

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER



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LAMANAI 1985: STOP ME BEFORE I DIG AGAIN

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In April, when for the first time in 22 years I attended a Society for American Archaeology annual meeting, I made an earthshaking announcement; 1985 would be the final year of our long-term excavation project at the ancient Maya site of Lamanai in northern Belize. From the darkened hall came countless snickers of disbelief; my audience knew my record. Originally scheduled to end in 1982, the Lamanai Expedition had been extended again and again, until 1985 would mark the twelfth year; in fact, a colleague has suggested that Liz and I take up permanent residence at the site. But all good things must come to an end, and 1985 was in truth set as our final year, with laboratory and mop-up work scheduled for 1986. After the first week of June, we were never to set shovel to ground again at a place that we had come to think of as a very real home away from home.

Our 1985 goal seemed simple, because the scale of the undertaking was comparatively small. In the final season all we had to do

was to expand on the results of the 1983 and 1984 digging in order to understand as fully as possible the extent and nature of the contact-period (A.D. 1544-1641) settlement. We needed only to move out from the zone of the two Spanish churches and seek the limits of the early Historic community, then determine how many houses had existed in the settlement, and what their occupation spans had been. Like most of the research designs of earlier seasons, this one sounded better on paper than it turned out to be on the ground.

Because we had spent a considerable amount of time investigating the church zone, I thought that very little remained to be done in the heart of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Lamanai. The same appeared true of the area farther north where we spent all of 1984; with the exception of some cleanup work, we had probably done all we could to reveal the history of the church-period settlement's upper-crust residential area. In fact there was one major discovery left to make in the area: beneath a



Figure 1. The east end of The Citadel in the final stage of excavation.

fifteenth-century or later modification of the stair of a tenth-century building lay the large pit grave of two people whom I have come to call The Loving Couple. I would tell you more about this discovery but for the fact that study of the remains of the man and woman and a tiny infant who accompanied them is still in progress; be patient, dear reader, for in time the story of what is in some ways the most interesting burial ever encountered at Lamanai will be yours to peruse.

As work went on north of the church zone, we began extending southward into an area of rather thinly scattered small structures atop a low escarpment at the lagoon edge. From some of the mounds close to the churches we recovered pottery and other evidence of sixteenth-century (or later) occupation, but a good many that were clearly built by the Maya yielded almost nothing but nineteenth-century English crockery and ironmongery, for which the acronym drawn from "Bricks, Rumbottles, Iron, Tin, China, Rubbish, And Pipes" seemed eminently fitting.

The Maya must have occupied the area while the churches were in use, but in the end we had only proximity to the churches as a kind of evidence of that fact. Frustrated, we kept on moving southward.

The farther south we went, the more we found excellent prospects coming to nought. Building after building had architectural features that suggested a sixteenth or seventeenth-century date; building after building stubbornly refused to produce any evidence to confirm the date. Finally, though, at the far southern end of our mapped area, we encountered cleared fields where there had once been tangled undergrowth, and for the first time we could see a promising-looking assemblage of very strange little buildings that we dubbed The Citadel (Fig. 1).

The size and shape of almost all the 14 buildings in The Citadel told us that something very odd and probably ceremonial had been going on in the group, and the nature of the construction told us that the date was at least sixteenth century. Surely here, I thought, we would find definitive data on Historic-period Lamanai outside of the church zone. Wrong again; The Citadel proved to be as devoid of dating evidence as it was full of intriguing architecture. It is possible that the structures, which include one that resembles a derby hat, were built in the Historic period, and they could even date from after the end of Spanish control of Lamanai in 1641, but all remain floating in time, essentially meaningless as part of the site's history. "Never have so many done so much for so little," Churchill might have said had he

surveyed the results of our labours.

Just when everything seemed hopeless in the far south, we struck paydirt in the form of a garbage dump not far north of The Citadel. Sackloads of typical, sixteenth-century potsherds and a few partly reconstructable vessels, plus animal bones, a few shells, and several copper artifacts emerged from the sunbaked soil. But even the mining of this lode did not produce European pottery or other goods; if Spanish presence had an impact on this part of the site, the impact left no physical traces, or at least none that we could recognize.

Meanwhile, at the very north edge of the church zone, we began to encounter Spanish pottery in an apparent Historic-period refuse dump along the front of a platform that I assumed was of similar date. Later excavation showed that part of the platform was very probably early Historic, but the front was a bit later -- mid-nineteenth century, to be exact. The supposed midden was in fact redeposited material, probably dug away from the front of the sixteenth-century platform when British sugarmill operators rebuilt the structure as a house foundation. Luckily we had not expended much time in recording the platform's details before its Victorian date became apparent; luckily too, work here led us to check the lagoon margin a bit farther south, where we discovered what was to be the focus of our efforts for most of the second half of the season.

One of our problems in dealing with the modern squatter settlement in the Historic-period area

has been the squatters' practice of throwing garbage around houses, and heaping malodourous masses of the stuff along the slope that leads down to the lagoon. What we found as we moved south from our excavation of the Victorian-fronted building was that the sixteenth-century inhabitants of Lamanai had the same garbage-disposal custom; along the front of a large platform of undetermined date we encountered Maya pottery and other domestic refuse mingled with Spanish pottery and occasional wrought-iron nails. In the top stratum there were also bits of English crockery and metalwork, but the lower levels were mercifully free of such material. For almost ninety metres we pursued the midden southward, while we cleared the top of the platform and began trenching there as well. Eventually it turned out that the Historic material was primarily in accumulated humus atop the structure, so we did not dig deeply; with just a few weeks left, we had to concentrate effort where it would do the most good.

The pressure of a season rapidly diminishing forced us to leave a few matters unresolved atop the platform as we moved southward to see how extensive the dumping of garbage at the side of the lagoon had been in the Historic period. I spent parts of several days clambering along the shore through piles of circa-1984/1985 garbage in search of something a few centuries older, until finally I had gone almost as far as The Citadel. Satisfied that little could be learned here except at unbearable olfactory cost, I distributed crews south from the church area for about 100 metres, and soon we were once again reveling in legitimate Historic-period

garbage. The shoreline work combined with excavation elsewhere to increase our sample of early Historic Maya pottery and other goods tremendously, and to add about 400 Spanish sherds to our previous total of just over 50. Between this work and the removal of the last burial from the first church, it appeared that we had about as much information on the Historic community as we could obtain by any process short of stripping the top 50 cm from the entire southern part of Lamanai.

Everything seemed to have fallen into place fairly well; if there had to be a stopping-point in the operation we had probably reached it. Secure in that thought, I turned my attention in the last days to some small final tasks that included a section trench less than one metre wide and about one metre long, within the arc of a strange semicircular feature we had found atop the garbage-bordered lagoonside platform. On our last morning, when all but a few men had been pulled from excavation to begin closing down work, the trench-digger arrived to report that he had struck a burial. Quickly I put a man on either side of the trench, and as they dug downward they also came upon burials. Fearing that I knew what we had discovered, I closed down the work until after the crew had left.

In the following hectic week two of the guards and I excavated a tiny sample of the area, and found 13 burials (Fig. 2); it was abundantly clear that we had found a second Historic cemetery. One could do no better in creating the archaeologist's ultimate blunder, a major discovery at the end of the dig; now I must somehow find a few



Figure 2. The first burials uncovered in the 'new' Historic cemetery.

thousand dollars and sufficient time to dig a cemetery that probably contains several hundred individuals, and surely will complete the burial sample from Historic Lamanai. All this should be done next year, during our mop-up time. As you see, the snickerers were right, for although excavation at Lamanai officially came to an end in mid-June we have not yet been quite persuaded to lay down our shovels.

Toronto
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