Chapter 16

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The Southern Maya Lowlands Contact Experience:
The View from Lamanai, Belize

Introduction

The extraction of historical perspective from the earth once trodden by the ancient Maya has in many respects proved as difficult a task as the reconstruction of Maya life in the Precontact period. Nevertheless, excavations carried out in the southern lowlands in recent years have provided at least a moderate degree of insight into the impact of the Spanish arrival on Maya material and social culture. The archaeological evidence available at present is frequently unclear and often conflicting from site to site, as of course it is for the pre-Spanish period as well. Unhappily, this situation is compounded by the effects of frontier conditions in the Dzulquinicob Province (Jones 1989), which exacerbated the thinness of the documentary record that characterizes much of the Maya area. As a result, congruence between archaeological and ethnohistorical data, the great hope that fuels the excavator's approach to remains from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is the exception rather than the rule. The nature of many of the problems that confront both archaeologist and ethnohistorian in attempting to de-
velop an understanding of the Spanish period in the southern lowlands is set forth in Graham et al. (1989).

Although archaeological investigation of Spanish period sites in the southern lowlands is still in its comparative infancy, the work at Tipu (Graham, this volume) and Lamanai (Pendergast 1984a, 1986b) has begun to provide us with a sense of what shape the record is likely to take when it is augmented by the identification and investigation of additional historic towns. The messages conveyed by the data acquired thus far suggest, however, that far too many facets of the record will remain amorphous no matter how many Contact period communities we succeed in examining. As a result, Columbian consequences for the southern lowlands will almost certainly continue to find their fullest expression in the documents. Nonetheless, the many questions and the small number of answers that emerge from the Lamanai data give us a picture of the early Contact period more fully illuminated than it would be if the light were cast by the written record alone.

**Lamanai at the Time of Spanish Arrival**

Founded by or before 1500 B.C., the northern Belize site of Lamanai (Figure 16-1) survived the decline that afflicted most southern lowlands sites in the ninth century and came through the collapse with most of its political and religious structure intact and its population probably diminished little, if at all (Pendergast 1986a). Throughout the Postclassic, the community continued to flourish despite the decay and abandonment of most neighboring sites and the similar fate that befall Lamanai's ancient central precinct. By the early sixteenth century, settlement was concentrated in the southern third of the site with what was apparently a small satellite community near the northern limit of the ancient site.

Although our investigation of the terminal Postclassic and early Historic community at Lamanai was as thorough as anything short of complete dissection of the southern third of the site would permit, it remains impossible to provide a secure population estimate for the sixteenth century. It is beyond question that the peak figures of the seventh through the fourteenth century were not sustained through the Terminal Postclassic period, but the extent of population dispersion from the ancient center is impossible to determine. The principal difficulty in this respect, the impermanent nature of much of the late architecture, obtains in the Historic period as well. The slim documentary evidence suggests a community of about 72 souls in 1637 (Jones 1989:117, 310), but the date is too late to relate to the archaeological picture or to indicate the size of the precontact Lamanai polity.

Despite the community's dwindling size, its fortunes appear not to have waned appreciably in the last years before Spanish arrival. Importation from both Maya and non-Maya suppliers continued to be of importance to the end of the Prehistoric period, and local technological change was equally significant inmaintaining, and possibly even expanding Lamanai's terminal Postclassic economy. Chief among the late innovations were the emergence of a new ce-
ramic tradition, the Yglesiias phase (Graham 1987:91–95), and the development of metalworking technology focused on the casting of large celts using material produced by melting down earlier artifacts. Data available at present do not document distribution of either metal objects or Yglesiias pottery from Lamanai to centers farther north or to communities within Belize, but the potential for economically productive exchange clearly lay in both of these classes of material.

Although one of the better measures of Lamanai’s Terminal Postclassic importance may be the Spaniards’ view of the community in succeeding years (Pendergest 1966b:4–5, 1988), the latest noble burial at the site provides unequivocal evidence that wealth and power remained aggregated in the shrunken sixteenth-century surroundings. Although the tomb lacked the sheet gold objects of a twelfth-century interment of similar scale (Pendergest 1981:44), it contained metals, ceramics, and other goods in sufficient quantity to bespeak noble status in unmistakable form (Pendergest 1984b). With a date very probably later than A.D. 1525, the burial is quite likely to be that of the last pre-Hispanic ruler of Lamanai. Like the polity he ruled, he may have been trading a bit on the dimming glories of times long past, but his and the community’s strength and status clearly rested on a foundation of continuing vitality and productivity.

The Effects of Spanish Arrival

The establishment in 1544 of an encomienda that may have encompassed Lamanai (Jones 1989:41–43, 301, 306) was probably followed quite quickly by Spanish contact with the community’s inhabitants. Although the first European entrants to what is now Belize encountered numerous hardships, the dynamics of explorer–native contact appear not to have developed as they did in the American southeast and elsewhere. Partly as a consequence of this and perhaps partly as a reflection of the economic realities of the Yucatan Peninsula, neither the encomenderos and their minions nor the clerics, most probably seculars, appear to have found it necessary or desirable to dispense European goods in quantity. The need to establish relations with the Maya, to provide recompense to guides and porters, and to purchase other services seems to have been met in some manner that did not leave recognizable material traces.

One would hardly expect to encounter St. Augustine’s profusion of European material (Deagan 1983:Tables 5.1–5.3) in the Maya towns and villages of a remote encomienda, but a kind of parity with peninsular Florida (Mitchem 1990), if anything a less economically attractive area than the Maya lowlands, might be expected. In fact, however, even the items that are plentiful in the American southeast generally range from rare to unknown in the extant archaeological record for the southern Maya lowlands. A principal difficulty in assessing the reasons for the comparative dearth of European goods is the fact that we have no information regarding the specific motivations behind the gifts of such material to Maya individuals. Furthermore, we have no means whatsoever of identifying the givers. The records for other times and places suggest that it would be almost equally easy to attribute the presence of most European goods either to political and economic maneuvering or to attempts at Christian persuasion. There are, however, some classes of artifacts for which both motive and—within limits—use can at least be postulated. Together with architectural, burial, and community planning data, such artifacts create a sense, albeit restricted and structured, of the consequences of Spanish presence for Maya economic, political, and spiritual life.

The Establishment of the Church

Erection of the first permanent religious edifice at Lamanai (Figure 16–2) followed the practice widely in use elsewhere in the Americas of superposing the Christian building on a native ceremonial structure. Superposition had the eminently practical aim of perpetuating precontact patterns of activity while supplanting one form of religious practice with another. At Lamanai, this entailed demolition of most of a small, fresco-decorated temple of probable fifteenth-century date and the raising of an earth platform around and over the remains as support for a structure that was partly of masonry and partly of perishable construction. In plan and probably in general appearance the structure closely paralleled the Tipu church, which appears to have been built some 20 to 25 years later (Graham et al. 1989:1256).

The ability of the Spanish to establish Christianity in substantial physical form quite early at Lamanai suggests that the new religion quickly made major inroads on precontact patterns of life at the site. It is probable, however, that the inroads were in truth limited by the fact that a single cleric, operating in the visita (circuit-riding) system made necessary by understaffing and the great distances between Christianized communities, brought Catholicism to Lamanai and initiated the construction of the church. As was probably to be expected in a frontier area, the building was a blend of Christian structural requirements and local construction techniques rather than the syncretic combination of Spanish and native techniques commonly found in the northern part of the peninsula (Benavides and Andrews 1979) and elsewhere in New Spain (Saunders 1990).

Far less grand than the temple it supplanted, the church surely had few exterior features other than its dimensions to distinguish it from precontact residences. Similarities with other early Historic period churches suggest that the form was a relatively standard peninsular accommodation between Christian precept and lowlands necessity. Variations in both exterior and interior features such as those that distinguish the Lamanai church from its Tipu counterpart were probably the products of differing abilities of friars as interpreters of the standard plan. In addition, the builders at Lamanai were confronted by bedrock outcrops that dictated unusual architectural solutions, just as they had done in precontact times. The constraints on the friar’s time imposed by the visita system may have meant that the construction itself was overseen by a native manager, whose skills and experience added another element to the syncretic mix. Later events in the church zone obscured the history of the area north of the first church. It appears probable, however, that a precontact structure north of the church was converted to use as either a convento (religious residence) or a
rather than a product of other concerns or even of limitations imposed by time, funds, and the cleric’s skills.

As was true everywhere in the Maya area, syncretism was as much the mode in religious belief and practice as in church construction at Lamanai. At the start, it was given its finest physical expression in a small event that occurred during demolition in preparation for the construction of the church platform. Though nominally a Christian, one of the workers must have felt it necessary to copper his betas by appeasing the old gods for the destruction of their temple. Seizing a moment when no unwavering Christian could stay his hand, he opened a small hole at the ruined temple front and deposited a small bat effigy vessel (Figure 16–3b). This done, he presumably found it possible to immerse himself in Christianity while knowing that the safety net of ancient belief was stretched securely beneath him. In this drawing of the best from both worlds, most or all of Lamanai’s inhabitants appear to have followed suit from the beginning to the end of Spanish hegemony and beyond.

Spanish Impact on Community Planning

The limitations imposed by isolation appear to have combined with Lamanai’s distinctive precontact plan, the product of a lakeside setting, to prevent redevelopment of the community center along Spanish lines. In contrast with Tipu, where a fairly standard Spanish plaza was created out of the heart of the

Figure 16–2. The platform of the earlier church at Lamanai, in the foreground, with the chancel of the later church in the background.

bodega (warehouse). The first type of structure would have been a standard element in the ideal Spanish plan, but might have seen little use in a visita system. The second would also have been an expectable presence in a church complex and would presumably have been needed no matter how episodic a cleric’s presence might have been. The presence of a moderate quantity of olive jar sherds at the rear of the structure suggests the warehouse identification, but scarcely makes such an identification irrefutable.

It would be reasonable to take the small size of the church, with a nave approximately 6 meters wide by 9 meters long, as evidence of a small number of parishioners. It is not certain, however, whether the building was designed to house all worshippers during Mass or intended as shelter only for a specific portion of the faithful. In the absence of documentary evidence for the period, we cannot be sure that the church is an architectural reflection of community size

Figure 16–3. Maya ceramic figurines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: a and c are precontact, b was interred during construction of the first church, and d is of a class that both antedates and postdates the Spanish presence. (Drawings by Louise Belanger)
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Although the visits system should have involved native population movement to provide a means of spreading introduced diseases, the susceptibility of the La Florida population to this disease range seems impossible to gauge at present. This is because the history of disease development and use at La Florida is untested, and the study of archaeological evidence is limited. As a result, we cannot now compare the disease patterns at La Florida with the data available for the Spanish period.

Consequence for Native Health and Diet

Although the data on La Florida suggests that the health consequences of the Spanish presence were probably severe, the specific reasons for the decrease of La Florida's population are not certain. It remains, however, a possibility that the disease introduced by the Spanish played a significant role in the decline of the La Florida population. However, this hypothesis is not supported by the evidence from nearby Mopa sites, where the disease may have played a lesser role.

Later Church Construction and Its Significance

The first church probably served the needs of La Florida and the succeeding centers in the area until almost the end of the sixteenth century. In the preceding centuries, the Spanish presence in the area was minimal and the impact of their influence was limited. The church construction continued until the end of the sixteenth century, when the Spanish influence began to wane.
2), placed just north of its unpretentious predecessor (Figure 16–2). It is not possible to determine whether the church was built in contemplation of a greatly increased body of parishioners or was a solution to problems already in existence, but the change in Lamanai’s fortunes is nonetheless unmistakable.

The second church boasted a masonry chancel to which a pole and thatch nave was attached. In overall plan and in some details, the structure resembled the church at Ecat, built 25 to 50 years earlier, as well as others in the northern part of the peninsula (Benavides and Andrews 1979:16, Figures 18, 19). The resemblances suggest that, like its predecessor, the second church was one of many variations on a standard peninsular blend of Christian and local requirements. Unlike the first church, however, the later building exhibits wholly European characteristics in the surviving masonry portion. Fully cemented wall core, facings of undressed spalls and cobbles capped with the heavy plaster characteristic of Spanish period construction, and massive quoins at the chancel entrance all bespeak the tradition of the European rather than the Maya. Although it is conceivable that, as before, the work was supervised by a native, it is far more likely that Maya hands were given direction by a Spaniard. This in itself suggests a view of Lamanai’s future in which Spanish influence might come to be more strongly felt than it had been over the first half-century of contact.

Whatever the hopes for Lamanai may have been, they began to wane early in the seventeenth century and by 1638 had come entirely to pieces as the community joined a widespread revolt. In 1641, Franciscan Father Fuensalida and Orbía found the church and other buildings burned and abandoned (López de Cogolludo 1711:bk. 11, chap. 13; Jones 1989:214–224). The uprising signaled the end of Spanish influence at Lamanai, as it did throughout most of Belize until 1695 (Jones 1989:189–211).

The Aftermath of Apostasy

The disappearance of the Spaniards and of native sacristans who had frequently been the only representatives of Spain on the southern lowlands visita circuit (Cáderas Valencia 1639) might be expected to have meant the death of Maya Christianity as well. Left behind as the Spaniards and their lieutenants withdrew were only local Mayas trained to carry on Catholic rituals and catechization (Peñalosa 1969:70), scarcely a real force for the preservation of Christian practice and belief in the face of apostasy. The archaeological evidence suggests, nonetheless, that elements of Christianity survived the uprising. The blend of Christian and ancient belief remained as it had always been, with the difference that syncretism was now overt and Maya practice, if not belief, was at the fore.

We were at first inclined to see evidence of post-rebellion Maya activity in the nave of the second church as a manifestation of apostasy. Erection of a stela, complete with the required substela cache, near the chancel entrance seemed to be evidence of the resurgence of precontact belief and a forceful statement of the rejection of Spanish Christian values. A small plastered altar near the stela and several offerings interred near the chancel front could also be taken to represent the reestablishment of ancient ways. This is especially true of the offerings be-

cause among other material they included pottery figurines (Figure 16–3) that represent a revival, or more probably a reemergence, of precontact material culture. Reconsideration of the evidence in the light of data from Tipu (Graham et al. 1989:1257) suggests, however, that the choice of location for the stela, altar, and offerings rested not on an attempt to repudiate Christianity, but rather on a continuing reverence for the church as sanctified ground. Although the chancel ultimately came to serve as a residence for a native family, it is clear that the lessons taught by Spanish clerics and their native assistants did not fall on deaf ears and continued to bear fruit long after the Europeans had departed.

The Spanish Impact on Native Material Culture

As I noted above, the quantity of European goods at Lamanai is small. It is, in addition, highly structured both in content and in context. In all of these respects, the picture at Lamanai parallels that at Tipu, although the inventories from the two sites exhibit a number of significant differences. Apart from the uncertainty regarding the motivation behind the importation of most goods, the slimmest of the Lamanai sample of European material raises questions as to the overall material importance of Spanish hegemony in the southern lowlands. As we shall see, however, certain items in the inventory may give us insights into the nonmaterial Spanish impact, even if their distributions within the site do not.

Olive Jars and Other Ceramics. With the exception of fragments found in contexts disturbed by nineteenth-century British activity, the entire sample of olive jar sherds comes from the church zone and from lakeside refuse dumps immediately to its south. A considerable portion of the olive jar sherd sample lay scattered in other refuse over the surface of the community’s second cemetery, situated between the rear of the second church and the lake. None of this distribution can be fixed in time within the century of Spanish influence, and the fact that most of the material consists of sherds without joins indicates that the material is redeposited. Redeposition or extensive disturbance is also indicated by the condition of material associated with the putative warehouse. In only one case, from the cemetery-area refuse, can a large part of a jar body be reconstructed. The distribution and condition of the material is probably best interpreted as evidence of the long-term reuse of a small number of jars. As a result, specific context is not necessarily a basis for interpreting building or area use, although it is surely significant that the olive jar sherds are concentrated in the church zone.

In comparison with many other parts of New Spain, Lamanai seems almost to have done without the products that are thought to have been contained in olive jars. The entire sample, which consists of 487 sherds, could represent no more than 40 to 60 jars, a seemingly minuscule number when spread over the full period of Lamanai’s Contact period history. One possible interpretation of the small quantity is that it represents solely the importation of oil and wine for sacramental use, with an average of less than one jar of each every 2 years for the 80 years between 1544 and 1624. The amount of guesswork in such a
calculation is readily apparent and makes clear the opportunities for any number of entirely different interpretations. In any event, the distribution of the sample argues for church-related use, and probably limits the range of possibilities as regards contents. The sample size shows that the jars and their contents were never among the major imports to the community. The fragmentary condition of the material suggests that extensive reuse, apparently never for domestic purposes to which the jars would have been well suited, followed the arrival of the jars at Lamanai.

If the olive jar sample is minuscule, the amount of other European ceramics recovered is almost microscopic. Columbia Plain small plates and shallow bowls are represented by just 47 sherds that are almost entirely from the cemetery refuse scatter, with a few from residential areas north of the church zone. A single green-glazed bowl base comes from near what appears to have been the principal Contact period residence (Pendergast 1985), Structure N11–18 (Figure 16–4), and floor surfaces of the building yielded two small sherds of Sevilla Blue on blue Majolica plus one of Sevilla Blue on white. The only other European ceramics consist of 11 sherds of what appears to be black-decorated Columbia Plain and four Sevilla Blue on blue fragments that came from a structure some distance north of the second church that may have been an important Contact period residence, but was too extensively disturbed during nineteenth-century British occupation to permit certainty regarding its history. Most structures that appear likely to have been built or used between 1544 and 1638 yielded no Spanish earthenware whatsoever.

As is true of other classes of European material, sampling error may have skewed the frequency of Spanish tablewares at Lamanai slightly, but there can be no question that such imports were of economic significance to the community. Even more strongly than in the case of the olive jars, the significance and use of the European pottery remain in question because the amount is so small. One logical conclusion is that Spanish wares were used only by Spaniards, who probably carried their mess kits from town to town and left behind only pieces broken by their user or a careless (and probably hapless) servant. It is equally possible that Spanish tableware was presented to community leaders as a mark of distinction, a kind of tabletop badge of office. If the first explanation is added, one has to envision Maya retention of fragments because of their association; if the second is chosen, one is forced to conclude that the Spaniards were extremely stingy.

Middens associated with N11–18 and with other structures quite likely to have been occupied during the Contact period make it clear that pre-Hispanic Yglicas ceramics continued in use throughout the time of Spanish presence. It would therefore have been very likely that any Spaniards resident at Lamanai for protracted periods would have found both necessary and desirable to adopt locally made pottery for household use, as was the practice in St. Augustine (Deagan 1990:309). It follows that the tiny quantity of Spanish ceramics cannot be used as evidence that all Spanish presence at Lamanai was transient any more than it can document the period in which importation took place.

Beads. Almost 90 percent of the sample of European glass beads comes from the midden associated with Structure N11–18 and from floor ballast surfaces within the structure. The fact that approximately 82 percent of the 46 specimens are Nueva Cadiz Plain and twisted suggests importation quite early in Lamanai's Contact period history. Both the date and the distribution of the beads open the door to several assessments of the significance of the material, no one of which can be given primacy over the rest. In this case, as opposed to other classes of European material, sampling error is moderately likely to have structured interpretation, and although the source of the error can be identified, no resolution of the problem is currently possible.

Dating appears to offer clearer evidence than does distribution, but even here there are two alternatives. If the dates commonly ascribed to the Nueva Cadiz type apply throughout the Yucatan Peninsula, it would be possible to conclude that all of the beads reached Lamanai as a single lot within the first decade of Spanish presence. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether a stock of the beads was maintained in Merida or in Salamanca de Bacalar, the villa that was the control center for the encomienda of which Lamanai was a part (Graham et al. 1989:1255, Figure 1). Such a stock might have been paid out over a considerable period in return for favors, to validate the status of local authorities, or for countless other reasons. The beads would, of course, have had the same range of uses, although greater impact, had they been brought to Lamanai in a single lot.
The questions that surround the history of bead importation and use are difficult to resolve, either by dating or by distribution. Although the beads come from a limited context, there is nothing in their association to indicate that they were originally one lot rather than individual specimens brought to Lamanai throughout at least the first half of the Contact period. Furthermore, their scattered distribution over floor ballast and particularly their presence in middens seems to belie the importance they presumably would have had on arrival at the site. It may be that a particularly striking kind of conspicuous consumption was the agency behind midden deposition, but this is hardly the stuff of which a real explanation of the beads’ significance can be constructed. Therefore, although N11–18 was clearly the principal residence of the Contact period, it does not necessarily follow that the beads served to signify the rank or status of the structure’s occupants. As we shall soon see, however, the conglomeration of European goods on and around N11–18 surely does tell us something about the importance of the building’s residents in sixteenth-century Lamanai.

The matter of sampling error is worth noting because of the sharp distinction between Lamanai and Tipu as regards bead quantity and distribution. Beads are unknown in midden and other residential contexts at Tipu and are most common as necklaces that adorn burials of children (Graham and Bennett 1989:116). The use of beads as burial accompaniments is not in evidence at Lamanai, but because burials in the earlier church are uniformly adults it is clear that beads may be seriously underrepresented in the current sample. The apparent presence of a children’s cemetery within a larger burying ground in the Apalachee (Jones and Shapiro 1990:502) suggests the possibility of a similar feature in the yet-unexcavated second cemetery at Lamanai, and it is our hope that exploration of the possibility will ultimately resolve the question of whether the difference between Lamanai and Tipu is apparent or real.

**Metal Implements and Other Objects.** Apart from nails, which are widely distributed in the Spanish period community but pose special problems because of the nineteenth-century British use of the area, all identifiable sixteenth- or seventeenth-century European metalwares come from either the church zone or Structure N11–18. The first context produced only two lockplates, and the second yielded implements in a quantity far from sufficient to have had any economic impact at Lamanai, as well as a small number of nonutilitarian objects. In this category, as in all others, one must conclude that importation had nothing to do with an attempt to impose European technology on the Maya, but rather was intended either to serve the Spaniards themselves or to repay native effort and provide material recognition of rank or status.

The implements, all recovered from floor ballast surfaces and exterior (probably paved) areas of N11–18, comprise one or possibly two knives, what may be a wedge, several pieces of strapwork (including one pierced by several nails), and a single axhead. Taken together, they constitute less than one would expect in a household minimally equipped with European goods in many other areas of New Spain. Perhaps more than any other category of Spanish imports, the tools seem to give voice to the Europeans’ guiding principle, which was that they gave in proportion to what they got—and in this region, one would judge, they got very little.

It is the lockplates and two objects from a floor ballast surface in N11–18 that broaden our picture of Spanish presence in some measure. Although the lockplate from the core of the platform that supported the first church has not yet been satisfactorily identified, it probably represents either a chest or some other European container. The other plate, from a stone alignment behind the second church, is of a more elaborate sort that would have adorned a chest of high quality. Though small for the purpose, the lock might have been part of a *varguera,* the distinctive multicompartmented chest-on-stand. In either case, the complete container might have been something transported from community to community, but it is far more likely that the objects were meant to remain at Lamanai, perhaps to hold the items necessary for the Mass and other sacraments. Although their number is small, the lockplates suggest a fairly substantial evocation of Spanish hegemony, and perhaps of Catholicism, through furnishings.

The final items, though tiny, convey a message at least as important as that of the coffers. The two objects are single gilt leaves of two book hinges. They resemble in general the hinges on volumes illustrated by Penney (1967:Plates I, V, VIII) that range in date from 1401 to 1600. The illustrations suggest that surface mounting of hinges persisted until about 1600, after which concealment of hinges within the binding was characteristic. The elaborate decoration of the Lamanai specimens suggests surface mounting, and hence may indicate that one or more books reached Lamanai and remained there prior to 1600. Of course, two hinge leaves do not necessarily make a book, but they are reasonable presumptive evidence for retention of a handsomely bound tome at Lamanai, something rather unexpected in view of the paucity of other European goods and the obviously high value of such a volume. It is intriguing to think that the book might have been kept secure by a native sacristan or held by the community’s leader as proof of his links with the European world, but one wonders whether the work’s contents can have had any great importance other than as a near-mystical expression of distant authority.

**Conclusions**

Sixteenth-century Maya response to Spanish entry into the southern lowlands probably found expression in ways as varied as the histories of precontact communities. The strategies and techniques that permitted the endurance of some functioning centers up to the arrival of the Spanish made the Maya vulnerable and at the same time resistant to the physical and spiritual incursions that followed. One the one hand, the Maya saw the Spaniards as cruel, obdurate oppressors, and they responded with a variety of resistance techniques that ultimately culminated in successful rebellion. On the other hand, they saw in the Spanish religion a different but partly parallel view of the world and the cosmos.
that they could adopt and adapt to conform to their own value system. It is, or has been, the archaeologist’s expectation that the drama of conflict and accommodation set forth in the ethnohistorical record would find reflection in evidence from the earth. The truth is, of course, that the reflection is there, but often so unclear that we cannot discern it.

The evidence now in hand suggests that Lamanai may in many respects be as flawed a mirror of Contact period events as any other single Spanish-controlled community would be. Although Lamanai and Tipu are but a tiny sample of the whole, the numerous contrasts between the two prime us to expect that the lessons learned in one excavation will not necessarily emerge from another. Yet Lamanai does tell us some fundamental things about the impact of the Spanish arrival on the Maya. It also informs us that a place of considerable importance in an area neither easily dominated nor readily productive may yield precious little evidence of its importance. Were it not for the second church, we would in fact probably feel safe in concluding that Lamanai lay at the far end of nowhere in Spanish thinking from beginning to end.

Although the European material record at Lamanai is, to put it kindly, quite thin, it is that very thinness which, as we have seen, permits some hesitant judgments regarding Spanish, if not native, uses for imported goods. The evidence makes it appear that the Spaniards never made a serious attempt to bring the wonders of European material culture to the southern lowlands. As people living beyond the pale, the Maya of Belize and their neighbors may have seemed worth changing only in the spiritual realm; the material investment for this purpose was not great, but even here the Spaniards stinted wherever possible. Otherwise they distributed their very limited largesse only where and when it was likely to bring good return on the money. The result was that they gave very little to the Maya overall, and nothing that supplanted traditional native technology. Where glass beads are found, there also are clay beads in equal or greater numbers. The bits of European crockery lie amidst masses of Maya ceramics, and the seemingly useful olive jars never made it to Maya households well supplied with locally made counterparts. The single axe is figuratively flanked by its stone cousins, and one can imagine a Spaniard learning to shave with an obsidian blade rather than suffering the dullness of his culture’s solution to that ever-present problem. In these and in other respects that surely included eating habits as well as preferences, the Spaniard became part Maya just as the Maya became part Spaniard.

Every aspect of Maya–Spanish relations that is reflected in the archaeological record bespeaks mutual adaption between two competing value systems, probably with more change on the Spaniards’ part than they realized or would have been willing to admit. The greatest irony is that when the Spaniards found the people of Lamanai risen in rebellion and the community abandoned in 1641, they concluded that they had lost. The truth is that they had lost on the secular field but not on the spiritual. The events that followed the burning of the church show that although the Spaniards had clearly failed to Hispanicize the Maya they had succeeded, probably more fully than they realized, in Christianizing them.

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Chapter 17

Anthony P. Andrews

The Rural Chapels and Churches of Early Colonial Yucatán and Belize: An Archaeological Perspective

The chapels and churches of early colonial Yucatán and Belize (Figure 17-1) represent some of the most important historical remains on this peninsula. Designed and administered by Spanish friars, and built and used by the Maya, they lie at the core of the initial process of acculturation that resulted in the Spanish domination of the culture and daily life of the newly conquered natives. These structures, often built with stone from Maya pyramids, became the new focus of the cultural and social life of native communities. They were the seat of indoctrination, in which the Maya were taught to shed their old ways and adopt the new, to give up their gods for the Catholic Cross, to learn a new language and the ways of a foreign culture. The chapels and churches were also the social hub of the communities, the locale for baptisms, weddings, fiestas, civic gatherings, and funerals. And, to complete the life cycle, the members of the community were often buried underneath these structures.

To the historian and archaeologist, these structures represent an important setting for the study of early colonial life, and of the process of acculturation.