The Church in the Jungle

No matter where in the world archaeological work is undertaken, whether in the desert or in the tropics, at sea level or on a mountain top, the first season of every new project is bound to be fraught with difficulties. Even though we have been at work in Belize (formerly British Honduras) almost continuously since 1969, the start of the new expedition last year was no less traumatic than earlier efforts. As always, we had to suppress the urge to begin exploration and excavation of the site during the long weeks in which a permanent camp was built and the other necessary arrangements were made for the beginning of a research programme expected to last until at least 1981. With the

The ROM's first season at Lamanai

David M. Pendergast

Above: Building the camp. With the roof framing in place, thatching gets under way.

Left: The church at Lamanai after the bush had been cleared away and debris removed.
long-range view of the project in mind, we found camp building a bit less tedious than it might otherwise have been, but no one could look back on the first three months on site as the highlight of the season.

In 1973, with the Altun Ha excavations completed and reporting of the work well under way, I decided that it was time to return to the field to begin work at a site which I had long since chosen as my next target: Lamanai. Translation of my decision into action depended in part on BOM financial support, but was made possible in large measure by the generosity of the Canada Council and the Richard Ivey Foundation of London, Ontario. The Ivey Foundation's support solved one of the knottier logistics problems, allowing us to set off for Belize and the new site in January of 1974.

Although Lamanai lies just 40 kilometres west of Altun Ha, it is in a totally different environmental zone on the edge of the great rainforest of the Guatemalan Peten, and is inaccessible except by river. While it was the site's inaccessibility that gave rise to some of our initial problems, it was partly because of Lamanai's location that I chose it for investigation.

In the Maya area, it is common to begin work at a site with no idea of the extent of occupation, either in space or in time. We had hoped that aerial survey, including false colour-infrared photography carried out for us by the Flight Research Laboratory of the National Aeronautical Establishment in 1973, might give us some idea of the size of Lamanai and the distribution of structures; in fact, however, the photographs revealed nothing but the tops of the tallest buildings, rising above the 100-foot-high jungle canopy. Our first on-site inspection, about 1974, told us very little about some of the structures but was too short to give us any idea of how many buildings there were, or how they were distributed. In any case, therefore, we were stepping into unknown territory when we first disembarked from our two-hundred-architectural-flight early in February, after churning some 30 kilometres up the New River to the great lagoon which forms its headwaters.

Though many things about Lamanai were unknown, the site had particular importance on two counts. First, it lies in a region about which almost nothing is known archaeologically; second, it is the only site yet discovered in the Central Maya Area at which there is an early Spanish church. These facts, combined with the
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Early documents gave us one
additional piece of information:
the ancient name of the site. There
were many churches along the
New River, but the description of
the one situated near the lower
divide of the great lagoon leaves no
doubt that this was the site on
which we were to begin work. The
time is variously recorded as
Lamanuy and Lomayyno; given the
Spaniards' lack of linguistic
expertise, it is most probable that
the name was Lamanai. This is
one of a very few cases in which
we know the original name of a
Maya site and are not forced to
concoct one. We also know the
probable meaning of the name: in
Mayan, Loman means drowned,
and yi is insect. "Drowned insect"
is hardly a splendid name, but it
must have had great significance
for the ancient Maya, perhaps
commemorating the first object
seen when the settlement was
founded.

From what little we knew, it
was obvious that Lamanai was a
site of high potential, and our
eagerness to begin excavation was
proportionately great. Before we
could begin work, we set out
on our first investigation of
ancient Lamanai.

The first burial encountered in the
small structure. Beneath the bowl
inverted as a cover, inside a giant
censer, rests an adult male in a
seated position. Invisible beneath the
censer are the smashed remains of
nearly fifteen more vessels.
The camp construction was not all drudgery without any archeological return, however. As the building progressed we began to clean the area thoroughly and found amazing quantities of archeological material lying right on the surface, just beneath the leaves. Even now, each rain brings new objects to light, so that surface collection is a never-ending process. With more than 2,000 pieces of obsidian, dozens of projectile points and spindles, weights, and numerous figurine fragments and other objects accompanying a great pile of pottery sherds, our surface collection soon resembled the results of a small-scale excavation. Beyond this, it demonstrated that the site had been occupied in the late Post-Classic (13th-15th centuries A.D.), precisely the period in which we were most interested.

With the surface indications of late occupation in the camp area, I chose to start excavation not at the church, which lay about a kilometre south of camp, but rather in a very small mound within the camp compound. The mound was attractive because of its small size, which would make extraction of an adequate sample possible even though the working season was short, and because of its rather unusual location in the centre of a small plaza. With a few days of excavation, it became apparent that I had made a good choice, for the mound dated from the period represented by the surface material, but contained richly-accompanied burials.

What began as an excavation likely to yield a few sherds at best soon turned into an operation of major importance, as a burial in a huge censer, bedded on a mass of broken vessels, came to light. The headless (and backless!) excavating a burial of this type, in which the body was placed, tightly flexed, within a giant vessel, are more than I care to recall. But by the time the work was done, the excavators at least had the satisfaction of having recovered the largest sample of late Post-Classic vessels and other accompanying a post-structure in the site.

Upper left: A bowl shape typical of 20th and Post vessels and other accompanying a post structure in the site.

Upper right: This small mound, only offering a construction in the site shown on page 3, suggests a century date.

Lower right: The censer, its rings coated with bright brown, was one of the 11 bronzes shown on the 15th or 16th century.

Lower left: An eplume found an the burial pit.
ition was not any accidents. As we began to dig, we found quantities of material lying in front of a large, flat rock, with small pieces of pottery and hearthstones nearby. It was as if a large room had been excavated, with a series of hearths and pottery pieces scattered about. The pottery was mostly blackware, typical of the 13th and 14th centuries. A group of people were living in the area, possibly engaged in some sort of ceremonial activity.

Upper right: A blackware jar, typical of the 13th and 14th centuries, was found in a group of vessels and other artifacts. The jar was opened to reveal a collection of small objects, including a small stone implement and a piece of pottery. The jar was placed in a large pit, possibly used for ceremonial purposes.

Lower right: This redware jar, typical of the 14th or early 15th century, was found in a small pit. The jar was opened to reveal a small stone implement and a piece of pottery. The jar was placed in a large pit, possibly used for ceremonial purposes.

Lower left: An effigy from another area was found smashed and scattered in a burial pit shown on page 36.
The richest burial thus far discovered at Lamanai, this 13th-14th century interment included three giant censer (one buried intact in the foreground, the other two smashed at the opposite site of the pit). The body lay in a secondary pit at the centre of the grave beneath the vessels.

Opposite page: Earlier construction concealed within the structure illustrated on page 36 These small units, all that remains of fairly elaborate buildings, date from the late 12th century A.D.

pottery yet encountered in the Central Maya Area. While the giant censer appeared unique, some of the associated vessels showed close ties with material from Mayapan, near the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, and provided the basis for dating the burial.

Further excavation in the small structure revealed another burial, this time not housed in a large vessel but nevertheless accompanied by some extremely interesting pottery, as well as other artifacts. By now it was clear that occupation at Lamanai in the 13th-14th centuries had involved not just stragglers living amidst the ruins of an ancient city, but rather a flourishing civilization which was very probably still in existence when the Spanish landed on the Lamanai shore. Obviously we had to learn more about life in this period, and just as obviously we stood a good chance of doing so by turning to the buildings adjacent to the small mound in which we had started work. At the same time, we quite clearly had much to gain by beginning work at the Franciscan church. So while one party continued in the camp area, a second detachment was dispatched southward to the church to begin cleaning and tree-felling. Though the church was more easily recognizable as a building than were its ancient neighbours, it was tightly gripped by the forest, and removal of the trees sprouting from wall tops proved no simple matter. Eventually, however, we had the area cleared and ready for excavation.

We began by clearing debris from the three rooms which formed the apse end of the church; the remainder of the building had been of poles and thatch and was burnt by the Maya in 1841, but would long ago have succumbed to the forest in any case. Our first probings of the debris brought a surprise, and a most unwelcome one at that.

In addition to what little we knew about the ancient site, we had considerable data on a mid-19th century sugar-milling operation at Lamanai, which was given the name Indian Church by the British. The mill, abandoned in the 1870s, still stands, as do house foundations and a well. The fields have long since disappeared but they seem to have been concentrated in the area south of the main ancient centre, and west of the church. What we did not know until we began digging was that the sugar growers had used the church as a smithy or scrap dump; out of the mass of soil and stumps within the rooms came chain, spikes, sheet metal, and large quantities of the castoffs of non-conservation-minded users. Perhaps the church had had some Spanish spikes in its timbers, or some other bit of material there, but I doubt that we
...and although the results of work at the church are nothing new, it is hard to believe that much has been done...We are not sure if the church was built before the Mayan city of Tikal...From the church, we have uncovered a large structure on the level above the church...The church...was constructed over a...previous structure...The church appears to have been constructed of...The church...was built above...a...previous structure...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...The church...was...constructed of...
ture, those from the large building include vessels related to the pottery of Mayapan, as well as unique forms. The existence of previously unrecorded kinds of pottery in both structures suggests that Lamani had a well-established ceramic tradition of its own, rather than simply borrowing ideas developed elsewhere.

Besides pottery vessels, burials in the second structure were accompanied by other artifacts which demonstrate the importance of Lamani in the late Post-Classic. Among these is a well-preserved copper bell of a type found in the Bay Islands of Honduras, and also in Oaxaca in southern Mexico, on the central Gulf Coast, and in the American Southwest. The Oaxaca Valley is the most likely manufacture site, so that the bell, like the obsidian found on the surface, is evidence of trade linking Lamani with areas both within and outside the Maya region. Together with other materials, the bell suggests that Lamani was not just some sort of outpost near the eastern fringe of the Maya area in Post-Classic times, but rather a centre of some importance in the commercial and political network which developed around Mayapan.

In a short first season, we have begun to bring to light a slice of Maya prehistory previously hidden beneath the forest and the decay of centuries. In the process we have raised questions which may take years to answer, if in fact they are answerable at all. One of the foremost of these is posed by the puzzling fact that the people of Lamani continued to develop and expand their way of life during the Post-Classic, while 40 kilometres away at Altun Ha the civilization of Classic times disintegrated in the 10th century and the site gradually succumbed to the encroaching jungle. Lamani is, in fact, the first site in the Central Maya Area to yield evidence of rich and elaborate development in the Post-Classic.

That Lamani lived while Altun Ha died may have been due in part to the fact that one is located on a major river, while the other lies in a spot cut off from the sea by several kilometres of mangrove swamp. The lagoon-side setting of Lamani may have facilitated continued contact with northern Yucatan, and hence with the influences which motivated Post-Classic peoples. At the same time, Lamani may have had some special significance which made such contacts desirable for its seafaring traders of Post-Classic times. The distribution and characteristics of the buildings at Lamani suggest that the site may have been an unusual type of ceremonial centre, with additional excavation, and luck, we may determine whether this was so.

We shall go on for at least the next seven years at Lamani, trying to provide answers to the questions having to do with the late occupation. We shall also, of course, extend our investigations into earlier time periods at the site, where we may find as much exciting information and as many intriguing questions as we have already encountered for the centuries just before Spanish contact. With the struggles of camp construction behind us and with a surprisingly large and rich body of data already in hand, we can look forward to years of research in which the difficulties promise to be less, and the rewards even greater, than those we have already experienced.

David Peckergast joined the ROM in 1966 and is Curator (Central America) in the Office of the Chief Archaeologist. Since 1964 he has been Field Director of the ROM's work in Belize (formerly British Honduras) and has recently completed seven years of excavation at the site of Altun Ha.