of the religion, such as the elaborately modeled and hourglass-shaped spiked incensarios associated with the Quetzalcoatl cult at Mayapan and elsewhere in Yucatan, are rarely found in the Naco valley (Masson 2000b: 265; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2003: 7, 25; 2009; Pugh 2001, 2002–2004; Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998; see also Rice 1987: 181–184). Modeled censers, possibly associated with ancestor worship (Masson 2000a), are completely absent from our collections, while two fragments of spiked incense burners were found (one each at Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306), along with a single complete example. The latter is a small bowl with a restricted orifice unearthed near Str. 306-86, well away from the WPP. Those incense burners used in the valley now are overwhelmingly ladle censers, whose shallow open bowls are attached to long, hollow tube handles. Although this form is widespread throughout southern Mesoamerica, it has a long history within the Naco valley, where it dates back to at least the Late Classic. It appears, therefore, that while some architectural symbols of the “cult” were accepted and displayed prominently in the WPP and Naco’s southwest principal plaza, the paraphernalia used in rites conducted in these locales had largely local inspirations. Whatever rituals the basin’s magnates engaged in when they traveled to other centers, in their own realm they seemingly modified the observances by eschewing some aspects of the rites and their distinctive symbols.

The other step taken was to insinuate the performance of rites explicitly linked to the Quetzalcoatl cult into gatherings that occurred within the WPP and Naco’s southwest principal plaza. As noted previously, these convocations, which combined feasting and religious observances, were among the primary cooperative activities that defined and reproduced webs encompassing members of numerous house groups (see also Joyce and Hendon 2000; Masson 2000b; Preucel 2000; Yaeger 2000). The orchestration of such convocations did not require the intervention of elites. They were, in essence, domestic ceremonies writ large, involving the same sorts of ritual and food-serving gear found throughout house groups of all social stations. To be indispensable to these rites of intensification and to the network they embodied, elites had to
introduce some set of practices they alone could perform. The Quetzalcoatl cult filled that need.

By commissioning the erection of physically salient elements of this symbol set in the heart of the center, notables at Naco and Site PVN 306 explicitly linked a universal religion to a body of deep-seated local beliefs and practices. Appreciation for the foreign religion was enhanced by infusing it with the emotional power of values rooted in feasting and religious observances conducted within house groups and households. At the same time, traditional rites and feasts were imbued with the charisma of a cult derived from distant, high-prestige lands (Helms 1979, 1988, 1992, 1993; LeCount 2001; Vaughn 2004; Yaeger 2000). In the process, the elites found their indispensable role in forging an inter-house network (see also Masson 2000b: 463). They could monopolize the knowledge needed to conduct religious observances on and about Strs. 306-17, 306-19, 306-174, and 4F-1. Insofar as these performances were perceived as central to the observances conducted in the WPP and Naco’s southwest principal plaza and to defining the sense of self celebrated there, then local rulers had established a route to power. Through cooperation within a network of the high-born abroad, these rulers controlled ideological resources useful in securing and sustaining their preeminence within their home domain.

The presence of roughly comparable, and sizable, symbols of this religious system at both Naco and Site PVN 306 implies that their leaders exercised comparable power and influence within the Roble phase basin. They were certainly able to establish membership in the same interregional network and employ its symbols to accomplish their own goals without undue interference from each other. There are no comparable symbols of this “cult” at Site PVN 144.

Site PVN 144’s inhabitants did, however, construct a striking set of architectural symbols that have no parallels at their larger neighbors. These are the three large stucco masks that flank the western staircases on Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 along the western edge of the principal plaza. These features have been tentatively identified as representations of God M, a patron of Maya merchants, who is frequently rendered with a large bulbous nose (Douglass and Mooney 2001). Whatever specific meanings the masks were designed to convey, their general form and locations have no local precedents. They were, rather, inspired by foreign models, almost certainly those provided by agents who lived in the Maya lowlands. There is no compelling reason to think they were closely tied to the Quetzalcoatl cult. Construction of the masks implies participation by those who commissioned them in yet another extensive network through which ideas and goods moved and alliances were established. In this case, the web may have been explicitly tied to traders, although we cannot rule out the possibility that these foreign symbols were reinterpreted within the Naco valley.
The location of these exotic symbols at Site PVN 144 suggests that they figured differently in the creation of social networks than was the case for foreign-inspired architectural forms at Site PVN 306 and Naco. The stucco images border entrances to two buildings that likely housed gatherings of influential community members (see chapters 4 and 6). Such meeting houses date back in the Naco valley to at least the Terminal Classic (Schortman and Urban 2004b). The erection of venues to host social leaders was not new, therefore, although the decorations employed in this case were fairly novel.

In addition to the stucco images, Strs. PVN 144-8-2nd and 144-8-1st were adorned with a basal sloping zone, similar to those seen on Strs. 306-17, 306-19, and 4F-1. Both of the iterations of Str. 144-8’s summit were also floored with plaster, part of which, at least in the penultimate version, was painted red. Such decoration of superstructure surfaces is attested to on buildings surrounding Naco’s principal plazas but not at Site PVN 306. These decorative embellishments further distinguished this community house from its neighbors, although Str. 144-18, immediately north of Str. 144-8, may have been decorated in a similar fashion.

As discussed in chapter 6, these features may have been integral to the roles Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 played in negotiations among power holders within the Naco settlement cluster. These interactions, probably accompanied by communal feasts and rituals, might have been carried out under the aegis of different supernatural entities than those associated with the paramount households at Naco and Site PVN 306. Hence, the absence of direct references to symbols of the Quetzalcoatl cult on and around Site PVN 144’s main plaza may have conveyed the intervention of different supernaturals appropriate to this very different context of inter-elite interaction. Even here, however, the same sorts of decorated food-serving bowls and ritual equipment found in public and private contexts were employed in celebrations conducted within the main plaza. Evocations of solidarity at all levels, from the smallest domestic webs to the network that embraced the entire settlement cluster, apparently employed much the same symbols that fused foreign and local concepts. Only the ways in which these enactments of local affiliations were tied to broader associations that privileged elite actors changed.

The final example of distinctive, foreign-inspired architecture known from the Roble phase basin is Naco’s ballcourt (Str. 4F-15). Wonderley (1981) sees the distinctive I-shaped form as inspired by highland Maya prototypes, as is the arrangement of the court and the neighboring “temple” (Str. 4F-1). In particular, he argues that the east-west arrangement of Strs. 4F-1 and 4F-15, with the ballcourt on the west, mimics organizational schemes seen as early as the Terminal Classic at Chichen Itza and which continued during the Late Postclassic among “Mexicanized” cultures throughout the Maya highlands and
lowlands (1981). Ballcourts are recorded during earlier periods in Naco valley prehistory. A particularly large example was erected at the Late Classic valley capital La Sierra, and a smaller court has been identified at Site PVN 110, where it dates to the Terminal Classic (Urban 1986). In both instances a lack of local prototypes strongly indicates that this architectural form, and the rites associated with it, were derived from areas outside the valley. In the case of Str. 4F-15 the fountainhead of inspiration lies to the west and north, from which the conceptual systems embodied in Site PVN 144’s stucco masks and the circular buildings at Site PVN 306 and Naco were derived.

Within Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco, alien architectonic symbols were grafted onto traditional practices and, presumably, integrated with the beliefs and values underlying those actions. In all three cases, exotic images were directly tied to gathering places of importance to the community in which they functioned. The primary distinction is that the Site PVN 144 examples do not appear as freestanding edifices. Rather, here the symbols are attached to a form of construction that served a function—hosting meetings of elites—with local precedents. Embellishing Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 in this way certainly transformed them, linking the notables who met within the aforementioned constructions and the actions in which they engaged during such gatherings with supernatural forces distinct from those materialized in the open plazas adjoining the two paramount households.

In all of the cases outlined here, architectural symbols of foreign religions were not explicitly tied to specific individuals or even domestic units. Expressions of the Quetzalcoatl cult at Naco and Site PVN 306 are adjacent to, but not incorporated within, their respective elite households. So, too, the masks at Site PVN 144 adorn community structures, not the residences of local luminaries. This may have been part of a policy that cast exotic faiths and their symbols as properties of entire communities, even if elites played crucial roles in enacting rites within them. In this way, relations between exotic and parochial beliefs could be portrayed as mediated by local lords who were simultaneously part of and distinct from the populations they sought to lead.

Leaders of Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco also apparently concurred that symbols associated with the foreign and sacred were to be located west of their residences. Structures 306-17, 306-19, 306-174, 4F-1, and 4F-15 lie in this direction from the paramount households at Site PVN 306 and Naco. Even within that sacred space, debris from religious devotions was concentrated on the plaza’s west margin (Strs. 306-182 and 4F-14). The same relations hold at Site PVN 144: buildings decorated with elements inspired by alien models are on the west side of the principal plaza; the clearest expressions of those distant contacts—the stucco masks—are affixed to the west sides of these edifices; and detritus associated with rites conducted in the plaza was collected on its west
side (Str. 306-19, Unit 1). This patterning may signify an underlying principle of behavioral organization that linked the west with concepts of foreignness and any supernatural powers derived from distant domains.

**SUMMARY**

We hypothesize that the Naco valley’s Roble phase elites effectively manipulated symbolic assets of both foreign and local origins to unite the realm they sought to rule, achieve prominence within that domain, and establish regular and sustained contact with their counterparts in other realms from whom they could secure the goods, ideas, and alliances needed to reproduce hierarchical relations at home. These objectives were accomplished by setting the parochial practices of food sharing and ritual by which house and household networks were enacted within the context of a universal religion, whose dominant symbols and rites were understood and enacted primarily by local notables (Baines and Yoffee 2000; Van Buren and Richards 2000).

Elites, working together within their own webs, used ideological resources in several ways to advance their political agenda. Social unity focused on paramount lords was achieved by associating symbols of the Quetzalcoatl cult directly with practices of food display and serving enacted in all houses and households at Sites PVN 306, PVN 144, and Naco (Dietler 1996; Dietler and Hayden 2001; LeCount 2001; Vaughn 2004). This linkage was achieved in part by promotion of a distinctive tripod bowl, the white-slipped exterior surfaces of which bore dramatic representations of serpents painted in red. As these reptiles were closely linked to the Quetzalcoatl cult, people looking at and eating from the red-painted containers would have been constantly reminded of the connections among food; the domestic webs in which it was produced, shared, and consumed; and the precepts of a religion unconnected to any particular place or time. Local events, such as house and household feasts, were thus contextualized within sacred premises that were universal in their scope and applicability. Every time house and household unity was enacted in food sharing, the participants’ ties to a broader congregation of believers were highlighted. Similarly, the public rites and feasts through which this broader congregation instantiated its shared affiliation and solidarity were infused with the emotional power of practices conducted regularly within the smallest domestic webs.

The conversion of generalized inter-house unity into a hierarchically structured web was accomplished by the creation of physically salient architectural symbols explicitly tied to specific prominent households (Moore 1996, 2003). At Site PVN 306 and Naco, these symbols were platforms whose circular forms linked them directly to the Quetzalcoatl cult. The construction of a ballcourt
at Naco adjoining the circular platform may have enhanced the power of the message the platform conveyed. The locations of all these buildings, immediately west of the settlements’ primary elite households, unambiguously tied social leaders with prominent expressions of the new religion while still distancing the former from the latter (see also Masson 2000b: 197). The staging of large-scale feasts and rites on and around these edifices brought most, perhaps all, of a web’s members in direct contact with the platforms and the concepts they embodied. By so doing, rulers encouraged their followers to experience celebrations of inter-house solidarity as expanded versions of those cooperative acts of sharing and ritual conducted in houses and households (Van Buren 2000). There is little doubt, however, that these gatherings were conducted under the aegis of local notables, structured according to principles that enhanced their preeminence within the community of worshippers. These magnates originally embraced the Quetzalcoatl cult, commissioned venues for its conduct, and tied those arenas closely to their residences. Whatever forms the original rites took, they almost certainly highlighted the importance of the center’s rulers in the observances. Thus local relations of power could be elevated to universal hierarchical premises, just as feelings of house and household unity were enhanced by setting them within a sacred realm of broad temporal and territorial scope.

Site PVN 144, in turn, hosted large-scale feasts and rituals in its plaza and smaller gatherings of elites in two prominent community buildings (Strs. 144-8 and 144-18) adorned with yet another set of distinctive, foreign-derived symbols. These edifices were part of an elite household complex but were also gathering places for influential members of the entire settlement cluster. Structures 144-8 and 144-18, therefore, were analogous to the WPP and southwest plazas at Site PVN 306 and Naco but on a smaller scale; all were venues where community members confronted symbols expressive of foreign religions while engaging in activities that embodied network affiliations that transcended house and household ties. The goal in each case was the same—that is, to situate novel loyalties to supra-house/household entities within the context of sacred principles unfettered by ties to specific places and times. Leaders took pains to link these alien symbols with the polities they ruled and not exclusively to their own households. Nevertheless, elites abrogated to themselves crucial roles in mediating linkages among house, household, site, settlement cluster, and the cosmos in which these nets operated. By controlling this negotiation, a few gained power over many.

On a broader territorial scale, elite participation in foreign faiths such as the Quetzalcoatl cult gave them access to a network whose members consisted of notables and, likely, merchants from different realms who communicated using a common symbolic vocabulary (Masson 2000b: 41; Smith and Berdan
At the very least, adherence to such belief systems provided a set of shared principles that facilitated forging the bonds of trust and mutual understanding crucial to establish enduring cooperative relations. It is by means of the network enacted through participation in common rites using shared symbols that goods, such as polyhedral obsidian cores, and ideas crucial to maintaining hierarchical relations at home spread. Restricting participation in this spatially extensive web to those who could decode and manipulate the relevant symbols would have helped its participants maintain exclusive control over politically potent valuables. Subordinates, therefore, could not challenge hierarchical relations by establishing independent access to these crucial items and concepts (Kipp and Schortman 1989).

In the course of synthesizing local and foreign practices and concepts, Naco valley magnates fashioned an extensive identity network that drew emotional power from the house and household webs it embraced, placed themselves at the center of this expansive net, and established long-term relations with high-status allies in other domains on whom they could rely for the political currency needed to sustain intra-societal hierarchies. There is no way of knowing to what extent, if at all, those who lived at Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco, as well as throughout the valley, accepted the precepts of these foreign religions (Alcock 2000: 119). Rituals continued to be conducted within houses and households in the investigated settlements using such traditional items as ladle incensarios. In addition, ceramic figurines, likely used in house group rites, are found exclusively in domestic contexts outside Site PVN 306’s paramount household (Brumfiel 2000b: 472–473; figure 8.6). These images are hand-modeled representations of sexless people, arms held across the chest and with simplified faces and no legs. The figurines have no known connection to exotic faiths and seem to represent items used solely in local religious devotions. Members of each house and household, therefore, likely conducted their own rites for their own needs using materials with exclusively local significance. They were not completely dependent on elites to meet their spiritual requirements and thus maintained at least a modicum of autonomy.

The combination of symbols that had great time depth with those of the new religion on Nolasco and La Victoria Bichromes further implies that foreign precepts were adapted to mesh with local understandings and beliefs. In addition, the absence of such late diagnostics of the Quetzalcoatl cult as modeled and hourglass-shaped spiked incense burners in valley collections indicates that the ritual system was not adopted wholesale at any of the investigated centers. Rather, its premises and symbols were modified for local consumption. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of red-on-white–painted bowls in domestic contexts throughout the investigated sites points to a general acceptance of at least some aspects of the foreign symbol system and their association with house and
household feasts. The multiple renovations attested to on architectural symbols of the “cult” at Site PVN 306 (Strs. 306-17 and 306-19) and on the masks on Str. 144-8, as well as the latter building’s multiple construction stages, hint at the protracted survival of these constructions and their continued use as public foci. Foreign religious precepts may not have been equally embraced by all valley inhabitants, and their significance may have been interpreted variably by those who held different structural positions defined by age, gender, rank, occupation, and place of residence. There is no denying, however, that foreign-inspired symbols spread widely across the basin and permeated even the most intimate recesses of daily life. Few of the valley’s residents were untouched by them. Elite manipulation of exotic and traditional symbols and practices, therefore, contributed to the forging of new webs organized along hierarchical lines.