

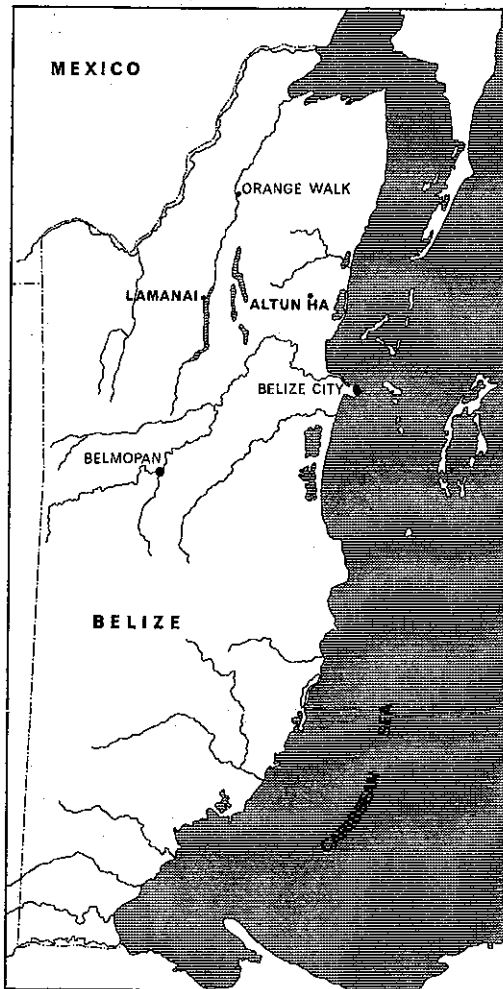
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BOATS, BURIALS AND BEANS - Or, Life at Lamanai Lodge
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For years I have planned to excavate another site in Belize (formerly British Honduras), just 25 miles west of Altun Ha but in a very different sort of setting, lying at the western margin of a large lagoon of the New River. Preliminary exploration of the site, known locally as Indian Church, in 1971 showed it to be larger and in some ways more complex than Altun Ha. In the fall of 1973 plans were completed for work at the new site, and in January of this year the expedition got under way.

Everyone knows, thanks to those numerous high-quality epics of the silver screen, how archaeological expeditions operate in lush tropical jungles. Arrival at the dirt airstrip of the lonely bush outpost (where supplies have been assembled by a mysterious local factotum with worldwide com-

mercial connections) heralds a flurry of activity: hiring bearers and mules, checking the caviar and tinned vichyssoise, readjusting pith helmets and checking the bandoliers of ammunition - in short, all the things necessary

to the Romance of Archaeology. A trek through the jungle allows the hero to essay a few perfunctory chops at the tangled foliage (but never, no never, perspiring enough to wilt his starched and pressed khakis). Finally the brave band bursts out of the forest into a clearing, where stand the remains of a lost city, gleaming brightly in the tropic fastness.

Compare, if you will, this Hollywood idyll with the real thing. Following nearly a month of cooling his heels awaiting the arrival of a freighter, the archaeologist is seen standing in the midst of a crew of longshoremen while the expedition's two Canadian-made boats are hoisted from a cargo lighter and deposited on trucks for transport to local yards for checking and test runs on the Belize River. After some rather warm hours of uncrating, our hero can be found at the helm of the flagship of the ROM fleet, giving every indication to the untrained eye that he is as at home on water as on land. His frequent consultation of the owner's manual might be seen by some as weakening his mariner image, but no matter; after several trial runs and a bit of excitement when the boat is lifted from the waters of the Belize for transportation by road to the New River 60 miles north, our intrepid hero is at last ready to face the perils of jungle travel.

I fear that disappointment awaits those who are expecting at this point tales of narrow escapes from the jaws of ferocious alligators, or a story of how the fearless archaeologist was forced to fling himself into piranha-infested waters and tow the boat the last hundred miles by clutching the bow-line in his teeth, swimming ever onward despite the poisoned arrow in his shoulder. Our first trip up the New River, after the larger boat had been set on the river by a crane at Belize Sugar Industries, was hardly the stuff of which Grade C movies are made. Accompanied by two of our Maya excavators, my wife and I navigated the 23 miles of exceedingly tortuous stream with only four wrong turns into blind channels, and at the end of our journey we entered New River lagoon to see the great ruined structures of Indian Church, or Lamanai as it is properly called, rising above the forest at the water's edge.

A few days later, Maya crew and supplies in tow, we returned to the site to begin camp construction. From mid-February until near the end of April, most of our energy was directed to this task, and even now, in mid-June, a few small bits of such work remain to be done.

Not all of our life this season has been dedicated to construction, however. From the first day of bush-clearing in the camp area onward, some type of archaeology has gone on, though for much of the time it has consisted of surface collection only. As it happens, the area we chose for our campsite, a bit of fairly level ground situated between a group of structures and the lagoon edge, was literally covered with artifacts, so that between hammering and sawing we could collect surface material in truly amazing quantity. Of course, artifacts from

the surface are usually not as significant as those from excavation, as they lack the context and associations occurring within structures. To see why this does not hold true for the camp surface collection, you need to know more about the site and its history.

I have used two names for the site, Indian Church and Lamanai. Each of these is correct, but each applies to a different period of the area's occupation. The former name was given to the spot in the 19th Century just before the British Honduras Company Ltd. began sugar production here. Scattered amongst the ancient structures are the mill, with its massive rusted iron machinery, and the ruins of company houses; these are, properly speaking, the remains of Indian Church, while the ancient Maya buildings, and one other structure as well, are Lamanai.

Most of the Mayan names for archaeological sites are products of the discoverer's fancy, but for a very few the actual ancient names are known, and Lamanai is one of these. Unlike other Maya centres in Belize and the adjacent Peten of Guatemala, Lamanai was still occupied, and perhaps even flourishing, in the 16th Century, having for some reason escaped the collapse which struck elsewhere. As a result, the Franciscans chose Lamanai as the site for establishment of a church, built some time prior to 1582, and it is from the Spanish records that we know the site's name.

The church, which was burnt by apostate Maya in 1641, stands in ruins in the southern part of the site, and around it are mounds which presumably represent the homes of its parishioners. Our plans for the 1974 season called for excavation in the church area first, as I hoped to be able to identify the materials of the last stage of Maya occupation at Lamanai before moving back in time by investigating the large structure of the Classic period (AD 250-900) site. The camp surface collection altered plans somewhat, though, for it consisted entirely of mid to late Post-Classic material, primarily of the 13th and 14th centuries A.D.

Our first excavations this year were in the camp area, though not, as one might expect, in or around a 30-metre high structure which lies at the southwest corner of the area. We chose instead a tiny mound, just over a metre and a half high, which stands in the middle of a small plaza south of the main camp. After drawing what little remained of the façade of the building, we began to section the core, and almost immediately came upon a burial cut into earlier construction lying beneath the late building. Sherds from the cores of both buildings were of Post-Classic date, so we knew almost from the outset that the structure was proving to be what we had hoped. The burial was, however, more than we had hoped for, and in a way almost more than we could bear.

The first signs of the burial were pieces of a vessel in the core,

arranged in a circle. Clearing showed these to be the remains of a large censer, smashed and laid atop the stones bordering a burial pit. As the pit was circular, it appeared that we might have a secondary burial, in which the bones were gathered up after the body had decayed, and placed in a pit or other container. Discovery of a bowl inverted over the mouth of a jar in the pit seemed to support this. However, when we removed the bowl we found ourselves confronted with a huge censer, over 55 cm. high, and removal of parts of the broken vessel revealed a seated primary burial.

Excavation of a seated burial is probably the most difficult type of burial work. When the burial is in a vessel and the vessel is in a pit, the difficulty increases severalfold. As if this were not enough, we found that the base of the giant censer was surrounded by a mass of vessels, all of them broken and scattered over the pit floor. Eight days of work sufficed to recover the fragments, which represent about fifteen or more vessels, many of them elaborately carved. From this burial alone we have an excellent sample of late Post-Classic ceramics, most suggesting close relationships with the great centre of Mayapan in northern Yucatán. A second burial in the same mound also seated but not in a vessel, yielded nearly a hundred shell beads and four more vessels, of shapes and types of decoration not found in the first interment. By good luck, our initial effort got us into precisely the time period which I had hoped to examine during the 1974 season.

So now you have heard tales of boats and burials, and of other things that have gone to make up this first season at Lamanai. What remains to be told? Ah, yes - the beans. Not the beans brought in by the sackful in the boat every two weeks, but rather the main object of my attention at the moment. In another building our excavations have carried us down through three structures to the floor of the fourth. Here, around a masonry block, the ancient Maya made a great burnt offering before capping over the old building with a new one. In the offering was corn, including kernels, ears, leaves and stalks, and we have both carbonized kernels and impressions in burnt soil of the plants themselves. Nearby, a small bag or other container of beans was laid, and it is to this that I owe the sore joints resulting from seven hours spent yesterday on my knees with teasing needle and tweezers, salvaging an excellent sample of ancient Maya comestibles. We may not have any alligator-wrestling, but there is romance in archaeology, even in the half-burned beans of a six-century-old offering. Of such things, and of Classic-period Lamanai as well, I shall have more to tell you at a later date.

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