

Opposite page: The jade mosaic mask discovered at Lamanai last year, after removal from the site and cleaning. The teeth and eyes are of pearly shell, and the pupils are obsidian.

Left: The "Lip" building, where the mask was discovered, near the end of the 1976 season. At this stage, the stair trench had reached a level well below the discovery site of the mask, which was near the base of the uppermost terrace.

# A Face from the Past

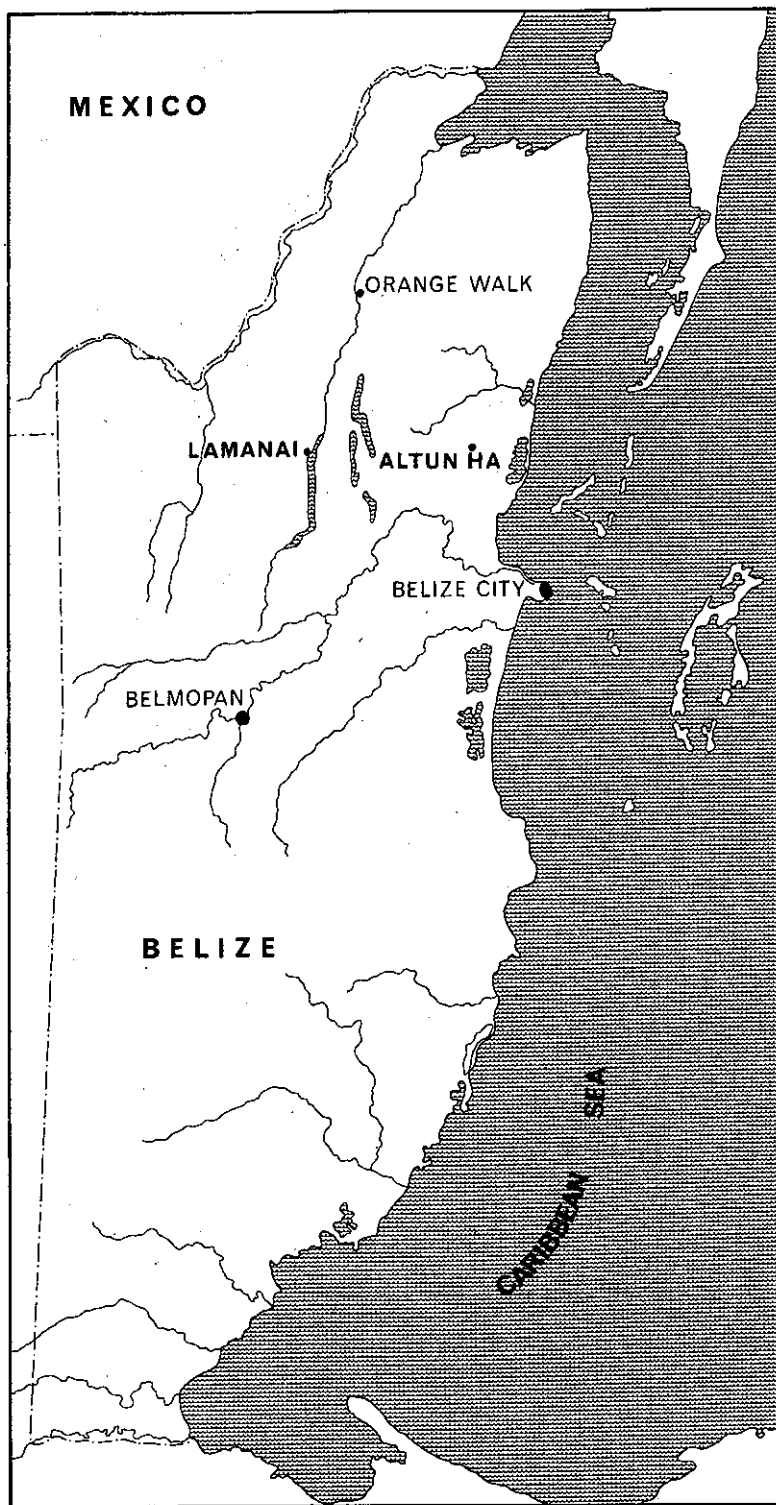
After the ROM's excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, came to an end in 1970, we turned our attention to the larger, and in some ways more complicated, site of Lamanai, just 40 km farther inland, where we began work in 1974. When I was considering the possibility of excavating at Lamanai, I knew only one 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 would 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 it was probably a centre of major political and economic importance in those centuries. Until 1976, much of our effort was concentrated on excavation of small buildings and the church itself (see "The Church in the Jungle", *Rotunda* 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 undignified 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.

## A Jade Mosaic Mask from Lamanai

David M. Pendergast



By mid-season, we had carried out enough excavation on Lip to 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 its series of terraces and large front stair. 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 type of impermanent construction in which ceremonies were carried out, but no evidence remains to support this assumption. What is clear is that the Lamanai architects came up with a novel means of adding masonry building in later times. Cutting away a portion of the central stair, they placed a two-room structure athwart the sole route to the top of Lip, adding small side stairs 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 examination of 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 burial 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 almost unknown archaeologically, and the 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 midline, where offerings are most likely to be found. Fortunately, in one sense at least, the totally ruined condition of all the stair below the two-room building allowed us to excavate without fear of damaging the façade.

Initial work within the rooms of the building, and in the area immediately

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 unattractive, 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 a cover over the area and leave the mask overnight, to allow the wax to harden completely. On the following day, some careful brushing and tapping, accompanied by the feeling of trepidation 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 those 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.*



Right: The Lip structure, late in the season. The trench through the stair is in the area where a stump can be seen projecting from the face of the building, above and behind the workers.

Below: Jade mosaic mask from Tikal. Though more elaborate than the Lamanai specimen, it was constructed in the same manner, and is probably of similar date.



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 colour than many of the elaborately carved pendants and other major pieces. But for the Maya, it was not mineralogy 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 colour was added the labour of designing the

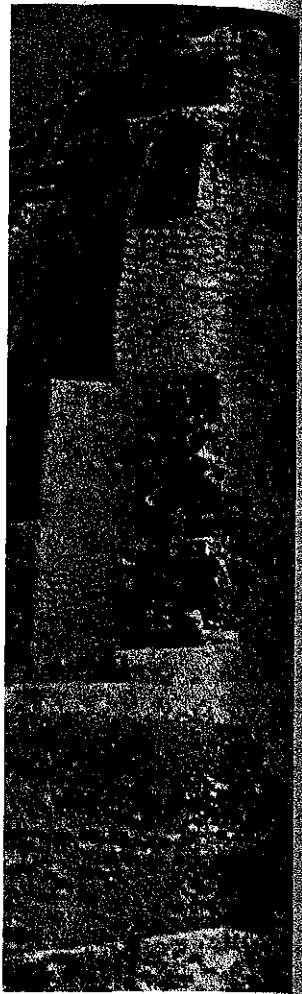
mosaic and shaping the individual pieces of jade, and, above all, the ceremonial significance of the mask. Like many of the carved pendants, the mask probably represents some figure from the serried ranks of Maya deities. Its importance is indicated by the fact that it was the sole object in an offering, 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 pearlescent 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 un-

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 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, link the Lamanai mask with specimens from Tikal which are thought to represent the Maize God or Sun God in his youthful aspect. Moholy-Nagy, "Mosaic Figure from Tikal", *Archaeology* Vol. no. 2, pp. 84-89, 1966). The feature symbolized by the green of makes either of these identifications plausible, though the ground on which we are treading here is uncertain at best.

While jade mosaic objects are uncommon in the ancient Maya inventory of artifacts, most of the recorded specimens are disc-shaped plaques, probably intended for use as pendants or ear ornaments by the priest-rulers of Maya society. Such masks may have gone unrecorded because they were recovered as piles of jumbled pieces, defied all attempts at reconstruction, but it is clear that the number of such objects was not great. Among the known specimens are some similar in size to the recovered at Altun Ha ("Jigsaw Jade", *Rotunda* Vol. 3, No. 2, 38-42), and there are also a very 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 disc-shaped plaques.

Of the larger masks, a few which approach or exceed life size, no two are alike. Some, like the famous mask from the Ruz Torul, Palenque, are unadorned, while others, including the Lamanai specimen and one from Tikal, have head-dresses ranging from simple to highly complex. Despite the variety in form and features, it is obvious that the larger masks, like



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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 jeweler in ancient Maya society.

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, and has recently completed seven years of excavation at the site of Altun Ha. At present he is directing the fourth season of excavations at Lamanai, where the ROM expects to continue work through at least 1981.

