

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM/ UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER

CONFIDENTIAL

New Series, No. 1, May, 1965

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Dear Friends:

Archaeological Newsletters have been issued sporadically by the Museum in the past. You may remember those sent from Jericho and Jerusalem. We know that they were well-received and have always hoped to put them on a regular basis, but circumstances have, up to now, made this impossible. We trust that with this issue we can begin a series which will bring you regular reports on the archaeological activities of your Museum written by those best qualified to do so - the field directors themselves.

It is quite true that you will probably learn the results of our field work in other ways. Already there have been reports in the Varsity Graduate and, of course, there will be the final publications. But a Newsletter can do something which such publications cannot do. Because the articles are written by the field archaeologist while he is actually excavating, they can have an immediacy, a human interest, and an atmosphere of enthusiasm which somehow are filtered out of the more scholarly publications. Ideally, a Newsletter should make you feel that you are actually present on the excavation and are hearing a report from the field director on what he is doing at that moment, what he has discovered, what interpretations he puts on his findings and what he must do next. He will probably include many details of climate and topography; he may describe the birds and animals and the general physical setting in which he is working. All these bits of information will help you feel that you are actually on the spot. And, finally, because the field director knows that his reports are not for publication he can relax and tell you informally of his problems, his hopes and his ideas at the moment.

Now, without further ado, I introduce you to Dr. David M. Pendergast, our Field Director in British Honduras, who recently sent me the following report on his current work at Altun Ha (Rockstone Pond). In the months that follow you will have other reports on our work in Ontario, in Iran, in Jerusalem - on land and under the water. I hope you will enjoy them all.

A. D. Tushingham  
Chief Archaeologist

## UNCOVERING A MAYAN CENTRE

The latter part of June will see the return of the rains to the Central American tropics, and hence will mark the end of field work for the second season of the Museum's British Honduras Expedition. At this writing, two-thirds of the season had been completed, with results at least as significant, if not in some ways more so, than those of the initial season at Altun Ha.

Movement into the field was delayed by unseasonably late and heavy rains, which turned the site and access roads into a quagmire. Following removal of seven months' growth of bush, in some places over ten feet high, the expedition camp was enlarged, and, with the Museum's new flag flying over British Honduras for the first time, excavation was recommended in early February.

The first task of the 1965 season was the completion of excavation left unfinished at the end of the preceding year. Following excavation of the tombs described in last summer's Varsity Graduate, attention had been turned to other mounds in the same group, south of the site's central plazas, with the aim of determining whether other mounds also contained tombs. Although no other mound was found to house a tomb, the group proved to be an interesting conglomeration of small temples, structures of unidentified use, and house mounds. Two of the structures, one an unusual L-shaped mass of boulders with only rough facing, the other a strange maze-like building with walls approximately three feet high, saw the initial efforts of this season.

Continuation of work in the same mound group later in the season resulted in clearing of eight mounds, including two small temples set atop platforms about six feet high. In the hearting of one of the temples, below the building floor, and also at the base of the L-shaped mound, were found apparent dedicatory caches - that is, offerings made to ensure that the gods would look with favour on the new building - in each case at the exact centre of the structure. In both caches there were giant flints like those found in the tombs, as well as shells, jade objects, and other items highly regarded by the ancient Maya. Subsequent work this season has shown that such caches were a common, if not invariable, part of construction activity, always including giant flints, although in varying numbers.

Giant flints also played a part in another type of offering discovered this season in several structures. Groups of artifacts, termed offertory caches, have been found in both small and major temples, and in mounds with little or no structural remains; they range from masses of obsidian flakes to pottery vessels containing jade beads, and, in two instances, groups of eight giant flints. These caches were, like the dedicatory type, offerings to the gods, but they were not directly connected with construction activity, frequently being placed outside of buildings, or in pits dug through floors. The two caches of eight flints, both discovered in the ruins of one of the major temples in the site centre, are especially important, since their locations make it clear that the caches were deposited after the temple had fallen into decay, probably several centuries after Classic Maya civilization had collapsed and Altun Ha had been abandoned to the ravages of the jungle. This, together with bits of evidence from elsewhere at the site, suggests that reverence for the ceremonial centre endured long after the priests and their ceremonies had disappeared.

Of the priests themselves we are coming to know a good deal more as well, as the result of the discovery, in a 60 foot high mound which forms the eastern border of the secondary plaza at the site centre, of a group of tombs. Beginning with the finding of a single slab of stone protruding from the face of the mound, excavation has gone on to reveal the existence of at least four tombs, placed in and around the structures which at various times capped the massive pyramid. Unfortunately, two of the tombs had been badly damaged by roof collapse, and the first discovered was marked by little more than traces of its content and form. However, immediately below this a second tomb was discovered, obviously antedating the first, and partially preserved by it.

In Tomb 2, the skeleton and its accompanying riches had miraculously survived the cascading of tons of stone and earth into the chamber; removal of the masses of fallen material revealed the remains of a priest laid out full length on his back, with 11 large oyster shells, 30 jade artifacts including 9 large pendants carved with representations of richly garbed priests, and masses of bone, tooth, and tusk beads, as well as several strikingly large pearls, and a variety of other objects. Sadly, a few tiny fragments of what may have been a codex, a book containing calendric, astronomical, or other knowledge recorded in hieroglyphic texts, were found at the feet of the individual. Over all this wealth, and the masses of cloth, wood, and feathers which undoubtedly accompanied it, a thick mantle of pigment was laid, giving a deep red colour to the entire chamber. Oddly, this richness was housed in a rough chamber like those discovered in 1964, and the same type of construction marks tombs 3 and 4, not yet fully cleared. This, together with the clearly honorific position of the tombs, suggests that vaulted tombs were not used at Altun Ha, and even those of highest status in the community were interred in what seem, in contrast with the artifacts, rather mean crypts.

In addition to the above described excavations, work has continued on one of the large mounds bordering the larger central plaza, including clearing of the pyramid base, excavation of late additions to the structure, and removal of the final phase of construction in several areas, to enable us to learn something of the nature of earlier buildings concealed within the mound's hearting. Also, excavations have been undertaken in two areas of the site in deposits yielding early ceramics, thus helping to fill in knowledge of changes in pottery styles in the Early Classic (ca. A.D. 300-600) and the Formative and Proto-Classic (possibly 200-300 B.C. or earlier - A.D. 300).

As with any excavation, as many problems have been raised as solved in the second season. For example, we have discovered one large stone with a pecked design, possibly a calendric circle, but there is still no evidence of stelae or other monuments, despite the availability of suitable stone at the site. On the other hand, the second season has served to extend and reinforce the recognition that the occupants of Altun Ha, living as they did near the Caribbean, were more oriented to the sea than previously supposed; in fact, there must have been a segment of the population whose days were spent entirely in fishing, collecting shellfish, and other maritime activities. With this and many other patterns beginning to emerge, and with many problems remaining to be solved, the coming season, scheduled to begin in January of 1966, should prove even more rewarding than that now drawing to a close.



ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM  
University of Toronto

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New Series, No. 24, May, 1967.

Editor's Note: We regret that two typographical errors crept into the last newsletter, written by Mr. Organ. On page 4, line 17, for "corded", read "corned"; and in the fifth line from the end, for "substance" read "substances".

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Rockstone Pond #1, British Honduras,  
April 16, 1967.

ALTUN HA: THE 1967 SEASON BEGINS

by David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Those who suffered along with the staff through the weather traumas of the 1966 season will be pleased to learn that 1967 has begun with a proper dry season, and with the climatic problem set aside, we have been able to concentrate on archaeology rather than mud. The season, now more than half completed, gives every promise of being the longest we have been able to sustain, and has already seen the addition of a considerable amount of information to that collected in past years. Too, the acquisition of the site centre by the British Honduras government as an archaeological reserve has solved many of the small problems which have afflicted the operation in past years, so that the work flows along with a refreshing lack of interruptions.

As in 1966, our main effort has been concentrated on Structure B-4, a rather prosaic designation for one of the main ceremonial buildings in the central precinct of the site, where in seasons past we encountered six tombs of priest-rulers, associated with the last six phases of reconstruction. At the start of this season, another of the inescapable archaeological axioms manifested itself: the survey department requested permission to place a marker atop the structure, and we chose a spot in the floor at the side of one of the round altars where no further work was contemplated, only to find, the day after the marker had been put in place, that an earlier round altar was concealed beneath the floor. We

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are still struggling with the problem of excavating around the survey marker in order to clear the earlier altar, which is the third thus far encountered, but partial excavation has shown the altar to have been the scene of sacrifices like those carried out on the later two, involving burning of copal resin and carved jade objects. Again, as in the case of the later altars, we have recovered from the area around the altar base quantities of blackened bits of what were once beautifully carved pendants and beads — not an altogether pleasant type of archaeological work.

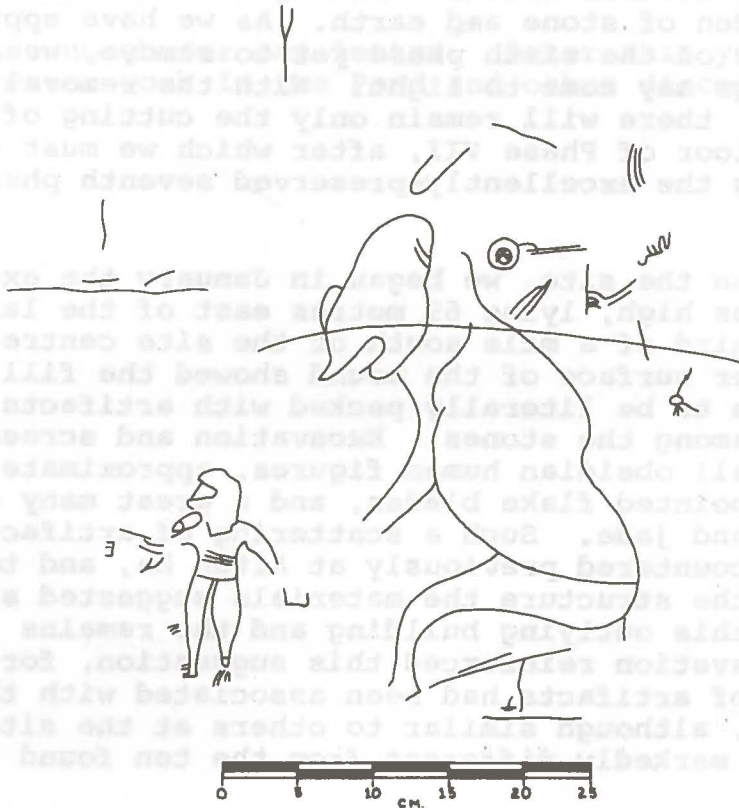
In the lower areas of the structure, we began by clearing away the overlying fill of the sixth phase from a long vaulted room of the next earlier structure. As the work progressed, it became clear that the room which we had discovered at the end of 1966 was in fact one of two, paralleling each other, and extending across the entire front of the building. Unfortunately, the ancient Maya had seen this two-room complex as too large to cover with the next phase of construction, and hence had demolished much of the vault and the greater part of the outer wall of the front room, leaving only the bases of small wall sections, rather like columns, between the nine entry doorways. We also found that all entrances to the rear room had been sealed, making it clear that the rear room had been abandoned and filled prior to the front room, and suggesting very strongly that the gradual process of covering the seventh phase was marked by continuing use of parts of the building, which conjures up a picture of the priests and retainers having to clamber over piles of fresh stone in order to carry on the ceremonies.

Clearing of the rear room brought to light products of what must be a basic drive in all human beings, the urge to doodle. Graffiti, or designs scratched on walls and other surfaces, are not uncommon in Maya sites, but most are no more than random lines, cross-hatching, or other simple patterns. Much rarer are designs such as those found in the rear room (Fig. 1), which include a small human figure in what may be the helmet and costume of a player of the ceremonial ballgame popular among the ancient Maya, and a larger figure which resembles very strikingly a mythical human-animal painted on a polychrome bowl found in another structure in 1966. The recurrence of the mythical figure in two separate contexts may indicate that the being was important in local folk-belief or religious practice, and the accompanying elements on the pottery vessel point to a connection with the maritime emphasis in the life of Altun Ha. Whether the graffiti were produced by priests or workers we cannot say, but it appears that the practice was simply the ancient counterpart of the modern tourist passtime, but without the names and dates which the modern carvers usually leave as their claim to immortality.

Perhaps the most uncommon elements discovered in Structure B-4 are the fragmentary stucco frieze panel on the rear of the two-room complex and a large stucco human face at the right of the central stairway near its base. The former has produced countless headaches, for much of the stucco was not bonded to the wall surface, and only extensive patching, gluing, and reinforcing has kept the bulk of the complex designs from peeling away from the building. In this area, as well as around the vaulting of the rooms, we now have a two-man cement crew working full time,

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**Fig. 1** Graffiti from the rear wall of the East room (Room II), Phase VII, Structure B-4.

trying to stabilize the structure sufficiently to ensure that the first heavy rains later this year will not wash away what we have excavated. Fortunately, the stucco face is in far better condition, though like most ancient representations of the human face its nose is missing. If the same is true of the other three faces which we expect to encounter as we clear the lowest part of the building, we shall come to visualize the Maya deities just as we do the Roman emperors, noseless. Only a stylized mask, probably Chac, the rain god, retains its beak-like nose, which was protected by the tomb discovered last year in front of the panel on which it lies.

At the moment, efforts on Structure B-4 centre on the area in front of the Chac panel, where it appears that, as covering of the seventh phase began, several offerings were placed in the fill of Phase VI, outside

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and below the tomb mentioned above. Three separate caches of objects have been encountered in the area, ranging from an isolated human skull with a single pottery vessel to groups of large ceremonial flints accompanied in one case by several incense-burning vessels, all badly crushed by the overlying burden of stone and earth. As we have approximately one and a half metres of the sixth phase yet to remove, we are hopeful that further offerings may come to light. With the removal of the last vestiges of Phase VI, there will remain only the cutting of a small test trench through the floor of Phase VII, after which we must cease work on the building, leaving the excellently-preserved seventh phase as a tourist attraction.

Elsewhere on the site, we began in January the excavation of a mound nearly 18 metres high, lying 69 metres east of the large pond which is approximately a third of a mile south of the site centre. Initial cutting into the upper surface of the mound showed the fill of the final phase of construction to be literally packed with artifacts, which were scattered at random among the stones. Excavation and screening produced 85 jade beads, 54 small obsidian human figures, approximately 65 long, delicate obsidian bipointed flake blades, and a great many other artifacts of obsidian, shell, and jade. Such a scattering of artifacts in structural fill had not been encountered previously at Altun Ha, and together with the unusual form of the structure the materials suggested significant differences between this outlying building and the remains in the site centre. Further excavation reinforced this suggestion, for it was found that the scattering of artifacts had been associated with the construction of a tomb which, although similar to others at the site in some ways, was in many respects markedly different from the ten found in and near the site centre.

The tomb lacked the roof of huge flint slabs which characterized all other crypts, and the contents were also different from those encountered in the other tombs, though orientation of the body was roughly the same. Absent were the large ceremonial flints, numerous jade objects, shell necklaces, polychrome vessels, and other normal burial accompaniments of the priests; in their place were 59 whole and fragmentary huge oyster shells, five monochrome pottery vessels, a deer antler, one pair of shell rosettes, a pair of pearls, a set of jade earplug flares, and a necklace of 80 small shell beads, 6 finely carved small jade beads, and one jade pendant which may be meant to represent an alligator.

Unfortunately, the reasons for the differences which set this tomb apart are not yet clear; it may be, in view of the fact that a small mound which yielded very late material lies not too far from this major structure, that the tomb differs from others because it is later by four to five centuries, but it is equally possible that the differences stem from an extremely early placement in time, since the earliest known tomb also lacks some of the artifacts found in later priestly interments. We hope that examination of the pottery vessels from the tomb, once they have been reconstructed from bits and pieces, may help to answer the questions regarding dating, but we are also attacking other phases of the mound in a quest for ceramics or other indications of age. In this attack we face

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some ponderous problems, however, for no phase yet encountered is in even moderately good condition, and we must piece together the form of the structure from fragmentary and fallen walls and steps. Work on this structure will continue to the end of this season, and very probably beyond.

This is enough for one letter. Later this year I hope to tell you of our underwater work in the Pond and other discoveries.

New Series, No. 11, May, 1967.

Editorial Note: We regret that two typographical errors crept into the last newsletter, written by Mr. Orpen. On page 4, line 17, "and" should be "and" and in the fifth line from the end, "additionally" should be "additionally".

Excavation Pond #1, British Honduras,  
April 16, 1967.

ALLENDALE: THE 1967 SEASON BEGINS

by David N. Pendergast, Field Director

Those who suffered along with the staff through the weather changes of the 1966 season will be pleased to learn that 1967 has begun with a proper dry season, and with the climatic problems set aside, we have been able to concentrate on archaeology rather than mud. The season, now more than half completed, gives every promise of being the best we have been able to experience, and has already seen the addition of a considerable amount of information to that collected in past years. Now, the excavation of the site under the British Honduras government as an official national reserve has solved many of the legal problems which have hindered the operation in past years, so that the work may proceed with a minimum lack of interruption.

As in 1966, our main effort has been concentrated on Structure B-4, a rather prosaic designation for one of the site's ceremonial buildings in the central precinct of the site, where in seasons past we encountered six tombs of priest-kings, associated with the last six phases of reconstruction. At the start of this season, neither of our archaeological archaeological zones manifested itself. The survey department's permission to place a further step the structure, and to clear a path in the floor at the side of end of the road - place where no further work was contemplated, only to find, the day after the work had been put in place, that an earlier road was concealed beneath the floor. We

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New Series, No. 31, December, 1967.

Salt Lake City,  
Utah,  
December 1, 1967.

THE FOURTH SEASON AT ALTUN HA: II

by David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Near the midpoint of the 1967 season at Altun Ha, a kind of archaeological exploration very different from the work of preceding years was begun. Knowing that the ancient Maya frequently placed sacrifices in bodies of water, we had long been eager to examine the main pond at the site, in the expectation of finding pottery vessels or other objects in the murky water. The preliminary exploration of the pond was carried out by Sr. Gustavo Verdayes, Director of Tourism for the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, and Sr. Ramon Bravo, of the staff of the newspaper "El Universal", in Mexico City. Later, a team of SCUBA divers from the museum, led by Walter Kenyon and including Claus Breede of the museum staff and Tom Gantert of the RCAF, undertook more extensive diving and survey work which, though it revealed no ancient offerings, did produce considerable knowledge about the form of the pond, including indications that the bottom had been artificially lined with clay, and one end dammed off to raise the water level, producing what appears to have been the main water supply of the community, supplemented by small artificial catch basins spotted around the site.

Mr. Breede remained on the staff for the remainder of the season, and with his assistance we approached completion of the monumental task, begun in 1965, of cutting away several structural elements of Str. B-4, to reveal the building discussed in the last Altun Ha newsletter. This structure, the seventh from the last, probably dates from the 7th Century A.D., and it now stands, virtually intact save for some demolition carried out by the ancient Maya prior to capping



it with Phase VI, completely cleared of overlying fill. We can now tread a fragment of the plaster floor of the plaza, and from it climb the stairway, pass through the rooms previously described, and ascend to the small round masonry altar which caps the structure.

The structure will be left as it now stands, since its excellent state of preservation makes it of prime interest to tourists. We have, however, essayed some small test cuts into the area around the altar and the floor of the two-room structure which sits athwart the stairway, as well as into the upper surface of a central stairway block which decorates the lower stairs. Each of these cuts has added materially to our knowledge of the structure, and two have raised major problems which must be faced in the coming season. In the area of the altar, a small trench, limited in size by tourist considerations, cleared a portion of an earlier structure, Phase VIII, which is marked by a round altar generally similar to those previously discovered. Since the Altun Ha altars are apparently unique in the Maya area, the discovery of another example of the form prompts us to ponder possible means of clearing some additional elements of Phase VIII. It would be extremely valuable to know the full time span covered by the altars, since we now know that their use died out with the construction of Phase IV. Too, since each of the altars has been accompanied by the shattered remains of jade objects sacrificed atop it, we would like very much to be able to determine whether this pattern is also present in Phase VIII. The engineering problems here are formidable, but not insurmountable.

The greatest enigma thusfar presented by work on B-4 was revealed by excavation through the floor of the two-room complex, in the central doorways. Here we encountered a mass of small stone mixed with lime soil, quite unlike the fill of other elements of the structure, and difficult to excavate because of its extreme looseness. Extension of the trench showed this fill to lie within what appears to be a very large pit, the edges of which are marked by the reappearance of the stone and black soil fill characteristic of the structure. It is quite clear that what we struck is a major excavation cut into Phase VII, and its relationship to the two-room complex above it indicates that the rooms were added to what was probably originally a platform-landing in the stairway of the structure. Since the pit is 325 cm. wide, and probably several metres long, it seems unlikely that it was dug simply to contain the offerings which were found in its fill, for both were near the surface, and even the more elaborate of the two, which lay beneath the midwall of the rooms and was revealed when a portion of the pit fill collapsed, is not a major offering, since it consists of two Thorny oyster valves, a jade pendant of moderate size, and a large baroque pearl. Unfortunately, constant shifting and collapse of the fill within the pit prevented excavation beyond a depth of two and a half metres, and near the season's end we were forced to refill the cut to prevent destruction of portions of the rooms during the rainy season.



We must, in the forthcoming year, devise a method of shoring the trench which will allow us to proceed below the depth reached this season, and hopefully to determine why such a massive cut was made by the builders of B-4.

Elsewhere on the site we spent much of the season in our continuing program of excavation of residential structures, beginning with a mound which appears to have been a house platform of the simplest type, probably used by people of the lowest stratum of Maya society. The mound consists of a mass of stone and earth, without any plaster floor, and hence probably topped originally by a floor of packed earth. Around the perimeter of the mound were found quantities of sherds of domestic pottery, together with animal bones and other food refuse, but the fill of the structure yielded only a few bits of pottery.

From this nadir on the residence scale we turned to a complex structure which probably lay somewhere near the upper end of the range. The mound forms one side of a small plaza bordered by other apparently residential structures, suggesting a pattern found elsewhere, in which such plaza groups are assumed to have housed members of a single family. The building proved to be more complex than expected, for the mound concealed remains of two separate structures, with the earlier built nearly at ground level and the later constructed on a platform, one edge of which is butted against the rear wall of the lower building. It appears that the lower building was abandoned prior to the end of the use of the later structure, and it may be that the family shifted from a simple six-room bungalow into the more prestigious upper-income-bracket platform residence. In any case, the lower building had been used as a garbage dump, and clearing of the six small rooms produced staggering amounts of pottery, including some reconstructable vessels and a group of ceramic oddities looking rather like flashlights, with the handle hollow and the flaring end heavily burned. In an interesting example of the links which unite the modern Maya with their ancient heritage, one of the workers excavating the rooms has told us of seeing such pottery objects in use when he was a child, about 50 years ago, as a type of fire making device; the handle was stuffed with cotton, and a flint and steel were used to strike sparks into the material. It may well be that, as in the case of the comals (pottery platters on which tortillas are cooked) which we found in other seasons, we have come upon another item which, until the introduction of modern conveniences in the early years of this century, had not changed essentially in more than 1000 years.

Stratigraphic cuts made into both residences showed that they had been occupied by people of high standing in the community. Burials from the bungalow were often accompanied by polychrome vessels of high quality, though the several child burials found in masonry benches in the rooms were without accompanying artifacts. In the platform structure,



an infant burial marked only by tiny bits of bone was accompanied by a large and beautifully carved jade pendant, the first occurrence of such an artifact outside of caches and priestly tombs. We can only guess at the reason for the presence of such an item with an infant, but a nearby burial of an adult, accompanied by 134 small obsidian and flint eccentrics of forms not previously recorded at Altun Ha, plus 9 large flint eccentrics, again a class of artifacts known up to now only from caches and tombs, suggests that the family must have had a very special status in Altun Ha society, perhaps through kinship with a major priest.

Finally, in addition to discovery of another structure which bids fair to fill in gaps in the data on late occupation at Altun Ha, re-examination of the pottery from the tomb encountered in the large structure near the main pond has strengthened the feeling that the unique elements of the tomb are due to its very early date. Judging by the single radiocarbon date available from a tomb at Altun Ha, the tomb from the pond area may date from the early 3rd or late 2nd century A.D. Since the tomb was part of the final construction activity on a mound 67 feet high, there are very good grounds for hoping that excavation of earlier phases of the structure will carry us back well into the Pre-Classic, perhaps several centuries B.C. Together with the several tasks already alluded to and many which have not been mentioned, the prospect of sectioning this major early structure makes the 1968 season seem a most promising one, and I hope that the next newsletter from Altun Ha will report that promise fulfilled.



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New Series, No. 36, May, 1968.

Rockstone Pond #1,  
British Honduras,  
April 29, 1968.

ALTUN HA, 1968: THE SUN GOD'S TOMB  
by David M. Pendergast, Field Director

The 1968 season in British Honduras began, like most of the others, with such mundane tasks as clearing away six months' growth of bush, resetting fences, and cleaning and rebuilding camp structures. Within a week of my arrival in the country, however, a small part of the crew had shifted from routine tasks to excavation, beginning with a small trench at the top of the Temple of the Masonry Altars (B-4), which was aimed at recovery of charcoal and burned jade fragments from around the altar of an earlier structure (Phase VIII) concealed within the building cleared last season. While we did manage to collect some charred wood, perhaps enough for a radiocarbon date determination, we found that destruction of the floor of VIII during the building of VII had apparently resulted in removal of jade fragments, so that we know slightly less about sacrifice on the altar of VIII than about those of later times.

From this we turned to reopening of the cut made in the central doorways of the rooms set in the stairway of this same structure. Excavation last year had partly sectioned a huge ancient pit beneath the rooms, and we set out to determine, if possible, the nature and function of the pit. I can compress two weeks' labour into one sentence: we cut a long, narrow trench down through over 13 feet of loose rock fill, shoring the sides with logs as we went, and when we reached bottom we knew only that the pit was deep, and filled with stone - not a single clue to the use of the pit was recovered.



Refilling of the abortive trench was followed by a small cut in the Temple of the Green Tomb (A-1) in search of data on the construction sequence, and any offerings placed in the fill during reconstructions. Like most excavations, this cut produced several answers, and also raised an unanswerable question in the form of a large, crudely built chamber, more or less bell-shaped, which was discovered beneath the temple superstructure. Several days' work in the sweatbath atmosphere of the chamber, raising soil and stone through a small opening in the roof, told us absolutely nothing about the reason for the chamber's existence.

Perhaps by now you can see why on March 5th I wrote a letter to Dr. Tushingham predicting that this season would be known as Altun Ha Information Year - that is, a year of much new knowledge accompanied by few objects. I should have written the letter earlier, for like washing the car (or, as the Mayas do here, throwing the family cat into the nearest body of water) to bring rain, the "Information Year" statement had almost immediate effect; at 10:30 the following morning, a worker at the bottom of the third cut we had made into the "Altars" Temple lifted a stone, looked beneath it, and said, "Aqui hay un hoyo" ("There's a hole here") - a rather prosaic way of announcing the discovery of the tomb from the seventh phase, dating from A.D. 650-700. Luck was surely with us in this instance, for had the trench, cut to clear an earlier element inside the large central stair block at the top of the building, been one foot narrower, we would have missed the tomb completely.

Four days of intensive effort brought us down atop the tomb roof, and in one hectic afternoon we raised three of the roof slabs, each weighing a thousand pounds or more, some nine feet up out of the trench. Removal of the slabs showed that almost all of the east wall of the tomb, built against the battered face of Phase VIII, had collapsed, leaving two roof slabs supported at the west end only, while two others, which bore the weight of nine feet of soil and stone atop them, were cracked through the centre. Bracing made this shaky situation a little less ominous, and late in the day on the 12th we were at last ready to begin clearing away the debris of the fallen wall, which concealed the tomb's contents.

While my wife began clearing a pottery vessel and other objects at the south end of the crypt, I set out to locate the skeleton, in order to give us guidelines for the excavation. Removal of several large stones of the fallen wall left me with a mass of lime soil, which I started to remove with icepick and brush. Within a few moments, the brushing revealed a piece of jade, obviously well above the level of the burial. Mentally cursing, I proceeded to clear what I took to be a pendant which had been dislodged by the wall collapse, coming to rest high up in the rubble. However, as I brushed, the jade went on; wherever I cleared, there was the object, clearly far larger than the average pendant. By now, the work was beginning to attract the attention of everyone around the tomb. Several minutes' brushing, not made easier by the mounting excitement swirling around me, revealed an absolutely huge and beautifully carved



quasi-human head, nearly six inches high, resting on its right side atop bones which were later found to be those of the priest's right arm. I recognized the head as that of one of the Maya deities, but like the title of a familiar piece of music which refuses to be dredged from one's memory, the identifying features plagued me for several days until, thanks to Peter Harrison of Trent University, the head's crossed eyes clicked into place as the mark of Kinich Ahau, the Sun God.

Though I was aware during the clearing that the head is the largest carved jade object ever discovered in the Maya area, I am told that I said nothing, in which respect I was markedly different from those around me. After removing the head for safekeeping until the tomb was completely cleared, I gently set it on the pan of the scale we use for weighing produce and meat in camp, and learned that it weighed 9 3/4 pounds, nearly twice the weight of the largest object previously discovered - and I am told that I still said almost nothing.

The head might well have made the remainder of the tomb somewhat anticlimactic, had we not found many more jade objects, including bracelets, anklets, pendants, and a necklace of 65 beads with a pendant as the centre element, plus a large necklace of shell beads, three groups of ceremonial flints, a number of stuccoed wooden objects, including bowls, of which unfortunately only the badly shattered stucco surfacing remains, and several pottery vessels, one of which is illustrated below. Of greatest importance, though, were the textiles and cordage which were found in relative abundance throughout the crypt, set atop and around a wooden litter, of which only badly rotted fragments remained, which served as the support for the body. The textiles and cordage themselves are, of course, not preserved, but in addition to the sorts of negative impressions found in a few tombs in other Maya sites, we have many pieces of cloth which, by some replacement process I do not pretend to understand, are positives, and look like the material itself. From negatives of cordage in the soft floor soil of the crypt, we have made latex casts which, like the textile impressions, seem almost to be the original objects. The rarity of evidence of such perishables in the humid Maya region makes these much less striking remains probably as important as the giant head.

One of the questions posed by reporters during the news conference on the discovery held in Toronto was whether the tomb was, like those of Egypt, protected by a curse. There is no evidence that the Maya shielded their tombs with curses, and the need for protection against looters was certainly small compared to the pharaohs' difficulties. When it came time to photograph the tomb, however, the difficulties which beset me began to make us wonder. I had managed to take one roll of photographs with my main camera when, probably as a result of the sweat and strain involved in such work, I jammed the works. After spending a half day trying to repair the camera, I set out with my backup equipment to continue work. After taking what should have been a good series of



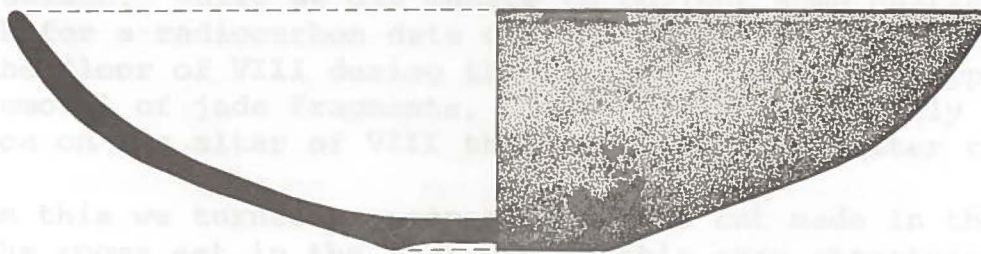
shots, I unloaded the camera, only to find that what I had been sold as Kodachrome II was in fact Kodachrome X — all my lens settings were incorrect. As this was the only roll of such film I had been able to find in Belize City, I was left without colour film, or so I thought. The following morning I borrowed some black and white film from the staff artist, only to find that it was too damp, and would not advance in the camera. A second roll fared similarly, and it was only when I recalled that the architect currently at work on building plans had spoken of having two rolls of colour 35mm. film that I began to have some hope of being able to make a photographic record of the tomb before I lost my last vestiges of temper, if not sanity. With the colour film loaded and advancing properly, I returned to the tomb with the giant head, and took a half roll of photographs before my flash unit began to malfunction. After a few half-hearted winks, it too gave up the ghost, leaving me to attempt time exposures in the half-darkness of the crypt, increased by a small rainstorm beating about the site. Finally, tired and a bit shaken by all this, I finished the photographing, put the giant head back in its bag, collected my camera gear, and started down the high stairway. Four steps from the bottom, I slipped. I remember thinking that the camera could be replaced, while the head could not, so I tucked the head under my arm (I did not think of the song about Anne Boleyn until much later) and rolled, ungracefully I suppose, down the four steps, a height of about six feet in all, ending up head down at the bottom, but with the head, and, miraculously, the camera as well, undamaged. The damage was mostly to me, and even this was more to ego than to flesh and bone.

One final occurrence was added to the list of photographic mysteries the following day, when the supposedly spoiled roll of colour film, on its way into town in its mailer to be sent to England on the off chance that something might have come out, was picked up by a gust of wind from its place in the Land Rover and blown out the rear window, coming to rest on the roadway, where it was found after some searching. For those looking for the romance of archaeology, curses on tombs, and so forth, there is some real food for thought here.

As I have wondered about a curse, so too have I wondered whether all of those buried in the "Altars" Temple might not have been priests of the Sun God, and whether the masks at the base of the temple stairway may not represent this deity. From this, perhaps prompted by my selection of Gerald Hawkins' Stonehenge Decoded for reading on the return flight from Toronto, I have begun to wonder whether sunrise at midsummer or the equinoxes might not come just on the line of the altars, if viewed from a centre point across the plaza, or if not something as precise as this, whether the placement of the temple at the east side of the plaza might not be significant. Thoughts such as these, speculative though they be, make me feel that the tomb has brought us closer to an understanding of at least some aspects of life in the ceremonial precinct some 1300 years ago.



Unfortunately, the tomb has overshadowed in the public eye, though not in ours, the importance of work being carried out in other parts of the site. Of this, and of other events of the season, I shall have more to tell you in a later newsletter.



0 1 2 3 4 5 CM.

Polychrome ceremonial plate with hummingbird centre design, from the Sun God's tomb. A.D. 650-700.



# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 40, September, 1968

Toronto, Ontario

Confidential:  
Not for PublicationALTUN HA: THE QUIET SIDE OF THE SEASONDavid M. Pendergast  
Field Director

When the tumult over the Sun God's Tomb had stilled somewhat at Altun Ha, we found it possible to return to tasks less spectacular but equally important, elsewhere within the site. We also decided to pursue excavations in the temple which housed the tomb, continuing far beyond the point which had originally seemed to mark the practical limit of our penetration. But before returning to this part of the project, let us see where in time and space our excavations took us in other parts of the site.

At the beginning of the season, prior to extending work on Structure B-4 and encountering the tomb, we had taken up again the clearing of a large temple near the main reservoir, where we began work in 1967. The simple tomb discovered here last year led us to recognize that a building examined because of its proximity to some of the latest material on the site was in fact quite early, its final phase having been built about A.D. 250, at about the time when the large structures of the site centre may have been started. Having cleared away parts of the last phase to reveal an earlier inner building, we set out this year to trench as deeply as possible into the heart of the mound, in the hope of pursuing the story of the site's occupation back into the Pre-Classic period, possibly to the beginning of the Christian era or earlier. This is the sort of work which seems easiest to the casual observer, and yet in a way is the most difficult. It involves stripping away hundreds of tons of stone, earth, and facing blocks to permit the cleaning, mapping, and photographing of the hidden structure, which then in turn is stripped away in search of yet earlier architecture. This sounds rather mechanical and simple, and to some extent it is, but it is just in the routine, ditch-digging nature of the work that



the difficulty lies, for workers employed here, especially when they learn of spectacular discoveries elsewhere on the site, easily become discouraged, and the pace of the work slackens imperceptibly day by day, until the men come to dread each round of pick and shovel work. The archaeologist's task in such a situation is that of convincing the men that their work is equally important, even though they are not "finding the marmalade", as the Mayas' expression for discovering tomb, cache, rich burial, or other interesting items runs. To do this, I had to spend at least some time each day carefully examining each sherd of the small groups coming from the fill, exclaiming on the importance of the bit, explaining to the assistant foreman that the small number of sherds is due to the great antiquity of the building, and generally trying to instil in the men sufficient enthusiasm to carry them through the long, hot days.

When all the stripping and trenching was done, the men left the mound dejectedly, for no "marmalade" had, as far as they could see, been discovered. In fact, in addition to uncovering an architectural sequence and a series of floors extending from mid-third century A.D. back to at least A.D. 1 if not earlier, the excavations had provided the first extensive sample of Pre-Classic pottery recovered in five seasons' work. With this body of material as a guide, we shall be able next year to investigate smaller mounds surrounding the large structure, and perhaps extend our knowledge even farther back in time.

While all of this stone and earth moving was going on, we had a crew at work on a strange-looking mound closer to the site centre, where a hunting dog had led us in 1967 to both an armadillo and a second lot of pottery from the very late (14th-15th century A.D.) occupation. Since data on the people of these late times are few and far between throughout the site, we set out in the hope that we might uncover a structure built in the 14th or 15th Century, rather than, as elsewhere in our excavations, simply reused during that period. Once again, though, after we had collected huge masses of sherds from the fill around the platform of the structure, it became clear that we were dealing with a Classic period building, occupied briefly, perhaps after a period of abandonment, by Post-Classic people. It begins to look very much as though we shall finish the work at Altun Ha with no more than this amount of knowledge of the late people, for they seem not to have built, but rather to have lived for a time atop the ruins of what their ancestors constructed centuries earlier.

Clearing away of rubble and earth from the building revealed an unusual form of residence, consisting of a series of five rooms, impossibly small by our standards (even those of apartment-dwellers), arranged in a single row. As is true of many such buildings in Maya sites, all rooms showed signs of having been modified many times, leaving to us the task of sorting out the various refloorings, additions of benches, recutting of doorways, and other alterations. In



the sorting-out, we found that this, like most houses, had been a sort of family mausoleum; in the many masonry benches and beneath the floor lay the remains of thirty individuals, almost two-thirds of them children. Since most of the burials were made at one time, it may be that several related families are represented, for both the total number of burials and the number of children seem far too great for one family, even with the high mortality of ancient Maya times.

Fortunately, though many of the child burials were unaccompanied by artifacts, several yielded pottery vessels, as did most of the adult interments. While, as is invariably the case, the bulk of the vessels are of forms and decoration new to us, a number parallel finds from earlier seasons, so that it is possible to fit the burials, and hence the structure itself, into the site chronology with relative ease. Among the new forms, nestled with other miniature vessels at the feet of a young child, was a tiny effigy pot in the form of a rather engaging bat. One can almost see the grieving parents placing the pot, perhaps a favourite toy, beside their dead child, or possibly making it especially as an accompaniment for use in the hereafter. Despite the excitement which comes with discoveries made in the temples and other buildings of the site centre, the house mounds are in many ways the most enjoyable to excavate, for it is here that we come closest to the people, in however small a way, and manage to grasp at least a bit of the form of their lives.

But the temples, too, intrigue us, and with the finding of the Sun God's tomb we were more intrigued than ever by the possibility that further discoveries might lie more deeply buried within the structure we have been excavating since 1965. Since we could see, alongside the tomb, the remains of an earlier structure which was capped by the building housing the tomb, we set out to push farther back in time, having received permission from the government to remove portions of the upper section of the building on condition that they be reconstructed following our probe. Our initial step involved the removal of the last fragment of the sixth building back in time, an altar which had been left atop the seventh structure, into which we were now about to cut. With the Phase VI altar gone, we were able to open a huge trench into the top of Phase VII, cutting down initially to the surface of VIII, about a metre and a half below, in an area approximately 4 metres square. We already knew something of VIII from what we could see in the tomb, and our hope was that a cut made in VIII would lead us back to one or more even earlier phases. Accordingly, after measuring what remained of VIII, we continued our trench, battering the walls slightly in the loose boulder fill to minimize the danger of cave-ins, on into the fill of the structure. We went past the expected location of a ninth phase, and found ourselves still in boulder fill; farther down, among the stones, we came upon an unexpected offering, obviously part of the eighth phase.



The offering consisted of pearls, shells, shell beads, and jade objects all literally encased in a mass of red pigment. The form of the offering suggests that the objects may originally have been contained in a bag or other flexible receptacle; when the container rotted, beads and other objects filtered down among the fill stones, so that we pursued elements of the offering for almost half a metre below their original resting place. At this depth and beyond for as far as we dared go, we found nothing but the fill of Phase VIII, and as our trench brought us over halfway down through the building's heart, we were as certain as possible without complete destruction of the temple that we had come upon the beginning of construction with Phase VIII.

As is so often the case, the rather negative evidence recovered from the excavation (that is, the absence of earlier phases) proved ultimately to be a most positive piece of information. If Phase VIII marked the beginning of construction of what was clearly the major temple of the second plaza, then was it not likely that Plaza A was begun earlier, with Plaza B having been added between A.D. 600 and 650? To answer this question, we opened a trench through the base stairway of one of the two Plaza A temples previously tested, and came upon, first of all, an offering. Most offerings have not included pottery vessels, and the few vessels in offerings have not been datable. In this case, however, the two vessels enclosing a group of jade and shell objects were clearly datable, and enabled us to place the latest construction between A.D. 450 and 550, before the Plaza B temple was begun. Near the season's end, we turned to the structure across Plaza A, and began a cut into its base stairway, in which we were still involved when the rains signalled closing of the work for 1968. Here, too, we had luckily come upon an offering in the hearting of the stairs, consisting of a single vessel, between A.D. 400 and 500.

I cannot now recall how many times I have recorded the fact that each question answered by excavation raises several more, but I do know that at no time has this been more strikingly demonstrated than now. If all of Plaza A is earlier than B, as now seems clear, then by electing to leave the largest structure on the first plaza untouched in favour of the slightly smaller one on Plaza B, we have missed the principal ceremonial structure of Early Classic times (A.D. 300-600), and possibly the bulk of the tombs from this period. Unfortunately, since limited funds, as well as other considerations, dictate that 1969 will be the final season of excavation, we might try to fill a 300-year gap in our knowledge by investigating a small temple across the plaza from the major untouched building, while at the same time attempting to provide answers to many other pressing questions by continuing excavations in outlying areas. This should make 1969 an interesting but hectic season, of which my next report, from the field, will bring you the first news.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 48, May, 1969

Rockstone Pond #1,  
British Honduras

Confidential:  
Not for Publication

## THE SIXTH SEASON AT ALTUN HA

David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Before starting the first of this season's newsletters from Altun Ha, I must go back for a moment to the second newsletter of last year. We often debate the effect of newsletters on the reader, and the less optimistic of the debaters usually opine that the monthly appearance of a newsletter on various desks is met with a quick glance at most, followed by filing in some general-purpose receptacle. The one thing we do not expect when a newsletter is sent out is that one will be sent back to us, but this very thing happened last fall, showing us that some do indeed read the verbiage. The returned newsletter, sent anonymously, pointed out through several comments written beside the text that I had gone on for the full four pages blithely assuming, as does almost every archaeologist who views "his" site as the navel of the universe, that all the readers know where Altun Ha is. I apologize for this, and to set matters aright I note that Altun Ha lies on the northern coast of British Honduras, a country now coming to be known generally as Belize, the name which it will have when it gains independence from England in the not-too-distant future. British Honduras lies at the base of the Yucatán Peninsula, sandwiched between Mexico and Guatemala, and forms part of the eastern periphery of the Maya area.

Now that Altun Ha is once again on the map, let us turn to the events of the first part of the 1969 season. Until last fall, this year was to be the last in the excavation programme, followed by ceramic analysis in 1970; however, the discoveries of 1968 heightened my feeling that an additional season would be necessary if we were to unravel the earlier part of the history of the site, and we have now, with additional aid from Canada Council, decided to



continue excavation through 1970. The principal aim of work in the final two seasons was to be deep penetration into what appeared to have been the most important temple of Early Classic (A.D. 300-600) times. With only two seasons, I feared that we might just be able to reach the critical areas in the heart of the 55-foot high structure by the end of our working time, as extensive cutting into the 25,000 cubic yards of stone and earth forming the pyramid would be a time-consuming task.

At the beginning of this season, we set out at the top of the building (Structure A-6), and soon had cleared the superstructure, an unusual temple composed of two parallel rooms about 7 feet wide and 146 feet long, with thirteen doorways in both the front and the back wall. Within one of the rooms, we encountered fragments of what appear to have been lintels and roof beams, buried beneath the rubble of the fallen roof. Evidence recovered later indicates that the beams were set into the building between A.D. 600 and 650, and they are likely to have lain in the earth since some time in the 11th Century; yet when I removed a small section for identification by Forestry Department officials, I had to use a hacksaw!! The beams will eventually be submitted for radiocarbon analysis, in the hope of verifying estimates of the age of the building.

When the superstructure was fully cleared, we began to probe levels below the floor of the rooms with a trench running down the face of the substructure. This revealed almost at once that much of the face was in extremely poor, and very shaky, condition, as a result of what seemed to have been a massive collapse in the centre of the stairway. Extension of the trench showed that the missing part of the building had probably been a large central stair block like that found in the temple which yielded the Sun God's Tomb, and investigation of the upper part of the block produced, to my surprise, yet another priest's tomb. My surprise stemmed not so much from the presence of the tomb as from its position, for while a central stair block is a logical place for a tomb, the uniform north-south orientation of all other tombs we have excavated led me to expect that any tomb encountered in A-6 would lie perpendicular to the long axis of the building, which runs east-west. In yet another demonstration of the perils of prediction in Maya sites, the roof slabs we struck clearly lay in an east-west line, parallelling the long axis of the structure, a fact which at first made me doubt that what we saw before us was actually the roof of a tomb.

As the roof slabs were out of position, and not supported by solid walls, we removed them, only to find that the entire crypt was filled with soil. This was a situation we had encountered three times previously, and it suggested that there might be a parallel between A-6 tomb and later tombs in Structure B-4. Excavation confirmed the existence of such a resemblance, for we found that the A-6 tomb had been desecrated, so that the crypt contained only fragments of the



splendour which had once marked it. While such a discovery is of great importance in the culture history of Altun Ha, it is disheartening to find only the bits and pieces remaining from what appears to have been an act related to the collapse of lowland Maya civilization. Apart from fragments of pottery and other materials, we found numerous elements of what must have been several elaborate shell mosaics scattered through the soil, including beautifully carved faces, elements of costume, and several delicately-posed hands. It would almost have been better not to have found more than one or two such pieces, for now we can only lament the loss of the artifacts. Fortunately, the desecrators failed to dig into the crypt floor, and hence missed four pottery vessels, three of them with intricate painted designs, which provide an excellent indication of the age of the tomb, placing its construction in the first half of the 7th Century A.D.

The difficulties we faced in excavating the tomb, resulting from its position in unconsolidated boulder fill, continued to plague us as we pushed our trench down the face of the temple, where we found no more than traces of a stairway extending to the plaza floor below. The entire face of A-6 appears to be in very poor condition, and we therefore decided to cut into the structure in our central trench, rather than extending excavation over the entire façade. This investigation cleared one tiny portion of an earlier building, a bit of plaster floor apparently marking the top of a structure with about half the height of the final temple, which was built at the time of the last reflooring of the plaza which it borders. The trench into the fill behind the stairway of this structure sectioned the same extremely shaky boulder fill encountered higher up, and we found that we could not penetrate more than a few yards into the heart of the building without great risk. Thus, barring some approach to the problem which has not yet occurred to me, we have done all we can in A-6, going back in time to about A.D. 550. If there is earlier construction concealed within the fill, and the presence of floors running beneath the base of the fill suggests that this may be the case, it must, I fear, remain hidden.

Meanwhile, an excavation which I had not planned to undertake has balanced, to some degree, the rather frustrating nature of A-6. When the investigation of A-6 was planned, it appeared that Structure A-3, a small temple facing A-6, would have to be left unexcavated, as time would not permit both efforts. However, when an obdurate landowner forced us to abandon temporarily the excavation of a small group of residential structures east of the site centre, I set a crew to work on A-3, hoping merely to recover an offering or possibly a burial with accompanying pottery which would shed light on the date of the structure. Our initial trench revealed an offering, but of a type not previously encountered, raising several questions and answering none. So we set out to



examine A-3 as thoroughly as possible, beginning with the excavation of the small, two-room superstructure, in which we found intriguing evidence that someone had lived in the temple following the collapse of the civilization, and prior to the toppling of the temple roof.

As excavation of A-3 progressed, we cleared a complex series of additions to the final phase of the building, some of which had concealed a pair of huge masks which adorned terraces at the sides of the central stairway. Unfortunately, the ancient Maya demolished much of the masks prior to covering them, so we can just make out the general form of most of the elements. In other areas of the building, we have been able to cut back to two earlier phases in a trench which revealed two additional offerings, one of which was an unusual conglomeration of shells, stingray spines, and other marine objects, accompanied by the shell of a small land turtle, contained in a lidded pottery vessel. In the last few days, clearing of the base of the stairway of the penultimate phase, which we have revealed fully by removal of the badly-collapsed final phase, produced yet another offering, a single jade pendant apparently dumped rather unceremoniously into mortar fill covering the bottom step. Our last effort in A-3 will be a trench into the newly-cleared stairway.

The results of this and of other excavations in several interesting small buildings in outlying areas including those from which we were barred at the start of the season will provide the material for another report later in the season. In the meantime we extend our thanks once more to the Harvie Foundation which has supported ROM's efforts in the British Honduras project for so many years and to Canada Council which added its help two years ago.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

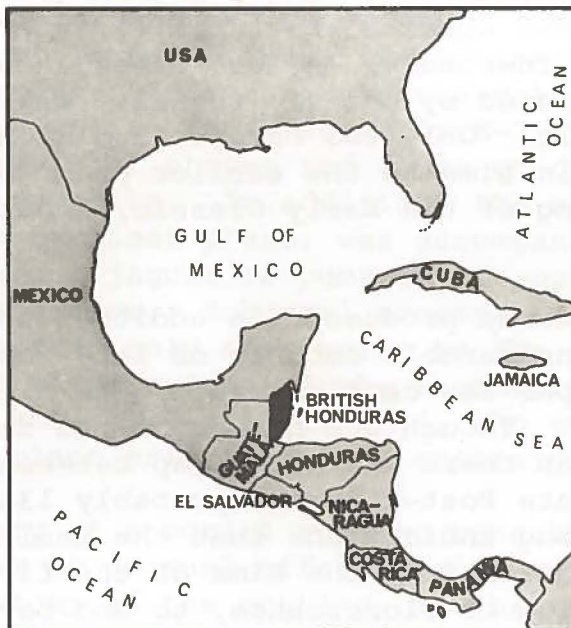
New Series, No. 56, January, 1970.

Toronto, Ontario.

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Not for Publication

## ALTUN HA: THE SIXTH SEASON COMPLETED

David M. Pendergast, Field Director



Once again, I must preface a report of events at Altun Ha with a response to one of our readers who, with the earlier anonymous commenter, may be the founder of a tradition of returning newsletters with added marginalia. The paragraph in my last report regarding the location of British Honduras (Belize) has caused someone to note that the words mean very little without a sketch, and to

request that something of the sort be included. I, too, would like to see the text brightened or clarified with illustrations, but unfortunately the Chinese dictum on the value of a picture holds true in the monetary sense as well, and hence the images in the newsletter must remain largely verbal. However, in this case we do insert a small map which we hope will answer all geographical questions.

I promised in the previous newsletter to discuss work in outlying areas of the site, and I shall leave events in the site centre during the second half of the season for



another time in order to tell you something of the results of the work in the residential areas. From the beginning of the project, it has been my intention to investigate as great a variety of mounds as possible in all the major occupation zones, but until 1968 circumstances dictated that work be concentrated in areas south of the site centre. This year, we set out to investigate a group of six very small, unprepossessing mounds bordering a small plaza about 300 metres east of the site centre, and we also, as a result of mapping work west of the centre, marked several small mounds and one newly-discovered major structure for investigation in 1970. The mounds east of the centre, in Zone J, were chosen because in one of them excavation in 1963 revealed what is probably the earliest ceramic material yet encountered at the site, perhaps dating from one or two centuries B.C. In the expectation of discovering more material from this period, we tested four mounds, each no more than a pile of stone and dark earth, in one case faced with a low, rather crude stone wall. In two of the four, burials were found scattered through the fill, suggesting a practice similar to that found in the houses of middle and upper-class families, where burial of the dead beneath the floor was customary; in most cases, however, the Zone J burials were not accompanied by pottery vessels, making their placement in time very difficult. Only two burials are clearly datable, and both appear to fall close in time to the earlier phase of Structure A-3, probably near the beginning of the Early Classic, about A.D. 250-300.

Most unexpectedly, the small mounds produced, in addition to Pre-Classic and Early Classic material, considerable amounts of late Post-Classic pottery which came from the upper few centimetres of the fill, and from rubbish dumps around the bases. Though the nature of the deposits make it impossible to be certain that there was not a gap between the earlier materials and those from the late Post-Classic (probably 13th-15th centuries A.D.), there are strong indications that the small mound group may have seen continuous occupation from the time of the first settlement of the site on through the period of florescence, to and beyond the decline and collapse of the civilization, ending only a short while before the advent of the Spanish to the northern part of the Yucatan Peninsula in the 16th Century. These data, though incomplete, point up something always in the minds of archaeologists: the small, seemingly uninteresting mounds may tell us as much or more of the prehistory of a site than do the major structures, and it is as likely as not that the unimpressive pile of stones and earth left undug holds the clues to unravelling many of the site's mysteries. In any case, we hope to pursue the indications derived from work in Zone J by excavating other mounds in the area next season.

Together with the Zone J work and completion of excavation of structures south and west of the centre which had been tested as long ago as 1963, we undertook excavation of a mound of moderate size (height about 6 metres) in Zone E, an area of dense concentration of various types of structures immediately south of the central plazas. Initial excavation showed the building, E-44, to be a minor temple closely similar to Structure E-7, which apparently was the eastern member of a pair with E-44, as the two



faced each other across an open area. The testing also revealed evidence of a late Post-Classic house which had been built atop the ruins of the temple, the posts being set, in some cases, into the partly-collapsed temple centre wall. Bits of late Post-Classic pottery and other domestic objects were scattered in the black soil covering the earlier structure, and there was some indication that the late re-use of the building had been accompanied by filling one room of the temple with mortar, in which a simple offering was placed, perhaps to placate the god to whom the building had been dedicated.

As we had excavated E-7 entirely in 1965 and 1966, I assumed that we could predict with reasonable accuracy what we would encounter in a trench sectioning its counterpart; in this assumption I was wrong, as I usually am when I attempt to extrapolate from one building to another. E-7, rebuilt five times, had been packed full of burials, and had contained an unusually large number of offerings, while E-44, rebuilt six times, yielded only two burials, and no offerings, in our first four-metre wide trench. Both the burials were unlike those found in E-7, and were accompanied by pottery vessels of shapes and types of decoration previously unknown at the site. In addition, the second burial, dating from the next to earliest phase, was accompanied by the claws of what had once been a jaguar or puma skin, apparently placed over the head and shoulders. A burial accompanied by a felid skin had been encountered only once prior to the discovery in E-44, and that was in the Sun God's Tomb; whether this suggests a special status for the individual in E-44, who was an elderly male, probably a minor priest, is not entirely clear.

The discovery of a burial running beneath the sidewall of the trench, plus an unusual offering also extending beneath the sidewall, prompted the cutting, in the last few days of the season, of a second trench in E-44, following June 6th, which was D-Day (Deluge Day). The rains of the 6th of June brought in the sidewalls of our trench, nearly 5 metres deep, and missed by only twenty minutes or so burying me and several workmen under tons of stone and mud. The digging out, plus cutting of the new trench, were done under tremendous pressure, as weather and the approaching close of the season left us less time for the work than we would have liked. Nonetheless, the work was completed, and yielded an additional fourteen burials, one of them accompanied by a jaguar skin, plus a dedicatory offering, placed off-centre in the third reconstruction of the building. As always, as many questions have been raised as answered by this and other excavations of the 1969 season, but hopefully in the single season remaining we shall wrest answers to some of the queries from the myriad mounds which still await excavation.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 60, May, 1970

Rockstone Pond #1  
British Honduras

Confidential:  
Not for Publication

ALTUN HA: GARBAGE AND OTHER THINGS

David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Before the 1970 season began, I set myself some ground rules, based on results of past seasons: (1) Do Not Work In The Site Centre, and (2) Do Not Excavate Late Classic (A.D. 600-900) Structures. Anyone who has followed faithfully the events of past years at Altun Ha will automatically know where, among other places, we are excavating now; that's right, in a Late Classic palace-type building on the edge of the site centre. The reasons for this, apart from the general perversity of archaeological events, will be dealt with later on in this tale, but first let us look at things which are neither Late Classic nor in the site centre.

My reasons for setting the now-broken ground rules lay in the large amount of data we had accumulated on the latter part of the florescence of Maya civilization and the comparative scarcity of information amassed on the beginnings of occupation at Altun Ha. I proposed to concentrate on small buildings principally in the zone west of the site centre, searching for early material, and also to excavate one mound of moderate size (height 6 metres) in the same area which was of interest because it lay at the end of a causeway, a position suggesting some special significance. The first part of this programme has now resulted in reasonably full excavation of six residential mounds ranging in time from the beginning of the Late Classic back to the late Pre-Classic, about 100 B.C. From these buildings have come 33 burials and 4 offerings, many of the former accompanied by pottery vessels, probably the most useful items amongst the grave goods, for they enable us to date both the interments and the buildings with fair precision. Excavation of small structures has also yielded a considerable amount of information on house construction,



including many forms and individual elements heretofore unrecorded at the site. Unfortunately, we still have not discovered any residential mounds which represent the early part of the Early Classic (about A.D. 300-450), though we know that construction activity was fairly intensive in the site centre during this period. In the second half of the season we hope to be able to shift parts of the crew to other areas of the site, including some partially investigated in earlier years, in search of the elusive Early Classic.

The large mound at the end of the causeway had been on my list for over a year as a high-priority structure for excavation, even though its top had been somewhat damaged by stone-quarrying. We set out to bring some order out of the chaos wrought by the quarrying and to trench more deeply into the upper parts of the structure, and in short order found that the outer shell of the building had no façade remaining. As there was no question of preserving anything for tourist-viewing if this area of land, now privately owned, should ever be added to the archaeological reserve, I decided to demolish the portions lacking any façade, hoping to find interior buildings in better condition. The opportunity to investigate completely a mound of this size does not occur often, and the results of our excavations make it clear how much is missed when only testing can be undertaken. At the outset, we began to encounter offerings in the outermost phase, and a small bit of excavation into an earlier building beneath the outer shell likewise revealed a cache consisting of three vessels of Early Classic. Sherds from the fill of this inner building appeared to confirm the early date, so we set out to sweep the structure away completely, as it, too, was simply a pile of fill with no facing stones. Removal of the earlier building revealed a great number of offerings, suggesting that the structure had been of special importance to the builders. The basis for this importance may have been what we discovered at the base of the second phase: a round platform about 10 metres in diameter and 130 cm. high. Such round structures are known from only a few other sites in northern Belize, and none has ever been investigated through controlled modern digging. Sherds from a partly-destroyed platform similar to our specimen indicated a Pre-Classic date, and the bits of pottery from our structure suggest similar placement, though later in the Pre-Classic than had been supposed. Within the round platform were remnants of two earlier structures, apparently of similar form, and the earlier of these contained a large number of burials, several with pottery vessels. Excavation of the burials is still in progress, but we already have 7 vessels from what is likely to be the 1st or 2nd Century B.C., plus data on burials of forms unknown in later times at Altun Ha. We shall, of course, continue for the remainder of the season, to search in surrounding small buildings for habitations dating from this early time.

But now back to the site centre, and the Late Classic. The building we are investigating is one I have been eyeing since 1963, when at



the time of the first test excavations at Altun Ha I noticed that quarrying by local people had revealed a well-preserved platform face just at the western edge of the site centre. As radio-carbon dates from a neighbouring temple indicate a date for the first reconstruction between A.D. 125 and 200, it occurred to me that the platform might be of similar or slightly later age. We started, therefore, with the intention of abiding by the ground rules, but the first exploratory trench through the outer shell of the structure revealed an offering consisting of two pottery vessels dating from the early part of the Late Classic. "Well", I thought, "this may at least mean that the earlier structure was built in the Early Classic, even if we have to cut through some Late Classic material to get at it." So we trenched on eastward, and eventually came to a spot where the structure's east wall should have been, near the back of a long mound lying between it and the plaza. We did not find the wall at first, but rather came upon a small lens of greyish, ashy soil. Continuation of the trench toward the east showed this lens to be somewhat larger than I had supposed at first, and to have a rather high sherd content. When we finally had a good section of the grey material exposed, it became clear that we had stumbled on The Great Altun Ha Executive Garbage Dump, a staggering mass of debris dumped into a narrow alleyway between the residence we were digging and the unexcavated long mound to the east.

We have just now completed excavation of the garbage mass except for a few sections at one edge, and in a way I almost wish we had never found the dump in the first place. The dump is an archaeologist's dream and nightmare combined, for it is full of material clues to the life of what was probably a priestly family, ranging from food refuse to needles and the sharpening stones used to repoint them, to shell beads and discs and all manner of small items, and to pottery, in such quantity as to fill every container we could lay hand on, including any wheelbarrow not currently in use. Here we have the castoffs of a family which, were it in existence today, would trade in its automobiles when the ashtrays got full, and so we get complete needles rather than fragments, and whole shell beads, and even a bone model of a canoe with only one small piece missing, as well as many vessels which must have been no more than cracked when they were tossed onto the pile.

The trouble lies with the vessels, for even a cursory examination of the several cubic yards of sherds shows that there are many potentially reconstructable vessels in the lot. But except for those which landed more or less in one spot and could be recognized as a single vessel, or those which have distinctive painted decoration, the task of sorting out thousands of blackware or redware sherds and from them piecing together perhaps one or two hundred vessels is almost beyond human ability. I do not yet know how we shall cope with the problem, but I do know that even from the vessels we have managed to sort out thus far we have gained a



tremendous body of new information on Late Classic pottery, including such things as one or two dozen vessels with the same design but executed by different painters, so that one can actually appreciate variations on a theme much as can be done with pottery in some parts of the Old World. Working through the sherds is rather like a trip through a potter's stock display, and one can almost hear the ancient Maya potter saying, "Now if you don't like that water-lily design with two red bands at the rim, we have it with one band, or with red and black in various combinations, and you can get the main design done in several ways, with or without black detailing on the red zones." In short, what we have is a tremendous mass of data on the people themselves, in a sense, but the mass is so tremendous that we may never be able to draw from it all the clues it contains to the lives of the Late Classic Maya.

Will a similar dump await us when we cut into the earlier platform which we set out to examine in the first place? I think not, and perhaps in a way it is just as well. In my next newsletter I shall let you know how the garbage and other things work out.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 65, October, 1970

Toronto, Ontario

Confidential:  
Not for Publication

## ALTUN HA: THE END OF THE DIG

David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Seven seasons ago, in January of 1964, we began what was envisioned as a three- to four-year programme of excavations at Altun Ha. Like the ground rules I mentioned in the last Altun Ha newsletter, our original time limit was not observed, due mainly to the great range of surprising new information which popped from the ground each year. Now, with the close of excavations in late June of this year, we have concluded what had become the largest and longest-lived archaeological project yet carried out in British Honduras (Belize). This is not an occasion for reminiscing, as we still have before us a season of laboratory work in the field and the digestion of masses of data for the final report, but after telling you something of events in the second half of the 1970 season I shall look back over the project as space permits.

To begin with the rubbish which figured so prominently in the last report, I can note with some relief that the earlier platform was not accompanied by a similar dump, but did turn out to be a rather well-preserved residential building with two-metre-high masks at the stair sides, but only stubs of the walls of the building which once stood at the head of the stairs. Trenching into this structure revealed offerings and burials which suggest that this may have been a palace (priestly residence) associated with the earliest temple in Plaza A, dating from about the late 3rd or early 4th Century A.D. As is true of all buildings tested from this period, the quantity of artifacts in the fill was small, but to compensate for this most of the burials were accompanied by one or more datable pottery vessels. The several pots from this structure, part of a total of 170 recovered this season, are now going through the lengthy process of restoration in our lab.

After work on the palace was completed, we turned to smaller



structures around Plaza A, and by so doing ended up with one crew too large for the structure being excavated. I decided to put the extra two men onto a tiny addition between a stairway and the platform wall which formed the western limit of the garbage dump. When the rubbish was cleared from the top of the addition, a hole had been noted running down into the fill, and one of the men, peering into the crevice, reported seeing a large piece of pottery. As the addition was about one meter wide by one and a half high and less than two metres deep, I did not expect anything striking, and in this, as in so many other cases, I was mistaken. From the moment the cut was begun sherds started to pour from the black soil fill, and by the end of the first half-day we had a small mountain of pottery set out beside the working area. It soon became clear that the entire addition was filled with sherds, and that most of the pieces could be fitted together; in short, we had a microcosm of the Great Pile, with a much better chance of sorting out matching pieces and producing reconstructable pots. In the end we had over 60 vessels, only three of which were whole, with a great many elaborately painted polychrome pots including several adorned with human figures and monkeys. As the addition was capped by the Great Pile, it obviously antedates that early Late Classic (ca. A.D. 600-700) material, and hence is likely to fall at or before A.D. 600, a period for which we had relatively little ceramic evidence. So once again the element of chance produced a most valuable addition to the picture of Altun Ha prehistory.

Outside the site centre, work continued in the round platform mentioned previously, revealing traces of seven earlier structures within the latest round building, with burials associated with almost each of these phases. In all, 33 burials were encountered in the building, and as several of them were multiple interments we have data on 55 or more individuals from the latter part of the Pre-Classic, probably dating from 200 or 250 B.C. to about the beginning of the Christian Era. The search around this large structure for residential or other buildings of the same period produced a great quantity of burials in residential mounds, but all of Late Classic or terminal Early Classic times. Only in one case did we find another Pre-Classic building, which could hardly have been identified as such had it not been a small round platform, as its fill contained neither burials nor sherds except for a few found just atop the underlying limestone of the area. The sole element found within the small platform was a sort of altar-stone at the building base, which was simply a large slab of soft limestone hollowed out and intensively burned.

Around this Pre-Classic structure were several mounds, all seemingly good possibilities for further early discoveries, but testing showed them to be almost uniformly of Late Classic date. In one case in particular, a most unprepossessing structure produced a very large number of burials, most of them accompanied by richly-painted vessels, and many with one or more small jade objects or other wealth items, including a beautifully-carved pair of large shell rosettes smeared



with cinnabar. Clearly this small residence had housed a family of considerable prestige in the Altun Ha community, apparently for a period of nearly three centuries; but why such a family should have occupied a small dwelling far from the centre of the site and out of the zone where most upper-class residences were found remains a mystery. Unfortunately, just as we were completing the first trench into this building in mid-May, a bit of rain appeared. Now, rain in itself, unless it is of the torrential variety occurring in the rainy season, is not much of a problem. We slipped about a little for a day or two, but soon got our mud-legs and continued with the work, little dreaming that the showers were not bringing May flowers, but another kind of delight.

Exactly four days after the showers, the first clouds of mosquitos began to appear in the daytime (some had always been there at night), a phenomenon usually reserved for June and later. Within a week, the shaded parts of the site, and these are many, were almost unbearable, and even the open areas were infested with millions of flying hypodermics singing merrily as they feasted on our bodily juices. Repellents were a little help, but sweat soon washed them away, and many of us were beginning to suffer reactions to the chemicals from over-use in any case. Around the excavations, the local villagers set up their cure for "flies", smudge-pots in which tree-ant nests, palm nuts, and other things are burned. The palm-nut smoke is bearable, and that of the ant-nests is tolerable for short periods, but somehow I could not get used to the smell of burning old rubber boots around the trenches. We kept at the work, swatting, sweating, and swearing, and wondering whether the ecologists have the full picture of the insect control problem, for six weeks after the onset of the plague, and I remember thinking as I sat atop one of the temples with the men working below that my proper title at that time might have been Lord of the Flies. Anyway, for those of you longing for a tale of the romance of archaeology, there it is.

During the smudging season we excavated a small group of structures surrounding a plaza a considerable distance northeast of the site centre, in an area not previously investigated. The choice of the group, which I assumed to be a family unit of some sort, was based on the discovery by the owner of the land of a group of giant ceremonial flints on the surface of one of the eight mounds. Excavation here produced several caches at or near the surface, something heretofore known in only two instances at the site, but when we dug into the building proper we found little to indicate any special importance, and hence no explanation for the rich offerings apparently made after the structure had been abandoned.

Elsewhere in the group, excavations yielded a great many burials ranging from terminal Late Classic or early Post-Classic (ca. A.D. 950 or later) back to the earliest part of the Early Classic,



probably about A.D. 300-350. Of the more than 50 burials encountered in the group, all but a few were accompanied by one or more pottery vessels, many of them of shapes and types of decoration previously unrecorded at Altun Ha. Fittingly, the last burial, which was actually recorded on our last day in camp, produced vessels of type never before seen at the site. From this it follows, of course, that if we continued we would recover new data from many mounds, perhaps something new from each of the nearly 475 mounds we have not touched. But such new information would most likely be of less significance now that the broad pattern of Altun Ha prehistory has been fairly well drawn, and hence it is time to stop here, report what has been done, and turn elsewhere to a new site in an area as unknown as was the coastal strip before we began at Altun Ha.

It has taken more space than I expected to report this season's events, so I shall limit my notes on the project in general to one aspect, saving other things for later newsletters. The final report will, of course, include a great many acknowledgements, among them the standard statements about the workmen. I would like to anticipate the final report by telling you a bit about the men who worked with us over the years.

We began with a crew of 13 (an important number to the ancient Maya, but just chance), of whom 6 were Creoles (descendants of slaves brought from Africa by the British) and 7 Mayas from a distant village, experienced in archaeological work and linked, however remotely, to the builders of the site. At the end of the last season we had 37 men, still about equally divided between the two ethnic groups, of whom only 6 had been with us since the start. In the beginning, the excavations were simply employment to the men, though the Mayas felt some pride in the accomplishments of their ancestors; by about mid-way through the programme, most of the men had begun to be ego-involved, as the jargon puts it, in the work, and in the last three years the men seemed to be working as much out of interest in archaeology as for pay. It is always true that the work could not have been done without the men, but with our crew it is a fact that much less work would have been done if these men had been of a different sort. It will seem sad not to be hiring on the men again next year, and from the nature of the season closing this year I think the sadness will be felt on both sides. But we shall still have the common bond of having worked together to unearth Altun Ha and bring to light some of the achievements of the ancient Maya.

Next year we face the rather monotonous task of sorting and classifying hundreds of thousands (or possibly several million) potsherds. We may get involved in one or two small excavation projects, but for most of the season we shall just be shuffling sherds. As this produces little worth reporting in a newsletter, I may reminisce about Altun Ha in future issues.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 72, May, 1971

Belmopan,  
British Honduras

Confidential:  
Not for Publication

## THE SHERD SHUFFLE:

Or, I Think I'm Going Dottery from Sorting So Much Pottery  
David M. Pendergast, Field Director

I can see those of you who were young in the 20's and 30's trying to remember how the Sherd Shuffle went; was it something like the Castle Walk, or closer to the Turkey Trot? The answer is neither; the Sherd Shuffle is rather like the Charleston — a lot of motion, with very little sense of getting anywhere. The Shuffle is, in addition, one of the myriad tasks which awaits every Mayanist when an excavation programme is completed: the sorting, counting, and description of the masses of pottery fragments recovered from dumps, building fills, and other spots around every Maya site. The ancient Maya were master potters who produced some truly beautiful vessels without the aid of the wheel or other technological devices, and amongst these pots are some which rank with the great ceramic masterpieces of all time. These sorts of vessels are not, however, the concern of the sherd-shuffler, or at best they show up only in the form of a few small bits amongst huge piles of less striking pottery. The principal grist in the shuffler's mill, and my main concern for the 1971 season, is the great variety of commonplace vessels which form the bulk of any Maya ceramic sample. Perhaps from this you can foresee that this Newsletter will not be packed with the Action, Romance, and Great Discoveries which are thought to be the archaeologist's lot; instead I shall attempt to portray archaeology as it really is, 98% of the time.

Each year of the work at Altun Ha (and I had better note again that the site lies on the northern coast of British Honduras [Belize] in case we have new readers who have not seen earlier Altun Ha newsletters) produced mountains of pottery fragments, few if any of which ever received mention in reports of the progress of the excavations though they



loomed large in each season's yield. As the ancient Maya were master potters, so they seem also to have been master pot-breakers, and when this tendency is coupled with the nearly 1600 years of occupation of Altun Ha one might expect the site to be littered with sherds, which in fact it is. Beside or behind each dwelling stands a refuse pile composed largely of sherds, and not infrequently the houses themselves have been found to contain similar heaps of broken pots. All of the construction at the site is likewise a repository for great lots of sherds, for the binder of stone fill in platforms is soil collected from various parts of the site, and no such collection could fail to include quantities of pot fragments. Since the working season each year at Altun Ha was long and energy levels were rather low by season's end, I elected to leave the great accumulation of sherds until the end of the operation rather than sorting and classifying the bits and pieces year by year. I felt also, and the feeling has proved to be well-founded, that the task might actually be somewhat easier, albeit rather staggering at the outset of the analysis year, if the entire mass could be gone over at once rather than piecemeal.

At the beginning of 1971, after spending a short time getting settled at Belmopan, the new capital of Belize, my wife and I were confronted by the first wave of the sherdpile. A truck brought its maximum load, about three tons, from the site and deposited it in what were intended to be the bedrooms of one half of the duplex building which serves as our headquarters for the year. When the unloading was done, we had two 8x8 ft. rooms filled to the doors and as close to the ceiling as the loaders could manage with wooden crates. The sight was not an altogether pleasant one, particularly when we realized that what we were seeing was just the first instalment. Once the initial shock had passed, though, I set to work prying open crates, examining their contents, selecting material for drawing or for preservation as part of the type sample, counting the lot, and then recreating the rejected material for eventual return to Altun Ha. There, compressed in a single sentence, is the essence of this season's work, but in view of the labour involved such compression seems a bit misleading. Working a nine-hour day six days a week (with some time off for a bit of fieldwork in March), I am now less than two-thirds of the way through the pile with slightly more than 400,000 sherds examined, and progress in some of the tasks which follow upon the sorting has barely begun.

After the sorting of a lot is completed, the portion of the pottery which is to be retained as a permanent type sample is labelled and set aside for shipment to Toronto, where most of the pieces will undergo further examination. In addition, there are from every lot a number of pieces which warrant illustration. The nature of such pieces and the number selected from each lot vary tremendously, but generally speaking the sherds for illustration are representative of shapes, varieties of surface decoration, or other elements not



present in the collection of whole and restored vessels recovered from burials and offerings. In some cases there are also painted sherds which parallel whole vessels but add motifs or variations missing from the complete specimens. The colours of all of these sherds must be described through use of a standard colour nomenclature, and drawing directions must be noted before the pieces can be passed on to the artist. These tiresome tasks are carried out uncomplainingly by my wife, who then turns the material over to Mr. Claus Breede, Scientific Illustrator in the Office of the Chief Archaeologist, who joined us late in January and will continue here until the end of April. In the three months available to him Mr. Breede cannot hope to complete more than a portion of the drawing tasks, especially as there have been several other demands on his time; hence, as expected, all of the specimens for illustration will accompany the type sample to Toronto, where Mrs. Georgina Hosek, Mr. Breede, and perhaps others will be engaged in drawing for some time to come.

All of the foregoing may sound like a great deal of work focussed on bits of broken crockery from which, as you may have noted, we are not attempting to reconstruct complete vessels. Reconstruction, even if it were desirable in all cases, is simply a physical impossibility, akin in many respects to an attempt to locate and fit together all the pieces of a late 18th Century jar scattered through refuse underlying and surrounding the city of Toronto, but with the time scale lengthened from two to sixteen centuries. If you are wondering why there should be so much attention to sherds in the Maya area, you are echoing thoughts expressed not only by archaeologists working in other parts of the world but also by many Mayanists. I can give you some answers to the question of why the work described above is warranted, but they will not be typical of the replies which might be given by some other Mayanists, due in part to the special conditions which existed at Altun Ha and in part to my own attitude toward ceramics. I see sherd studies not as an end in themselves (which some do), nor as an exercise in classification in a sort of Linnaean manner which produces much information about pigeonholes but very little about people. The sherds are not the major framework for the prehistory of Altun Ha, nor perhaps even the best of the several sets of ancient clues available. They are, in most cases, a supplement to other sorts of data already in hand, adding poundage to an already rather corpulent body of information rather than flesh to a bare skeleton. As I noted above, this stems in part from the special nature of our discoveries at Altun Ha; at many other sites the importance of sherds is considerably greater, and there may frequently be cases in which the archaeologist has little else to guide him.

At Altun Ha, an unusually large number of burials, most of them accompanied by pottery vessels, lessen our dependence on sherds for vital information regarding developments in the local Maya



ceramic tradition. As the burials were usually distributed over the entire range of reconstruction phases of each building, the grave goods give us a very good ceramic sequence; obviously the burials in the lowest and earliest stratum of a structure antedate those in the overlying stratum, and so on through however many strata are encountered. In addition, discovery of burials with similar ceramic associations in separate structures gives us the opportunity of developing a sequence longer than that represented by any single building. Of paramount importance in all of this is the fact that burials can be directly related to building phases in which they occur, while sherds in building fill may be from any period prior to the time of construction. For these reasons I am depending wherever possible upon the burial lots for dating of buildings and for establishment of the broad ceramic sequence, while the sherds are used to fill in chinks in the pattern.

I spoke earlier about the difficulties of reconstructing vessels from the masses of sherds collected from various parts of the site. While it is true that we cannot, barring impossibly large expenditures of time, hope to rebuild a pot from its scattered pieces, we can often reconstruct it on paper with a drawing giving a full or nearly complete idea of what the vessel actually looked like. Since no group of burials no matter how large will yield examples of all the ceramic variety at any Maya site, such paper reconstructions are of great value in expanding the collection without the necessity of sorting through piles of sherds for pieces which might not be there at all. Occasionally, though, such sorting does actually seem worth the effort when a fragment of an especially striking vessel crops up. Unfortunately, it happens more often than not that such a fragment, often beautifully painted, will pop out when a box is opened, giving rise to visions of many more pieces of the same pot hidden down in the pile. If no further pieces are forthcoming after diligent searching, of course I am disappointed and I sometimes feel that it would be better to have nothing at all than to have only one tiny indication of what the vessel might have been. On the other hand, it is far worse indeed to find two pieces of an elaborately decorated vessel and nothing more, particularly if the two pieces cannot be fitted together.

I could go on for many more pages about sherds, reflecting upon the preoccupation with pot-fragments I am now suffering and noting specific instances, of which there have been several, of solutions to problems supplied by sherd-shuffling (including in two cases shifting of dates of structures about 300-400 years forward in time due to discovery of late sherds in what were thought to be early buildings), but I suspect that you have by now been told more about sherds than you really wanted to know. I shall leave descriptions of our small excavation projects this season for a later newsletter, wherein I should also be able to take note of the completion of the Sherd Shuffle. For the moment, then, I close this thrilling saga of the Romance of Archaeology As It Really Is, with envy for those of you whose only contact with sherds comes when another kitchen dish bites the dust.

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# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 84, May, 1972

Toronto, Ontario

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## WHEN THE COUNTING STOPPED

David M. Pendergast

When last we saw our intrepid sherd-sorter, he was ankle-deep, head first, in sherds, counting numbly away as the days sped by. "Whatever became of him?", you may have wondered in recent months as your thoughts turned from the chill of Canada's winter to the blissful life on the tropic Caribbean shore in far-off Belize. For those who have clung tightly to some wisp of hope that the sorter would defeat the sherd-pile, rather than vice versa, there is good news. By June the gigantic pile was at long last reduced to a mound, then a heap, then a bunch, then a bit, and finally to nothing. The work was completed, save for measuring and recording several thousand stone tools, and a few other similarly minuscule tasks. Six hundred and twenty-two thousand five hundred and forty-six sherds after the beginning, the sorting was done, the lists compiled, and the data ready for further processing. There were those who said it couldn't be done, and they were wrong. On the other hand, there were those who said it shouldn't be done, and they may have had a point. But done it was, and the sorter somehow survived.

Looking back now on the Intensive First-Level Ceramic Analysis (this sounds far more scientific than "sherd shuffle", somehow), I am able to think of it as an almost pleasant interlude in the archaeological operation. The endless days filled with sherd-dust have receded a bit in my memory, and I recall the very real pleasures of living in Belmopan, the new capital of British Honduras (Belize). Apart from brief periods spent in Belize City after the 1964 and 1967 field seasons, my wife and I had never lived in a "city" house in B.H. with running water, electricity, and other conveniences without which urban folk are now unable to survive. Beyond these amenities, Belmopan offered the quiet of a new and not yet fully populated city,



combined with the virtual absence of the mosquitoes and other stinging creatures which made evenings at Altun Ha an experience never to be forgotten. The opportunity to work in the cool of the evening (and the nights were always cooler here than on the coast) without fear of being bled dry by buzzing beasts served to sharpen the contrast between our camp and city life. But the bush was never far away, and a few minutes' walk or a somewhat longer drive would take us to the sort of environment in which there may have been a few more insects, but there was also a greater variety of colour and life. All in all, the positive side of Belmopan-cum-bush life far outweighed the more than twelve tons of sherds through which I waded between January and June.

Though our ventures into the bush were largely confined to one-day sorties, we did manage one longer trek, or at least a period of several days in which we went from Belmopan into the forest, spent the day, and returned home. This mini-expedition was for the purpose of recording and excavating a small cave near the Sibun River, about twenty miles east of Belmopan. I had been told of the site in 1970, but had not had time to make the trip to see it. Early in the Great Sherd Year, though, Mrs. E.W. Craig of Belize City put me in touch with the owners of the ranch on which the site lies, and after discussions with Mr. Richard Woods and his mother we arranged to have a look at the cave, then unnamed.

The area in which the cave is located is an unusual one, with high, rough limestone hills bordering a narrow alluvial plain on the south side of the river, and low, nearly flat granitic "pine ridge" on the north. The hills are pocked with caves, as are the mountains to the south and west where we had worked in earlier years. This rough terrain is typical karst topography, but I suspect that this doesn't tell you very much. It is simpler to say that the area is rugged, difficult to get around in, but extremely interesting nonetheless.

On reaching the Woods' ranch, we set out on a track which lasted for about a mile, then gave way to a trail which in turn gave way to a passage through openings in the bush covering the hill containing the site. With Mrs. Craig and Mr. Woods, my wife and I struggled up the sodden and slippery hillside, not really expecting to find what we had been told the cave contained: a wooden spear and a small wooden box. We reached the cave entrance, a high narrow slit in the face of the hill, and passed over a mound of vegetation and fallen rock into the main chamber, a great cleft which duplicated the form of the mouth, its floor running level for a short space and then rising to pinch out against the chamber roof. As we had been forewarned, the main area of the cave contained nothing to indicate ancient use, let alone the sorts of objects one sometimes encounters in the caverns of Belize. The archaeology, we were told, all lay above us in two alcoves running laterally from the main chamber.



With some effort, principally on Richard Woods' part, we managed to attach a rope to a projecting rock at the outer edge of the main alcove, and I proceeded to use it to make my way up a rather difficult cave wall. Upon reaching the alcove floor, I flashed my headlight over the small area before me, and saw at once that at least part of what we had been told was true. Pottery vessels, ranging from small jars to large dishes and huge storage jars, stood in groups along the west and north sides of the area, unquestionably just as they were left centuries ago. Across from them, leaning against the east wall of the alcove, was a wooden shaft 68 inches long and an inch in diameter, its upper end sharpened to a point. My description of what I could see brought my wife and Mrs. Craig up the rope in short order, dispelling the fears they had voiced about such a climb. When we were all assembled and a lantern had been lit, we were conducted with great ceremony by Mr. Woods to a spot between two of the vessel groups where several small, flat stones lay in a heap. Telling us that he had stumbled on this feature only after several visits to the site, he carefully drew aside the stones to reveal what lay beneath, and there indeed was the small wooden box whose existence we had doubted so strongly.

We know that wooden objects played a large role in the lives of the ancient Maya, but our knowledge comes mostly from secondary sources, such as representations of what are clearly wooden artifacts in scenes on pottery vessels and carved monuments. The tropic damp has long since obliterated all but the last traces of Maya artistry in wood, leaving only lintels and beams in some buildings, a few objects preserved in the waters of the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itzá, a single carved figure which seems to have come from a cave in the northern Maya area, and an occasional random scrap which has somehow escaped the fate of the rest. Perhaps many caves, as well as all surface centres, once contained wooden boxes, spears, and other objects, but as far as we know the box and spear from this small cave on the Sibun are the only such artifacts to have survived.

As quickly as we could, we undertook mapping and excavation of the cave, to which we gave the name Actun Polbilche (Cave of the Wood). Following this brief foray into field archaeology, I returned to the sherds, alongside which were now arrayed the 23 vessels from the cave, as well as numerous small artifacts and the spear. The box was sent to Toronto with the kind permission of the Minister of Trade and Industry in Belize, so that its fragile and damaged form could be strengthened and preserved. In spare moments I measured and described the vessels, amongst which were many jars in such excellent condition despite their 10th Century A.D. date that their capacities could be measured by simply filling them with water. Such work provided a nice contrast with the mounds of important but sometimes disappointing fragments from Altun Ha.

When the struggles with sherds, pots, stone tools and other things



came to an end, it was time to depart British Honduras and wend our way northward again. Only then did we realize fully that our departure would mark the finish of the Altun Ha Project, though not of our commitment to work in the country. As the time for leaving neared, we made one last trip to the village of Succotz, from which the Maya men on our crew had come. We sat in a small shop built by one of the workmen from the proceeds of his time at Altun Ha, surrounded by the Maya men whose energy and faithfulness had made the project what it was. The men listened while I spoke at length in Spanish, the language we had always used, about the now-distant time when we began the labours at Altun Ha, about the events of the past seven years, and about what the present and future might hold for us. When I was done, my foreman, a man of the wisdom and dignity befitting his Maya heritage, spoke for himself and his friends. He talked of the sadness which had suddenly engulfed us all at the thought that what we had shared was ending, and of the hope that the time until we could be together at work on a new site would be brief. At last I rose, as did the men, and they came one by one to shake my hand and wish my wife and me a safe journey and a speedy return. There were tears in my foreman's eyes, and the lumps in our throats made us glad to be in our Land Rover and off for Belmopan, and for home a few days thereafter.

Now, many months later, the reporting of the Actun Polbilche excavation is well on its way to completion, awaiting data from specialists who are studying seeds, bones, and other material. Meanwhile, reporting of the Altun Ha project, an undertaking of very formidable magnitude when compared to the tiny but important Actun Polbilche excavation, is also progressing well. My six-month stint in loco Tushinghami slowed my own work on the reports, but fortunately Dr. Stanley Loten has managed during those months to work wonders with the architectural data, while the artists and technicians have laboured mightily to complete work on the artifacts. If all continues at the present pace, I may be fortunate enough to send my next Newsletter copy from a new camp at a new site, in the company of old friends in British Honduras.

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# ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER



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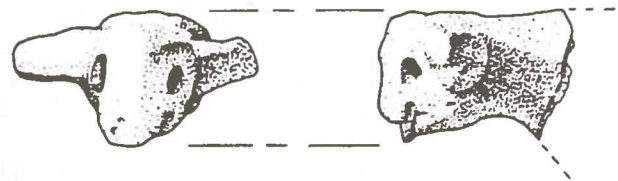
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PEOPLING THE PAST: HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?

David M. Pendergast, *New World Archaeology*

Time attacks all. It begins by stripping away the feelings that surrounded an event; we cannot revive the sentiments we experienced in times past, whether good or ill, no matter how we may strive to do so, and those experienced by others were largely beyond our grasp even at the very moment. Time then removes the meaning of the event, often bit by bit but sometimes wholesale, until all of the intangible web that enmeshed something when it occurred is gone. Look at a 19th-century tintype of your great-grandparents, try for a moment to sense their feelings as they endured the vise-like grip of the photographer's clamp for this important occasion, and you will know how fully we have lost the knowledge of our own culture little more than a century ago. Imagine, then, how much greater the barrier is between the archaeologist and a society that lies across a great gulf of time and cultural difference and has left virtually no written record of its achievements, let alone of its people's daily round. How is that gulf to be bridged, if indeed it can really be spanned at all?

Everything we know, or think we know, about ancient cultures is either history, when the written word at least gives us a window on events and attitudes, or prehistory, when the words are absent. The archaeologist who focuses on a time and place depicted by historical records attempts



**Fig. 1:** Head of a pottery animal figure, probably a child's toy; length 2.5 cm; Altun Ha, 16th century.

by excavation to verify, refute, or amplify what the documents have to say. The other focus forces reliance on evidence from the earth alone; the non-perishable products of human endeavour, and sometimes the very soil itself, become the documents from which the tale must be read. The bridge between us and the unrecorded past is ethnographic analogy, which is to say that we understand an object or the evidence of an event because we perceive its resemblance to something we know.

Show anyone in the world today an ancient stone axe and the object's general use will immediately spring to the viewer's mind, even if a dweller in our far north may not envision the felling of trees with the implement. But what answer would we obtain from some being whose technology used only the laser for cutting? We are often unaware of how fully we depend on



ethnographic analogy, but in fact it is as much at the root of our ability to understand the uses of objects from our own culture of a century or two ago as it is the foundation of archaeological interpretation.

The obvious problem in the use of analogy is that it will work only for objects or processes that are still in use, or at least were in use recently enough to have had every detail set down on paper. Hence the success rate for analogy diminishes in direct proportion to the distance in time that separates the student from the object studied. It also diminishes sharply when the modern world is not derived from the ancient. The third factor that is very likely to affect one's success in using analogy is preservation: where only the most durable materials survive, the gaps in the archaeological record may mask a resemblance to a known object that would explain the artifacts's use. Readers who have followed the account of my work over these many years know that all three of the problems affect the focus of my studies, the ancient Maya.

The Maya material world of a millennium and more ago was replete with perishable riches. Today no more than traces survive; though we cannot calculate the loss with any pretense of precision, it is probable that more than 90% of the material remains of Maya grandeur have succumbed to the incessant attacks of the tropical environment. Hence the documents we must "read" are like tattered bits of parchment with more words missing than present. On rare occasions the reading is aided by modern Maya practice, or even more rarely by the survival in use of an ancient style of object. Usually, however, a glimpse at today's Maya household will reveal precious little that is likely to be a remnant of life in the 1600s, let alone in the middle Classic of A.D. 600. As a result we treasure every occasion on which today's world opens a window on the past, and we know that Western technology's invasion of the Maya area reduces the chance of such an experience day by day.



**Fig. 2:** Pottery fire-carrier; length 20.2 cm, ca A.D. 850.

In my experience the most striking example of modern identification of an otherwise unidentifiable object came at Altun Ha more than twenty years ago. As we trenched through a large refuse pile dumped in a house abandoned about A.D. 800, we came upon an artifact that looked very much like a pottery flashlight (Fig. 2). Turning the object over and over in my hands, I mused on its use---aloud, I soon learned as my foreman came up behind me and began to provide the answer to my question. To my great surprise, he identified the "flashlight" as something still in use when he was a boy, about 1920. Such things served then as fire-carriers; the hollow handle held combustible material, and a strike-a-light was used to ignite the material so that one could carry fire from place to place. Sure enough,



the top part of the object was blackened inside and out, as were most others we found farther on in the dump and elsewhere around the site in later years. Had the first one emerged from the earth this year there might have been no one around to tell of its use, and we would have been reduced to guessing, as we so often do, and probably guessing wrong, as we so often do. In all likelihood we would have called the fire-carrier a ceremonial object.

Grateful though I am for analogy-provided explanations of artifacts, I am painfully aware that they deal only with a tangible world that is no more than the beginning of the road towards the people themselves. Like all archaeologists, I begin excavation in the sure knowledge that I shall never be able to resurrect the people fully, or understand the minutiae of their daily lives, or feel the emotions that swayed them. Yet I remain hopeful that clues to these matters, however small, will spring from the earth---that the understanding of objects may occasionally produce an understanding of their users.

Time and time again my hopes come to nought as I stand in the cleared-out rooms of an ancient residence and am forced to acknowledge that I cannot divine the use of a featureless cubicle. Here is a place where people lived, and loved, and laughed, and bore children, and grew old, and died; but the life is extinguished, the love cannot be felt, the laughter is beyond my hearing, and the children followed their parents into death long ago. It is sad that of all the facets of life it is usually only its end that has left its traces clear for me to see. There was a time when I approached those traces in a wholly objective manner, recording grave size, burial length, accompanying artifacts, and all the other data as I might set down the dimensions of an axe. In so doing I was, I now recognize, missing another kind of analogy that can invest the past with meaning that is neither precise nor scientific, but nevertheless can tell us something about ancient Maya life, whether



Fig. 3: Bat-effigy pot from a child's grave, height 6.9 cm; Altun Ha, ca A.D. 650.

in city, town, or village. This is the analogy of emotion.

Partly because of the great limitations in our data and partly owing to the archaeologist's striving for some sort of scientific quality in the record of the past, the Maya are usually portrayed as a people who displayed their carefully controlled emotions only in the rigid frame of religious activity. Nonsense. What Maya father can have looked down at his sleeping son and failed to see a mirror of himself? What mother can have raised a daughter without wanting to set her feet solidly on the path to happiness and fulfillment? And, all too often in a time and place where infant mortality was rampant, what parents can have placed their child's body in a grave without knowing a searing pain that would never quite be assuaged? As we excavate a home we cannot document a father's and mother's love for their children, but we know it



existed because the Maya were human. As we methodically record the contents of a child's grave it is a great mercy that we cannot feel the parents' pain, but we can measure its intensity against the yardstick of our own lives. In prehistory, this is probably as close as we can come to restoring humanity to ruined ancient communities.

What, then, of the time when prehistory flowed into history? From the Spaniards' arrival in Belize around 1544 onward, should we not have a written record that will breathe some life into the archaeological remains? The archaeologist's hope is certainly that this will prove true; Spanish priests and their helpers were directed to keep records of baptisms, marriages, and deaths, while secular officials were to collect census and other information on a fairly regular basis. But Belize was a frontier area where record-keeping was evidently anything but a high priority. The few harried Spaniards in the land had the gigantic task of bringing Christianity and European social order to a people who usually failed to recognize immediately their

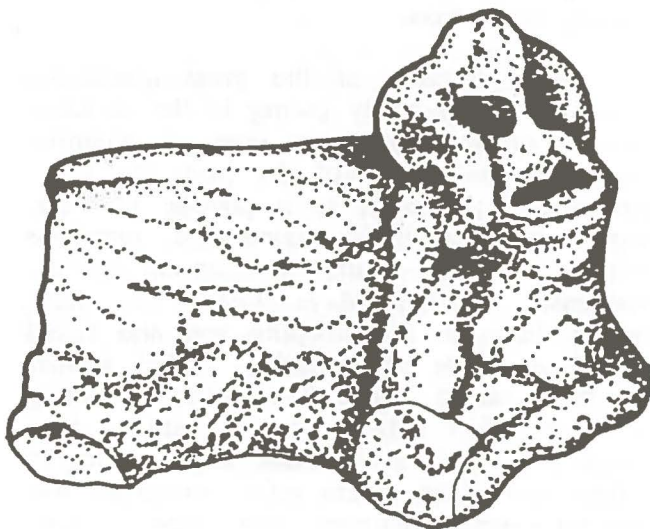


Fig. 4: Animal pinched from clay, probably by a child whose mother was making pots and fired the toy along with her wares; height 4 cm, Altun Ha, A.D. 850 or later.

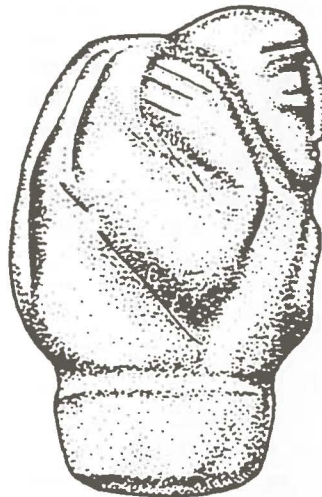


Fig. 5: Burden-bearer, apparently using a forehead strap; Altun Ha, ca A.D. 650.

need for such benefits. For this and other reasons the Spaniards did not follow the dictates of central authority, or if they did they failed to see to the safe housing of the records. As a result, the hope that the Historic period will bring us closer to the Maya as human beings very largely vanishes.

On lamentably rare occasions individual Mayas make brief appearances on the Spanish documentary stage. For Lamanai there is but one: a boy, Ah Chuil, who travelled from Lamanai to the northern Yucatan town of Tibolon in 1560, stayed for a year with a man named Juan Chuil, and then returned to Lamanai. One Lamanai family name, one proof of kinship ties between Lamanai and the north, are all we know from this single record. How much of Lamanai's 3500-year history had the Chuils seen? How large was the family? How did they put food on the table? And, most important of all, where among the remains we excavated is the evidence of their existence? No analogy, no study of historic documents, no examination of the archaeological record will answer these questions. Ah Chuil of 430 years ago and all the Ah Chuils of the centuries before will always be there, just out of reach, challenging me to bring them to life from the tantalizing fragments they left behind.