

# Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 132, May, 1976

Lamanai, Belize

Confidential:  
Not for Publication

LAMANAI 1976: ARCHITECTURE AT LAST  
David M. Pendergast, Field Director



Fig. 1.  
The "Lip"  
Mound.

The first two seasons at Lamanai (see Newsletters 110, 122) were spent excavating structures that must surely rank near the top in the Most Unprepossessing Rockpile ratings. (The winner in this category in 1975 was, as you may remember, Structure N10-4, which gave us that memorable performance as Jumbled Mess, but also thrilled audiences with 44 burials.) To start the 1976 season, I decided to raise my sights a bit, moving from featureless lumps one or two metres high to one of the major mounds in the camp area, rising nearly twenty metres above the platform on which it sits. Such a decision is not lightly made, for work on larger structures always means earthmoving on a grand scale, with headaches to match. But it was clear by the end of 1975 that we needed data from the largest structure in the zone we have been investigating, and also that we were more likely to encounter well-preserved architecture here than in the smaller mounds. So the mound, uncer-

Previously designated "Lip" (not my doing, in this case; studentappers gave it this cognomen in 1974), was marked as the focus of attention for 1976.

On January 16th, we began excavation, though not on our primary target. Because N10-4 was still a mass of uncertainties at the end of 1975, we started this year by plugging away a bit more at this extremely strange building, picking our way through a core of gigantic boulders in search of the walls of the earliest component in a rather hazy sequence of construction. Two weeks' work left us no farther along the path to understanding than we had been, so we abandoned the effort, at least until some later time when mature reflection has (or so I hope) clarified what now seems a hopeless tangle.

While struggles with N10-4 continued, the main body of the crew began the Herculean task of clearing bush from "Lip". When the work was done, something that required two weeks' effort by thirty-two men, we had a denuded mound, somehow less grand than it had looked before, but ready for excavation at last. The mantle of forest now lay in piles around the base of the mound, not lending to the attractiveness of the scene, but its removal had revealed the mound's contours, as well as several areas in which masonry was exposed, giving us clues as to where excavation should be started.

The promises offered by mounds prior to excavation usually turn out to be empty ones when the digging gets under way. With "Lip", however, we have been more fortunate than I could have hoped; the visible bits of masonry are indeed parts of terrace facings in the upper portion of a temple which is turning out to be in excellent condition, and of unusual form. The fact that our excavations have revealed the well-preserved structure is, curiously, both happy and sad, for the work involves cutting away the remains of later construction, which time and nature have reduced to rubble. In the upper portions of the mound, not a stone remained of any terrace face of the later construction, and it appeared in the first weeks of excavation that we could strip away all of the later core, revealing the earlier structure from top to base. A simple, if rather massive, task, or so it seemed then. But as always, expectations turned out to be far off the mark.

A description of the excavations day by day might make them sound straightforward, uncomplicated, and almost routine, as though one just encountered a facing (perhaps with all the red-painted stucco still covering the limestone blocks), cleared it, and went on from there. In some parts of "Lip", as in some other structures, this is almost so. But there are always parts which have suffered root damage, and these often pose real problems in the sorting out of what stood on the spot before tree-fall ripped out huge chunks of masonry. Much worse, though, are areas which are well-preserved but make no sense at all. It is here that the headaches attain their greatest magnitude.

Shortly after the work began on "Lip" we had a headache area, and I

spent many days staring at it, as if the intensity of my gaze would somehow bring order out of a chaotic jumble of wall faces and core.

Artists know those moments in which they finally see how to achieve just the effect they desire; writers experience the joy of a plot line suddenly seen clearly to its conclusion; scientists feel the thrill of a flash of insight; and even the humble archaeologist has his moments, in which the light that has eluded him for so long finally shines, and what seemed inexplicable is converted in a stroke from question to answer. "Of course!" he says, "That's what it must be." And, if he is honest with himself, he adds, "Why didn't you see that before, Dummy?" Such a moment finally came one day on "Lip", when I realized that the assortment of facings interspersed with areas of core had to be the ends of walls bordering two rubble-filled rooms, revealed because the end wall of the Building had fallen away. The unusual position of the Building, part way up the centre stair rather than at the temple top, probably contributed to my difficulties in recognizing what we had excavated, but still I felt thick-skulled for not having seen the answer before.

Once the light dawned, I made my way from the end of the Building around to the front by a series of leaps (intellectual and physical), to where there should have been centre doorways. And there they were, or at least contours suggesting their presence, just where they should have been. Things began to fall into place all over the upper part of the structure, and within a half-hour or so, the men were busily clearing what turned out to be a two-room Building with many odd features, most of it in quite good shape.

That flash of light might not have been so long in coming had Stan Loten of Carleton University been with me from the season's start. Consultation between the two of us is far more profitable than my debates with myself, partly because the empty spaces in one head can be filled with the contents of the other, and partly because two people can look at separate parts of a structure simultaneously, and tell each other why a particular reconstruction of events will or will not work. Stan's presence here for a week following the ROM Mesoamerican tour in February helped resolve many problems on "Lip" and elsewhere. His time on site was immensely useful to me, but hard on him; it nearly killed him to leave all these architectural wonders in the tropic fastness, and return to what Ottawa has to offer in mid-winter. But he bore it well, and will be back at the beginning of May for a three-month stint of architectural recording, while students complete the site map.

Stan's departure was, almost predictably, followed immediately by the discovery of some features of great architectural interest. In fact, the day after he left saw us clearing the first major part of the outer structure we had found with facing intact. And on the terrace face, or stairside outset, at the east flank of the centre stair, is a large and complex mask. Subsequent excavation has

brought us to the point of being ready to clear the mask's counterpart at the west; the edges of the panel are now visible, and it appears that we shall have two striking bits of the late structure intact, while almost everything else above their level has succumbed to the ravages of time. Now we face the task of trenching in behind the masks, leaving enough of that structure to ensure preservation of the facade, while trying to clear the lower terraces of the earlier structure. As always, what seemed simple has become complex; it would not be archaeology if it were otherwise.

I have left for last the question of dating "Lip", because I have no answer for the question at present. The zone in which "Lip" lies has yielded much late Post-Classic material (probably primarily 14th Century A.D.) in past years, though we have also recovered some data from the 9th and 10th centuries. On the basis of style, the earlier structure in "Lip" could be of very late date, but this seems unlikely in view of the amount of later construction. Bits of pottery from the building core are of no real help, as they could obviously be much older than the structure itself, and we have not yet encountered any burials, offerings, or other material which might fix the construction in time.

We do have evidence of late Post-Classic activity in the area of "Lip", in the form of a huge midden at the northeast corner of the mound. From this giant garbage dump have come masses of pottery, including many beautifully-carved pieces, plus great quantities of animal bone, shells, and small artifacts, but nothing which tells me the time of construction and use of "Lip". Perhaps, as the season progresses, we shall be able to penetrate the earlier structure, and find in its core some clue as to its age. For now, however, we have to be satisfied with a structure that is undatable but, unlike most of its neighbours, at least looks like something. For the first time at Lamanai, we can change our standard comment of past years from "This is architecture?" to, "This is architecture!"

\* \* \* \* \*