A Face from the Past

A Jade Mosaic Mask from Lamanai

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After the ROM's excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, came to an end in 1970, we turned our attention to the larger, and in some ways more complicated, site of Lamanai, just 40 km farther inland, where we began work in 1974. When I was considering the possibility of excavating at Lamanai, I knew only one thing about the site: it was the only Maya centre in the lowlands of Guatemala and Belize which boasted a Franciscan church. Built about the 1570s, the church at Lamanai continued in use until 1641, when the Maya parishioners turned apostate, burned the wooden and thatch parts of the building, and fled westward. Obviously there must have been a considerable community at Lamanai in the 16th century, for no religious order constructs a church where there is no congregation. Hence it seemed likely that Lamanai had been occupied in the centuries following the fall of Classic Maya civilization around A.D. 900. If this proved to be so, Lamanai could be the first site in the Central Maya Lowlands to yield any significant amount of information on those intriguing Post-Classic times.

Our first two seasons of work produced results far beyond my expectations, showing that Lamanai was not just occupied during the Post-Classic, but was probably a centre of major political and economic importance in the centuries. Until 1976, much of our effort was concentrated on excavating small buildings and the church itself (see "The Church in the Jungle", Vindula Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 32-40), but in the season just past we turned to one of the larger structures at the site, popularly known as "Lip". (This rather dignified designation for what I have on record as Structure N10-9 was bestowed by student mappers, in honour, if that is the word, of the government L.I.P. programme.)

Some of our struggles with Lip's twenty-metre-high, rather complicated mass of architecture have already been outlined in a ROM Archaeological Newsletter (No. 132, May 1976), but it was not until after that writing that we began trenching into the core of the building, a process that remained incomplete at the season's end in July. The trenching was designed to give us information on early elements in the architectural sequence, but it has also brought to light some extremely interesting offerings, all of which include jade, that great Maya ceremonial wealth item. One of the offerings, the most striking and significant of the three recovered thus far, is the subject of this brief glimpse at the results of the third season of our eight-year programme at Lamanai.
By mid-season, we had carried out enough excavation on L1 reveal a single primary structure which several additions of varying size and complexity had been made. At first glance, Lip does not appear markedly different from other Maya structures, with a series of terraces and large front steps. It is, however, outside the "standard" pattern in one major respect: it lacks a chambered masonry building at its summit. Presumably, the level surface at the top of the structure once supported a pole-and-thatch building or some other form of impermanent construction which ceremonies were carried out in but no evidence remains to support this assumption. What is clear is that the Lamanai architect was up with a novel means of adding masonry building in later times. Cutting away a portion of the central stair, they placed a two-story structure athwart the sole route to the top of Lip, adding small steps at the building's back to provide access to the summit.

Once we had sorted out the sequence of this and later additions, we were in a position to begin examining the heart of the structure. Such examination involves cutting trenches into the core of the building, in the hope that earlier construction may be exposed beneath the cleared area. In addition, there is always the possibility that the trenching will bring us to a ritual or an offering which may contain materials helpful in dating the construction. For Lip, this possibility was a critical one, as Lamanai lies in an area previously known archaeologically, and its architectural style therefore provided no firm clues as to its time of construction. And so, in addition to other probing, we opened a large trench along the structure midway where offerings are most likely to be found. Fortunately, in one section at least, the totally ruined condition of all the stair below the two-story building allowed us to excavate without fear of damaging the façade.

Initial work within the rooms of the building, and in the area...
In the rapidly diminishing light which marks the quick transition from day to night in the tropics, we began to build a new back for the mask. Over the jades we poured a layer of melted wax, in which strips of cloth were then placed. Additional layers of wax and cloth followed, until we had a solid, if rather attractive, new back, to which we could only hope that all the pieces of jade would adhere. Now that the mosaic was protected from the elements, we were free to place cover over the area and leave the mask overnight, to allow the wax to harden completely. On the following day, some careful brushing and cleaning, accompanied by the feeling of anticipation which always comes at the last, critical moment, brought the mask out of the ground with only minor dislodgement of pieces at the edges and around one eye.

As removed from its matrix, the mask is approximately 19 cm high and 13 cm wide. It is made up of nearly one hundred pieces of jade, almost all of them carefully shaped, but only those of the cheeks, nose, and mouth seem to have been specially formed for these spots. A number of pieces, about one-fifth of the total, were discovered out of their original positions during excavation. While the pieces which came away as the mask was lifted could be replaced without great difficulty in their wax sockets, those found out of place posed a

Opposite page: The mask as it looked in situ, cleaned of dirt and ready for rebacking.

Below: The lip structure seen from the plaza on which it fronts, with the season's excavation just under way.
more serious problem. The mosaic may have extended around the sides of the original backing, and there may have been some mosaic-covered areas on the reverse as well. With the decay of the backing, which was probably of wood, and with flattening caused by the pressure of overlying soil and stone, the jades on the sides and back came to lie atop the remainder of the mosaic, their original positions forever lost. For the rest, however, placement of the mask face-down resulted in relatively little distortion of the arrangement of the pieces of jade and the shape of the obverse surface, so that the face as we see it now has very much the appearance it had centuries ago.

With a few exceptions, the jade of the mask, while generally well polished, is not of particularly high quality. As always in the Maya area, the term “jade” embraces materials which may have a very low jadeite content. Most of the jade in the mask is in fact a mixture of jadeite and albite, which has a less intense green color than many of the elaborately carved pendants and other major pieces. But for the Maya, it was not minralogy that mattered. Any stone with even a tinge of green was of ceremonial importance, whether carved into a pendant or shaped into the elements of a mosaic. To the value inherent in the green color was added the labour of designing the mosaic and shaping the individual pieces of jade, and, above all, the ceremonial significance of the mask. Like many of the carved pendants, the mask probably represents some figure from the series ranks of Maya deities. Its importance is indicated by the fact that it was the sole object in an offering, whereas most offerings were composed of several artifacts.

For the portions of the face not easily depicted in jade, the artisans employed other materials. Teeth are represented by two sections of pearly white shell with incised vertical lines, while the whites of the eyes are made of pieces of the same shell, and the pupils are obsidian discs. The overall effect is not that of a portrait, but we are most certain that the mask intended as a representative individual. The face, sensibly male, but neither upbridged nose (a character in all Maya depictions of huipilognomy) nor any other feature identifies the god portrayed. The appearance of youth, or at least a certain absence of any signs of age, marks the Lamanai mask with signs from Tikal which are thought to represent the Maize God or God in his youthful aspect. Dyson-Nagy, “Mosaic Finds on Tikal”, Archaeology Vol. 3, No. 2 (pp. 64-69, 1966). The forehead is covered by the green of the eyes, and the eyes themselves appear to be the same age of the mask. The surface is uncertain at best. While jade mosaic objects are common in the ancient repository of artifacts, most recorded specimens are disc shaped. The exceptions are recorded pendants or ear ornaments. The latter may have gone unnoticed because they were recovered from jumbled pieces of vases or other objects. It seems clear that among the known specimens there are some similar in size to those at Altun Ha (“Jigshe”, Rotondo Vol. 3, No. 2 (pp. 64-69, 1966)). There are also a very few fragments of the entire head, such as specimen Tikal. The latter are free-standing and may have been parts of a larger object like the Altun Ha specimen. It is probable that these objects were used in the same manner as mosaic disc-shaped objects.

Of the larger masks, a few are of which approach or exceed life size in two are alike. Some, like the mask from the Ruiz Tomb, are undecorated, with the clear, clear lines, including the Lamanai specimen and one from Tikal. The dresses are more complex; despite the variety in size and features, it is only at the larger masks, like
like that of a portrait; but we can be almost certain that the mask was not intended as a representation of an actual individual. The face is undeniably male, but neither the high-bridged nose (a characteristic of all Maya depictions of human physiognomy) nor any other feature identifies the god portrayed.

The appearance of youth, or rather, the absence of any signs of age, may link the Lamanai mask with specimens from Tikal which are thought to represent the Maize God or the Sun God in his youthful aspect (H. Moholy-Nagy, "Mosaic Figures from Tikal", Archaeology Vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 84-98, 1966). The fertility symbolized by the green of jade makes either of these identifications plausible, though the ground on which we are treading is uncertain at best.

While jade mosaic objects are not uncommon in the ancient Maya inventory of artifacts, most of the recorded specimens are discs or plaques, probably intended for use as pendants or ear ornaments by the priest-rulers of Maya society. Some masks may have gone unrecognized because they were recovered in piles of jumbled pieces that confused all attempts at reconstruction, but it is clear that the total number of such objects was never great. Among the known specimens are some similar in size to that recovered at Altun Ha ("Jigsaw in Jade", Rotunda Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 842), and there are also a few depictions of the entire human figure, such as specimens from Tikal. The latter are free-standing, and may have been altar-pieces, while objects like the Altun Ha specimen probably served the same purpose as mosaic discs and plaques.

Of the larger masks, a few of which approach or exceed lifesize, no two are alike. Some, like the famous mask from the Ruz Tomb at Palenque, are undomed, while others, including the Lamanai specimen and one from Tikal, have headdresses ranging from simple to highly complex. Despite the variety in form and features, it is obvious that the larger masks, like their smaller counterparts, were ornaments, not meant to be worn on the face. In some instances, as in the Lamanai specimen, the size is too small to permit use as a true mask, and all lack the eye-holes and other apertures necessary if the wearer was not to make a quicker trip than intended down some flight of temple steps.

As rarity contributes to the interest value of the Lamanai mask, so also does the possibility that it can serve as a basis for dating the construction in which it was found. With the notable exception of the Palenque mask, which dates from about A.D. 700, all datable mosaic masks and representations of the human figure from the Central Maya Lowlands appear to fall between A.D. 400 and A.D. 550, in the latter part of the Early Classic period. There is always the possibility that the mosaics, like many pendants and other objects of jade, had acquired the status of heirlooms before they were deposited as offerings or grave goods, but data from Tikal suggest that the century-and-a-half span in the Early Classic covers time of manufacture as well as interment. A date within this period for the stair in which the Lamanai mask was found fits with what we know about the age of later elements in the structure; sherd content from terraces built after the stair indicates a date in the 7th century A.D. or later, and another offering from a context contemporaneous with the stair is probably of Early Classic date.

While the mask now reposes in Belize, we hope eventually to be able to bring it to the ROM, where the Conservation Department staff can be saddled with the task of replacing dislodged pieces and constructing a permanent new backing, making the adjustments necessary to compensate for the slight distortion which occurred as the original backing disintegrated. When this work is done, we shall be better able to appreciate fully a rare and truly striking example of the aesthetic and technical achievements of the jade worker in ancient Maya society.

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