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LAMANAI 1977, EPISODE TWO: LANGUISHING ON LAG
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Fig. 1. Men at work near
the top of Lag.

When we last saw our hero, if that is the word (and I am quite sure it is not), languishing at Lamanai, he was confronted by an even larger source of confusion than usual, in the form of "Lag" (N10-43). That was early in April, and the Newsletter written then closed with some typically cautious (one might even say evasive) comments on the possibilities of unravelling the mysteries of the 30-metre-high mass of masonry. In the days that followed, the intrepid archaeologist struggled time and again up the front of Lag, a

climb made ever more hazardous by the accumulating backdirt on the slope; inevitably, as he reached the top, gasping mightily for breath, one of the men would report that the instructions given just shortly before were not producing the expected results. Few tasks require greater acting talent and self-control than that of summoning up a seemingly intelligent response in such a situation, when there is not enough air in one's system to permit much more than simple maintenance of proper oxygen balance in one's cells. But responses were given; new orders were issued; men began a new attack on the structure; and time and again the attack produced more confusion, rather than less.

April wore on, patience wore thin, pick points wore down, and stock answers as to where to dig wore out. Intrepid climbing up the face of Lag became more difficult day by day, not so much from the backdirt as from

the traumas lying in wait at the summit. Added to these was the fact that one of the men, who seemed more often than not to be in the most critical (i.e., least understandable) portion of the structure, could not forbear to offer his explanation, in extenso, of all the features which had been revealed. Such explanations are not conducive to rational sorting-out of the features by an archaeologist, even one who may possibly understand what lies before his disbelieving eyes. So, when the chatter (liberally larded with remarks about how simple the whole matter was) became too much to bear, the loquacious digger found himself transferred to Lip, where the problems seemed comparatively minuscule. Would that such a simple solution had existed for the architectural tangle on Lag.

If the noble struggle with the demons of Lag had been carried on in the name of the New Archaeology, the apparent chaos of architectural units would have become the subject of a Research Design, incorporating a Model (or perhaps several, just to hedge the bet), and a Paradigm might even have been formulated. Had this occurred, the result would have matched exactly a statement made in a recent paper by a scholar of the New Archaeology School: "The empirical archaeological concomitants of models based upon this paradigm are found wanting in the light of new evidence" Or, to put it in the deathless words of one who wrote while under the influence of several anthropological symposia, what emerged daily in the struggle was "a finite set of exclusively disfunctional scenarios which mediate a systemic man-environment-technology aggravation interface". In English, these statements presumably mean that all explanations failed to fit the facts, and this failure was more than a little frustrating. I leave it to the reader to imagine the words chosen by our poor befuddled archaeologist, unaccustomed as he is to the latest fads in Archaeospeak because of long sojourns in the jungle, to express his attitudes toward Lag.

But throughout April a ray of hope beckoned, for in May Stan Loten was to arrive like some architectural knight on his charger, to clear up all the mysteries. May came, and so did Stan. On his first trip up Lag, which left him more winded than those now conditioned to a task akin to clambering up the side of a ten-storey building sheathed in loose dirt, he was sorely puzzled. But with his customary enthusiasm, he said that he'd be back shortly to spend some time going over the features, and see if he could sort them out. By lunchtime that day he had the unspeakable effrontery to sit down at the table and announce that it was all really very simple, once you got the hang of things, and he was sure that in a short while he would have everything straightened out. Shades of the loquacious digger, one might have thought, but Stan knows his business; at the day's end he appeared in camp with a scheme which explained all the seemingly inexplicable things atop Lag. With a few quick sketches, he showed how the various bits and pieces had once formed a more or less coherent, albeit very strange, building.

I shall not burden you with a description of the units which make up Lag; it is enough to say that none thus far encountered, with the exception of terracing at the sides and rear, fits standard patterns (if such there be) in the Maya area. There is now a

sequence of construction visible; what began (or at least existed at some stage in its development) as three separate structures atop a platform was ultimately converted into one great mass with nothing at the top but a floor surface too small to have supported any kind of chambered building. At one point a mask, or perhaps several, adorned each side unit of the complex, but these were almost totally demolished before disappearing beneath later construction. Little of the outer shell of the structure remains (one basis for the initial confusion, along with the unusual form of the features), but some earlier efforts, and the aforementioned terracing that supports them, are emerging in fairly well-preserved condition. Masonry characteristics suggest that everything now visible is of early Classic or Pre-Classic date (4th century A.D. or earlier), which lends additional importance to what was already an extremely interesting structure.

Use of masonry characteristics in dating

So now we could, if we were so inclined, construct a Model to fit the facts; instead, we have simply lulled ourselves into complacency with the belief that we understand most of what happened at the top of Lag. That complacency will, of course, be shattered not once but many times as work proceeds next year, but Stan and I have always known our "Models" to be more fragile than paper kites, and we have often launched them into the air only to see them shattered as they collided with the hard earth of archaeological facts. One thing is certain, though: the prediction made in the last Newsletter that you'll be reading a great deal about Lag in the future will be borne out.

Though it loomed large in the work schedule for the second half of the 1977 season, Lag was not the only object of our attention. Excavation continued on Lip, bringing to light one more offering, beneath the base stair. This consisted of two dishes, one inverted over the other, with a pyrite mirror, some small jade objects, and several shell artifacts inside. Unfortunately, the offering ceremony included burning atop the vessels, so neither the upper dish nor the mirror is much to look at now. Equally unfortunately, the dishes are not of a type which can be dated by comparison with pieces from other sites, but the offering antedates the two from Lip mentioned in the previous Newsletter, so must be of Classic date, probably 7th or 8th century A.D. We have gone as far as we can with the lower stair, and at season's end were turning our attention to the area around a small room which stands in the centre of the middle portion of the stair. The room is an unusual feature in itself, but there are elements behind it which at the moment remain in the "Lag class", which is to say that they cannot be explained. We shall continue work on Lip



Fig. 2. Lip at the end of the season.

until about mid-season in 1978; by then, we'll have probed as deeply into the structure as possible, we'll know as much about the construction sequence as can be learnt without destroying the building entirely, and we may, if luck is with us, have come up with evidence on the dating of the earlier parts of the structure.

In the north, Kambel proved to be the thinnest soup we have yet encountered, and all our efforts at finding some facings in place, or clearing earlier construction beneath the outer shell, have come to nought. We have a few spots left in which we shall do some probing, but unless these produce something positive we shall have to write Kambel off as a "duster", and turn elsewhere. Fortunately we have somewhere else to turn, for our work in the complex just south of Kambel, where we started with Sac, has begun to produce very interesting results.

Although excavation of Sac yielded just as little as did the work on Kambel, we remained undaunted and turned to the principal structure in the group of five. Another etymological discursion is necessary here; Sac (with a broad "a") was not named with any great humorous intent - the name is the Mayan word for white - but humour crept in, as it is wont to do, when we got round to naming the other mounds in the group. Sac sits atop a platform which is now "Xiu" (X has the sound of "sh" in Mayan), while the principal structure in the group is "Fut" and the other three are "Jil" (with the "h" sound of the Spanish J), "Tow" and "Sol". It is with Fut that we are now concerned, and here, in contrast with neighbouring structures, we are finding reasonably well-preserved architecture. A pleasant change, that. What we have encountered thus far is very like Lip, with a two-room building set athwart the main stair. This now seems to be a Lamanai building type, and if we can date Fut we may be able to use the type itself as a dating device elsewhere at the site. 1978 will see us clearing the remainder of Fut's exterior and then probing into core wherever we can, and so it, like Lag, will surely be a star in future reports.

Not of
arch.
features
for
cross
dating
with
other
buildings

Far to the south of the "Pedal Series" of structures, we intended to continue work in the church cemetery, but threats of rain forced us to postpone excavation until next season. Then we shall roof the mound (no mean task in itself), and work as necessity, rather than weather, dictates. Speaking of weather, the November day on which I am writing this is grey, damp, and cold, and my hands and feet are numb (there's no heat in my office just now). The message from my circulatory system is clear: quit typing and Head South. In a few weeks I shall do just that, fleeing before the snows, and next May you will have the next instalment in the continuing saga of life amid the merciless architectural tangles, and the merciful warmth, of Lamanai.

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