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LAMANAI 1980, EPISODE TWO: MORE IS LESS
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There is a great universal truth in archaeology, a sort of maxim we repeat again and again as we excavate: More Is Less. The trouble is that we usually find ourselves repeating those words after the fact, which is to say after the results of excavation have reminded us once more of what we should have known: the more you dig, the less you know. That's not always the case, of course; excavation generally adds to knowledge day by day, but the difficulty is that the additions often knock the pinnings out from under assumptions previously held, and all too frequently destroy what we had unquestioningly accepted as The Truth.

The 1980 season at Lamanai provided some object lessons in the wisdom of stopping work when you know everything there is to know about a structure, rather than continuing until you find out that you knew nothing at all. One of the earlier lessons arose when, flushed with the success of the work on the stela in front of N9-56 and the ballcourt marker (see Newsletter No. 180), we decided to tackle a re-sited altar in the plaza fronting Structure N10-9, the southernmost major ceremonial building at the site. In the hope to learning when the re-siting took place, we set out to raise the great stone and move it to one side, a task in which we were successful, after a few broken cables and other minor mishaps.

With the altar set aside, we began excavation in the mass of boulders supporting it, and almost immediately came upon four offerings. Obviously whoever moved the altar to its final resting-place had taken care to make the spot ceremonially suitable for such an important object, but unfortunately the altar-movers chose artifacts that are not easily datable, giving us a problem rather than a solution to one. A far greater problem came, however, from deeper beneath the altar; when work had reached the bottom of the offerings, it was clear that we were well below the level we took to be the ancient land surface beneath N10-9. On and on the men toiled in the mass of stones, reaching first three metres, then four, and then, when it had begun to seem that we would labour on forever in the rockpile, they struck bottom. But the bottom was not an ancient land surface; it was one corner of a low plaster-surfaced platform and a small expanse of its perimeter floor.



Fig. 1. Effigy vessel, ca. 300 B.C.; a stylized crocodile head address projects above the appliqué face. Height 11.6cm.

The existence of construction far below what we took to be base soil resembles what was revealed beneath N10-43, where a small early platform, perhaps the support for a residence, lies under a massive temple of 1st or 2nd century B.C. date. Fortunately the structure below the altar is not covered by later buildings that we would have to take care to preserve, but in order to expose it we are faced with removal of countless tons of stone. Next year we shall have a look at what lies beneath all that rock, but until then we simply have to recognize that all of our assumptions about the stratigraphy underlying N10-9 and its plaza have been shattered. We had The Truth right there in our hands, but let it slip away by digging beyond the point where a sensible excavator would have stopped.

As in the south, so also in the northern part of the site. Here we continued work described in Newsletter 180, concentrating on residential structures of both early and very late date. When I wrote in April we knew a fair portion of the history of a small structure group ranging in age from perhaps the 6th century B.C. to the 15th century A.D., and we were "attempting to extend the story by digging a tiny platform which abuts the main one at the west". Dig it we did, and in the process recovered extensive ceramic evidence from late Post-Classic times, probably the 15th and early 16th centuries. So we know the date of the construction and the time of use, but we are left without a clue as to what the building was. It is far too small to have supported a residence; the most it could have had atop it was a hut about two metres square. Ceramics from around the structure are largely ceremonial but include some apparently utilitarian vessels, so we cannot classify the building as either a shrine or a domestic platform with any certainty. As our excavation of the platform was total, we shall never have any more evidence than we now possess, and so once again we might have seen The Truth more clearly had we never set shovel to ground.

North of the platform group stands a mound that appeared, because of its size and shape, to be a small ceremonial structure. We began work here early in the season and continued until June; of course our understanding of the construction history changed time and again as the work progressed, but the principle of More Is Less lay not so much in the architecture as in material dumped at the building's front. Trenching here produced a considerable quantity of 1st century B.C. pottery, including parts of two vessels of forms different from any previously recovered at Lamanai. We now have enough to permit reconstruction of part of one of the vessels, but it appears unlikely that we shall ever recover the remainder; so again we have more knowledge than we had before, but it is just sufficient to raise questions for which answers may never be forthcoming.

Luckily the work on the ceremonial structure was not all a matter of More Is Less. Two burials encountered in the primary structure and a later addition were accompanied by pottery, in the earlier case a ceramicist's ideal set of seven different vessels. Not only do the pots fix the

time of construction at about the 3rd century B.C., they also include the earliest crocodile representation yet discovered at Lamanai. The existence of this early piece strengthens the suggestion that the ancient name of the site was Lama'an/ayin, "submerged crocodile", and that the saurian held some special place among the deities worshipped at this lakeside centre. Next year we plan to clear the top surface of the structure in search of evidence of a pole-and-thatch chambered building atop the plaster floor; what we find will in all probability be another example of that lesson we should surely have learned by now.

Even in N9-56 and its neighbouring structures, a group on which we have been at work since 1977, we continue to have our supposedly solid understanding of construction history and related events shaken by new discoveries. In N9-56 itself we have somehow managed to tunnel farther into the heart of the building without changing what we already knew, though we have found a structure earlier than any previously cleared. That discovery must have come around Stanley Cup time, as our nonsense naming has a distinct hockey touch; among the units is a plaster surface we call Gyla Floor (think about it), and a platform called Savard.

Out on the surface in front of N9-56 stand several very small platforms, which we knew to be of Post-Classic date (perhaps 14th-15th century A.D.) because of their architecture. The investigation of them was mentioned in Newsletter 180; what I failed to note there was that the mass of vessels smashed in the core of one platform showed, when reconstructed, that some of my ideas about the pottery sequence at Lamanai will have to be revised. This sort of thing can be viewed as sharpening of the picture previously recognizable, but it is a bit disconcerting when some of the props supporting the ceramic dating framework of the occupation get knocked away.

Besides the discoveries in and in front of N9-56, there are the offerings in the stair of the platform (N9-53 on which N9-56 sits, mentioned in Newsletter 180. Not long after we had completed work on the caches described there, we came upon four additional offerings, each contained in a pair of large bowls of a class we now rather unceremoniously call cake-pans or mixing-bowls, depending on whether the vessels are flat- or round-bottomed. The four offerings and one mentioned in the earlier Newsletter were placed in pits in the platform stair when it was covered with a new stair late in the 5th century A.D. A check of Newsletter 180 will show that I dated the first offering as perhaps 1st century A.D.; additional digging has pushed that date ahead by four hundred years or more. In this sense, the caches demonstrate that More is sometimes More, but the existence of five offerings in a single construction unit, with only one on the all-important stair midline, is something not previously recorded at Lamanai or elsewhere. We clearly still have much to learn about the deposition of ceremonial materials, an area in which we thought our understanding was reasonably secure.

The amount of learning left to do was shown to be even greater by our work in a flanking stair of the N9-53 platform. Excavation of the stair produced nothing at all, but in a floor below there was a large rectangular cut, the right size for a tomb but definitely in the wrong place; tombs are supposed to be on the building midline, and in major temples rather than their supporting platforms. After a long period of work removing rock and mortar from the hole, the men came

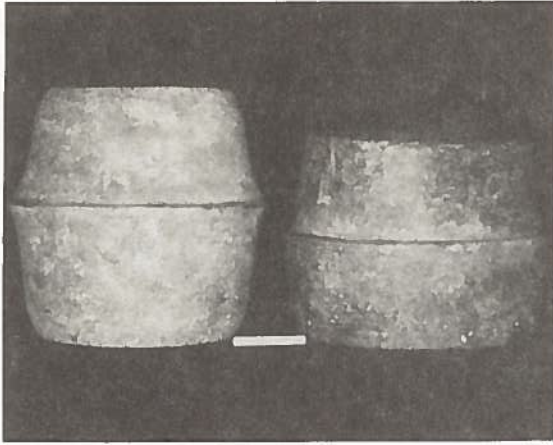


Fig. 2. "Cake-pan" cache vessels from N9-53, 5th century A.D. Height of left pair 21.7cm.

upon an arrangement of roof slabs that told us we were indeed on top of a tomb. Removal of the slabs revealed a crypt much like that of the tomb found in N9-56 (see Newsletter 163, December 1978), with remains of the cloth cocoon that had covered the burial visible in a few patches, but unfortunately this tomb was in much poorer condition than that in N9-56.

The location of the burial in a pit in bedrock allowed water to seep into the crypt, leaving only smears of colour in the ground as evidence of wooden and other perishable objects. There were, however, two pottery vessels, a polychrome plate and a large blackware footed and lidded cylinder, half-buried in one crypt wall. The cylinder fixes the date of the tomb as 5th century A.D., about

the same time as the N9-56 interment. The discovery of the N9-53 tomb means that now we shall have to check flanking stairs and other odd spots in various structures with which we thought we were finished, and the chances are that by so doing we will not discover a single additional tomb. Because the two tombs are nearly contemporaneous we cannot be sure that their unusual construction, and the strange location of the N9-53 example, are typical of earlier or later times at Lamanai; what is clear is that the people of Lamanai did not always follow the burial and offering practices standard at other Maya sites. It is equally clear that we have a major task ahead if we are to understand this aspect of the site's history together with all the others in which problems still remain.

Finally, another word about the ballcourt mercury. Perhaps I was writing in haste last April, for I omitted a phrase I always try to insert when I am away from my library; I meant to say that mercury had never before been encountered in a Maya site, as far as I knew. Colleagues have written to tell me of four earlier finds of mercury in the Southern Maya Highlands; the Lamanai mercury is the first reported from a Lowlands centre. What is important is not that it is the first, but rather that its presence may indicate Highland ties, and that the offering and ballcourt are part of the evidence for ceremonial activity, including major construction, at a time when Classic life at other Lowlands centres was on the verge of collapse. As to the specific source of the mercury and the means of acquiring the metal, research now under way may clear up the picture a bit, although even in this matter I am conscious that the result may be another lesson in that undying, omnipresent principle that pervades all archaeological work. At any rate, by the time you read this I shall be on my way to the field again, hoping to prove that, on occasion at least, More Is More.

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