

# Archaeological Newsletter

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Lamanai, Belize, Central  
America

LAMANAI 1983: A REAL GLYPH-HANGER  
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Figure 1

When we finished our investigations in Ottawa last year (see ANL 203 & 208), we had amassed a great deal of information on life at Lamanai in the 10th and 11th centuries; moving right along, we worked northward this year in search of further construction from these years on to the 16th century. The scene of our first endeavours was a moderately large structure (N10-27), which for reasons I shall not discuss we named Harold. The first few shovelfuls of earth removed at Harold's base did indeed produce evidence of 12th-century and later domestic use of the area; they also yielded one of the greatest surprises in all our years at Lamanai, a beautifully carved stela that lay face down just 30cm. below ground surface at Harold's centre.

In everything that makes up the archaeological assemblage at Lamanai, one cannot fail to feel some contact with the ancient inhabitants. There is as much humanity in the discarded fragment of a pottery vessel as there is in the largest temple or the most elaborately carved jade; the smallest objects serve as reminders of the frailty of human intentions, just as the collapse of Maya civilization gives us an intimation of our own society's mortality. Nowhere, though, is there a stronger sense of plans and dreams gone awry than in the monuments erected to the glory of rulers, and now cast down into the debris of the buildings they once adorned. Stela 9 at Lamanai is just such a monument; the beauty of its carving and the intricate details of costume and glyphs on its surface bespeak a society in full sway, artisans at the peak of their abilities, and a ruler at the height of his powers. One wonders how the ruler, whom

the glyphs may identify as "Smoking Shell" but whose real name we shall never know, would look upon the unearthing of his monument by archaeologists from a culture and a time so far removed from the days when he enjoyed the exercise of power at Lamanai. How, too, would he view the night trips made by my wife Elizabeth and myself to show our son the "Stone Man" by generator-powered electric light?

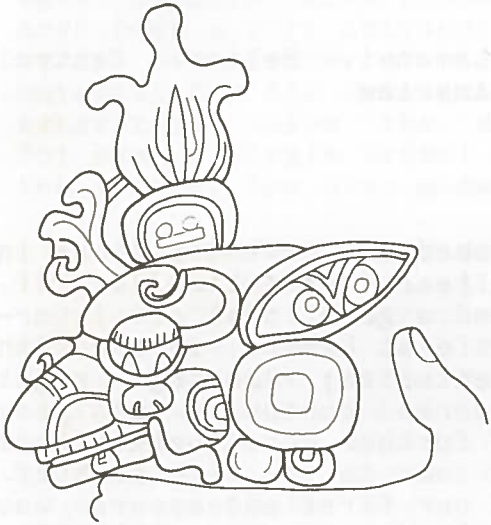


Figure 2

The great personage is shown in full regalia, with a great ceremonial bar across his chest and shoulder. At the bar's upper end is the standard reptile head, in the mouth of which there is usually a human head; in this case, however, the mouth contains a seated figure (fig. 1), whose wrists are bound with a cord. In the ruler's left hand rests a marvelous deer's head with a rare glyph as its ear and the number 7 (a bar and two dots) in its headdress (fig. 2). In company with the epigraphers and art historians among our colleagues, we shall have many months of study of the monument before the wealth of detail is fully analyzed.

The stela may be of 7th-century date, but unfortunately the offering from beneath its base did nothing to shed light on the time of erection. Instead of pottery vessels or other material datable on the basis of style, the offering contained only a small number of shell beads, some chips of chert and obsidian, one large chert blade, and the skeletons of five or more children, about two to eight years of age. Sacrifice of the children seems probable, though nothing about the badly fragmented skeletal material documents such activity. We may yet recover additional dating evidence from elsewhere in the building, but at the moment we face reliance on the monument's glyphic dates to fix the time of raising of a truly superlative example of the art of the stonecarver in the service of one of Lamanai's great rulers.

The stela dates to a time well before the period of our principal concern, but middens at the sides of Harold's stair brought us back to the time of the 10th and 11th centuries. At the building's southwest corner, small refuse-bordered platforms carried us on into the 12th century and near to the end of the prehistoric period. Though we have spent nine years investigating the Postclassic, the work near Harold increased significantly the inventory of vessel forms and decoration, and nearly doubled the number of residential structures, known from the 12th century and later. Emboldened by the results of the first three weeks' work, we moved westward to the plaza where the lone ballcourt lies, to see whether Postclassic activity could be documented by excavation at building bases in this area as well.

We have often remarked that the mounds near the ballcourt seemed somehow different from the remainder of the site centre. Was that apparent difference real, and perhaps the reflection of Postclassic use? To answer the question, we began limited trenching at the south and west sides of the plaza. Almost immediately, in a sort of deja vu reprise of the Harold discovery, we came upon a huge stone, very like the butt of a stela, at the centre base of N10-36 ("Bufo"). However, the stone proved to be plain, probably part of a giant step such as we have encountered on other structures that were modified in the 11th century or later. With visions of another carved stela set aside, we extended the trench slightly to the east -- and found that the neighbour of the first stone was a gigantic slab adorned with sixteen glyphs flanked by two seated figures in elaborate costume. The glyphs are at least partly calendric, but the history of the slab is even sadder than that of Stela 9, and it has left us with very fragmentary evidence indeed. Some time after the stone and its flanking companions were set in place, the Maya ground down the surfaces of all three and removed most of the details of the glyphs and the seated figures. An expert epigrapher may resurrect some of the glyphs, but the obliteration of the uppermost group of four will prevent us from ever knowing the full meaning of the text and being able to fix the time of placement of the stone by a reading of the dates. Consequently we must hope for the discovery of an offering to date the event, and thus far our investigations have failed to find one.



Figure 3

The slab may be part of an immense, low wall that has shown up in front of several neighbouring structures that appear to have been at least partly in ruins before the wall was built. The wall seems to enclose a huge area within which the ballcourt lies, but whether the enclosure was somehow related to the ceremonial game played in the court is not clear. Imagine our surprise, then, when work along the west limit of the enclosure cleared a structure that appeared to be one side of another ballcourt! The new "court" structure lies immediately west of the court already identified, and its position suggests that the rear of one of the first court buildings could have served as one face of a second court. With this in mind, we began a trench from the new "court"

building across to the back of the other structure. The trench brought us into battle once again with the roots of a cohune palm, a frequent opponent in this year's excavations; there may not be many among you who have experience cutting cohune root, but anyone who faced barbed-wire entanglements in World War II is familiar with the problem. Extricating ourselves finally from the roots brought us face to face with another of the monumental surprises of the season: not far from the new "court" structure lay a huge altar or marker disc

(fig. 3), its surface just below the humus and root mass.

The altar is the largest by far of all discs, as far as I know, in the Maya area. At two metres in diameter and 72 cm. in thickness, it is an awesome piece of work. Its weight of about 5 tons must have made its transportation from the quarry a staggering task, and the methods used to move it defy comprehension. Unfortunately, fire damage, coupled with weathering, has all but obliterated what must once have been a very intricate carved scene on the disc's top surface, so again the sense of loss is acute. Here, too, we require offering material for the dating of the monument's placement, and extensive excavation below the disc has revealed only a mass of chert chips. Not even a single vessel accompanies the giant stone, perhaps because the size of the disc made the object itself enough of an offering.

Just before the disc emerged, we had made yet another discovery in our marathon glyphic roundup, at the base of a building north of the new "court" structure. Some years ago, reconnaissance here revealed a small slab with a single very large glyph on one surface; we recorded the glyph, but were unable at the time to check the association of the slab with the building. Now, with further clearing, we could see that a typical late Postclassic small, uncarved stela lay half-toppled a short distance north of the slab. Here, again, was a huge cohune palm, and as we chopped away at the roots we came upon the edge of a large slab that lay flat in front of the Postclassic stela. On the slab were three more huge glyphs (32 X 36 cm.), and not far away were several pieces of yet another slab with additional glyphs, at least one of them calendric. Together with the other monumental discoveries of this season, the strange giant glyph slabs have changed Lamanai from a site with only two (one and a half, really) carved stela and no glyphic texts into a centre that clearly had a strong tradition of monument-carving, in which artisans of the highest calibre were employed.

Meanwhile, Liz has been directing excavation of a very late Postclassic midden in the camp area, perhaps the latest material in the site centre. The work began as a simple test of a refuse dump, in an area I had always seen as essentially unused until the last century or two of prehistoric life at the site. Cutting through the midden went routinely enough until the cleaning up of pits for section-recording revealed a plaster floor and other construction beneath the midden. Now the individual pits have become a large area exposure, and we may eventually be able to show that specialized construction, perhaps related to the use of the lagoon margin, was undertaken in the camp area as early as the Classic period. Here, as elsewhere, after nine and a half seasons at Lamanai, we still learn something significant each time we set shovel to ground; with luck, we may have one more season after this one, and I suspect that the end of that year will see us, as will June of 1983, still discovering how much we have yet to learn about one of the more fascinating and important centres of ancient Maya civilization.