

Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 203, April 1982

Lamanai, Belize, Central America
April 18, 1982

LAMANAI 1980: OTTAWA, STELLA DALLAS, AND THE WOODLICE
David M. Pendergast, Field Director

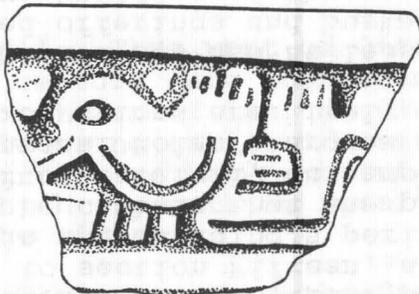


Fig. 1. One product of Ottawa's spring cleaning, this 2.5cm-high bird and his serpent(?) companion on a 15th century bowl.

While the title of this Newsletter might seem to be a listing of the top three punk rock groups in the Lamanai Hit Parade, it is in fact a fairly accurate depiction of the first half of the ninth season here. Most of what we have done this year was planned as an extension of work completed in 1981, and to some extent the events have actually paralleled the plans, a phenomenon almost unknown in Lamanai excavation history. We have had our surprises, however, and what was perhaps the best of them was bound up in the last item of the title, as we shall see.

The focus on Ottawa and related structures this year has seen us making headway in the study of the last six centuries of life at Lamanai, by moving everything from tons of rock to spoonful of humus. This is the kind of archaeology that really requires patience, far more than is needed in the excavation of offerings and burials. It is one thing to face a complicated interment or a group of vessels in a deep pit, and know that a long, hard day's work lies ahead; it is quite another to trace the outlines of exciting new kinds of structures and predict what the full form of the buildings should be, but be confronted with the need to remove 12 to 18 tons of boulders in order to confirm the predictions. When that removal must begin with a sort of broom-and-dustpan spring cleaning effort, the strain on one's patience can be truly monumental.

This year we set out to section the 10th century and later buildings revealed last season, and to examine those left unexcavated in 1981. Because the last remaining untouched major structure had no visible architectural features, and because the west end of the courtyard area seemed to have a very rough surface, we decided to have a look at all the rocks before removing them to get at whatever structures might lie beneath. To expose large expanses of rocks, the

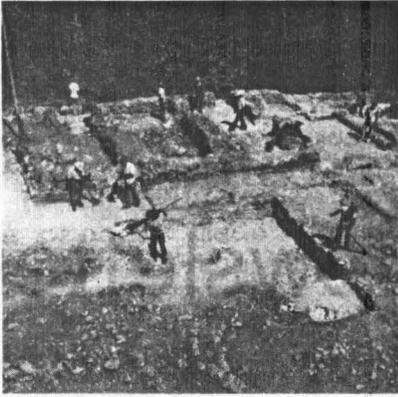


Fig. 2. Sweepers man their brooms as the west and north sides of Ottawa are prepared for photographing.

excavators had to kneel among the stones and remove the humus with trowel and brush, while the wheelbarrow men waited half a day for enough material to accumulate so that they had something to wheel away. The excavators probably thought that they expended many days' effort for very little, but in fact the clearing of the courtyard surface revealed two or more assemblages of stone that clearly represent house platforms. The platforms, which must have supported thatched structures, were almost certainly built at a time when the original pattern of use of the masonry buildings had come to an end, a date shown by pottery and other domestic refuse to be 14th century or later.

The sort of spring-cleaning work that revealed the small house platforms also went on atop N10-15, one of the few buildings at Lamanai for which we have failed to devise a nonsense name. "Fifteen", as it is known, has also proved to be a rockpile, and though it is of much larger dimensions than the house platforms, it must likewise have supported a thatched building. Refuse here does not provide a clear indication of construction date, though some materials on and near the surface suggest that the building is several centuries earlier than its smaller counterparts. We have just begun to section Fifteen, and in the process have revealed two large pits in the building's perimeter floor. In other circumstances, I would be certain that the pits contain burials or offerings, but the number of carefully cut empty pits in floors at Lamanai (we know them as "Lamanai Holes") argues for a somewhat less sanguine view of what the excavations are likely to produce.

Ottawa has had at least its fair share of Lamanai Holes, but has yielded offerings and burials of the productive sort as well. In the western building of the group, sectioning of a floor added atop the original room surface at the structure centre exposed three pits, one on the midline and two uncharacteristically off this spot so vital in Maya architectural-religious belief. The first pit examined yielded something found in a good many offerings at Lamanai: a clutch of obsidian blades. The blades, of a material probably imported from the Guatemalen Highlands, reflect the strong focus on obsidian in Lamanai offerings, but do not help to establish the time of construction of the building. Hence a feeling of disappointment generally accompanies completion of an offering of this sort, and reinforces pessimism regarding others yet to be investigated. In this case, though, the prognostications proved wrong, for the second pit yielded a fine footed dish of 10th or 11th century date, with resist decoration in the form of two trefoils and two stylized hands. The third pit was equally productive; from it came a black bowl that seems earlier than the footed dish, and may have been an heirloom when interred.

At the base of the third pit, where a layer of lime soil should have been, there were instead a number of airspaces among rocks. This circumstance led me to dig below the level where work would normally have halted, and brought me down on yet another offering, part of an earlier building beneath the one on which we were at work. The body of the offering consisted of two huge red dishes, one inverted over the other, with the standard Lamanai contents of a very small lot of

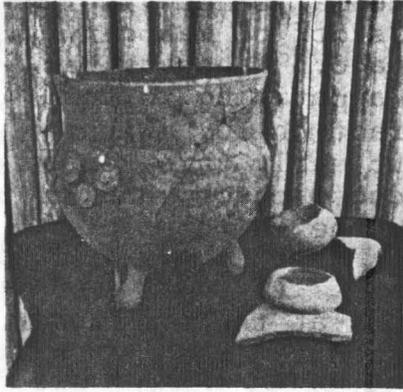


Fig. 3. The necks of two Spanish jars, ca. 1570-1640, and a 25cm-high tripod Maya bowl, buried beneath the church floor sometime after 1641.

shell and jade objects, and some obsidian blades. Atop the vessels lay a ceremonial flint, an uncommon occurrence here except in a few other offerings probably contemporaneous with this 8th century one. The flint was the first real surprise of the season, for it proved to be one of the larger, if not the largest, ever recovered from a Maya site; at 77.6cm, it is just about 2cm shorter than my little boy, beside whom it was stood up for comparison at the end of the day's digging.

In a complex such as Ottawa, we shall inevitably end up knowing more about the elite who occupied the grand masonry buildings than about their successors who dwelt in far less luxurious accommodations. We try to make up for such holes in the data on middle and lower-class life by searching beyond the central part of the site, but the amount of activity at Lamanai in the 10th through 16th centuries means that we often stumble on elaborate materials in outlying areas as well. Thus west of Ottawa we are at work on buildings of 8th to 10th century date that seem to be small residences, and may be part of a pattern of late development in western parts of the site that saw little or no earlier construction. At the same time, just north of the group, we have encountered two small, very late platforms, each of which supports an uncarved stela; these are the Stella and Dallas of the title.

The masonry of the Stella and Dallas platforms fixes the date of construction in the 15th or 16th century, and excavation of Dallas, the closer unit to Ottawa, also yielded ceramics of that period. While we were awaiting assembly of equipment to move the lower part of the broken stela to see whether an offering had accompanied erection of the monument, we turned our attention to Stella. Here we began the usual job of perimeter clearing, which in this instance involved trenching around boulders exposed at ground surface. The trenching provided our second major surprise, for the largest of the boulders proved to be the broken top of another stela that stands, encased in its platform, beneath Stella. The existence of the earlier monument has prevented us for the moment from investigating Stella, and because the lower platform yielded no clue to its date, we shall have to perform a rather difficult double moving of monuments here in order to determine when the practise of stela erection away from the main temples began, and for how long it persisted.

Finally, the woodlice. "Woodlice", is the Belizean name for termites, the bane of every Mayanist's existence not during excavation but in all attempts at storage afterwards. No building in our camps seems heavily infested with woodlice save the lab; a cardboard box set down on the floor one week cannot be lifted the next, for its bottom will have become breakfast cereal for the little cellulose-eating beasts. Paper bags have a culinary appeal equal to boxes, and perhaps second only to Canadian pine as haute cuisine in the eyes of Lamanai's termite gourmets. Over the years I must have replaced every cardboard box a half-dozen times, and a listener at the lab door would likely have heard me give voice to a fair range of uncomplimentary remarks about bugs that destroy label and container, and often force me to go

back to my notes in order to re-label a lot of material before it is re-boxed. This year, in desperation, I ordered a stock of mahogany crates, something I should have done many seasons ago. Mahogany has two virtues: it is plentiful, and it is about as appetizing to termites as leftover mashed rutabagas are to the average child. With crates at hand and a new warehouse built, I set out early this season to bring order once again out of the woodlice-produced chaos, and in the process made two highly important discoveries, the third major surprise of the year.

Back in 1974 and 1975, we conducted excavations at the 16th century Spanish church that stands south of the site centre, and in the process we recovered ceramics and other evidence of Maya occupation of the church following its desecration in 1640. One of the lots of pottery appeared, at the time of excavation, to be little more than a pile of sherds from several vessels, and so it was bagged and set aside for later examination. The woodlice consumed most of the bag, and as I sorted out bits of undigested paper from amongst the sherds, I noticed that many of the pieces were from one vessel. Washing and gluing gave us the first nearly complete piece of evidence to show that the vessels in use after 1640 were no different from those of one to two centuries earlier, a very important point in our assessment of conservatism and change in very late prehistoric and early historic times.

*No Change
Vessels in
Late Post-C
Historic*

Together with the Maya ceramics were masses of material from the mid-19th century British use of the masonry chancel of the church as a smithy. My remarks about the Victorians in 1974 and 1975 closely resembled my comments on the woodlice in later years, for the effect of their use of the church was to mix scrap iron, coal, and gin bottle sherds with the earlier refuse. As a result, all European material was labelled as 19th century, but when I pulled apart the woodlice-chewed bags with such labels, I came upon some sherds that did not appear to be Victorian earthenware. As with the Maya pottery, a bit of washing and gluing gave us important new evidence, in the form of a number of fragmentary 16th-17th century Spanish jars. Here, for the first time at the site, we can see something beyond the spiritual effect of contact between the Maya and the Spaniards, and the presence of the jars will now lead us to combine completion of work on the church-period cemetery with a search for other midden deposits in the vicinity.

Some work at the church may be undertaken late this season, for the presence of a squatter settlement on the archaeological reserve appears likely to force us to concentrate at least a portion of our forces in the far southern part of the site from mid-April onwards. At the same time, though, we shall try to complete our picture of Ottawa's later history, and to learn more about residences and ceremonial construction west of the site centre. There is also work still to be done in the far north, and in the feature we call The Harbour, and as this season reaches its midpoint I grow increasingly aware of how much we have yet to learn about Lamanai, especially when chance continues to shed new light on this fascinating place. There is, in fact, much to be said in favour of continuing here until my retirement date; after all, where else could I have a lake at my front door, a seemingly inexhaustible source of new archaeological information at my back, and even the woodlice as allies?

* * * * *