

Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 208, September 1982

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

LAMANAI 1982 (II): HEADACHES IN OTTAWA AS STELLA REMAINS DATELESS
David M. Pendergast, Field Director



Fig. 1. "Fifteen" after our season of struggles with it; in the background, Stan Loten labours over the plan drawing.

Of late, Lamanai Newsletters seem to have fallen into a standard pattern: a recounting of the season's events to date is followed by an expression of hope regarding the outcome of excavations still in progress. Expectations are the stuff of which archaeology is made, and a seasoned excavator (as well as any reader of the Newsletters) knows that the results of the work often diverge sharply from the predicted path. Rarely, though, is the disappointment as full as it was in the Stella and Dallas platforms (see Archaeological Newsletter 203, April 1982); not only did offerings refuse to emerge from beneath the stelae, we failed to recover the slightest shred of firm dating evidence from Stella, and managed to keep that record absolutely intact when we examined the earlier platform and monument buried beneath Stella. In the end, we knew only

that Dallas was built in the late 15th or early 16th century; on grounds of similarity, we can assume that Stella is of similar date.

The platform excavations would have turned out to be almost pure exercises in the raising of many questions and the answering of none, had it not been for one curious discovery in Dallas, a fragment of a near-lifesize stone mask with some Olmec-related features. The find raised the hopes of the workmen, who had been slugging through rather stubborn core and turning up nothing more than sherds, which to them are of only slight importance at best. Of course no further pieces of the mask emerged from the digging; what else could one expect? But then, after I had turned the fragment over and over in an attempt to visualize the full form of the

mask, a small light came on in my memory, and led me to a case of objects from the 1974 season, where I found a piece of a very similar mask, made of the same material.

The occurrence of two fragmentary masks doubled the sense of loss caused by the first discovery, and so the two fragments sat for some days as an irritating object lesson in the realities of archaeology. Then Stan Loten turned the Dallas piece which I thought was upside-down, fiddled with the two fragments for a bit, and fitted them together! Our two masks were now one, and the joined pieces provided a fair idea of the object's appearance. In addition, they gave us a rare kind of crosstie between two structures that stand some 80m apart, but must have been built at the same time. Now, of course, we are hoping to find the rest of the mask in some other contemporaneous platform, a hope as likely to bear fruit as is the search for a needle-tip in a barnful of hay.

While the Stella-Dallas drama was unfolding, our main effort continued to be focused on the Ottawa group, almost certainly the most complicated assemblage of buildings at Lamanai. As we dig on, we face again and again the basic archaeological truth: when you think you know the course of past events, stop digging, for further work will prove you wrong. In Ottawa, and especially in the structure with the prosaic name Fifteen, we have been proved wrong so many times that we now look upon refutation of the morning's decision by the afternoon's digging as the norm. Handwringing and tears have not quite become the order of the day here, but an observer would note interminable discussions, a great deal of shoulder-shrugging, occasional oaths, and a lot of foolish-looking grins as our attempts at architectural wisdom are ground into the dust by the data.

When last I wrote, we had just begun to section Fifteen, and a check of the Newsletter shows that I wisely avoided predictions about the building's nature. That nature is so complex that I am not sure how to begin a description of Fifteen's history, and I shall probably be just as uncertain when the final reporting is done some years hence. With some minor areas in which equivocation is still possible, we at least know that Fifteen was begun in the mid-to-late 9th century A.D., remained in use through a series of modifications that spanned the next 200 years or so, and was then covered with the mass of stones and earth that gave the building the rockpile appearance mentioned in April. So much for dating; it is the modifications, though, that almost beggar description. Fifteen began as a variant on a standard kind of upper-class residence, possibly built entirely of stone but just as possibly with lower walls of stone and the upper parts of the structure of wood and thatch. In most residences, one can expect to find alterations and additions in considerable number; the ancient Maya were given to the closing of doorways and opening of new ones, to the addition of masonry benches along room walls (often over house burials), to raising of floor levels with a few cm of new plaster, and to an almost endless variety of other building transformations. Most of the changes seem, in a "normal" building, to have been dictated by practical considerations, and sometimes we can even essay an explanation of events that appears (unless we keep digging) entirely plausible. In Fifteen we have all the sorts of changes found elsewhere, but we have them over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again.

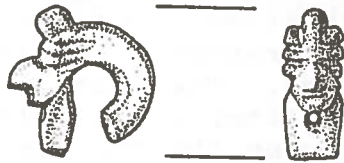


Fig. 2. One of the three shell fasteners (?) from Altun Ha, duplicated by the Lamanai specimens. Actual size.

The addition of a bench to a room seems practical; the masonry block could provide sleeping and sitting space, while serving as a convenient repository for the remains of a recently-deceased relative. But no bench in Fifteen contained a burial. Once in place, a bench might be modified by a new top surface, flanking elements, or whatever, but the body of the unit was left intact unless the whole house was undergoing reconstruction. But in Fifteen, benches were ripped out wholesale, and then rebuilt along precisely the same lines, not just once but many times. Rooms were made practically inaccessible and unusable by benches, then cleared out, then cluttered up again. At

one point, some of the main walls of the building were chopped away, either with an accompanying demolition of the roof or with numerous crossed fingers as new walls were built right on the sites of the originals. Meanwhile, floors were added, chopped away, rebuilt, cut through, rebuilt, chopped through, rebuilt, patched, rebuilt, cut through, rebuilt, patched, chopped away, rebuilt..... The place is an archaeologist's and architect's nightmare, and it came to invade Stan Loten's and my dreams, as it filled our waking hours.

Because the modifications were so numerous and frequently involved demolition of a unit that was then copied by the new construction, we have no way of gauging the amount of time that separated various undertakings. It is clear, though, that maintenance was not the reason that underlay most of the work, and no other practical consideration can be seen in most of the changes we have uncovered. In such circumstances, the archaeologist immediately seizes upon the profession's all-encompassing and all-satisfying explanation: the modifications were ceremonial. If one takes "ceremonial" to mean that we have no idea at all why the thing was done, then the catchall term is correct enough in most cases. Here, where logic (albeit Canadian logic of more than a millennium after the fact) suggests no reason for the alterations, it may actually be true that some sort of belief in the need for very frequent renewal kept the owners of Fifteen hammering away at changes year after year, even when the absence of unencumbered space forced them to tear out what they had built and then reconstruct a copy on the same spot. However, this seems to be one of those plausible explanations I have mentioned, and so one should be wary of accepting it. As I spend the off-season in restoration work on our home in Toronto, built about a thousand years after Fifteen, I am made ever more aware of how futile it is to attempt to explain even the decisions of a 19th-century homeowner, let alone those of people whose lives are separated from ours by so many centuries, and by a cultural gap that clearly cannot be bridged.

While Fifteen continued to give us headaches, it also produced a huge variety of invaluable artifact data. From additions at the east end of the house came enough pottery to fill several large sacks, and to give us about 25 reconstructable vessels; a pit of unexplained use behind the house likewise produced sherds and vessels in great quantity, with the date in both cases about A.D. 900-1000. The work here also yielded some sherds of probable mid-7th century

date that are the first unmistakable ceramic crossties between Lamanai and Altun Ha. The two sites are separated by only 40km, and one ought to be able to expect a great deal of similarity in their artifact inventories, though in ancient Maya communities the differences generally outweigh the resemblances even in neighbouring sites. The fact that our first recovery of Altun Ha-made pottery came after eight full seasons at Lamanai tells us something about links between the two communities, but also about the sampling error that skews our perception of prehistory even when excavations are of very great duration. This, too, argues for a cautious approach to acceptance of the archaeologist's explanations as approximations of the truth.

Though the Altun Ha ceramics were an exciting find in Fifteen, the most striking crosstie of the season was of shell rather than pottery. From the core of a bench in one of Fifteen's rooms came a small object, hook-like in shape, decorated with a human face; its use remains unclear, but it may have served as a clothing fastener. Both the shape and the decoration are distinctive, and as far as I know the form is recorded only at Altun Ha, where three specimens were recovered from a burial. In this case, though, the resemblance goes beyond the norm for crossties; the Lamanai specimen is not just similar to those from Altun Ha, but rather is identical to them in every respect, and almost certainly was once part of a set of four produced by a single maker at Altun Ha.

As with the stone mask fragments and the multiple modifications to Fifteen, the little shell object gives us a basis for conjuring up a picture of past events that goes far beyond the physical evidence itself. Such pictures can neither be proved nor disproved by further digging, but work in the coming season should provide solid filling for some of the blank spots in the larger canvas of ancient Maya life at Lamanai. When the digging stops, as we fear it may have to do next year, we shall have to take the canvas as it is, knowing all the while that further work would disprove much of what we have to say, but just might, on occasion, confound us by proving us right.

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P.S.: Though archaeologists seem always to look backwards in time, I am aware that it is 1982, not 1980. The transmogrification of the date in the title of Newsletter 203 occurred after the manuscript left my hands. Must have been archaeogremlins.