

# The Hunchback Tomb

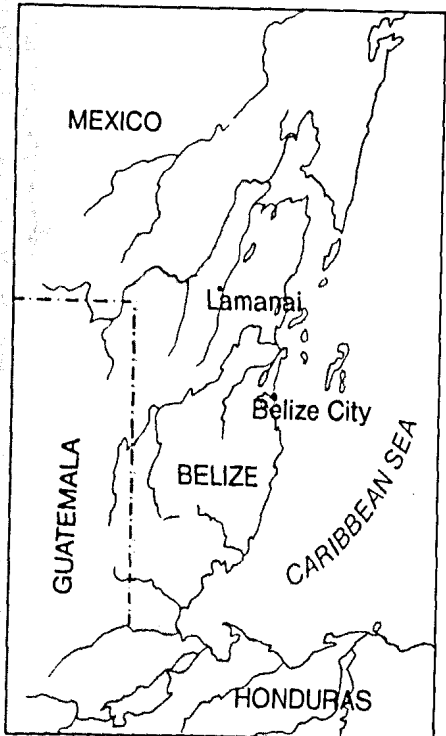
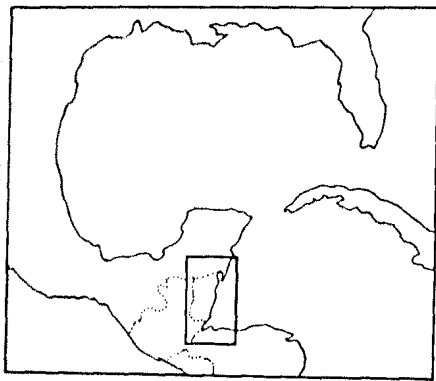
A major archaeological discovery in Central America

By May 1983 we had nearly completed ten seasons of excavation at Lamanai, in northern Belize. With more than fifty-seven months' work behind us, we should have been far beyond the point of beginning to duplicate some parts of the picture of ancient Maya life that had emerged from the ground over the years. Yet every building we investigated produced significant new material, an unusual thing even in sites larger than Lamanai, with its 20 buildings spread over four-and-a-half square kilometres. Each time we started work on a new structure, we wondered if the seemingly endless richness and variety of Lamanai's archaeology would at last reach its limit, and that thought was never stronger than when we returned in May to extend investigation of areas near the 16th-century Spanish church that lies south of the site's central precinct.

David M. Pendergast

Excavators led by Claude Belanger clear the older of the two Spanish churches, about 100 metres south of the hunchback tomb site.





Construction of the first church at Lamanai, probably in 1567, must have made the southern end of the site the focus of the early historic community. With this in mind, we spent part of 1980 in a search for 16th-century dwellings and other buildings in the vicinity of the church, with no conclusive results. Our return to the area was meant primarily to complete exploration of the immediate environs of the church, and this work in itself provided a very considerable number of surprises. In addition, we planned to check buildings at a greater distance from the church zone; this aspect of the study, though it involved only one structure, resulted in an addition to our knowledge of late prehistoric life at Lamanai that is at least as significant as any made in all the preceding seasons.

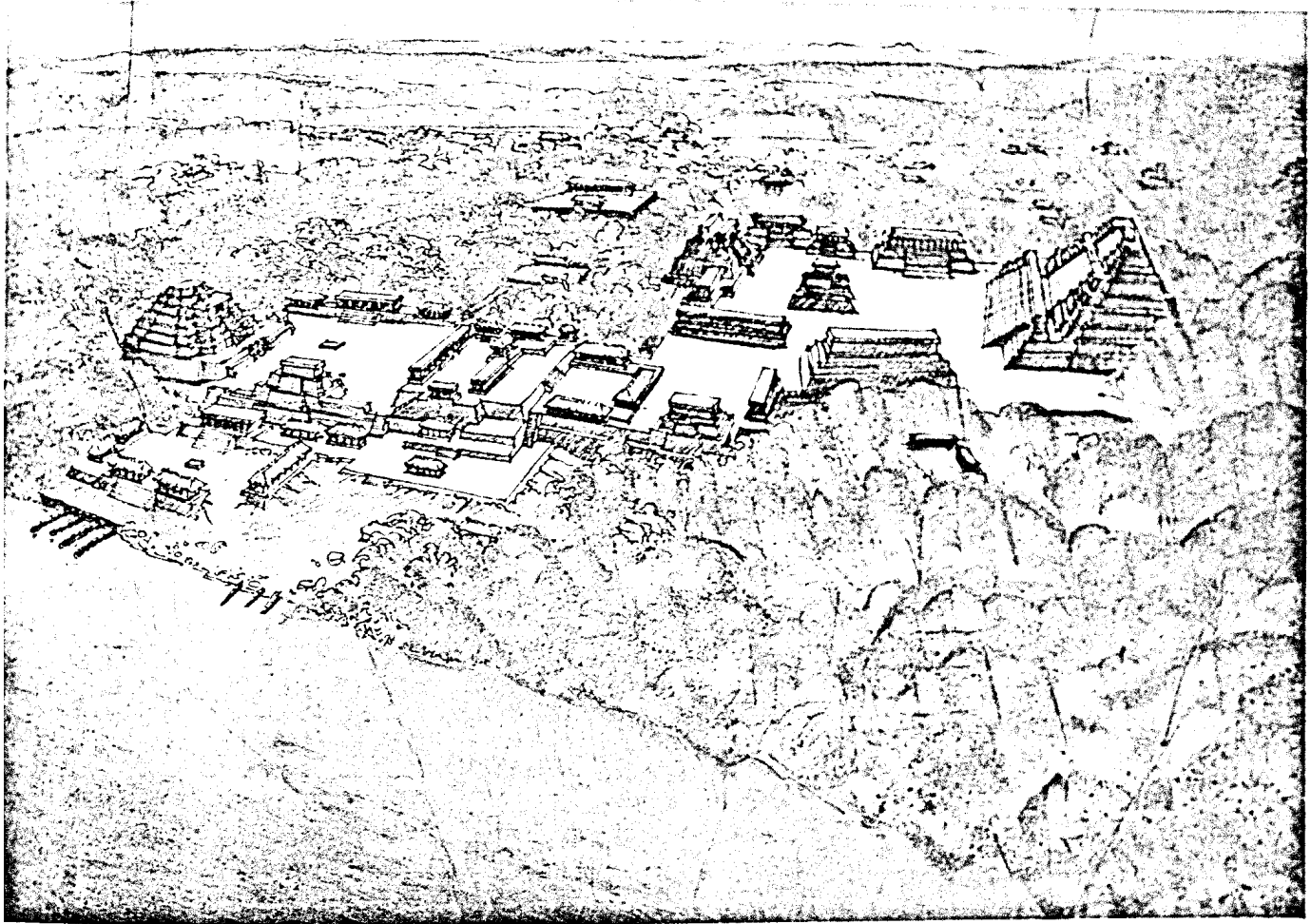
When we moved away from the church zone we chose what seemed to be a most unpromising candidate for investigation: a mound less than one metre high, clearly never more than the base for some sort of perishable building, set by itself near one edge of a very extensive but not very well defined platform. Our choice was dictated by the mound's location, not by its physical features. First of all, it was only about 100 metres north of the church, and second, it lay on the edge of the expanding settlement of illegal Salvadorean and Guatemalan immigrants that threatens a number of structures in the southern part of the archaeological reserve. That threat often takes the form of re-use of ancient mounds as sites for houses, and of course it also means that we must work under the gun, sometimes almost literally, if we are not to risk loss of artifacts left in the ground overnight. At the start, the risk of the loss of data did not seem high, but as it turned out, we were confronted by this concern daily for more than a week.

Our first trench into the mound showed that re-use had already occurred. Long after the structure, built in the 5th or early 6th century and used until about A.D. 950, was abandoned, Victorian England made its appearance at Lamanai, and one of the sugar-mill families chose the small mound as a house site. Scattered over its top and concentrated in what had been a large depression at the south side was the most extensive collection of mid-19th-century crockery, glass, metalware, and other household goods we have yet encountered at the site. While we are not focused on the 19th-century occupation, the material is still of interest, particularly for what it reveals about our ability to reconstruct family life from evidence that is only 125, rather than 1000, years old. Thus the Victoriana is a story in itself, but the shallow pit that served as the main 19th-century garbage dump turned out to be the heart of the tale the structure had to tell.

Removal of the European refuse revealed a few bits of the ancient mound's face and associated floors on the south side, but as we worked towards the garbage dump all the features vanished. The deepening of our trench picked up another facing, near the line of what we had already cleared, but built of very different sorts of stones, and clearly of greater height than the mound itself. Further digging amidst more broken glass and soup-plate sherds cleared a face that led southward, away from the mound. None of this made sense as part of the Maya building, and at first I thought it might be a Victorian pit or well. That thought remained in my mind as one of the excavators trowelled away soil in a corner of the pit and revealed what seemed to be the top of a tube or pipe, mixed with bits of the 19th-century garbage.

I set out to examine the tube, working in what appeared to be a sort of small enclosure in the pit's northwest corner. The area's size prevented me from having a good look at the tube and a strange pottery object attached to it, so I removed more of the soft soil from the enclosure, and then realized that we had jumped back several centuries from Victorian times, and had made what was likely to be a significant discovery. The importance of the object and of its companion pieces was, however, far greater than I could judge at first encounter with what is probably the latest elite tomb at Lamanai.

For all of the discovery day, a Saturday, I worked at clearing what was soon recognizable as a very large and extremely unusual pottery figure. Because of the presence of villagers nearby, I re-buried the figure at the end of the day and

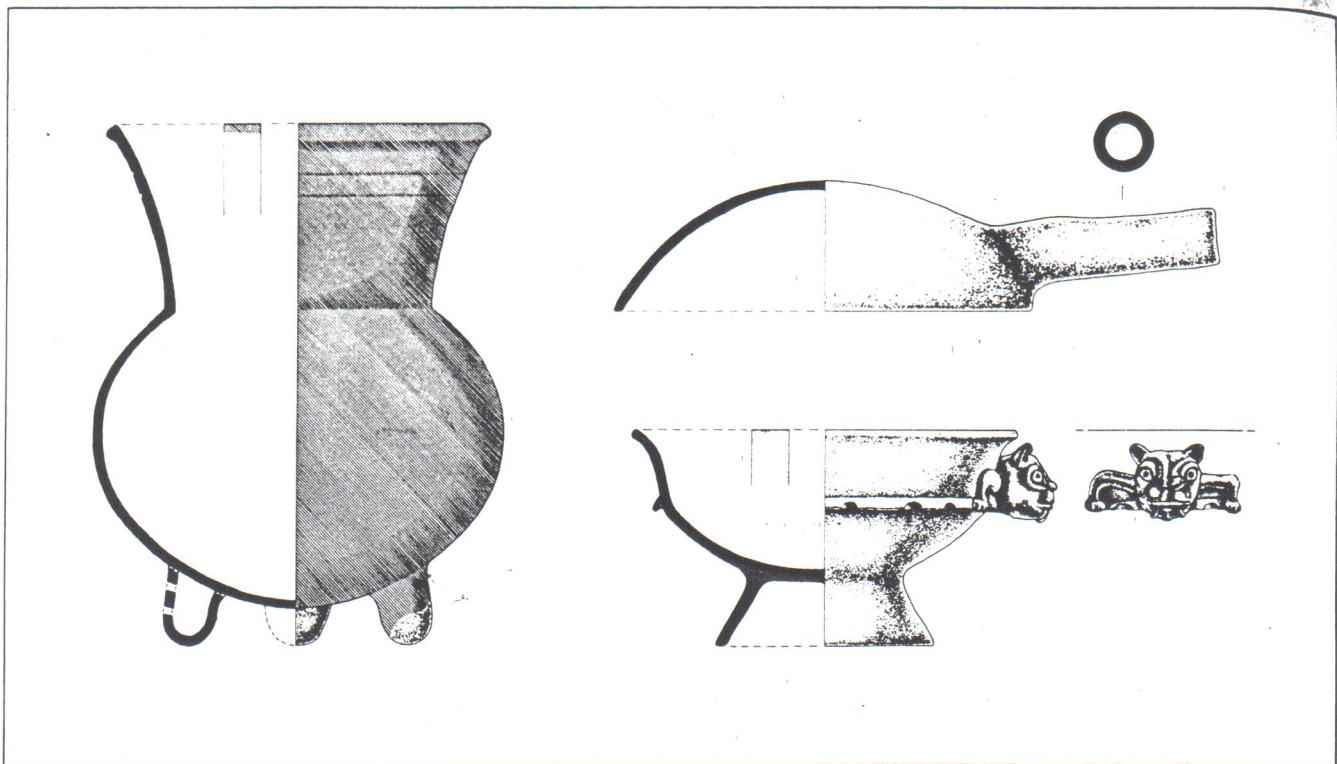


returned early the following morning to complete preparation of the find for photographing. This began a week of days that ran from sunrise to sunset, with each day occupied by clearing as much of the pit's contents as I knew I could record and remove before dark, leaving whatever lay below for the next day. This was hardly a satisfactory method of excavation, especially as the objects within the tomb soon could be seen to be both plentiful and very special.

Lamanai's centre as it would have looked from the air about A.D. 600. Drawing by H.S. Loten.



Discovery of the tomb revealed the badly broken hunchback figure seated in one corner of the crypt.



Tripod jar (height: 28 cm), "frying-pan" censer, and stuccoed jaguar bowl from the tomb. Drawings by Louise Belanger

The plotting of each artifact in position, coupled with the recording of its depth, will permit us to produce in the lab a complete drawing of the interment, but the day-by-day segmentation of the work has left us with no photograph that comes close to showing the entire lot of grave goods in place. Add to this the frequent gunshots that punctuated our days in the village, and the occasional whizzing of bullets very near us, and you can see that the work was carried out in something less than ideal conditions. Nonetheless, we emerged with a collection of data far beyond any expectations we might have had even if we had guessed that the tiny mound concealed a royal burial.

In addition to the remains of the principal individual, which had almost entirely disintegrated because the body was laid on soft limestone bedrock, the pit held the complete skeleton of a second adult, apparently tossed in at the south side above the tomb's base, and a carefully laid-out child, near the second adult. The tomb was probably sealed with some sort of wooden roof capped with stones and earth; decay of the roof pitched the overlying material into the crypt, disrupting the arrangement of some of the contents and breaking several objects. It appears, though, that stones were also placed within the pit, since the body of the second adult was sprawled over a number of large rocks and surrounded by a good many more. Roof collapse may also have broken the large figure, despite a sort of rough cribbing of rocks that surrounded this major element in the tomb's furnishings.

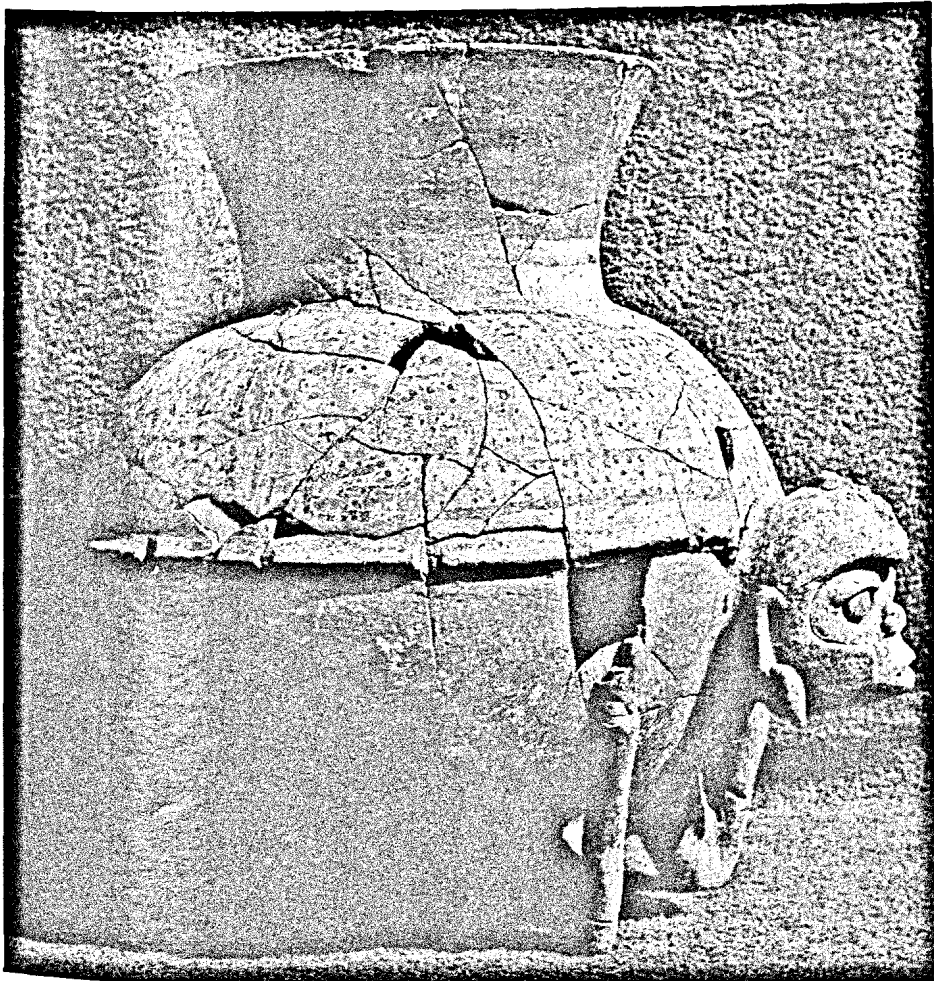
Besides the figure, the tomb held considerable quantities of shell and jade beads, two severed human upper arm bones not from the individuals buried in the crypt, and two large worked human bones, each carved with intricately detailed scenes; in addition, there were two copper bells of different sizes and shapes, and a single adult-size copper ring. The ring has a particularly poignant quality about it, for it was slipped over one of the child's fingers, perhaps as a farewell gift from a grieving parent. Besides these riches, there were twelve pottery vessels, a real treasure-trove of different forms and surface treatments. Among the vessels are several sorts not previously recorded at Lamanai, as well as one form that, like the figure, is unknown, as far as I am aware, elsewhere in the Maya area.

Some of the vessels bear sufficient resemblance to other ceramics from the site to indicate that the tomb was probably constructed in the late 15th century, and could in fact be of early 16th-century date. Among the essentially standard

forms of this period are three "frying-pan" censers, two tripod redware plates, a small unslipped tripod bowl, two small unslipped jars, and a somewhat unusual blackware bowl that resembles a jar in form. The pottery inventory also includes a pedestal-based unslipped dish, originally stucco-coated, with an appliqué jaguar's head and front limbs on one side, and a large redware jar with three feet that are good markers of the last part of what Mayanists term the Postclassic period.

The unique vessel is a gigantic redware jar, its upper body covered with stucco that bears complex line-and-dot designs in red. Below the stuccoed area is an appliqué monkey's head at the vessel's front, and at the rear the creature's tail curls up over the body and onto the stucco. The monkey's limbs, bent at the elbows and knees, form the four legs of the huge jar, and his hands and feet are attached to the vessel's sides. Though the jar's form and colour, as well as the treatment of the monkey's head, are within the Postclassic range, the decoration on the stucco, together with the animal-limb supports, places the vessel in a special category.

The unique jar and its eleven companion vessels, as well as the other elaborate grave goods, attest an importance that is underscored in a dramatic way by the giant figure. Clearly the most special object in the tomb, the figure is a hollow representation of a hunchback, clad in a simple loincloth and headdress. He is seated on a stool that appears to be a faithful representation of an object from real life because of its dished top and two splayed, single-board legs. At the back of his head, the hunchback has a large red-painted queue that extends down over one shoulder. All exposed areas of the body are, or were originally, covered with a thin stucco wash over which are panels of fine black-line geometric designs. Ash that filled the lower half of the figure bespeaks the object's use as an incense burner, and the treatment of the hands, feet, and limbs indicates relationship with censers of the so-called "Mayapan style" recovered elsewhere at

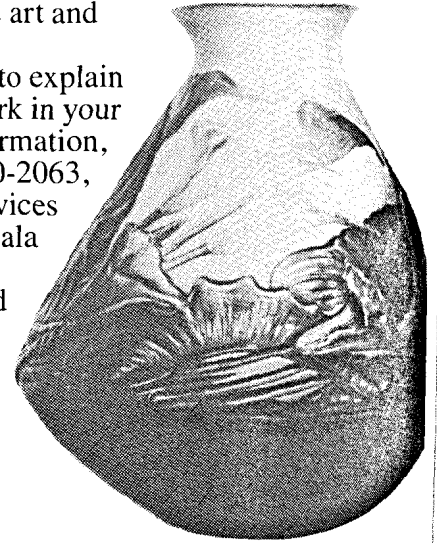


Jar with appliqué monkey head, legs, and tail, found beneath the hunchback figure. Height: 39 cm

# There's one person in Canada... who can tell you everything you need to know about Christie's auctions.

He's Murray Mackay, Christie's representative in Toronto. Mr. Mackay will answer your questions about buying and selling at Christie's auctions in New York, London and on the Continent. He will also arrange for the appraisal of fine and decorative art and jewellery.

Mr. Mackay will be pleased to explain how the exchange rates can work in your favour as well. For further information, call Murray Mackay at 416/960-2063, and let him place Christie's services at your disposal. (Pictured) A cala lily double-overlay mod-blown glass vase by Emile Gallé. Sold from a Canadian Collection at Christie's New York for \$14,300.



## CHRISTIE'S

Suite 803, 94 Cumberland Street, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1A3, Canada

BAUBLES BASKETS BASKETS BANGLES BANGLES BEADS

# Discover Directions East

ANTIQUE  
IVORY  
INLAY

12 Wellesley  
St. West  
967-6920

**"NOW OPEN" 1st CANADIAN PLACE**  
Concourse Level T.S.E.  
364-2663

Village by the Grange  
71 McCaul St.  
593-4374

SILKS AND SILVER JEWELLERY FASHION JEWELLERY FASHION KIMONOS CARVINGS



The hunchback figure after field restoration; note the realistic features of his two-legged stool. Height: 37 cm

Lamanai. The figure's face is, however, much more expressive than those of Mayapan censers, and the decoration of the body is unreported elsewhere. Hunchbacks, who seem to have had an honoured role in Maya religious belief but whose significance is not fully understood, are depicted in several instances at other sites. No other representation is, however, an aesthetic counterpart for this amazing and sensitive portrait figure.

Work on the materials from the tomb, and on the drawn record, will continue for some time. The ROM's Conservation Department is now labouring over the two carved human bones, both of which were broken by collapse of the chamber's roof. They are of great interest not only because of their elaborate ornamentation but also because they suggest a relationship with a burial, probably of slightly earlier date, that was recovered some years ago at the south end of Lamanai's central precinct (*Rotunda* 13:4, 5-11). We hope that radiocarbon analysis of the ash from the great figure will give us a more precise date for the tomb than we are able to derive from study of the ceramics and other grave contents, though the tripod redware plates and the large tripod red jar make the late 15th or early 16th century placement reasonably secure.

The most curious feature of the tomb, which we shall probably never be able to explain, is its association with the small mound. There is nothing about the unprepossessing structure, either in form or in contents, that suggests any great distinction between it and other small residential structures. If there was indeed something special about the structure when it was in use, the physical evidence of it had surely disappeared in the four to five centuries that elapsed between abandonment and the building of the tomb. Those charged with construction of the royal sepulchre must have come upon a mound that looked much as it did when we arrived to begin excavation, and hence their choice may have been motivated by some sense of an aura that surrounded the structure. That sense is, of course, lost to us, and thus we shall probably always see the little mound as a most unlikely site for the burial of a person who was surely a major figure in the life of Lamanai not long before the opening years of the Historic period.

*David Pendergast, curator in the ROM's Department of New World Archaeology, is now in Belize directing the eleventh and final season of excavations at Lamanai, where flak vest and helmet may soon become standard archaeological accoutrements. The project will draw to a close in 1985 with a year of laboratory and mop-up work, and final reporting should begin soon thereafter.*