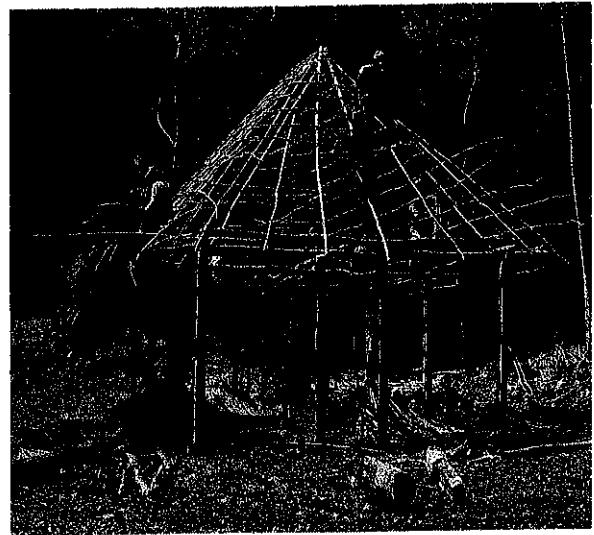


## The Church in the Jungle

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 1964, the start of a 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 ROM 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.

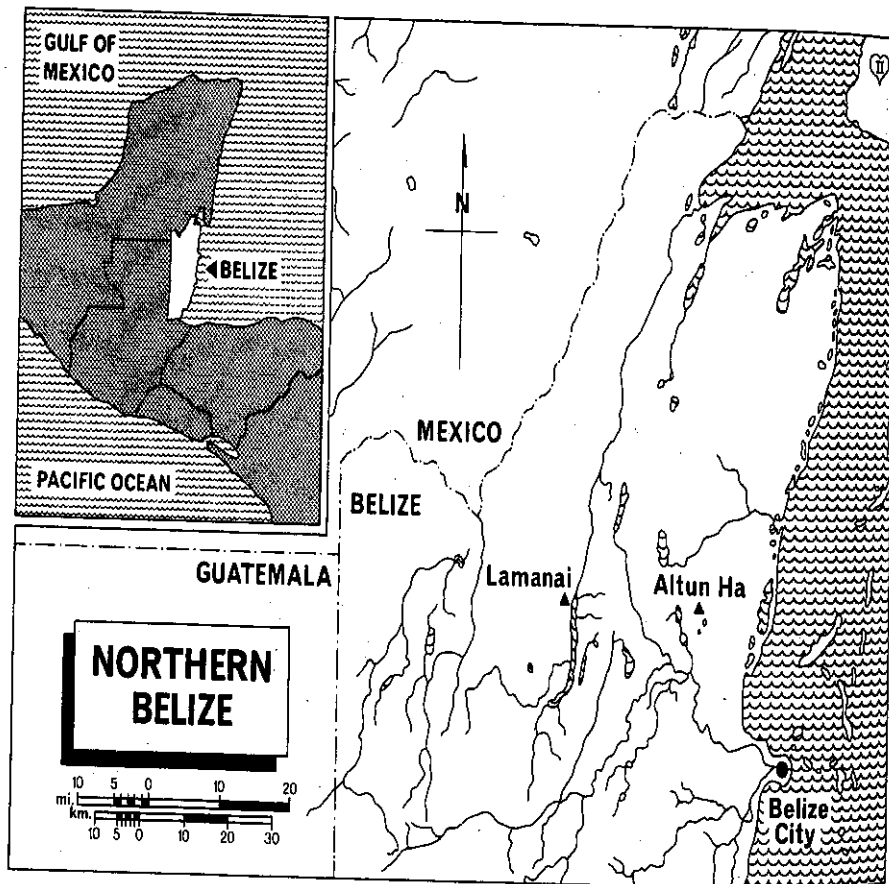
Although Lamanai lies just 40 kilometres west of Altun Ha, it is in a totally different environmental zone on the edge of the great rainforest of the Guatemalan Peten, and is inaccessible except by river. While it was the site's inaccessibility that gave rise to some of our initial problems, it was partly 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 1971, 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, also in 1971, told us a bit more 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 many ways, therefore, we were stepping onto unknown territory when we first disembarked from our two-boat archaeological fleet early in February, after churning some 38 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

other impressive size of some of the major structures, indicate that Lamanai might have remained an important centre to the time of Spanish conquest. Luckily, bits of archival data give a clue to the time of construction of the church—probably the 1570s—and the date of abandonment by apostate Maya was definitely recorded in 1641. Our plans for the first season included investigations at the church, with the hope that we might begin work in the area of the Hispanic buildings as well. Early documents gave us an 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 head of the great lagoon leaves no doubt that this was the site which we were to begin work on. Its name is variously recorded



st buildings, rising above the foot-high jungle canopy. On-site inspection, also, told us a bit more about some structures but was too short to give us any idea of how many there were, or how they were distributed. In many ways, we were stepping onto a territory when we first looked from our two-holed logical fleet early in the morning, after churning some 30 miles up the New River to the lagoon which forms its eastern end.

In many things about the site were unknown, the site's particular importance on two counts: first, it lies in a region in which almost nothing is known archaeologically; secondly, it is the first site yet discovered in the Central Maya Area at which an early Spanish church was found, combined with the

rather impressive size of some of the major structures, indicated that Lamanai might have remained an important centre up to the time of Spanish contact. Luckily, bits of archival data gave us a clue to the time of construction of the church—probably in the 1570s—and the date of abandonment by apostatized Maya was definitely recorded as 1641. Our plans for the first season included investigations at the church, with the hope that we might begin work in the pre-Hispanic buildings as well.

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 end of the great lagoon leaves no doubt that this was the site on which we were to begin work. The name is variously recorded as

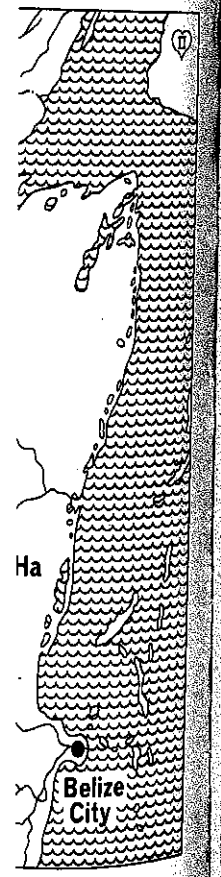
Lamanay and Lamayna; given the Spaniards' lack of linguistic expertise, it is most probable that the name was Lamanai. This is one of a very few cases in which we know the original name of a Maya site and are not forced to concoct one. We also know the probable meaning of the name: in Mayan, *laman* means drowned, and *ai* 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 turn a spadeful of earth for archaeological reasons, though, we had to put shovels, machetes, chainsaws, and other equipment

to work to build the camp. With twenty Maya men to clear the camp site and assemble materials for the construction of thatched buildings, we soon began to make a dent in the forest, though at considerable cost. As it turned out, the spot chosen for the camp was reasonably level, and free of ancient construction, but the trees which clothed it were enmeshed in the heaviest tangle of vines I have ever seen.

Days of hacking, tugging, and dragging finally resulted in the clearing of a good-sized patch of land, and we began to create a camp designed to last a decade or more. Everyone worked with a will, and by late April most of the construction was finished or well on its way to completion. As soon as a small crew could be spared from the building 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 perhaps fifteen more vessels.





The second structure investigated in 1974. About 17 feet high, it has little except its shape to identify it as an ancient building.

The camp construction was not all drudgery without any archaeological return, however. As the building progressed we began to clean the area thoroughly and found amazing quantities of archaeological 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 spindle 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 area 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 headaches (and backaches) of 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

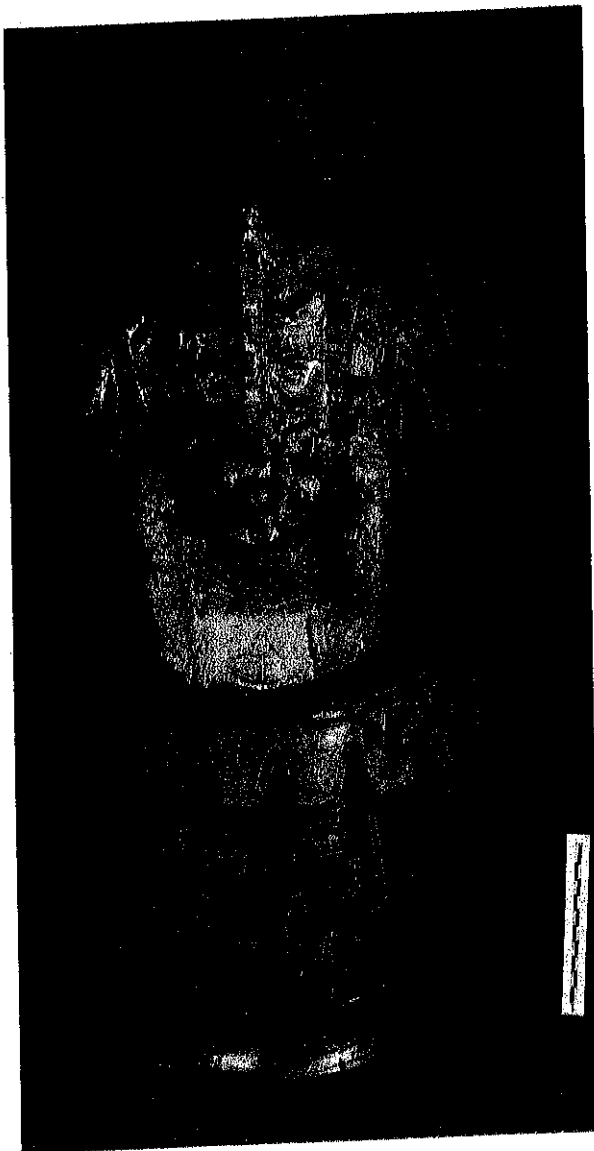
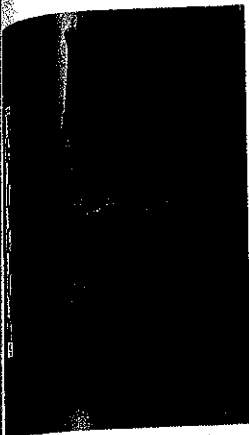
Upper left: A black shape typical of 13th-15th centuries A.D. Paravessels and other objects accompanying a first structure investigated.

Upper right: This mound contained 13 pieces of pottery, the only offering construction on the site shown on page 3. Context suggests a 13th century date.

Lower right: This censer, its interior coated with bright red pigment, was one of the largest burials shown on the site. This form common at the site, possibly unique.

Lower left: An offering censer found in the burial pit.

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Upper left: A blackware jar of a shape typical of the 13th and 14th centuries A.D. Part of a group of vessels and other artifacts accompanying a major burial in the first structure investigated in 1974.

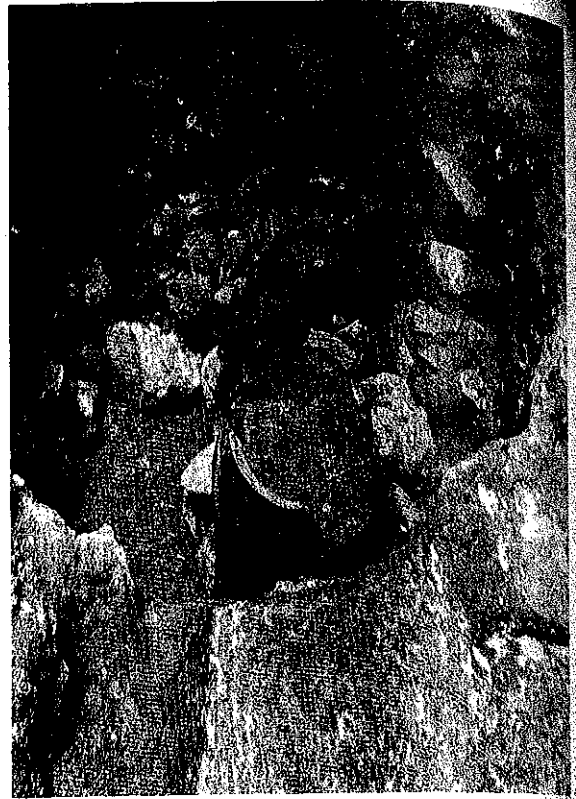
Upper right: This redware bowl contained 13 pieces of chipped flint, the only offering from the final construction on the large structure shown on page 38. Its shape and context suggest a 14th or early 15th century date.

Lower right: This giant redware censer, its ringed effigy decoration coated with brightly painted stucco, was one of the three vessels in the burial shown on page 38. Dating from the 13th or 14th century A.D., it is of a form common at Lamana'i, and possibly unique to the site.

Lower left: An effigy from another censer found smashed and scattered in the burial pit shown on page 38.

The richest burial thus far discovered at Lamanai, this 13th-14th century interment included three giant censers (one buried intact in the foreground, the other two smashed at the opposite side 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 14th 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 Yucatán Peninsula, and provided the basis for dating the burial.

Further excavation in the small structure revealed another, earlier burial, this time not housed in a huge 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-15th 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 1641, 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 stones within the rooms came chains, spikes, sheet metal, and huge quantities of the castoffs of non-conservation-minded metal-users. Perhaps the church had had some Spanish spikes in its timbers, or some other bit of metal here and there, but I doubt that we

can now sort such pieces out of the six sugar sacks of ironmongery which adorn our lab. I had some words for the sugar people, probably ill-suited to the church atmosphere in which we were working, and certainly not repeatable here.

Although the results of work within the church were a disappointment in some ways, they were also of great interest for what they revealed about the post-abandonment history of the building. According to the Spanish records, the Maya who destroyed the church fled westward to Tipu, a famous contact-period centre not yet identified archaeologically. This may have been so, but at least some of those who fled later returned to live in the church, depositing domestic debris within the rooms and outside the walls. In addition, our first trenching below the floor level in the centre room revealed a burial and several offerings, all of which must postdate the burning of the church, and probably represent

use of the building in the second half of the 17th century. Though it is hardly impressive, this late material is as significant in its way as that from earlier centuries recovered from buildings near camp.

To return to the camp area: with work on the small structure completed, we turned our attention to its neighbour on the west, a mound without any exposed architecture and with a surface seemingly composed entirely of boulders. Most of the rest of the season was spent on this structure, and by the end of July we had penetrated just beyond the midpoint of its height, with most of the work concentrated in a central trench. The cut revealed a sequence of late Post-Classic construction involving what appear to be at least six major modifications. Most of the modifications are of forms not previously recorded in the Maya area, but unfortunately we know little more than this, as each unit was extensively razed before it

was capped with additional construction. Despite the gaps in the data, however, the sequence represents the greatest volume of architectural information yet recovered from Post-Classic contexts in the Central Maya Area.

In addition to the architecture, we encountered one large offering of burnt material, including quantities of corn and beans, something of a rarity in the humid tropics, where perishable materials are usually preserved only if charred. The offering was part of dedicatory activity, which is to say that it was made on top of the razed remains of one structure before construction was begun on the overlying building. Through most of the construction sequence, the dedicatory activity luckily also included burials, of which we now have ten. Most of the individuals were interred with pottery vessels, and it is these plus sherds from building core that tell us the age of the construction. Like the ceramics from the small struc-



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 Lamanai 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 Lamanai 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 Lamanai with areas both within and outside the Maya region. Together with other materials, the bell suggests that Lamanai 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 Lamanai 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. Lamanai is, in fact, the first site in the Central Maya Area to yield evidence of rich and elaborate development in the Post-Classic.

That Lamanai 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 Lamanai may have facilitated continued contact with northern Yucatán, and hence with the

influences which motivated Post-Classic peoples. At the same time, Lamanai may have had some special significance which made such contacts desirable for the seafaring traders of Post-Classic times. The distribution and characteristics of the buildings at Lamanai 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 Lamanai, 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 Pendergast joined the ROM in 1968 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.*