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LAMANAI 1981: A REGULAR THREE-RING CIRCUS
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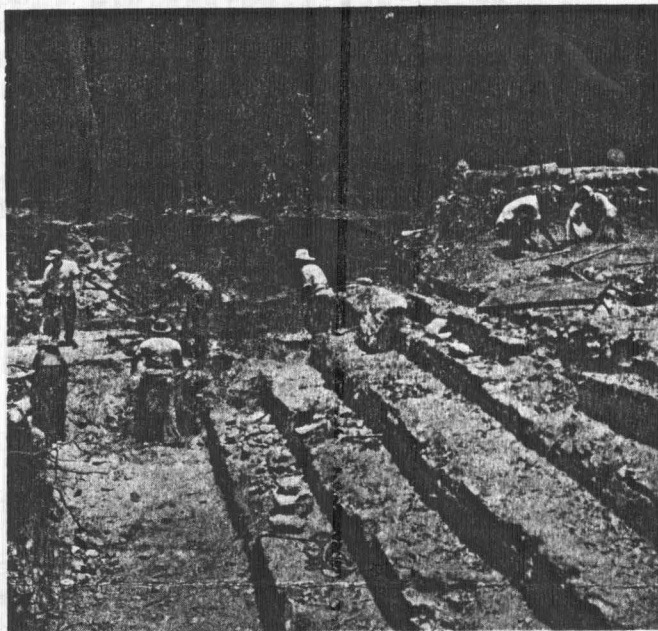


Fig. 1. Excavation in progress at the east end of "Ottawa"; the men are removing Boulders core from the face of Snow.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, only a dime, the tenth part of a dollar...and now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, if you'll direct your attention to the centre ring, you will see marvels beyond your wildest dreams... ." Those time-honoured sounds of circus life are not exactly what we hear at Lamanai this year, but in the first half of our eighth season here the atmosphere is often very much like that of The Greatest Show On Earth. The source of the multi-ring spectacle is partly the distances between excavations this year, which are greater than ever before and about to grow even greater, but the principal element in the circus scene is the product of those excavations. As in 1980 we are managing to span a great many centuries, but this time the hurling of a stone from the earliest to the latest part of the dig would

require an extremely powerful catapult.

The main aims of the season are two: to explore the northern suburbs of Lamanai in order to see when the fringes of the site were in use, and to search wherever possible for further evidence of Post-Classic (10th-16th century) occupation. It is the work in the north that has separated our excavations by such great distances; including work now in progress southwest of the camp, some of the excavations are more than 2km apart. This means that I sometimes

make several trips a day along seemingly endless trails, and it also means that I view with dismay the prospect of extending work another 450 metres northward in May. It was enough in years past to move from one building to another nearby to check on progress; now I find myself trekking from a burial in one place to an offering in another, and setting new records for the two-kilometre dash as I do.

Ring Number Three is currently occupied by several widely scattered operations, chief among them an investigation that has nothing to do with ancient Lamanai, but is part of the history of the area nonetheless. Because we have an additional architect, Brian Marriott of Ottawa, here for part of the season, we have undertaken enough trenching to permit recording of the mid-19th century Indian Church sugar mill, an ill-fated effort of the British Honduras Company Limited. The settlement was once touted as a likely future industrial centre, yet today the mill's great flywheel is held fast in the clutches of a giant strangler fig, and its outbuildings lie concealed beneath the humus. Somehow this recent ruin seems to affect visitors more than do the ancient Maya buildings, perhaps because it is evidence of dreams gone a-glimmering in our own culture. A complete study of the mill would be a fascinating task, especially as the indomitable Brits seem to have had as great a penchant for brickwork as the Maya did for cut limestone, but our present effort will, sadly, have to stop at architectural recording, as the ancient site is the main focus of our attention.

Ring Number Two is presently the scene of our greatest effort, and the occasional shifting of the main spotlight to events here makes one suspect that the work will soon move to the centre ring. The ring is located immediately behind our camp, in what has always seemed to be a gigantic platform made of boulders, and a most unattractive prospect for excavation. Because the camp area, at the south end of the site centre, has produced the bulk of the Post-Classic remains, I thought it might be worth checking a few small lumps atop the platform this year to see if they were of late date. The checking began in what appeared to be a bit of typical Post-Classic masonry, but of course the appearance was deceptive; what we came upon almost at once was one wall of what has turned out to be part of the best-preserved complex of residential buildings we have encountered.

The multi-room residence lies at the west side of the platform, and it appeared at first to be part of all the boulder mass at which we have been staring over the years. Now we know that the western structure sits atop a platform with a vertical rear face almost four metres high, which was covered by a huge construction effort of which the boulders are a part. The boulder core was not only laid up against the rear of the structure, it was used to fill an entire large courtyard extending eastward to just behind the camp. At the east side of the courtyard stands another complex of structures, their facades excellently preserved beneath the mantle of boulders. For reasons I cannot bring myself to go into, the whole assemblage of buildings is known as Ottawa, and some of the components of the eastern group bear the names Snow and Sleet. Sleet, the earliest structure thusfar exposed, stands with its walls almost intact to their full two-metre height; with its roof ripped away, it was capped by Snow, a terraced platform with large stairs, the platform top lying above the wall tops of Sleet. Then came the huge courtyard-filling operation, to which we have given the name Boulders, and atop this was built the final structure, a little platform denominated Slux, using the Mayan "sh" sound for the x. Around both Slux and its western counterpart,

Ottawa

were boulders covering west platform?

What rear?

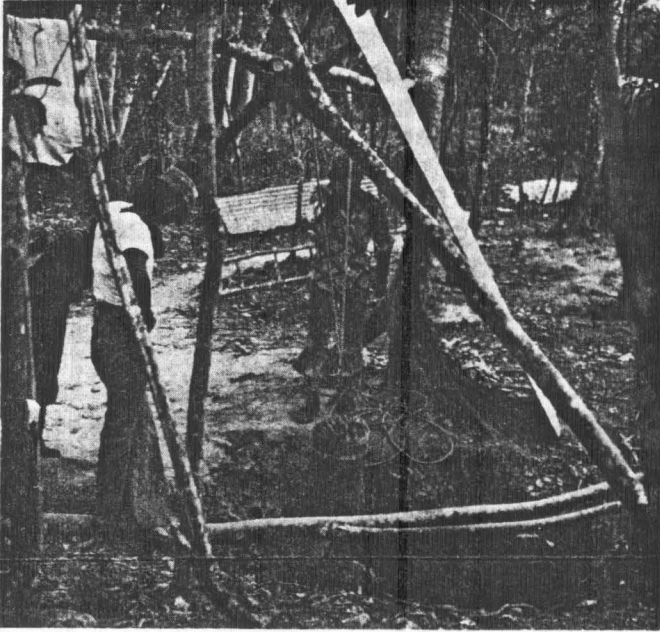


Fig. 2. Lifting soil out through the collapsed roof of the middle chamber of the chultun.

the north end of Snow; from the debris atop its platform have come many large fragments of stucco decoration painted in red, orange, pink, yellow, black and bright blue. The stuccowork resembles that on a building of 9th century date at Altun Ha, and may eventually help to fix the date of some of the eastern units in Ottawa. At the moment, and until the men leave for their mid-season break next week, we are tearing away at Boulders in order to gain some idea of where we should turn in the remaining portion of this season.

For now the far north holds the spotlight in Ring Number One, and it is in fact a small platform group called The Circus (the mappers did it; I have no idea why) that has been producing the most spectacular results of the season thusfar. None of the three buildings atop the low platform looks to be more than a pile of unshaped stones, and to a great degree appearances here are not deceptive. At the east lies a building only half a metre high, boasting nothing more than one bit of cut-stone facing, yet from it have come a number of offerings and burials, the former including vessels of the 7th century A.D., a time represented in only one other northern structure. Across from this stands a building hardly more imposing in height and equally impoverished in architectural features, and it, too, has yielded burials and offerings in surprisingly large numbers. Among the eighteen burials are many with pottery vessels, all of the 9th and 10th centuries. Included among the vessels are many forms we have not seen in previous years' work and some that are entirely new to Maya archaeology. The outstanding piece is a decorated blackware cylinder just 9cm in diameter but over 38cm high, probably the height champion among vessels of this shape. The two buildings have given us evidence of use of part of the northern district of the site over three centuries or more, and are also a striking demonstration of how much there is to learn after seven full seasons of work.

The main attraction in the centre ring is not a building but a

Mux, lay refuse of terminal Classic and Post-Classic date, showing that the buildings were in use from the 10th to perhaps the 16th century A.D.

The range of architectural information recoverable from Ottawa is obviously tremendous, but our main concern at present is the age of the construction. In the caution born of seeing early judgements reversed by the acquisition of more evidence, I am loath to state flatly that Boulders was built in its entirety in middle Post-Classic times or later, but data we now have in hand suggest that this is the case. Earlier buildings such as Snow and Sleet could themselves be Post-Classic, although the greater likelihood is that they are of earlier date. Just two days ago we discovered yet another building buried beneath Boulders, abutting

hole in the ground, a chultun or series of underground chambers excavated in limestone by the Maya for purposes that remain the subject of debate. In this case there are three chambers, and it was collapse of the roof of the middle room that betrayed the feature's presence. While none of the chambers has yielded evidence on its original use, all contained masses of refuse, the archaeologist's chief delight. The chultun refuse is especially delightful because it is primarily of late Pre-Classic date, perhaps 100 B.C. to about A.D. 100, while just below the entrance tube were parts of two beautiful polychrome bowls of about A.D. 250, obviously the last discards thrown into the chambers. We now have more than thirty drawable vessels from the chultun, some of them nearly whole; one, a spouted jar of very unusual colour, was found intact atop the surface of the midden, beneath lime fallen from the ceiling. Whereas one might conjure up some ceremonial reason for disposal of so special a vessel, a hole in one side makes it clear that someone's carelessness was the cause, as it probably was for most of the rest of the vessels. I suspect that the lesson taught here applies in many situations in prehistory; where the archaeologist sees religious mystery, the ancients were probably just cursing their fumble-fingeredness.

Apart from all of the pottery, which includes some kinds apparently not previously recorded in the Maya Area, the chultun provides a kind of sealed time capsule that tells us a great deal about what we should expect in any midden. In some instances, fairly large sections of vessels were cast into the chultun, only to break as they hit the pile, while in others pieces of a pot were stacked together and dumped atop the garbage heap. What we can see, in fact, is exactly what one would expect: when a vessel broke, its owner made an effort to gather up the pieces, and dumped what could be assembled in the chultun, but pieces were missed (who has not dropped a cup, carefully cleaned up the mess, and found half the handle behind the refrigerator a year later?), leaving the archaeologist with gap-ridden jigsaw puzzles.

The chultun has also yielded evidence on late Pre-Classic diet, in the form of quantities of animal bone and thousands upon thousands of freshwater snail shells. It is apparent that in the 1st century B.C. the lone impediment to gorging one's self on escargots au beurre d'ail à la Lamanai was the lack of butter and garlic; in these straitened circumstances the Maya presumably dined on boiled snails, a dish that Stan Loten affirms to be something less than a gourmet's delight. The snails were, however, an excellent source of protein, and that was surely more important than their unappetizing aroma and appearance. From such mundane things as the shells and from such strikingly beautiful things as the bowls, dishes and jars we shall be able to create a much fuller picture of late Pre-Classic life at Lamanai than we had before this season, while far to the south the other end of the time scale is emerging from beneath hundreds of tons of boulders. As work continues around the chultun and in that group 450 metres farther north while it goes on apace in Ottawa, my main concern will be whether I can continue travelling from ring to ring in the Lamanai circus without wearing away the last few millimetres of my boot-soles before we close down in mid-June.

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