

Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 156, May 1978

Toronto, Ontario

LAMANAI 1978: Un Ballo in Maschera
David M. Pendergast, Field Director



Fig. 1. Excavation in progress
on the front face of "Fut"
(N9-56)

Ah, I can see you now in evening dress, libretto in hand, settled back in your favourite chair awaiting the first notes of the overture to Verdi's rather complicated opera. You are in for a surprise, however; this is a Masked Ball of an entirely different sort, for which sweat-soaked khakis would be far more appropriate than a tuxedo. For we are once again at Lamanai, in what used to be the remote vastness of the Belizean tropical forest. Used to be, I say, because between seaplane flights and the inexorable approach of a road we are beginning to see far more signs of the outside world than I, at least, would like.

Amidst the seaplanes, the Harrier jets from the newly-established British Army bombing range across the lagoon, and the other curiosities hereabouts, we do manage to keep on with the archaeological battle. With two small exceptions, we have taken up this year where we left off when last I was regaling you with stories of our daredevil escapades in the jungle. Lip, as the first major structure to be investigated, deserves first coverage: we have, of course, masks on the basal platform, Olmecoid jaguars if one can believe the reconstruction drawings, but they came to light long ago, and can hardly be the reason for a Masked Ball in 1978. In fact,

we have been trenching deeply into Lip, partly to clarify some features encountered in 1977 and partly in search of evidence for structures earlier than any we have seen thus far. The clarification has been carried off successfully, but otherwise we have gone about as deeply into the heart of Lip as prudence permits, and have only a great section cut through core of the previously-recognized primary structure to show for our efforts.

What we have not discovered in Lip, and probably never shall, is evidence for dating the primary structure. Later construction spans the period from perhaps the middle of the Late Classic (8th Century A.D.) to about the middle of the Post-Classic in the 12th Century, but the beginnings of Lip remain floating in time. They are likely never to be pinned down unless we can overcome such minor problems as an abiding fear of cave-ins, and carry our trenching farther into the building's vitals.

Lag, on the other hand, is still far from the deep-trenching stage. By the end of last season we had exposed the central and western elements at the top of this imposing 33-metre-high structure, as well as a considerable expanse of terracing. The top units are far from usual, with a centrepiece consisting of a stair and flanking terraces leading up to a very small floor surface, and at the west side a small "standard" temple (which is to say a terraced platform supporting a chambered building) facing inward toward the side of the centre element. We set out first this year to have a look at the east side, in the hope of augmenting what we had in the way of data on the western temple, where collapse had sheared away the rear half of the construction. As we might have expected, the ancient Maya conspired to thwart our ambitions by razing the eastern unit almost to the ground before later work was carried out. So we have the base plan lines for the eastern temple, just to add to the sense of frustration one always feels when a building is unique and the data on it are maddeningly incomplete.

With the east side work completed, we turned our attention to the front of the centre top element, where collapse had removed parts of the stair, revealing what appeared to be an earlier façade underneath. I say "appeared to be" because the construction of Lag is such that one can be misled quite easily: the entire core consists of facing stones and other pieces of soft limestone set in mortar, and where the builders got too compulsive in laying the stones one can have what looks remarkably like a façade. At any rate, we found that all of the terraces we cleared last year and at the start of this season are part of an earlier structure, and it thus seemed advisable to clear away as much of the later stair as possible.

As the later facing came off, the lower parts of its predecessor were revealed in almost pristine condition. In the upper areas, however, the wrenching out of chunks of masonry by the roots of falling trees had combined with some demolition by the Maya to leave us with just random bits and pieces of the façade. This is especially sad because it is here that we come to the first facet of the Masked Ball; on both sides of a very narrow centre stair there appear to have been elements of a large mask. With just a fragmentary ear ornament here, the curve of an eye there, and a few curlicues else-



Fig. 2. One of the laboratory tables, covered with figurine censers and spare parts.

where, we can never know what the mask was, whether animal or human, cross-eyed or wall-eyed, smiling benignly or glaring malignantly. The absence of solid data permits me to sketch whatever strikes my fancy, so I now have a giant mask in which the stair forms a sort of set of vertical teeth, and one could climb from the figure's chin right into the sinuses. That is very likely far off the mark, and those with more architectural knowledge, or less whimsy, than I will probably do a reconstruction drawing that looks a little less horrendous. But in any case there was a mask, and it seems to be but one of several on Lag, including the one we encountered at the top when work first started last year.

It is in the northern part of the site centre, at Fut (N9-56), that we come to the remainder of our story for this year. Work here last season revealed a structure with two rooms sitting athwart a stair, much like the arrangement in Lip. Because of the parallels between the two structures and the good preservation of Fut, we set out this year to investigate this smaller temple as thoroughly as possible. There was already evidence for a sequence of construction, and initial work this year brought to light two buildings underlying the outer shell, both well-preserved. The earlier of the two is only partly visible at present, and we cannot be sure yet which elements are parts of it and which belong with later construction. It consists of a broad centre stair with flanking outsets and terraces, and it seems reasonable to assume that the stair leads to some upper elements of which traces are just now emerging.

Built atop the earlier structure, perhaps simply as a frontal addition, was a two-room building sitting on a sort of podium. Of its many interesting features, the most striking is the rear chamber, which is probably the champion Vestigial Room. In many temples at other sites the rooms are so diminished in size that they are actually narrower than the walls that separate them; here the wall between the rooms is 120cm thick, and the rear room has a width of only 32cm. Ceremonially significant, surely, but not a suitable place for large-scale ceremonies.

And what of the Masked Ball, here at Fut? It is on this structure, in fact, that the masks are everywhere. Not that every bit of the façade is adorned with the features of some deity; we are working today on clearing what may be a mask outset at the side of the stair of the earliest construction, but otherwise Fut does not seem to have been embellished as were Lip and Lag. The masks on Fut come from the humus and collapsed debris covering the remains of the structure, and from a time near the end of the Lamanai occupation when Fut was already an abandoned, decaying heap. They are part of Mayapan-style

figurine censers dating from the 13th to perhaps early 15th century, which were used in one or more ceremonies on Fut, then smashed and scattered over the mound surface.

Mayapan-style figurine censers are wonders to behold. Consisting of a vase-shaped footed vessel with a large figure attached to the front, they depict deities in a seemingly endless array of costume and variety of poses. While ceremonial considerations fixed limits within which such depictions had to remain, the potters were given considerable latitude in ornamentation, and seem to have been bound only by the limits of their imagination and skill. The results are truly amazing. Deities stand or sit at the fronts of their vessels, clad usually in a sort of body armour over the chest, a cape over the shoulders, and a large breechcloth. Their arms are generally raised or thrust forward, while legs are usually straight. Bracelets, earplugs, and sandals are shown in great detail, and the variety is tremendous, but it is in the minor accoutrements that the profusion of forms is greatest. On capes, headdresses, and in the hands are ornaments, decorations, embellishments, trinkets, baubles, bangles, beads, gewgaws, thingumabobs, gadgets, whatsits, spangles, and such a general assortment of whatnots and unending trumpery as to beggar description. Here in pottery is a leg with a calf-ornament of copper bells, there a hand holding a small wooden-handled flint axe; here a tiny snake which probably adorned some shoulder, there a hand-mirror with no hand to fit it; and here, just out of the ground yesterday, is an arm of what must be the famous deity Dzuluinic Sanders, as the hand holds a bowl containing what could be mistaken for a chicken head.

All of this ceramic array was, you remember, smashed and scattered over Fut. Hence the excavations turn up one bit of a vessel here, another bit there, another twenty metres away. My laboratory tables now resemble the casualty ward of a hospital near Highway 400 on the first weekend of the cottage season: arms, hands, legs, feet, chests, faces, ears, and so forth lie strewn over table tops, often with bits of tape when two pieces have been found that fit together. Slowly, ever so slowly, vessels take shape out of the thousands of fragments, giving us the first sample from Lamanai of reconstructable figurine censers, probably locally made in imitation of those produced at Mayapan, in northern Yucatàn. Apart from the wealth of costume data which the vessels provide, they give us more information on links between Lamanai and Mayapan, and perhaps another facet of the explanation for the ancient name of the lagoon and its river: Dzuluinicob, which means "supreme leaders". Lamanai seems likely to have been the seat of such leaders, and the next Newsletter from here should have more to tell you about the society which they led, however, many pottery or masonry masks we may encounter in the rest of this season.

* * * * *