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Lamanai, Belize, Central America

LAMANAI 1980: AS EASY AS PICKING UP QUICKSILVER WITH A FORK
David M. Pendergast, Field Director

Some of the men working at Lamanai have been with me since Altun Ha days, ten years ago and more. Their attitudes, born of the unending richness of that site, have been bent a little at Lamanai, where spectacular discoveries are blended with heavy doses of architectural slugging, the day's reward often being the sight of another portion of a stair rather than the unearthing of what they term "marmalade". We have had our high moments, it is true, but not until this year did a season start off with a bang and a whimper. The bang consisted of myriad offerings and other intriguing finds; the whimper has come from me as I race around the site clearing, recording, photographing and removing ancient treasures, sometimes several in one day. In a period of just under three weeks from late February through mid-March we recovered thirteen offerings, some of them of very considerable proportions; this has meant expansion of the collections, of course, but luckily it has also brought answers to a great many questions about Lamanai's past.

In N10-43, our initial work was aimed at clearing up the mess left by collapse of stabilized areas during phenomenally heavy rains last year. In the course of this work we cleared a number of features of what appears to be the earliest structure in the temple sequence at this spot, though our investigations eventually reached an impasse as the rains decreased and drying earth began to fall from a tunnel roof, pelting the excavators into an understandable state of reluctance to continue digging. Before our hand was stayed, though, we recovered another offering to supplement those found last year, probably the second earliest from N10-43. Buried beneath a floor was a rather baggy cylindrical lidded blackware vessel containing two oyster shells which encased a pair of human figurines, one of shell and the other of jade, both seemingly related to the Olmec tradition of the Gulf Coast. These are kinds of objects not previously encountered at Lamanai, and the jade figurine, as well as the carving style of the shell piece, seem to expand our knowledge of links between this site and others both within and beyond the boundaries of the Maya Area.

We may yet do more clearing in the upper parts of N10-43, but it is at the base of the structure that the most unexpected discovery was made. Here, as we cut down through plaza floors fronting the temple, we came upon the sort of dark soil which elsewhere overlies bedrock, but as we dug through it several large fragments of a vessel came to light. Though all of the soil appeared to be sticky dark brown muck,

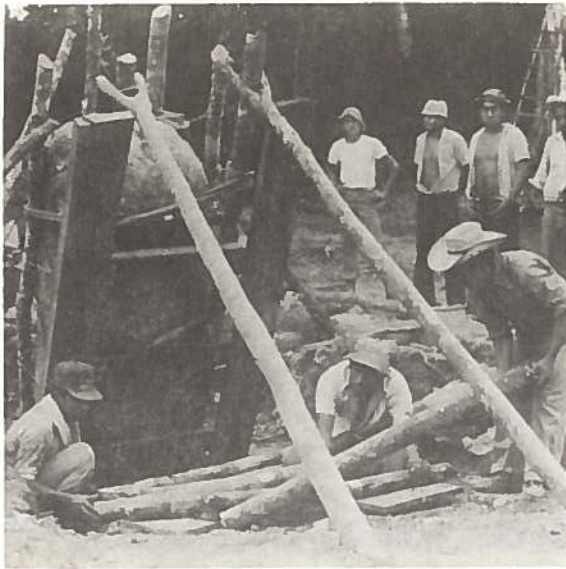


Fig. 1. Workmen moving Stela 1 from its site in front of N9-56.

away at the platform and soil levels beneath. As I write this, an excavation crew is stretching our trenches farther west than I had ever thought to take them, in preparation for an assault on the underpinnings of N10-43 which should tell us a great deal about early use of part of the site centre, as well as about pottery (and, we hope, burials) from the last several centuries B.C.

On, or rather in front of, N9-56, we started out to tie up some loose ends remaining from past years' work. Foremost among these was the matter of the stela, placed in a curious position in front of the temple, and its relationship to a platform surrounding it as well as to evidence of late re-use of "Fut" and its associated structures. Investigation of this matter involved excavation of the platform, clearly of Post-Classic date on the basis of its architectural characteristics, and then moving the stela to permit examination of the platform's heart. Those few preceding words cover a number of days of engineering work and construction, guided by Claude Belanger, and they somehow make a very difficult task seem too simple. In the event, however, the stela was moved, and from work both before and after this monumental undertaking we were able to make certain that the erection of the great carved slab and the construction of the platform had been part of massive ceremonial activity carried out on N9-56 and in surrounding areas probably in the 14th or 15th Century A.D. An offering from within the platform included a small figurine vessel which helps to establish the date of the activity, as do almost twenty vessels which were smashed and deposited in the platform core; among these, sadly in fragmentary condition, is a vase in the form of an ear of corn.

Together with an examination of very late events, we have been looking at the earlier stages of construction of the platform (N9-53; "Xiu") on which N9-56 sits. Here, too, we have come upon offerings: first a pair of vessels of Pre-Classic date (perhaps 1st Century A.D.) containing remains of a shell and jade mosaic, and then an isolated vessel of 6th Century date. This latter offering will be the bane of my existence for the remainder of the project because, unlike all previously discovered, it lay deep in a pit, encased in very hard mortar. This led me to conclude, on first examining the pit, that there was no offering, as cache pits normally contain soft soil, not mortar. I was to rue that conclusion.

Claude's persistence on the following day revealed the vessel, and I then spent a very long time supine on the floor surrounding the pit, hacking

we found that part of it could be peeled off of the rest, revealing an ancient use surface in which a shallow unlined hearth had been built. It was from the hearth that the vessel fragments came; when excavation was completed, we had most of a late Pre-Classic jar and major portions of several bowls, all of them likely to date from 200-400 B.C. Extension of the trench revealed another early feature, a low plaster-floored platform edged with unshaped stones, associated with another ancient land surface some distance above that containing the hearth. The platform resembles several excavated by Dr. Norman Hammond at the Cuello Site in Orange Walk, but differs in the unfortunate respect of lying almost entirely beneath the stair of the later temple. To investigate the early remains we shall have to devise a way of leaving part of the temple undamaged and hanging in mid-air while we pick

away the mortar while the workmen's comments ran along the lines of "I told you so; knew there was an offering there' you just have to dig deep enough, and you'll hit the marmalade". So now, each time a possible offering pit appears, I am obliged to excavate it to the maximum depth my arm length will permit, even if the pit is packed with stone and mortar. If I stop before, say, 70cm, and tell the men that the hole contains nothing, they give me disbelieving looks (or so I think), and watch me depart in the sure knowledge that, had I broken just one more icepick by going a few centimetres deeper, the marmalade would have been there. My fear is not those looks and thoughts; it is that the men are probably right.

The success of our monument-moving in front of N9-56 prompted similar efforts elsewhere, with at least equally intriguing results. But while we are at N9-56, let us go northward, as I do several times each day, to the area of small structures. As we go, we pass by Holiday House, the largest structure at Lamanai, atop the platform of which we are now testing some small buildings that seem to be of Early Classic date, perhaps 4th Century A.D. On our right, a little further on, lies a giant platform, 97m long at the top, which sits back of the feature we call The Harbour. Testing here, which has involved one mortar-filled cache pit, shows the building to be of very special form, and an offering recovered from the latest addition to the base stair appears to be of middle Pre-Classic date, perhaps as early as 600 B.C. It thus appears that most of the structure is very early, and for this reason we intend to carry on with the work here, as part of a programme of examining structures which are obviously special in form or location, or both.

Beyond the harbour structure lies territory which seems more open, as most of the buildings are only a few metres high, and almost hidden in the bush. Work was begun here last year, yielding late Post-Classic midden and earlier material from building core. This year we have found that the late midden abuts a structure built about 200-300 B.C., from which we have recovered a huge quantity of sherds and some partially reconstructable vessels. A bit to the north lies what seems to be a small ceremonial structure which is probably equally early, while to the south is a platform with what is probably the longest history yet uncovered in a single group of structures at Lamanai. In this area one can, even without a good pitching arm, toss a stone from perhaps the 6th Century B.C. into the 15th Century A.D., spanning the whole known occupation of the site in a few metres.

The group of structures began as a single platform, about a metre in height, built at some time in the Pre-Classic. A jar placed on bed-rock beneath the platform suggests the possible 6th Century B.C. date, but how it is related to the structure is not yet clear. Platform core contains sherds of perhaps the last century B.C., while on the surface are sherds dating to as late as the 6th or 7th Century A.D. At about this time, a building was added at the north, probably a small house platform atop which a thatched structure sat. A burial in the core dates the construction, but no traces of the perishable structure remain, nor do we know what may have sat atop the main platform at this or any other time. Finally, though, a fairly substantial house platform was raised at the east; in its stair lay an offering of a figurine vessel of 15th Century date, and another offering of a vessel in the form of a shell with a human head emerging from it was placed in the top of the nearby 6th Century house platform. A great deal of history in a small space, and we are now attempting to extend the story by digging a tiny platform which abuts the main one at the west. Then we shall go even farther north, about 300m beyond our northernmost present efforts, in



an attempt to determine when (and with luck, how) various parts of the north suburbs were occupied.

But back to the south, and to monuments. Some years ago, we excavated the ballcourt which stands a bit south of N10-43. Though one of the smaller courts known, it boasts a truly giant centre marker disc, and I had intended to raise the stone in the hope of finding an offering which might date the construction, but had somehow let the task slip by. This year we raised the stone and there, just a few centimetres below, lay an offering. Though like others in that it was contained in a lidded vessel, this offering gave us something unique to ponder, in addition to providing solid proof that the court was built at about the beginning of the 10th Century, a time at which life at other sites was coming to a standstill. This tells us a great deal about Lamanai's strength in a time of collapse elsewhere, though it does not pinpoint the source of that strength.

Fig. 2. The miniature vessels inside the container of the ballcourt cache, with the pool of mercury visible below them. Vessel diameters ca. 4.5cm.

Removal of the lid of the vessel revealed an oyster shell, capping two tiny pots, one of which was packed with cinnabar (mercury ore). Clearing of the little pots for photography involved removal of accumulated soil around them, and as I brushed away at the dirt I saw a glint of silver. The Maya did not use silver, but the gleam was obviously more than the product of sweat in my eyes. I cleared the other side of the pots, and there was the silver again, apparently a disc. I touched the disc with my brush, and its surface moved. Now entirely unwilling to believe my eyes and my sense of touch, I brushed the disc once more, and saw movement on the opposite side of the pots. The silver was liquid; it was mercury, a material never before encountered in a Maya site.

The difficulties of removing a large pool of mercury from the bottom of a pot gave rise to the title of this Newsletter, but the difficulties of explaining the presence of something never previously found in the Maya Area are far greater. Was the mercury, about 130 grams of it, collected as tiny droplets of native metal from cavities in cinnabar deposits in the Guatemalan Highlands, or was it smelted, there or at Lamanai? Did the ancient Maya in fact possess the technology required for production of mercury from cinnabar? Whatever the source, how was the mercury used, and what was its significance in the ceremonial context in which it was found, or in others? As with many discoveries, the answer to one question is accompanied by new and even more perplexing queries, to which answers may never be forthcoming. This is as true elsewhere at the site as it is of the ballcourt offering, but nowhere else, to date, have the new questions been posed quite so spectacularly. I would like to think that the tasks and problems of the rest of this season will seem small after what we have unearthed thus far this year, but somehow I cannot really bring myself to believe that; I fear that in the months to come we shall often be, figuratively at least, picking up quicksilver with a fork.

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