



Report on the 2017 Investigations at Lamanai

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The 2017 Investigations at Lamanai

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Report to the Institute of Archaeology, Belize

Rehousing of Artefacts in 2017

Work at Lamanai in 2017 was concentrated on completion of the initial stage of sorting and re-housing in metal boxes of all material resulting from the excavations carried out at the site, as well as all material recovered during the work of restoring ancient structures and the construction of tourist facilities. Drs. David Pendergast and Elizabeth Graham arrived on site on 7th May, and on the 9th set in motion the sorting of the remaining sacks and other containers of excavated material with the hiring of two workmen from the local village: Don Antonio Esquivel and Adolfo Sanchez. (Figure 1). In the four-week period available for the work, the crew, with occasional assistance from Outpost staff (Brenda Arevalo) (Figure 2) and visiting academics (Christian Isendahl), sorted and recorded when necessary all remaining material including ceramics, lithics, faunal remains, stucco fragments (Figure 3), and a variety of other objects in small quantities, and all but a very small portion was re-housed in metal boxes.



Figure 1. Don Antonio, Adolfo & Graham sorting stucco.



Figure 2. Brenda Arevalo supervising rebagging and rehousing.



Figure 3. Stucco from one of the 25 or so bags that were stored in the bodega.

By the end of the working period on 3rd June all such efforts had been completed (Figures 4, 5), and the filled boxes had been stored temporarily in the project's Old Museum building (Figures 6, 7). Our plan is to have small zinc containers made to replace the plastic bags, at which point the boxes will be moved back to the storage shelves in the bodega.

In addition to moving the boxes back to the project bodega at some future point, it will be necessary to check the small finds stored in the old museum against the collection records to ensure that all objects are correctly marked with identifying information. In all other respects, however, the Lamanai collections have been transformed from a relatively chaotic state to a controlled and protected condition, thanks in large part to the support provided by the Friends of Lamanai and the Americas Research Fund. As a result, studies of the highly significant remains yielded by the excavations will be easily facilitated in years to come.



Figure 4. Boxes were first filled and placed on shelves in the bodega to be labelled.



Figure 5. The stucco was too heavy for the zinc boxes so it was sorted, re-labelled and placed in clean sacks. In the bodega.



Figure 6. Zinc boxes stored on the floor of the Old Museum. The buckets contain ground stone.



Figure 7. Zinc boxes placed against the west wall of the Old Museum, and under the work table.

Continued Documentation of Monuments at Lamanai 2017

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Introduction

On the 8th and 9th of July, 2017, the author of this report and Jorge Can (Archaeological Conservator, Belize Institute of Archaeology) documented the carved monuments found at Lamanai as part of excavations conducted at the site under the direction of Dr. David M. Pendergast (1974–1988) (see Pendergast 1975, 1977, 1981a, 1981b, 1984, 1986a, 1986b). The author serves as epigrapher for the Lamanai Archaeological Project (1998–present), and the documentation was conducted as part of the same project, under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Graham (2000, 2001, 2004). This report constitutes the second instalment, wherein the first reported on work conducted at the site in July of 2016. Both the latter and the present report have been formally submitted to the Institute of Archaeology.

The purpose of this research effort is continue the documentation of the monuments including their measurements and state of preservation, to secure photographs of these *in situ*, as well as to ascertain the original provenience of each at the site. Also in keeping with the goals of the previous season, the work aims to finalize templates that will used in the drafting of new line drawings of the extant corpus of monuments at the site. In 2017, some of the preliminary pencil drawings were checked against original monuments, something that will have to be done again during the upcoming 2018 field season. These new drawings are part of an on-going research effort, by the author and Dr. Pendergast, who are preparing a full-length report on the carved monuments at the site, for publication and dissemination to the academic community, specialists, as well as lay people alike. This study will provide scholars and interested readers with the context and description of each monument found at the site, as well as line drawings, accompanied by photographs of selected details, and a text providing up-to-date epigraphic – and where relevant, iconographic – analyses.

The study follows up on the photographic documentation work conducted in 2003, by Stuart Laidlaw (Lecturer, photography & digital imagery) of the Institute of Archaeology of University College London, in England. The present efforts run in parallel with the work of Dr. Bruce Love who has independently secured photographs of the Lamanai monuments in 2016. The present study is also envisioned as building upon the foundation set by the wonderful, three-part study of Stela 9, published in 1988, providing a detailed review of the context, epigraphy and iconography of this important monument (Pendergast 1988; Closs 1988; Reents-Budet 1988). Since these publications, the field of epigraphy has steadily progressed and it is now deemed a suitable time to prepare new drawings that are more attuned to details of paleography and epigraphy. The resulting publication will provide more refined and updated analyses of the monuments, which while somewhat technical—given the nature of the subject matter—will be written as an approachable text that can be appreciated by tour guides and tourists alike.

Corpus

In preparing the study of the monuments of Lamanai, the author, in collaboration with Dr. Pendergast, has been preparing a comprehensive inventory of the monuments. In so doing we have also been able to update the nomenclature of the monuments to better reflect their nature and also to conform to the norms of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, the project of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology that is the leading standard for epigraphic research in the Maya area (Graham 1975). Thus, for instance, the carved monument that served as the central riser of the megalithic stair of Str. N10-36, which previously had

been designated as Stela 11, has now been re-designated as Panel 1. Similarly, the risers of the hieroglyphic stair that have been found scattered throughout the northern part of Plaza 5, the plaza fronting the High Temple (N10-43) have been re-designated as Steps 1 through 5, since it is now clear that these form part of the same original monument, even though these were displaced by the ancient Maya in antiquity. In addition, these risers together constitute a hieroglyphic stair and are thereby designated as Hieroglyphic Stair 1. Below we provide an the most updated list of monuments documented at Lamanai, with the proviso that these tabulations remain preliminary and are subject to change as this research progresses (Table 1).

This list supersedes that presented in the foregoing 2016 report. For instance, we have been able to confirm that Stelae 4 and 5 are in fact carved. Stela 4 is that erected in front of the nave of the later church (i.e., YDL II or N12-13; see Graham 2011: 199-207, 208-218) with traces of carving are still visible on its upper southern side. Early accounts by Thomas Gann relate that a sculpture in the shape of a snake was discovered within the church and was exported to the US, since it appears in the inventory of the Smithsonian Institution (where it was catalogued as a stela), but is now lost (Gann 1926: 64-65; see also Pendergast 1986b: 5; Graham 2011: 213). This sculpture was said to be covered in several layers of stucco that were brightly painted and decorated. Some of the descriptions also mention a stela and I suspect that Gann was describing Stela 4, which he also said bore traces of carved, or at least decorated, plaster. Inspection of the monument did not reveal any plaster, but the section with carving is delineated by extensive spalling, which might explain why Gann interpreted this feature the way that he did. Stela 5, has evidently been displaced a little since its discovery, and is now found as two fragments, situated 2 m apart at the southwest corner of Str. N10-12 of the Ottawa Group. Stelae 6, 7 and 8 were all relocated during the 2017 season. We have also been able, in consultation with Jorge Can of the Institute of Archaeology, been able to confirm that Step 5 was also found in the later church (YDL II or N12-13) as part of the Institute of Archaeology conservation of historic buildings funded by the U.S. Ambassador's Fund and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (Graham 2008). The one monument that remains to be relocated and documented is Stela 10, and it is hoped that it can be rediscovered during the 2018 season of work at the site.

Designation	Context	Plain/Carv
Stela 1	Str. N9-56	carv
Stela 2	Str. N10-9	carv
Stela 3	Str. N9-56	plā
Stela 4	N12-13 (YDL II)	carv
Stela 5	N10-12	carv
Stela 6	N10-63	plā
Stela 7	N10-64	plā
Stela 8	N10-64	plā
Stela 9	N10-27	carv
Stela 10	N10-74	carve
Altar 1	Plaza P2	carv
Altar 2	N10-38	carv
Ballcourt Marker I	N10-40/41	plā
Panel 1	N10-36	carv
Step 1	Plaza 5	carv
Step 2	Plaza 5	carv
Step 3	Plaza 5	carv
Step 4	Plaza 5	carv
Step 5	N12-13 (YDL II)	carv

Table 1: Tabulation of the monuments found at Lamanai.

What this tabulation reveals is that the corpus of Lamanai is much larger than is usually appreciated. The size of the corpus is nonetheless clearly proportionate with the size of the site, being the second largest in Belize, after Caracol. For the sake of comparison, Caracol is known to have a corpus comprising 24 carved stelae, 24 carved altars, 5 carved ballcourt markers, a hieroglyphic stair, in addition to plain monuments, making it the single largest corpus of monuments for any Belizean site.

Another aspect that is of interest is that Lamanai evidently had a hieroglyphic stair, which was also the case for Caracol in antiquity, before the stair was removed in the late seventh century, being scattered to Ucanal, Xunantunich and Naranjo (Helmke and Awe 2016a & 2016b). What is interesting about this feature is that most sites in the central Lowlands that exhibit such hieroglyphic stairs had a connection with the so-called Snake-head dynasty (Helmke et al. 2015:21-25), which had its seat of power at Calakmul in the Late Classic, shifting from Dzibanche in the mid-seventh century (Martin 2005; Martin and Velásquez 2016). At present, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest ties between Lamanai and the Snake-head dynasty in the Late Classic, but this is something to consider, especially considering the absence of such hieroglyphic stairs at Tikal and neighboring sites.

Only portions of the hieroglyphic stair originally raised at Lamanai have been found, as parts of five risers, and based on the portions of text preserved and syntactical parameters, I surmise that at least another two or three such risers originally constituted the hieroglyphic stair. Assuming that all the risers were aligned to form a single large step at the base of a large monumental stair, as seems likely, it can be surmised that the original stair may have graced Str. N10-42, on the western side of the High Temple plaza (Plaza 5). In fact, a close examination of the distribution of the risers that remain *in situ* reveals that the vast majority were found at the base of Str. N10-42 and that the tops of large, similarly-sized risers are visible in the undergrowth (Figure 2). Of the carved risers, Steps 2 and 3 have been moved to the Visitors Centre during consolidation work conducted by the Institute of Archaeology. Steps 1 and 4 remain on site, at the base of Str. N10-42, whereas Step 5 is now in storage, having been moved by the ancient Maya to the nave of the later church. Together, these distributional data suggest that the currently known risers were part and parcel of the broad stair of Str. N10-42 and that excavations are warranted to further clarify their original context and to reveal additional carved risers. The risers in question date to the seventh century, based on an associated partial date and the style of the associated text, as well as the mention of one of the figures named on Stela 9 (i.e. *K'ahk' Ujo'l Yopaaht*, the second name of "Smoking Shell", see Closs 1988: 13-14) (Figure 1), confirming their contemporaneity with a Late Classic construction phase of N10-42.



Figure 1: Photograph of the large monolithic riser designated as Step 3, naming the seventh century king, *K'ahk' Ujo'l Yopaaht* (photograph by Christophe Helmke).

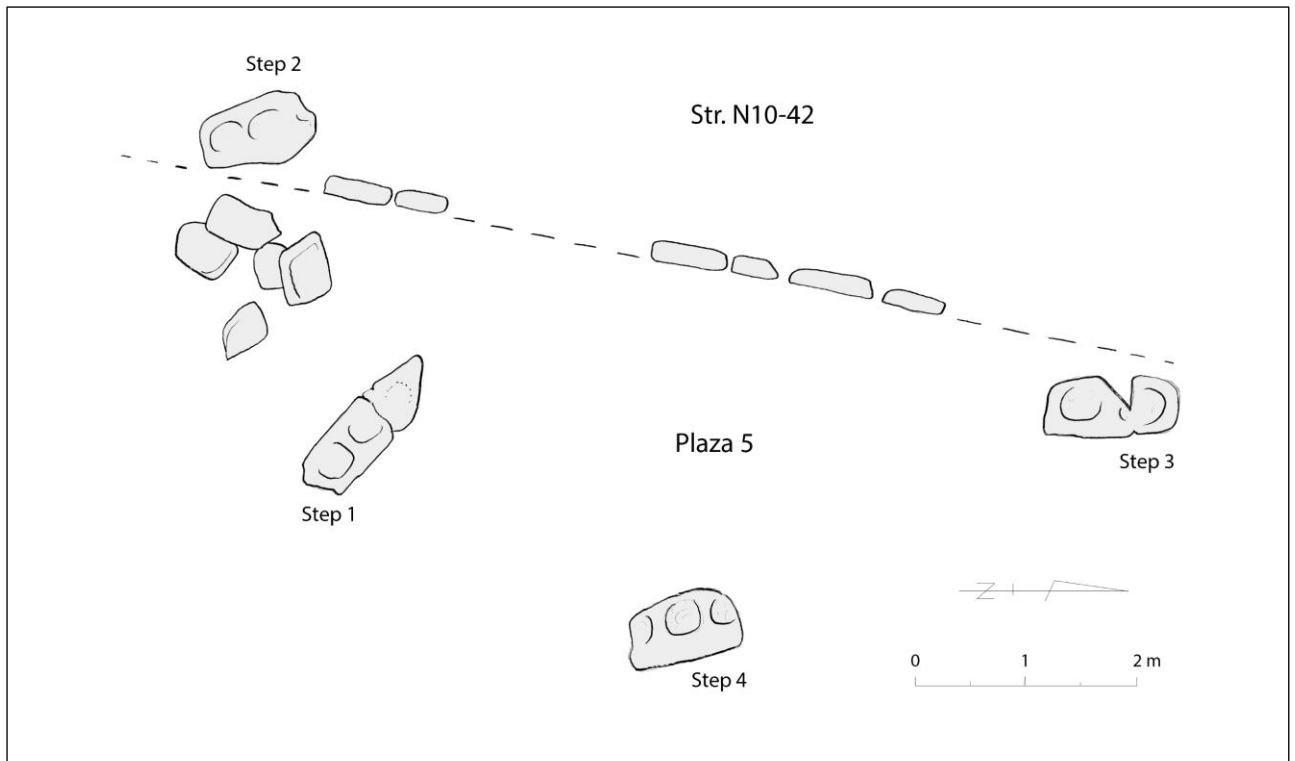


Figure 2: Sketch plan of the base of Str. N10-42 showing the original disposition of the four carved risers in relation to other risers that remain *in situ*. Scale is approximate. Plan is aligned to grid North (plan by Christophe Helmke).

Large blocks of similar size were used as stair risers at Lamanai during the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic transition, but these are a subsequent manifestation of this architectural tradition. Examples of these large and later risers and can be observed in the access to the Ottawa Group (Plaza N10-3) platform, on the south side (Graham 2004). These types of large monolithic risers are also known from contemporaneous contexts at the archaeological site of Marco González on Ambergris Caye, suggesting some sort of equivalence and relationship between the two sites, predominantly during the Early Postclassic (Graham & Pendergast 1989).

Method

The photographic documentation entailed digital photography with a Canon EOS M3, mirrorless camera. All the photography was conducted at night with artificial raking light—with daytime photography serving to supplement the overall context shots. The physical photography was conducted by the author of this report with the assistance of the Park Rangers, Kevin Díaz and Walter Rodríguez. Compact and portable LED lights of (200 lumen) were held in position close to, but without touching, the actual surface of monuments, in order to bright out as many of the carved details as possible, through high contrastive cross-lighting. Due to the low levels of ambient lighting, variable exposure times or shutter speeds of 1/8 sec. through 1/40 sec. were employed with high ISO at around 6400. With each shot secured, the light was moved in a circular motion to a new position in order to highlight details that were not readily apparent in the previous shot and a new shot secured. This process is repeated until a minimal selection of six shots have been secured with variable lighting. General shots of the whole monument are secured first, following by large shots of various sections, and finally focusing on smaller details. In the case of glyphic texts for instance, the entirety of the text is shot first, followed by groupings of glyphs and finally on individual glyphs, as necessary. This process is illustrated in the figure that follows (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Three alternate applications of raking light to the hieroglyphic text of Panel 1. Note how each lighting highlights details from the different angles (photographs by Christophe Helmke).

Results

Following up on the documentation work conducted in 2016, the author and Can examined the monuments that are now on exhibit in the Visitors Centre, including Stela 9 as well as Panel 1 and Steps 2 and 3. In this respect, the Rangers were particularly helpful. We double-checked all the measurements and the author also annotated a series of pencil sketches of the various monuments and texts. These revised sketches will be merged into the photographic templates and used as part of the drawing process. Stela 1, which is also in the Visitors Centre, was not available for documentation or photography, since it remains boarded up in plywood. It is hoped that this stela can be freed from the cribbing in 2018 so as to better document it and secure measurements as well as information of relief and depth of carving.

Having completed the documentation at the Visitors Centre we proceeded to the site, to document some of the monuments that remain on site. These included Stelae 2 through 8 as well as Altars 1 and 2 and Ballcourt Marker I. Interestingly, a close inspection of Ballcourt Marker I revealed that its edge is delineated by a carved band and is partly recessed to better accommodate the plaster surface and thereby have a surface that was flush to the ground of the playing alley. As such, Ballcourt Marker I is technically speaking carved, since its edge is recessed and there is a clear foreground to background distinction. Nevertheless, it does not appear that the marker was ever carved with designs that could be qualified as iconography, nor with glyphs, and as such, it continues to be considered as plain. As part of this circuit, we were able to document the metrics of Stela 5 and to make field sketches of the carving. We also secured measurements of Stela 3 and documented its original context of discovery and its relation to Stela 1 in the N9-56 "Mask" group. In addition, we were also able to relocate the plain Stelae 6, 7 and 8 (Figures 4 & 5) that are located at what might be called a small causeway terminus group, to the west of the Ottawa Group, in association with the relatively low Strs. N10-54 (*i.e.*, Stelae 7 & 8) and N10-63 (*i.e.*, Stela 6). These low structures define the southern edge of the low platform that constitutes the terminus group, wherein N10-55 appears as the dominant ritual structure of the complex.

What remains for a future season, planned for the early summer of 2018, is to double check the preliminary inked drawings against the original monuments in the Visitors Centre, in the bodega and on site, as well as to relocate Stela 10. More nighttime photography will be required for Stelae 4, 5 and 10, as well as Steps 1 and 4. In addition, it would be ideal to clear, by means of excavation, the base of Str. N10-42 and to produce a scaled plan of the stair and its risers, as well as Stelae 6-8 as discovered *in situ*. I hope that this can be coordinated in time and that this will bring to a successful conclusion this part of the documentation project.



Figure 4: Fragments of Stela 6 as relocated *in situ* in 2017, in association with Str. N10-63 (photograph by Christophe Helmke).



Figure 5: Fragments of Stela 8 as relocated *in situ* in 2017, in association with Str. N10-54 (photograph by Christophe Helmke).

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