

Lamanai Postclassic

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David Pendergast and I began work at Lamanai in 1974. Now, after six seasons, it appears that the site has been more or less continuously occupied from at least as early as the Chicanel phase of the Preclassic right through to the conquest and beyond.¹ In A.D. 1640 the Christianized Maya desecrated the church that had been built in the sixteenth century and allied themselves with the citizens of Tipu, but Lamanai was still not entirely abandoned. Then, around the middle of the nineteenth century a sugar mill was established near the site. This operated until about 1880, when the site was finally completely abandoned as a permanent settlement. Although there were rumors in 1979 that the Belize government planned to locate a new agricultural village in the area, this has not yet come to pass; however, parts of the site of Lamanai have once again been re-occupied by refugees from El Salvador.

The strategic location of the site at the head of the New River lagoon, known in colonial times as the Dzuluinicob, or river of the "Foreign Men," no doubt explains this long continuity of occupation. But the question of when Lamanai reached its peak of population and in what fashion its fortunes shifted over time can only be answered with more reservations than assertions. We are just now completing one phase of investigation and starting another. Our understanding at this point naturally reflects the work that has been done. This tends to suggest that the high point for Lamanai was in the Preclassic and perhaps into the Early Classic periods. The largest structure that we have been able to date so far is from the Chicanel phase of the Preclassic. It is a pyramidal temple 30 meters high with the fully developed substructure form—system typical of Early Classic ceremonial architecture in the Peten, and may have had vaulted building components. It is not only large but architecturally sophisticated. Other structures comparable in size or even larger, as yet un-

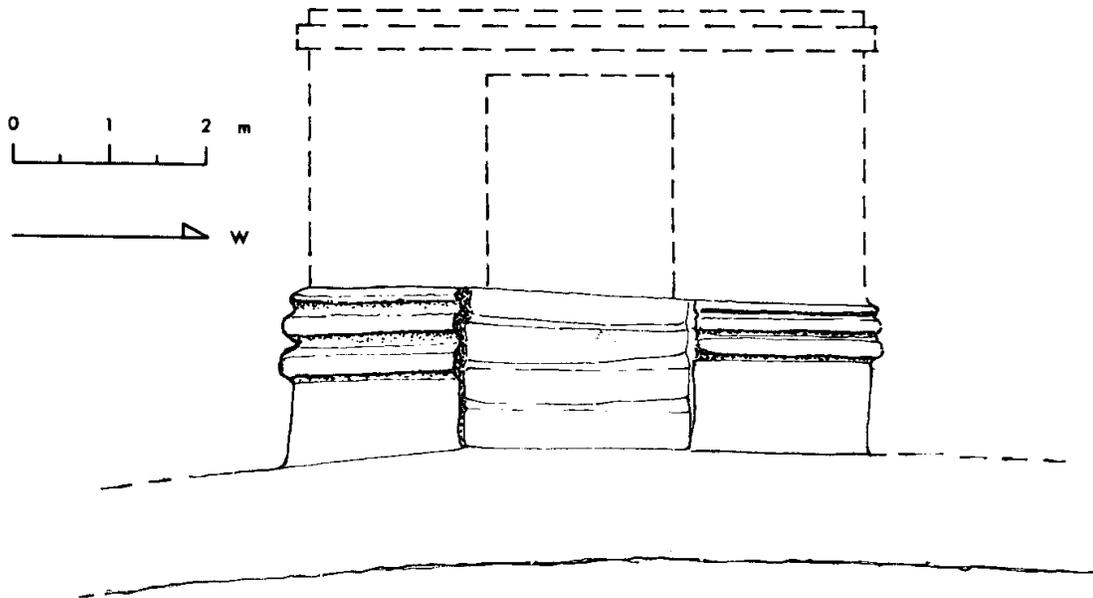


Fig. 1. Sketch reconstruction of the front (north) elevation of a Lamanai building evincing architectural ties to the east coast of northern Yucatan.

tested, look very similar on the surface and may date from the same period.

Large scale construction continues through the Classic period and even into the Postclassic though at a much reduced level. But the Postclassic period, with one exception, basically appears as a cessation of monumental construction. The population may not have decreased very much and the ruins of the Classic period ceremonial structures continued to be used but the technical skills, organizational capacity, perhaps the access to resources, and maybe even the perception of a need for large scale monumental construction all have disappeared.

The site, or at least the area that we have defined for investigation, stretches four kilometers along the west shore of the lagoon. It covers six square kilometers and contains 718 structures visible on the surface. The largest structures form a fairly compact central zone outside of which both the scale and density drop off dramatically.

The sixteenth century *visita* church in the southern part of the site provides some historical period Maya artifacts that represent re-occupation after the church was burned in A.D. 1640. This material, which consists of domestic wares and censers, cannot be readily distinguished from Postclassic productions that date several centuries earlier. In other words, the material that we have been able to date stratigraphically to the early conquest period is not very distinctive stylistically. We may well have historic period settlement in other parts of the site but cannot separate it from Postclassic occupation.

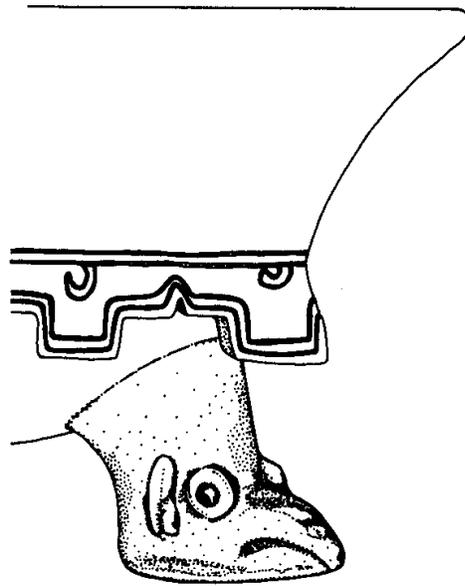


Fig. 2. Pottery effigy support in the form of a bird head (redrafted by A. F. Chase from an original slide).

A mound immediately south of the church had been used as a burial ground during the period in which the church functioned, from about A.D. 1570 to 1640. This mound could represent either a Postclassic Maya structure that had been razed and built over prior to the arrival of the Spaniards, or a structure in use at the time of arrival and demolished in the process of establishing the church. A masonry stair had been built against the debris-mound and dozens of burials, accompanied by very few artifacts, had been intruded into the core masonry. The structure, shattered in this process, was a small square building with a very crude three-element molding that ran around the top of its substructure component (fig. 1). The molding, though even more degenerate than anything at Tulum, clearly relates to architectural forms typical of northern Yucatan and certainly suggests the Postclassic rather than any earlier period.

To date, the most productive source of Lamanai Postclassic material is the southern part of the central zone of monumental construction. Here, right at the lagoon edge, a series of Postclassic residential structures appears to have been built on top of a long abandoned, mounded-over ruin of Classic period or earlier construction. The Postclassic structures are minimal house platforms of simple rectangular shape, only about 30 centimeters high, in one case with vertical slab facings. Large parts of the platforms have been destroyed by intrusive burials accompanied by pottery with both Mayapan and Tulum-related attributes. These include carved red wares with segmental flanges and tripod supports in the form of human and bird



Fig. 3. Pottery deity mask on a large Postclassic vessel.

heads (fig. 2). The period of occupation probably extends from Middle to Late Postclassic.

In the plaza to the west of these structures is a small rectangular platform representing three phases of construction, all Postclassic. Dedicatory to two of these were burials accompanied by large quantities of pottery, the later one in an urn that had been packed in and bedded on smashed Mayapan-related wares. The earlier of the three platforms had well-cut vertical slab facings.

The west side of the same plaza was formed by a much larger mound representing Postclassic construction on top of Classic period or earlier structures that may have been abandoned prior to Postclassic reoccupation. The Postclassic architectural development consists of three identical structures, one on top of the other, each with a single very large room, roughly 20 meters long by 10 meters

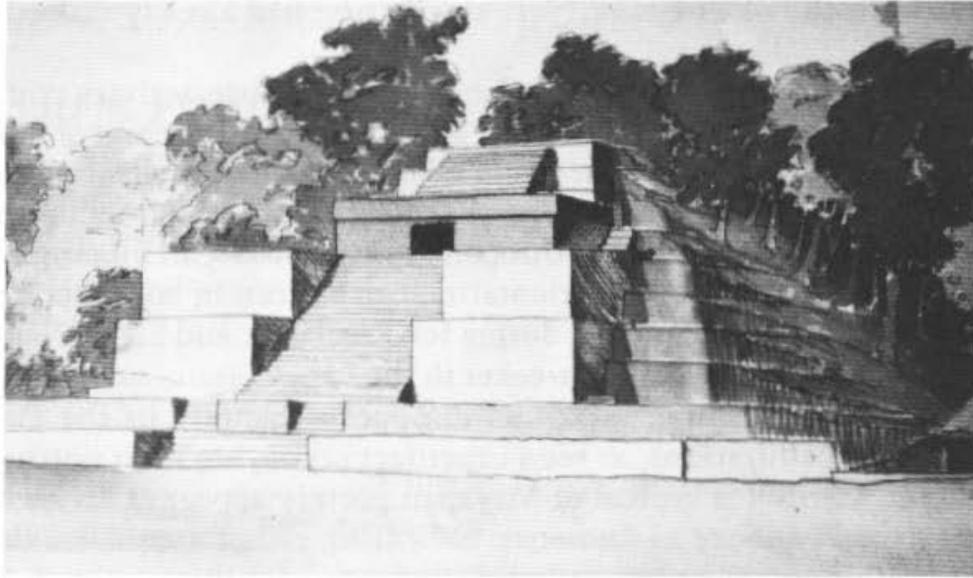


Fig. 4. Lamanai Postclassic monumental architectural construction.

wide. The roof structure must have been of timber and was supported on massive timber columns. Walls were thin, of wattle-and-daub, plastered and painted with polychrome designs. The core is a very distinctive type of dry-stone boulder construction found elsewhere at the site only in one Terminal Classic structure. Facings on the substructure are a mixture of horizontally bedded and vertical flat slab stones, some merely split boulders. Inside the large room, against its rear (west) wall was an interior platform around which corn, beans, and other food crops had been burned in a way suggesting ceremonial rather than residential functioning. Dedicatory to this structure is a rich burial dated by radiocarbon to the middle of the twelfth century. Ceramics associated with the burial have Mayapan-related attributes including elaborate deity masks (fig. 3).

Immediately inland from this structure, on the edge of a higher plaza, is a large Postclassic midden that seems to consist entirely of smashed ceramics and the remains of marine organisms and other foodstuffs. The ceramic artifacts include ladle censers with crocodylian features. The midden seems to be a ceremonial rather than residential one. It fills the southeast corner of the plaza and laps up against the base of a large pyramidal temple that had been built in the Early Classic period, modified frontally in the Late Classic and again in the Postclassic. This is our one example of Postclassic monumental construction (fig. 4). Although only a frontal addition it is still a large undertaking and in technical attributes is entirely Classic although the core contains Postclassic ceramics. At the time that

it was built the older Classic period structure had already started to collapse.

Farther north in the site evidence of Postclassic activity comes from scattered censer fragments in and on top of the debris of Classic period structures. Of four major Classic period temples two produced this kind of evidence. One of these produced fragments from perhaps 50 Mayapan-style anthropomorphic censers, all incomplete.

To summarize, a Peten orientation can be seen in both architecture and ceramics of Lamanai during the Preclassic and Early Classic periods. This becomes much weaker in the Late Classic, as the Peten area reaches a cultural peak, and disappears entirely in the Postclassic when affiliations, as seen in artifact styles, are with northern Yucatan. Attributes typical of Mayapan pottery appear at an earlier date in the sequence at Lamanai, indicating either a cultural flow from south to north or an expanded time depth for this material. We have evidence for both continuity and discontinuity between the Classic and Postclassic at Lamanai. This may mean nothing more than that different parts of the site were in use at different times. The size of the Postclassic settlement still remains to be investigated. In the start that we made during the 1979 season, testing in small structures outside the site center, we have already encountered Postclassic occupation. As this program continues we will surely find more and hope to be able to establish a complete Postclassic chronology.

Note

1. The text of this paper is essentially the same as that delivered at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Cincinnati in 1979.