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Lamanai, Belize

LAMANAI 1975: THE GOODS ARE OFT INTERR'D WITH THEIR BONES

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Those who recall the account of adventures during the first year of the ROM's new project in Belize (see Newsletter 110, July 1974 and Rotunda, Spring 1975, pp. 33 ff.) will remember that we managed to encounter a surprisingly large amount of material from the late Post-Classic (13th-14th centuries A.D.) by excavating rather unprepossessing mounds on the fringes of our camp. I planned to start the second season by following up on the fruitful work of 1974, continuing to dissect a complicated structure (given the identifying name "Buk") in which we had already cut a section trench. When last year's Newsletter was written, the trenching had produced a great deal of intriguing architectural information, plus quantities of burnt corn and beans. By season's end ten burials were added to the data, and it was these as much as the complicated construction sequence which made it seem worthwhile continuing work in a great pile of stones and earth which looked like a building only to the archaeologist's eye. At the same time, I thought it might be profitable to investigate other mounds in the area, especially those bordering the small plaza on which Buk faced.

The primary reason for continuing interest in these small, featureless mounds is their age, for the late Post-Classic is a period about which virtually nothing was known prior to our work at Lamanai. What we learned in the first season was that Lamanai was the scene of a rich and varied development in the last few centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards, suggesting that the site was a centre of major importance during this period. In the final days of the 1974 season, discovery of a complex pit burial in Buk, containing extremely elaborate giant censers as well as a copper bell, strengthened the feeling that Lamanai was far more than a rural outpost of Yucatán-centred Post-Classic

Maya civilization. I hoped to start 1975 by seeking further support for this view through work in neighbouring mounds.

If my aim was to demonstrate the richness of the final centuries of life at Lamanai, perhaps I should have started work in a 30-metre-high structure just west of Buk. Instead, I chose to investigate what may rank as the least attractive mound in the area, a long low structure which we named "Cib", set on the slope just above high water mark of the lagoon. Less than a metre high on its inland face and only three metres high on the lagoon side, Cib looked like nothing more than a pile of earth dumped with some care, and then faced on the ends and the lagoon side with rough boulders. Hardly a great temple, this; I thought we might cut an axial trench through from front to back, just to see if Cib was of the same date as its neighbours, and then turn to other structures. As always, my expectations were far off the mark, but this turned out to be a very good thing.

At the end of the first day's digging, we had a good section through some very dark, mucky soil, in which there were a few stones plus the usual quantity of sherds. The pottery indicated that the structure was indeed of late Post-Classic date, and the architecture, if one could call it that, indicated that we would not be occupied long with the dissection of the mound. But on the second day, the excavators struck a burial. It seemed possible, with the discovery of one interment, that we might encounter others in the top quarter to half-metre of the mound, and that they, like the first, might be accompanied by grave goods. By the beginning of the third day of work, prospects seemed a bit brighter despite the miserable nature of the soil, still damp from a prolonged rainy season, and the even more miserable nature of the insect population, swollen considerably by those same rains.

There were more burials in Cib, yes indeed there were. Soon each of the three excavation teams had found a burial, and as these were cleared, recorded, and removed, others kept coming to light. For some weeks we were never without at least one burial in some stage of excavation, and often there were three or more being exposed at one time. In the centre section of the mound, there was literally no area as much as one metre square in which there was not a burial, and the men dug in constant anticipation of finding even more. By the time we had stripped the dark soil stratum from the mound, we had a total of 44 burials representing 47 individuals, all from the late Post-Classic.

Many of the skeletons were in reasonably good condition, and some skulls so well-preserved that they could be removed intact, but the information provided by the bones themselves is only a small part of the excavation results. A number of the skulls are deformed, with flattening of the frontal bone accompanied by broadening of the rear, a practice favoured by the Maya for increasing physical beauty (*chacun à son goût*; if sloping foreheads turn you on, Lamanai would have been



Structure "Buk" from west,
with part of camp beyond.

a good place to be around A.D. 1300). Most also have modified teeth (another beauty aid, though probably linked with rank or status rather than simply a cosmetic technique), with the corners of the upper incisors cut away to leave a charming centre projection. Over half of the burials were in an unusual position, face down with the legs drawn up so that the feet rested on the hips, and this plus the dental modification suggests

that the individuals may have been linked either by kinship or in some other way, with the mound serving as the group burial ground.

While the burial position is unusual and the dental modification more widespread than at some other sites, it is the grave goods which provided the greatest number of surprises. Of the 44 burials, 24 yielded one or more pottery vessels, and many had artifacts of shell, bone, and stone. In addition, 6 were accompanied by copper objects, ranging from simple round bells to elaborate wirework ornaments and bell-headed pins with complex decoration. The total number of copper objects from the six burials is 17, and considering the rarity of metals in the Maya Post-Classic, this is a large number. The variety of forms and the elaborate nature of many of the pieces are more important than the total, for they suggest that the inventory of metal artifacts at Lamanai may well have been as rich as that anywhere else save the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itzá.

While the pottery vessels are surely of local manufacture, the metal objects are just as surely not. Like the obsidian, jade, and some other materials encountered at Lamanai, the metal objects come from some distance away. The most likely area of origin is the Oaxaca Valley of southern Mexico, though West Mexican sources may also have supplied some of the pieces. Typological and metallurgical analyses will be needed before trade links can be fixed with any precision, but the presence of the objects at Lamanai is enough in itself to demonstrate that the site was a centre of sufficient importance to attract very special items of material wealth.

The burials occupied much of our attention for a good many weeks,

but at the same time we were getting on with removal of all the core and floors of several reconstructions in the northern half of Buk. The work was aimed at providing further information on very unusual structures for which no parallels have been reported elsewhere, and also at clearing a structure revealed at the base of our 1974 trench. Moving countless tons of stone and earth is not an easy or attractive task for the men, especially when their confrères are discovering burial after burial just a few metres away. Nonetheless, the men slugged away at the mound, and just as the last burials were being cleared in Cib, more interments began cropping up in Buk.

The first burial in Buk in the 1975 season provided no great surprises, but Burial 16 added a new element to the Buk mortuary data, for its position duplicated that of the majority of the Cib burials, and it was accompanied by a metal ring resembling one from a Cib interment, of a yet unidentified alloy. It seems from this that we can expect to encounter metal artifacts with burials of Post-Classic date, but in no uniform distribution, either in a given structure or in association with a particular burial position or other feature. This means that we cannot plan any excavation to recover further data of this sort, but it also means that we never know when discovery of a burial will carry with it an extra bit of excitement.

The extensive excavation in Buk should have cleared quite a bit of the structure at the bottom of our original trench, but in fact it revealed burial after burial, with the total for the building now standing at 36, and excavation still in progress. Having completed work in the northern half of the structure, we have now turned our attention to the south; this is not just out of idle curiosity, but rather because we found, when we reached the lowest level in the cut, that the structure we expected to reveal had been chopped away beyond the limit of our original trench. The best-laid plans of mice etc. etc., and hence we are now digging southward, still finding burials, and still not to the point of duplicating information on the late Post-Classic, though we have 109 restorable vessels from this season to add to the 70 or more from 1974.

We shall not stay with the small mounds forever, though. Next season I expect to start work on one of the major structures, as well as continuing investigations in some small buildings and in the 16th-Century Spanish church near the southern limit of the site. The large mounds may produce architectural remains in better condition than those we have encountered thus far, but still, as I stand thirty metres above the lagoon and survey the structures below me, I shall surely see some which are the equals of Cib for unattractiveness, and might well be its equals in data yield. Those small mounds are hardly the stuff of which movies are made (one simply cannot dash dramatically up the side of a dirt pile less than a metre high), but when excavation shows them to have been the burial grounds for people of considerable status and wealth in a rich and complex society, they put even Grade A celluloid tales to shame.

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