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A DUSTY TUNNEL

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Perceptive readers of past Newsletters from Lamanai will have noted that there is a pattern to all of the reporting: attract attention with some attempt at witticism at the beginning, and trick the audience into wading through the dreary discussions of archaeology that follow. At least one colleague has detected my method; his gently chiding letter noted that the Newsletter of last July "...has a most attractive beginning - so much so that I read the whole thing but unfortunately it led me down a dusty tunnel of archaeology." This seems to me to be a gauntlet flung down, a challenge not to be dismissed casually; clearly I should come up with some introductory material that equals the attractiveness of last July's prose. I have racked my brain until it is stretched out of shape, but found nothing to match or even approach the opening of my previous report. Hence the prosaic title above; having been informed that some persons hereabouts are considering use of my Newsletter titles to prove derangement, I have opted for the straightforward headings and turgid verbiage which most take to be the hallmarks of archaeology.

When I penned the last Newsletter in April, we were just over halfway through the 1979 season, and had spent most of our time examining major structures at Lamanai. I spoke then of our plans to expand work in residential buildings, which indeed we did do from May onward, keeping all the while at the digging into the life histories of temples as well. I expressed the hope, in closing the last report, that we might finish the season with a reasonably clear understanding of where we needed to turn in the years ahead, and in fact we have managed to do just that. How we did it, and how we succeeded at times in turning defeat into victory, is the tale I have now to tell.

The site map told us that investigation of small structures, most likely to have been residences, would lead us north and west of the zone in which temple buildings are concentrated. We had sampled several of the low platforms lying within the ceremonial zone in years past, and found most to be of Late Classic date, built probably in the 9th Century A.D. This suggested intrusion of residential use into the Central Precinct in the period when parts of the area ceased to be used for ceremonial purposes, but it told us nothing about events in the surrounding residential areas. One of these areas borders the feature which we call "The Harbour", for the possibly sensible reason that it might have been just that before silting-in turned it into a seasonal swamp. Our first shot at residential investigations for 1979 brought us to the south edge of The Harbour, where a scattering of



Fig. 1. Section through Pre-Classic mound north of Harbour, with offering in foreground. Try to contain your enthusiasm.

small platforms generally less than one metre high seemed to indicate domestic use.

The first step in excavation at lowland Maya sites is not digging, but bush-clearing. The area we chose was a forbiddingly ugly tangle of trees, shrubs and vines, through which trails had to be cut before we could even find the small mounds, let alone excavate them. Removal of the structures' forest cover followed; though I once leaned toward cutting as little as possible, I am now inclined to bush mounds completely before work is begun, to reduce tribulations later on. This is something of a calculated risk, since if we do not extend work beyond our initial tests, most of the bush-cutting will have gone for nought. Still, I thought, the risk could not be very great, as we were in an area likely to yield significant data, and the desirability of doing extensive work on the small structures was

correspondingly high. I suppose one might call such thoughts Research Design; like most propositions set forth in the absence of data, this one came a cropper almost as soon as we set shovel to ground.

Digging small structures is frequently frustrating, and in some senses unrewarding, because while we may know that a mound was once someone's home, we are often unable to determine what that home, and the life that went on within it, were like. One of the sad truths of archaeology is that as one moves down the scale from elite to peasant, from wealth to comparative poverty, one generally has less and less data with which to work. Material possessions are almost always a manifestation of power, and their absence or scarcity distinguishes those over whom such power is wielded. Thus the tomb of a ruler may contain almost unimaginable treasures, while a craftsman's grave may yield a moderate range of pots and other articles, and the poor pit in which a peasant lies is likely to be entirely devoid of artifacts. As with burials, so also with houses; from the palaces of the mighty to the shantys of the poor is a huge leap architecturally, with the result that we know a great deal about the former, and far less than we would like about the latter.

The problems attending work in small structures are, of course, clear at the start, but still one can expect to recover some clues to the quality of proletarian life, enough to make the work worthwhile. So we set out to dig the two mounds we had cleared, full of high hopes. One day's work sufficed to show that the surfaces of the mounds were virtually bare of sherds; the next day's labour revealed that only one of the two had any sort of masonry facing encasing the platform; the third day showed that the core of the smaller structure was absolutely sterile save for an unaccompanied fragmentary human skull; and a few more days' digging demonstrated that the other building did not even have so much as a bit of skull within it. No plaster floors remained atop the platforms, and only a bit of a stair and a fragment of facing at the front of the second mound gave some slight indication of the form of the structure. Undaunted, we proceeded to investigate the rear of one platform, where garbage was likely to have been dumped. Not a sherd emerged from the trenching. Not even the tiniest scrap. No stone tools. No chips of flint. Not even an animal bone, or a bit of one. Nothing. Nil. Nought. What might charitably be called minimal data yield.

Someone more obdurate than I might have kept plugging away at these two unproductive structures, but I decided that admission of defeat was

preferable to butting our heads against an absolutely unyielding wall. So we abandoned the south side of The Harbour and moved on. North of The Harbour lay more small mounds, swathed in thick second-growth bush. How inviting they looked! About the same size as their southern counterparts, with surface characteristics that were at best only slightly more attractive than the ones with which we had just been struggling, the two mounds we chose gave every promise of providing answers to all our questions. Or so I told myself as I set the men once again to chopping and dragging and piling the local flora. I tried to look confident as I laid out trenches while the men waited patiently to begin digging, trying hard to conceal their scepticism. More than once in this period they commented on how much poorer these people had been than those at Altun Ha, and more than once I felt inclined to agree with them.

This time we attacked only one of the two mounds, being twice cautious after getting burnt. The first few shovelful of soil revealed, as they almost always do, virtually nothing, but then, to everyone's surprise, we began to encounter sherds. Soon it was apparent that we had struck a small midden, a garbage dump, alongside the platform. Archaeologists revel in the discovery of garbage, as you all most know by now; this time, though, there was good cause for cheer, as the detritus consisted mostly of pottery from the Pre-Classic, probably dating from the last century or two B.C. Here at last was exactly what we had been seeking: evidence of early occupation in the north-central part of the site. Granted, removal of the midden showed that the masonry of the platform was nothing to bring joy to an architect's heart; I had to work very hard to persuade Stan Loten that the few rough stones should be photographed and measured. But still, we had an early residence, or so it seemed. The sherds were fine, but evidence from the core of the platform would be far more conclusive as to date of construction. And so, after the masonry was duly (I almost wrote "dully") recorded, we opened a trench into the heart of the building.

The platform core produced far more sherds than did the midden, and again all were early. Sherds are not, however, good evidence for dating construction, as they only give a lower limit date; that is, they show that a structure was built either at or after the time of manufacture of the pottery. Fortunately there were burials in the core as well, but unfortunately they fit that pattern I mentioned earlier, in that they were unaccompanied by artifacts. Luck was with us, however; tangled in the roots of a fairly sturdy tree, where important things seem all too often to lie, was an offering, laid down when the platform was built, presumably to placate the gods watching over the household. The two vessels - and one cannot do better than to find pots, which are more datable than jades - proved that we had a late Pre-Classic building, probably from the last century B.C.

Subsequent work even further north, where we shall be continuing in 1980, has given us once again a platform without much in the way of external features, but with a core packed with sherds even earlier than the pottery from the Harbour-area mound. A curious and interesting feature of this platform is the presence of a Post-Classic midden abutting one side, showing that the latest occupants of Lamanai lived in the north as well as the south, though whether they were erecting buildings here in the 14th or 15th Centuries is something we may never know. Nearby stands what appears to be a small ceremonial structure, and investigation of this in the coming season may tell us something about the more elaborate aspects of life in the northern sector of Lamanai.

But what about the major temples on which we were at work earlier in the season? Here, too, the discoveries from May onward were striking.

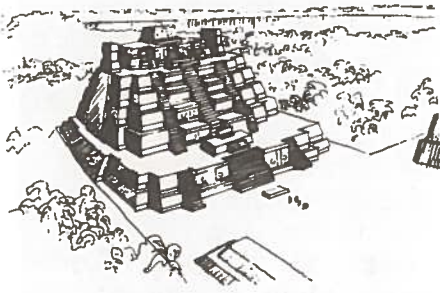


Fig. 2. N10-43 in the late Pre-Classic, after some modifications to the building top.

In N10-43, tunnelling into the stair shown in Fig. 2 of the July Newsletter yielded an offering of pottery vessels showing that the structure was built at about the same time as our productive Harbour-area mound; at 33 metres in height, N10-43 is by far the largest Pre-Classic building known in the Maya Area. We are not running some sort of competition among excavation projects for the largest or the oldest or the most spectacular; the significance of N10-43's size lies in what it tells us about the organization of Lamanai in early times, and about the importance of the site as a major centre during this period.

Pre-Classic Lamanai was clearly a community with a powerful elite capable of marshalling a large labour force for ceremonial construction.

Such power, as well as the scale of the undertaking, must reflect the role played by Lamanai in the Central Lowlands during the Pre-Classic. As we now know that the early population was spread fairly widely over the site, and as we have evidence of Pre-Classic construction in other ceremonial buildings, it is probably fair to characterize early Lamanai as a city, and to rank it among the truly important cities during the developmental period of Maya civilization.

Our rabbit-warren of tunnels in N9-56 has shed further light on early life at Lamanai. You will recall that digging had brought us to a platform of probable late Pre-Classic date, with a "mysterious black line" on the top floor. We subsequently found that the black line was part of a set of plan lines painted on the platform top as guides for the builders of a chambered structure which was torn down before the platform was covered over. Because most of the structure remains intact, we determined to clear as much of it as possible, and so extended our tunnel system along the north side to reveal the facade alongside the centre stair. Here we came upon a surprise: a painted stucco mask which resembles very closely those discovered at the site of Cerros, 71km northeast of Lamanai. The dates at Cerros place this stage of N9-56 at about the same time as N10-43 and the Harbour-area mound; the similarity of the masks indicates close ties between the two sites, which seems to fit into an emerging picture of a strong Pre-Classic presence throughout northern Belize.

Well, there it is. The advances in our understanding of events at Lamanai were tremendous this season, and we have indeed reached the point at which we can determine where we need to search for more answers in coming seasons. Time was when the story of such important discoveries might have seemed enthralling, the very stuff of which archaeological legends are made. But somehow, as I measure what I have just written against the yardstick - pardon me, metrestick - of the opening part of last July's Newsletter, I feel obligated to apologize for having led you down one of those dusty tunnels where no champagne flows and no marimba music is to be heard. If I could have come up with a description of some event which would have provided respite from the excavation reporting, and matched in euphoric quality that featured last July, I would have done so. Obviously, though, what I said then held true for the remainder of the season: "Alongside this event...the excavation project pales into insignificance".

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