

Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 144, May, 1977

Lamanai, Belize

Confidential
Not for Publication

IN THE SOUP, AS WELL AS OTHER STRUCTURES
David M. Pendergast, Field Director



Fig. 1 "Lip" early in the 1977 season;
"Buil" to the left

The start of the 1977 season at Lamanai, that widely-famed jungle retreat, water-sports centre, and, incidentally, Maya archaeological site in northern Belize, saw us taking up where we had left off last year, but without the rains which made June and July of 1976 such a glorious time for all mud-lovers. The second half of last season was spent, when weather permitted, in further examination of "Lip" (see Newsletter No. 132), excavation in neighbouring structures, and probing near the 16th century church, where we succeeded in locating the cemetery. As the church was literally founded upon a rock, with insufficient depth of soil for interment of the faithful, a small nearby mound was chosen as the cemetery site. The restricted space meant constant disturbance of old burials by later ones; in the limited trenching we were able to carry out before the season's end, we encountered remains of over

sixty individuals, and we have scarcely begun to touch the burial mass. As they were Christians, the Lamanai parishioners were generally buried without accompanying objects; hence the artifact data from the cemetery are likely to be disappointing, but the information on the 16th-17th century population will be invaluable. I would have continued work in the cemetery at the start of this season, but have postponed it until later, when I shall have enough help on site to permit me to keep a close watch on the excavation.

With the cemetery set aside for the present, we began again on "Lip", and on "Buul" and "Ek", two small mounds nearby (Fig. 1). Once these were under investigation, I set out one day to have a look at the northern part of the site. As I drew near the area, I heard the sound of axes and machetes, and it soon became apparent that someone was cutting milpa - clearing the bush for slash-and-burn agriculture, that is - in the site, where such things are forbidden. As I did not know how many men were at work, I had no stomach for marching in and attempting to stop the cutting on my own. So I beat a hasty retreat back to our work area and marshalled an army of thirteen men. Backed by them, and with my assistant, Claude Belanger, at my side, I found it easy enough to tell the leader of the group that cutting had to be stopped. My numerical advantage was obvious, and the fact that the man stood about 5'1" tall helped quite a bit as well. I placed myself as close to him as possible, and as his glances ranged round at my armed force and then rather steeply upward at me, I knew we had carried the day. But in order to make it clear to any other potential milpa-cutters that we intended to settle down and dig awhile, I decided that we should begin immediately the task of clearing the structure chosen for excavation.

As the work farther south was going along routinely, Claude and I spent our days alongside the men, with chainsaw or machete (I stuck mostly to the latter, as I am better with the blade than with those infernal creations of modern technology), felling trees and cutting underbrush on a yet-unnamed building. Ah, what can compare with the joys of manual labour in the jungle fastness? What pleasures of city life can lure one as does the swinging of a machete all day long, with that solid feeling of the blade biting deeply into wood while the handle bites deeply into one's blisters? Where amidst the city lights can one remain soaked with sweat from dawn 'til dusk, and feel the perspiration mingle with delicately-scented fragments of decayed ant nest and rotted wood, as the forest's detritus showers down with the felling of each arboreal giant? So great are the rewards of such labour that I found it necessary to wrench myself away from the daily cycle after but a few days, and spend two weeks leading a tour in Mexico and Guatemala, lest I become so immersed in our tropical pleasure dome that I might forget the principal purpose of the season, which was, as I thought, excavation.



Fig. 2. Pottery figurine head, late Post-Classic

the structure remains.

I wish I could say that all of our labours in bush-clearing and name-choosing have been crowned with great discoveries in Kambel and Sac, but such is not the case. Very extensive trenching into both has produced almost nothing at all. The exteriors of both have been almost completely destroyed by time and the elements, and, while Sac is a multi-component structure, Kambel thus far appears to be one huge mass of boulders and soil, with no earlier structures inside. As it was my hope to see whether late Post-Classic (12th-15th century) materials occurred in the north as they do in the neighbourhood of Lip (Fig. 2), Kambel seems very watery soup at present, and Sac is hardly more encouraging. We have more to do in both these structures, of course; as we shall see in a moment, one of the great lessons of archaeology is that excavation should never be stopped until one is certain that no further data can be recovered. But besides the two on which we started, we have now cleared a third northern structure, and work will start on this and a small mound not too far away, as soon as the men have returned from their holidays.

The lesson I mentioned above was driven home to me in March, when I decided to try to clear up a few points on a structure we excavated in 1975, which I felt we did not yet understand. This is "Cib", a very unprepossessing mound from which forty-two late Post-Classic burials, most with pottery vessels and several with copper objects and other grave goods, were recovered. What I hoped to do this year was to clear some additional parts of the façade of Cib, and to cut a section trench along the midline. The first was easy enough, though there remains the usual confusion resulting from demolition of many features prior to later construction. The section trench, besides providing good evidence of the construction sequence, showed me that I had stopped too soon in 1975, for it revealed additional late

On my return to Lamanai, I found the clearing completed, and so put one crew on the newly-denuded structure, and another on a small building nearby, which I had decided to investigate at the same time. The smaller mound was named "Sac" for no particularly good reason; the larger is "Kambel". Looks like a Mayan word, does it not? I know what I risk in telling you the etymology of Kambel, but here goes: the structure is in mapping square P9; this is the first excavation in a "P" square; "P" suggested pea soup; Stan Loten asked me the Mayan word for soup; I didn't know, but espying a familiar red and white tin on a shelf near where we sat, I said "Kambel". Laughter ensued (that was my intention), but "Kambel"

Post-Classic burials, including one pit containing two primary interments plus a great heap of bones representing four or more other individuals. From this and a second burial have come fifteen pottery vessels, many of them different from anything we have seen thus far. The most striking discovery, however, was two carved bone tubes, each about 6" long, one of them so beautifully executed that it ranks among the real masterpieces of Maya bone-carving. Now we are committed to an even more thorough excavation of Cib than I had anticipated, so that once again circumstances have overthrown the neat (and therefore obviously unrealistic) initial work schedule.

And what of Lip? Our work is nearly done in this major structure, for we have cleared as much of the façade as we can, and have probed as deeply in most spots as we dare. Lip now looks far more like a building than it did last May, and the construction sequence may (I cannot use a stronger word) be clearer than it was then. What is certainly clearer is the date of much of the construction; this is the result of our discovery of two offerings, and of re-examination of sherds from one core unit. Each of the offerings includes a huge black-on-red jar, capped by a dish of similar colour, and each yielded giant ceremonial flints like those from Altun Ha - the first we have seen at Lamanai. The dishes also resemble specimens from Altun Ha, which date from near the end of the Classic (9th century). Core sherds from the last major addition to the building are of late Post-Classic date, and so it appears that the sequence extends from some time in the Classic through to very near the end of the prehistoric period. It is now also clear that the jade mosaic mask found last year (see Rotunda, Spring 1977) must have been an heirloom when it was buried, as it comes from the same construction unit as the two offerings described above.

As I write this, we are near mid-season, and we have just begun yet another structure, the tallest at Lamanai. This is "Lag", and you'll be reading a great deal about it in future Newsletters. I do not omit discussion of it here for lack of space, but rather because I hardly know what to say. Each time I struggle up the very steep, 30-metre-high face of Lag to our trenches at the top, the results of our work are perfectly clear. I stand and look at units such as I have never seen before, in locations which defy all logic, and it is perfectly clear that I haven't any idea at all of what we're exposing. Such a feeling is not uncommon at the start of work on any structure, but the mystification in this case surpasses that on any other building at Lamanai. Perhaps, by the next Newsletter, I shall be able to describe Lag to you with full confidence, among the many unravelled mysteries of Lamanai. Perhaps; but if I were standing atop Lag now, rather than seated here at my typewriter, I would surely doubt the wisdom of what I have just written.

* * * * *