CHAPTER SIX

Intercessions with the Gods
Caches and Their Significance at Altun Ha and Lamanai, Belize

David M. Pendergast
Royal Ontario Museum

Examinations of the excavation reports (1985-1989, 1990, 1991) at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1985, 1992; Pellicer 1986) and Lamanai (1974 through 1987, Graham 1987) revealed a diverse range of caches, with very substantial breadth in form and even more exciting variety and richness in contents. The major category of offerings from Altun Ha and the cut from Lamanai illustrate directly the parallels and contrasts between two interrelated centers, while at the same time they provide evidence regarding cooperation and innovation in both material and immaterial culture. Perhaps of greatest importance, however, is the significant light that these data shed on the determinants and the mechanisms that encouraged offering activity at the two sites in late Classic times. In very large part, the understanding of cache deposition that emerges from the Altun Ha and Lamanai material evidence points to the centrality of the northern Lenca area and very probably to the Altun Ha area as a whole.

Part of the contrast between the sites is in the most visible, although not so easily articulated, by a lack of reflection of different elements present by neighboring sites such as Tikal. In the same time period, part of the contrast is the product of the considerable differences in economic systems. At Altun Ha, during most of the pre-Conquest period, the early years of the Postclassic, while at Lamanai the period was characterized with a beginning of a new, more significant period of economic expansion, and a more central role for the site in the region. While the shift toward a more centralized economic pattern at Lamanai is evident in the changing pattern of goods and the emergence of a more complex social structure, the shift is less evident in the economic activities at Altun Ha, where the continued importance of agricultural production is reflected in the dominance of agricultural products in the cache suites. This suggests that at Altun Ha, while there was a shift toward more centralized economic activities, the shift was less pronounced than at Lamanai, where the emergence of a more centralized economic system is more evident in the cache suites.

In this context, it is significant to note that the cache suites at Altun Ha and Lamanai are not simply reflections of the different economic activities at the two sites, but rather they are reflections of the different social structures that emerged in response to the changing economic conditions. In this context, the cache suites can be seen as reflections of the different social structures that emerged in response to the changing economic conditions, with the different social structures at Altun Ha and Lamanai reflecting the different economic activities at the two sites.

The cache suites at Altun Ha and Lamanai can be divided into three categories on the basis of content. The first category includes offerings that occur in non-economic contexts, such as offerings related to religious activities, offerings related to funerary activities, and offerings related to domestic activities. The second category includes offerings that occur in economic contexts, such as offerings related to agricultural activities, offerings related to craft activities, and offerings related to trade activities. The third category includes offerings that occur in both economic and non-economic contexts, such as offerings related to religious and domestic activities, offerings related to agricultural and craft activities, and offerings related to trade and economic activities.

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appears to differ materially from the other two, but in fact it is quite likely to have exhibited some other offerings in function.

**THE HISTORY OF CACHE ACTIVITY AT ALTUN HA AND LAMANAI**

**The Preclassic**

The earliest evidence at either site of what can surely be identified as offering activity occurs at Lamanai, but it includes no artifacts, and its context is somewhat obscure. The data are nevertheless significant because of their implications regarding evanescent offering activity—events highly unlikely to be discernible in the archaeological record except with the greatest of luck. In an apparent harbor near the north end of the site, a concentration of cores polish far greater than normal for the site, with absolutely no indication of architectural or other cultural association, points to offering of whole cores that were tossed into the waters from a boat, raft, or platform. The radiocarbon date of 1500 B.C. from wood stratigraphically associated with the pollen may indicate complex offering activity very early in the Preclassic, though not necessarily the deposition of caches as they are normally defined.

The first two major modifications to the primary structure—one of two factors that clearly distinguished Lamanai from Altun Ha—occurred at Lamanai without cache placement. The first major building start, the Na sequence, and indeed the Na Platform, is so early that the Preclassic—in contrast with later times at the site—this structural line set does not serve as the determinant of cache location. Although the inclusion of jade objects had become a significant part of Altun Ha offering practice by about 600-300 B.C., the stipulations regarding position that marked subsequent events evidently were not yet in force. At Lamanai a northern substructure yielded a two-vessel cache with marine shells and obsidian that exemplifies the pattern of primary-axis placement, the typical occurrence of caches without surrounding cairn, or any protection, and the use of pottery in caches that remained the rule at the site and at least until early Postclassic times. Elsewhere at the site during the Preclassic, ceramic caches occur both on and well away from the primary axis. In addition, some are accompanied by a feature common at Lamanai from Preclassic through Terminal Classic times: the empty pit, often on or very near the primary axis, with every indication that use as a cache container was either contemplated or actually carried out. Such pits, which we came to know as "Lamanai Holes," were predominantly common. The frequency of their occurrence suggests that they were not immediately placed offering pits for which correction was subsequently made, a phenomenon that may be in evidence at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990a:259). Pits of this character also occur without associated caches nearby; this observation, together with the occasional presence of a thin basal stratum of organic decay product or evidence of burning, suggests their use for offerings that were composed entirely of perishable objects, either artifacts or natural materials.

Late in the Preclassic it is possible to discern in Structure N10-43, the beginnings of a predictable approach to offerings in major Central Preclassic structures that sharply distinguishes Lamanai from Altun Ha. Although it is very risky to attempt to assess cache significance on the basis of contents, the Lamanai evidence suggests that logical determinants of cache placement were not operative in the community. Neither architectural axis and complexity nor the degree of change wrought by modifications was necessarily reflected in primary-axis offerings of an appropriately sumptuous nature, or even in the presence of an offering in any form.

But simple, the approach to offerings in major communal structures at Lamanai seems exceedingly parsimonious when compared with that at Altun Ha. Witness the Late Preclassic structure in the Na sequence. Although it was obviously an undertaking of very considerable significance, and was embellished with highly important stelae and mask, it housed no offerings, as far as we could discover from our extensive excavations along the primary axis and deeply into the core of the platform. The first two major modifications to the primary structure of N10-43, also of Late Preclassic date, likewise appear to have gone unaccompanied by cache deposition or other dedicatory activity.

Only at the beginning of the third reconfiguration of Structure N10-43, which resulted in a new stair and significant changes in the main lower landing area, was work on the structure dedicated to proper fashion with an offering placed in a pit cut into the plaza floor at the base of the original stair. Situated on the primary axis, the cache was unquestionably a dedicatory effort in advance of the new construction. Still, it scarcely raised the weight level represented by its earlier counterpart. It did, however, commence a substance within the pattern of ceramics in Lamanai caches that persisted through much of the Classic: the use of paired dishes in lid and container for small objects of various sorts.

Although the evidence that bears on Preclassic offering practice is severely limited, it shows quite clearly that the focus in the early centuries of Lamanai’s occupation was on pottery vessels (fig. 4.6) as the principal, and often the only, element in caches. With the exception of a single jade bowl and a jade bib-helmet figure pendant from N10-45 (fig. 6.2), no material imported from any great distance were to have played a part in cache assemblages. One could deduce from this evidence that Lamanai’s trade connections were limited in the Preclassic, but this should be qualified such a deduction is readily apparent. It is equally likely that the seemingly parsimonious approach adopted for Preclassic offerings was simply a matter of preference, and in fact much of the later record appears to bear out this interpretation of the earliest cache data.

**The Classic**

During the opening years of the Classic, both sites saw a considerable amount of building renewal and probably some rebuilding. As in earlier times, and indeed throughout the history of Lamanai, there was literally no hard and fast rule regarding placement of offerings along the primary axis of new construction, or in any other context. A building renewal might contain an offering although its predecessor had none, and the presence of such an offering certainly did not decide similar deposition in succeeding modifications. If we were to use Altun Ha as the yardstick, we would judge that the builders of Lamanai disregarded far more than half the opportunities for cache placement. Furthermore, if we were to adopt Altun Ha’s cache contents (fig. 6.3) as the standard—a serious error, beyond question—we would be forced to conclude that the inhabitants of Lamanai rarely if ever attained the lofty heights of cache wealth that were commonplace among their coastal neighbors.

**Fig. 6.1** Backsaw cylindrical vessel container (height 20.2 cm), Lamanai Cache N10-47, 300 B.C.-A.D. 500.

**Fig. 6.2** Contents of Lamanai Cache N10-45b. Height of jade bib-helmet pendant is 4.7 cm.

**Fig. 6.3** Altun Ha Cache F-45, probably c. a.d. 600. Pit diameter is 40 cm.
Lamanai’s Classic offerings resemble those of Altun Ha in one respect: they conformed to no pattern whatsoever, except during a brief period in the Middle Classic, and then probably only in two neighboring structures. The absence of patterning in cache contents, combined with the seemingly erratic distribution of offerings, leads all too easily to the assessment of cache characteristics as a reflection of the relative importance of various construction efforts. A building modification with a cache must have been more important than one without, and a large offering must have reflected greater importance than a small one. In fact, we have no knowledge of the rationale that determined cache size, or of the basis for choice of one piece of construction as an offering site and rejection of another. The variety in both of these matters is so great that it might as easily be laid in caprice as to conscious choice in ritual practice. Whether caprice or choice, however, there is no question that the determinants were adhered to for greater frequency at Altun Ha than at Lamanai.

Examination of the full panorama of Altun Ha’s Classic offerings and the more limited but equally intriguing range at Lamanai would require at least an entire volume. However, it is worth noting here that while the Classic period at Altun Ha shows evidence of single, highly varied offerings in association with structural modifications, the Classic at Lamanai was marked by a brief period of near uniformity in cache containers, among which was a group of five pairs in a single stair modification. In middle to late Early Classic times, Lamanai’s builders introduced paired, unslipped, large round-side bowls as container and lid, which were unquestionably made specifically for cache use (fig. 6.4). It is curious in the extreme that the development of some standardization in containers was accompanied by one of only two deviations from the pattern of single structure-associated caches encountered at the site.

Multiple offerings also occurred in Structure N9-9, but in a form that differed to almost every respect from all other offerings at the site. In the case of the upper part of the stair, the builders placed two separate mosaic objects, of which one, a large mask, survives nearly intact. Unfortunately, the other object, which was of smaller total volume and was probably not a mask, consists largely of patternless fragments.

Late Classic offerings at Lamanai were marked by departure from earlier patterns and also by greater opulence. Such offerings often retained paired vessels but replaced vessel contents either with groups of large ceramic bowls (fig. 6.5) or with obsidian in quantities as large as 9.6 kg. For perhaps as much as two and a half centuries, offerings at Lamanai appear to have made a forceful a statement regarding the site’s prominence as did those at Altun Ha, though with materials generally a bit further down the scale of ceremonial value than many from caches at Altun Ha.

The Postclassic

Near the artificial separation between the Late Classic and the Early Postclassic at Lamanai came a variety of dedicatory activity that, together with what may have been the largest single construction effort ever mounted at the site (Pendergast 1984a:232-233), heralds a very considerate community reign. The construction work was set in motion to the accompaniment of one of the largest offerings known at Lamanai, which involved massive amounts of burning as well as numerous specialized vessels (Pendergast 1984a:242). Slightly earlier, the deposition of a much smaller but highly important offering of vessels and mercury beneath the marker disk of a small ball court (Pendergast 1984a:203) testified eloquently to Lamanai’s socio-economic strength in a time of chaos in many other southern Lowlands centers.

The middle and late years of the Postclassic, a time of reshaping and concentration of the community in the southern portion of the Central Precinct, were marked by a shift away from use of quantities of artifacts in dedicatory offerings. The focus from the thirteenth century onward was, instead, frequently but not uniformly on single vessels (fig. 6.6) or other objects, which were deposited both in units under construction and in or near ruined buildings. The change may have been partly a reflection of decreasing size of the Lamanai polity, but evidence of continuing internal and external economic vitality suggests that reduced cache size resulted from a shift in values rather than a decline in means. Part of this evidence consists of offering contents from the early and middle parts of the time span.

From the thirteenth to the early fifteenth century, the inhabitants of Lamanai deposited some fairly splendid smash-and-scatter offerings on the surface of buildings either long abandoned or in their final days of use (Pendergast 1982c:19). Here the prodigious disposal of high-value objects in termination rituals attained a level equal to that of earlier times, especially in the case of thirty or more locally made and imported Marquana-related figurine censers spread over and around Structure N9-56 (Pendergast 1984a:22, fig. 17). The contrast between such termination deposits and many of the dedicatory caches suggests that the importance of dedication offering had
diminished by at least the Middle Postclassic. There is, however, no solid reason to assume that smaller amounts of material indicate reduced ritual importance of the activity, or that the value of the objects offered was not entirely commensurate with the importance of the construction or other endeavors involved. The truth is that in this respect as in others, the Postclassic was a time of change that must be understood in its own terms rather than by comparison with earlier patterns (Pendergast 1990b).

The Contact Period

The Historic period was marked by the first significant disruption of offering practices whose fundamental principles had remained constant since the Preclassic. The disruption was occasioned by the intrusions of Europeans into the Maya world, which began in Belize about 1542 (Graham et al. 1987:259). From the outset until the Spanish hold on Lamanai was permanently shaken loose in 1638 (López de Cogolludo 1572:book 33, chap. 13), it appeared that Christian precepts had largely swept aside indigenous beliefs and practices. Suppression of the first Christian temple atop the ruins of a native one, however, was accompanied by deposition of one pre-Columbian-style offering (Pendergast 1991:343), and the presence of related activity is documented by numerous references to idolatry in the ethnohistorical record. Lamanai served as a center for reduction of the surrounding territory and hence had a varied and only partly stable population. As a result it was probably experienced more resistance to Christianity and resurgence of pre-Columbian practice than existed in some other Spanish-period communities.

Part of the evidence that pre-Contact values and techniques remained generally powerful is part of a joint Maya/Spanish accommodation (Graham et al. 1987:257; Pendergast 1992). Consist of continuity in offering practice. Once freed of Spanish presence, the Maya reasserted earlier attitudes (figs. 6.7, 6.8), but in contrast to that in some instances were determined at least in part by Christian considerations (Graham et al. 1987:257; Pendergast 1991:345-347; 1993). The strongest expression of the resurgence of pre-Columbian practice in a partly syncretic form was the placement of a mela with accompanying sacred cache in the ruined rear of the second church. The cache contents were of classes that would have been chosen before European contact, but the sacred space in which the activity took place was now defined by Christian belief.

Similar conjoining of Christian sacred space and pre-Columbian cache practice is reflected in at least three of the other six caches placed within the nave and at the face of the masonry chancel of the church. The remaining three offerings comprised one group of miniature animal figurines and two ceramic mythical crocodilian creatures, surely a restatement of the crocodile association reflected in the name of the community (Pendergast 1998:35-39). The close resemblance of the figurines to ones deposited elsewhere in the community more than a century earlier is direct physical evidence of the maintenance of the pre-Columbian tradition alongside Christian belief.

In contrast with the profusion of church offerings, axial and other caches are nearly absent in what is very likely to be either a Spanish-period or a post-1641 settlement zone at the south end of the site (Pendergast 1991:35). The scarcity of offerings may indicate diminished concern with dedicatory matters in residential context, but it is equally likely that it reflects an overall reduction in resources or the closing off of trade in some classes of material. Full consideration of such complex issues goes well beyond the bounds of the present discussion. There is no question, however, that offering practice in the Historic period bespeaks a Maya dedicatory tradition that was durable enough to withstand and accommodate the onslaughts of a new belief system, and to survive into the post-European period with most of its essential elements intact.

**CACHE PLACEMENT AND CACHE MEANING.**

The data from Altun Ha and Lamanai clearly present a solidly documented opportunity to move beyond description to a characterization of the modal aspects of dedicatory activity at the two sites. Although neither center is fully representative of southern Maya Lowlands prehistory—and indeed in the Maya context it would be foolish to seek a holotype—I suggest that the general statements that follow are very likely to be widely applicable in the Maya world.

**The Role of the Primary Axis.**

It is abundantly clear from the record at both sites that the primary axis was the principal determinant of cache position in communally built structures. Evidence suggests that the Maya established this vital structural feature by visual identification rather than precise measurement. As a result, offering position might deviate slightly from a true measured axis, and the deviation was likely to be greater in upper portions of a structure than at the base, presumably because those depositing an offering there found fewer visual keys to axis position. One of the aims in placement of a cache on the primary axis can surely be understood as support for or enhancement of the function of the axis itself, which appears to have been dual. The primary axis was, first, an identifier of the structure, distinctive of that building and maintained as an entity that, though invisible, was perceptible as physically separate from the axes of any facing structures. This concern accounts for the offsetting of facing buildings in the otherwise symmetrical configurations that usually border plazas and other platform surfaces. In its relationship to the axis as structural identifier, a cache can be seen as purely dedicatory, especially if it lies beneath or at a low level within a new construction. It is most likely that continuing focus on the primary axis should have led to reorientation with every significant remodeling of the structure, but the histories of both Altun Ha and Lamanai show that this seemingly logical approach did not obtain in either community. The actual significance of a given construction effort, as opposed to the archaeologist's assessment of it, may be at issue here. Significance was surely a ceremonial matter for the Maya, while our judgment is with some exceptions rooted in engineering and traffic-flow concerns because there are no mundane clues to ceremonial impact.

The second aspect of the primary axis is its function as the main avenue of communication with a deity. In this respect, the midline is very likely to have been understood as extending not only beyond the foot of the stair and across the plaza but also beyond the summit into the heavens, presumably for an unattainable distance in both directions. Although this would appear to have offered the opportunity for axial caches well beyond the limits of a structure—in one direction, at least—the evidence suggests that the building was perceived as the proper vessel for all axial offerings. The power of the axis was no doubt understood to be self-generating, but it was surely relied on with the presence of one or more offerings along the vital line. A broad or preconstruction cache might well have served both to dedicate the structure and to amplify the vital communication system; caches at higher points in the building seem most likely to have been focused on the latter function.
It is far more difficult to identify primary use caches in residential structures, largely because domestic structures often had more than one main entrance and sometimes more than one entrance that was not in regular use. This is why data from the 1979 survey of the Lower Santa Fe site is particularly relevant for this analysis. Although there were numerous instances of improperly or probably primary use caches in residential structures at both sites, Thurnro and I assume that it is likely that the deposits found in this context were generally similar to those in construction contexts. In addition, however, the presence of secondary activity in residential structures suggests that there was more than one possible use for primary-level structures. The smallest feature in the Lower Santa Fe site was a small hearth that the authors did not consider to be a primary-level cache. However, it is possible that it could have been used for such purposes.

It is also possible that primary-level caches may have been used in other structures. The authors in the 1980 survey of the Lower Santa Fe site found evidence of such caches in other structures. However, the presence of secondary activity in residential structures suggests that there was more than one possible use for primary-level structures. It is possible that these caches may have been used for such purposes, but it is also possible that they could have been used for other purposes as well.

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