

Archaeological Newsletter

Series II No. 6, January 1985

LAMANAI 1984: DIGGING IN THE DOORYARDS

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Lamanai, Belize
29 April, 1984

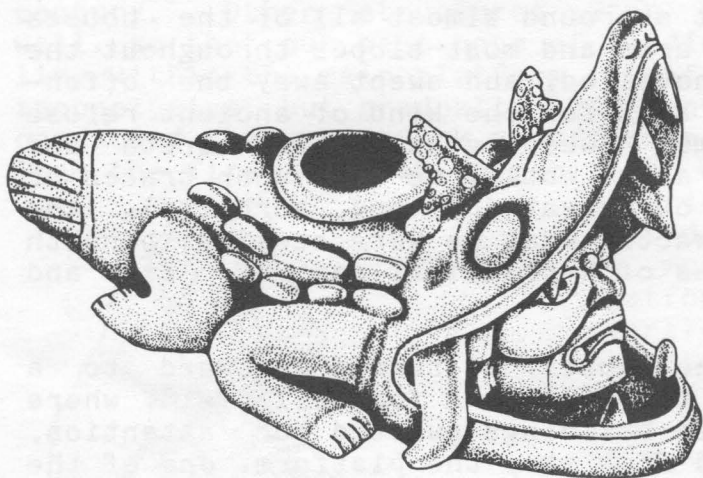


Fig. 1: Crocodile offering vessel
from Structure N11-4; length 23 cm.

chicken droppings was part of the latest occupation phase, and observation of numerous domestic creatures roaming about the houses clustered south of Lamanai's centre appeared to confirm our hypothesis. The garbage and the houses actually threatened to prevent the putting in place of one of the last major pieces of the Lamanai puzzle and indeed made us fear that we might not be able to remain at the site at all.

Those of you who have read the article on the Hunchback Tomb that appeared in the winter issue of Rotunda (Vol. 12, No. 4) will know that the usual problems that beset archaeologists in the field were

It is hard, when one is mucking through Mexican beer tins, plastic bags, old shoes, and hundreds of rum bottles, to see the material as potential grist for some future archaeologist's mill. Still, we have pondered the tale that such garbage has to tell at Lamanai, and have even wondered about developing a sequence of Early Plastic I / Cerveza Modelo / Early Plastic II / Neoplastic Running-shoe and so forth. Extensive olfactorial sensory modal regression analysis permitted us to suggest that a huge sample of pig and

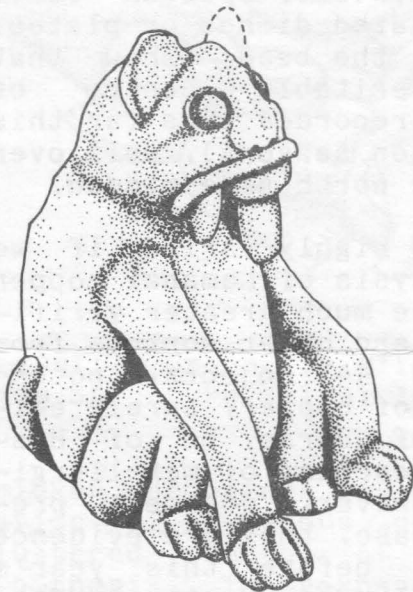
compounded in 1983 by the growing number of Guatemalans and Salvadoreans who were pouring into a squatter village at Lamanai. The squatters punctuated our days and nights with gunfire, and it seemed very likely that their presence would keep us from investigating the area north of the two 16th-century Spanish churches, where I thought we would have the best chance of recovering information on the site just before and during the time of the Spanish presence. To our good fortune, though, we arrived this year to find a peaceful settlement, about half the size of last year's, in which people were expending their energies in a desperate attempt to eke out an existence, and no one had the money to buy bullets. As a result, the area formerly closed to us now lay open, and we set about investigating what appeared to be a few structures scattered among and beneath squatters' houses.

Though at first it seemed to be the socially acceptable thing to have one's dooryard trenched, the squatters' enthusiasm soon waned as it became apparent that the work was very likely to leave a house perched on an island of soil surrounded by something that resembled a moat designed by a committee. On our part, enthusiasm ran high from a purely archaeological point of view but was very hard to maintain in the face of the modern middens that surround almost all of the houses and blanket virtually every level area and most slopes throughout the village. Nonetheless, we raked, shovelled, and swept away the offensive modern rubbish and probed the soil for the kind of ancient refuse with which we feel much more at home. Sweeping aside the excreta and 20th-century garbage as quickly as we could, we came upon traces of earlier settlement everywhere. To our great joy (and surprise), the Maya material turned out to be exactly what we were seeking; beneath the modern community lay the remains of a principal part of 16th and 17th-century Lamanai.

While work continued around the houses, we turned westward to a cleared area that was to have been the village's football field, where a large platform and several related buildings awaited our attention. As the brush was being cleared from atop the platform, one of the workers discovered a large, elaborate copper ring among the leaves. At the time it seemed very likely that the object had come from a burial near ground surface, because all of the copper artifacts from earlier years' digging were associated with burials. Digging in the area of the discovery produced no evidence of an interment, though, and the presence of the ring would have remained baffling had we not begun by then to find copper objects in the midden that lay along part of the front and one side of the platform. Bells predominated, but there were needles, fish hooks, and wood-splitting wedges as well. Work around a more northerly platform also yielded copper objects, but the southern platform truly seemed to warrant the name Copperopolis far more than does the California goldfields town that rejoices in that ungolden title. The tale of how we came to find the mother lode of copper, and how the striking finds of this year fit into the picture of Maya prehistory that has emerged from the last ten years at Lamanai, is the account of what bids fair to be the most productive and most significant of our eleven seasons here.

The copper artifacts were accompanied by projectile points, corn-grinding implements and other tools, huge quantities of pottery in forms we had not seen before, and masses of animal bone. The platform had clearly seen heavy domestic use in the 16th century and perhaps even later, so we set out to probe the structure and to investigate the small buildings that sat atop it. The first trench into one of the small structures produced an offering that is likely to be of 16th-century or later date, in the form of a weird crocodilian creature of pottery (Fig. 1). Most of the beast's features are those of the reptile that gave Lamanai its name, but a fish tail and a pair of bumpy antlers are things that have not been observed on any crocodile in the area today--nor has any shown up with a human head in its mouth. The creature closely resembles several encountered in our church-area excavations last year, but differs from them in that its hollow body held a number of objects. Removal of soil from the beast's body revealed three small jade beads and another of our surprises for the season, a bead made of gold sheet over a clay core.

Though possibly of Historic-period date, the crocodile lay in a building apparently built centuries earlier, and hence documented important ritual activity but not construction in the 16th or 17th century. Other structures atop the platform seemed to be early as well, so that our best hope of finding late construction appeared to lie within the main platform itself. Trenching here at first proved inconclusive, but gradually 16th-century sherds began to appear in the core, and then we struck an offering that is closely comparable to one from the first Spanish church that must date from about 1545. The



offering, a rather humourous-looking seated jaguar (Fig 2) seemed very likely to mark the centre of the 16th-century platform front, which could be seen to overlie the side or back of an earlier structure. Further digging revealed a second offering at the side of the earlier building, a human figure reclining on a strange disc that might have served as a vessel lid but may be complete in itself. Work on the platform is now almost done; it has shown conclusively that the 16th-century Maya of Lamanai were keeping up a scale of construction not markedly lower than that of earlier centuries, in what may have been the centre of the community just before the Spanish arrived.

Fig. 2: Jaguar offering vessel from Structure N11-3; height 9.2 cm.

While the large platform was being probed, we continued to clear brush from surrounding areas and to sweep the ground in search of other signs of construction. Just east of the platform, the clearing work revealed four vertically set stones that appeared to be part of the facing of a very small structure such as we have found elsewhere in the late structure groups. We began clearing the exterior of the "small

platform", and now, several weeks later, we have just finished the first stage of the job. What we saw at ground level was just the tiny tip of an architectural iceberg that has emerged from the soil as the highly complex structure N11-18, more than 22 metres long and boasting a form that resembles row housing (Fig. 3). Many of the building's features are unknown elsewhere at the site, though the basic construction method is that of the centuries just before the Historic period.

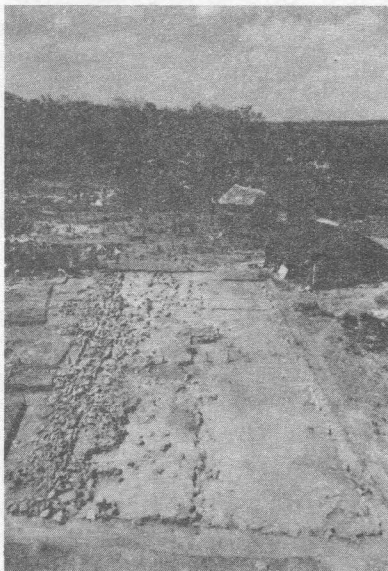


Fig. 3: Structure N11-18 seen from the south, amidst squatters' houses.

The structure may indeed have been a sort of row house arrangement, for at the north side lay a mass of domestic refuse; yet along the front, in what seem very like the small yards that one finds in Toronto's row housing, are several podiums or altars. Just before our mid-season break we finished clearing almost all of the building and recording the extensive masonry collapse, and two days from now we shall begin to remove the debris and to section the structure in search of evidence of the date of construction.

Some features of the building, especially the qualities of the plaster that remains in fragments in many areas, suggest a construction date after 1560. That suggestion is bolstered by evidence from the north-side midden, where we have recovered 21 European 16th or 17th-century glass beads of many different forms and colours. Together with a half-dozen fragments of Spanish olive jars, blue-decorated glazed dishes or plates, and green-glazed bowls, the beads show that N11-18 was the veritable centre of

Copperopolis. Of the 44 copper objects we have recorded thus far this year (seven more than in all the preceding ten seasons), well over half are from the surface of N11-18 and from the north-side midden.

The copper collection is now very large and highly varied; if we can find a way to add the objects to the analysis of Lamanai copper that has already been carried out, we should have much greater verification of the identities of the several Mexican and other sources from which objects were traded to Lamanai. Among the 44 objects, potentially the most significant are two small pigs of copper, surely evidence of on-site copperworking. The pigs may, of course, be of Historic date, and therefore a product of Spanish teaching of metallurgical techniques to the Maya. They might, however, document pre-Hispanic metalworking by the Maya. In either case, they are evidence of a technological process that was not known, before this year's discoveries, to have existed in the Maya area. It seems entirely fitting that the last stage of the project has been successful in locating the last phase of Lamanai's occupation and has continued the tradition of major additions to our knowledge of the ancient Maya in each year of digging. Exploration of the final chapter in the site's 3200-year life will come to a close when our twelfth season ends in June of 1985.