The Old Man and the Moon

A 14th-Century Figurine from Lamanai

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Over the years the excavations at Lamanai in northern Belize have turned up a huge store of objects from ancient Maya life, many of them of kinds previously unknown in the area (see "The Church in the Jungle", Rotunda 8:2, 1975, pp. 32-40; "A Face from the Past", Rotunda 10:1, 1977, pp. 4-11; and "An Ancient Maya Dignitary", Rotunda 13:4, 1981, pp. 5-11). In the 1981 season we began work on a great complex of structures just at the back of our camp, and here as elsewhere we encountered quantities of new information on the occupation of Lamanai from the 10th to the 15th century, and even earlier. We had bypassed this area in earlier...
seasons because of its singularly unattractive appearance; with nothing save masses of boulders visible on the faces of its many platforms, it seemed a most unlikely prospect for excavation. This year, however, we decided to have a look at a small rise on top of the largest platform, and as a result we are now engaged in what could become a task stretching over the two remaining years of the Lamanai project.

By mid-season we had begun to reveal structures buried beneath the masses of boulders and to clear a large complicated residence at the west side of the main platform (see "Lamanai 1981: A Regular Three-Ring Circus", ROM Archaeological Newsletter No. 192). The roof and upper walls of the house were probably constructed of poles and thatch, so that all we have left are the wall bases and the floors of numerous rooms and courtyards. There is also evidence of a staggering number of alterations and additions to the original structure. At its north end the house once boasted a courtyard bordered in part by small platforms that may have supported other residences. In the courtyard and at all other sides of the house lay masses of refuse, the residue of an age that knew nothing of green plastic bags and twice-weekly visits from massive trucks.

The refuse surrounding the house gives us myriad insights into the lives of the building's occupants, though we are often left with almost as many questions as would face an archaeologist attempting to unravel the skeins of our lives by sorting through those plastic bags. Mixed in with the most recent part of the courtyard deposit, which dates from
The figurine's true identity is still a matter of debate. While it is generally agreed that the figure is a young girl, the specific identity has been the subject of much speculation. Some have suggested that she is a representation of the rain god, others propose she is a fertility symbol, and yet others argue for a role as a celestial being. The ambiguity of her identity adds to the richness of her imagery, allowing for multiple interpretations depending on the context.

The figurine's costume is notable for its intricate details, particularly in the headdress and the headdress on his head, which is often decorated with shell and other elements, reminiscent of the elaborate headdresses worn by the Tikal Maya. The shell on his head is generally associated with the sun god and other deities associated with fertility and the cosmos.

The figurine's true significance lies in its ability to convey a complex set of meanings through its physical attributes and the context in which it was found. Its presence in a ritual setting, possibly as part of a larger burial or offering, suggests a role in the religious and ceremonial life of the Tikal Maya.

The figurine is a testament to the creativity and skill of the Tikal Maya artists, who were able to create such detailed and symbolic works. Its study continues to provide insights into the beliefs and practices of this ancient civilization.
have marked most or all Maya deities, Ixchel was the moon and, at the same time, goddess of procreation, of the earth, and of water. This last association presumably linked the goddess to the marine shell symbol, and by extension both she and the shell came to be associated with birth. Thus the goddess's realms and symbols overlap those of God N, and their joint appearance begins to look more logical than the difference in their ages makes it seem.

God N, as an aged Bacabs, was linked with the sky he helped support and so shared this sphere of the world with the Moon Goddess. At the same time the shell, symbol both of water and of the nether regions of the earth, bound both deities to these other two principal realms of the environment; thus the pair may have been a dual embodiment of the complete universe. Because God N cannot be said to have held dominion over the sky in the same manner as did the Moon, he might seem the less important member of the pair were it not that he appears much more frequently in Maya art than does Ixchel. Probably we should see the two as equal, and view their union as a doubly strong metaphor in Maya religious thinking.

Though there is a fairly clear theological basis for the pairing of the two deities, the explanation for the seemingly erotic nature of their union is a bit more elusive. The possible interpretations of the gods' pairing are legion, but the procreation/birth symbolism associated with Ixchel and presumably extended in part to God N through the shell symbol suggests that the scene may be a metaphor for creation or re-creation. The shell may reinforce the meaning through its association with water and hence, in

Left: God N emerging from a shell, height 8.8 cm. From a 15th-century A.D. offering at Lamanai. (Drawing by Louise Christianaon)
Maya religious logic, with fertility. Perhaps the Moon Goddess, whose celestial embodiment was renewed every twenty-eight days, is revitalizing the aged God N through their union while they are jointly engaged in renewing the forces of nature. There was surely once a tale in Maya mythology that explained the scene, but in its absence we can only propose an explanation for which, unhappily, no solid proof can be offered.

The Lamanai figurine does not add to our meager store of knowledge about the union of the Old Shell God and the Moon Goddess, but it does tell us something about the importance of that union in Maya belief. The figurine's presence amidst domestic refuse and its simplicity of manufacture show that it was a household object. The form of the base suggests that the piece was intended to be set on a table or bench or perhaps on a domestic altar. At any rate, it is clear that by the 14th century the pair of deities had made their way into the homes of the Maya, whereas earlier their depictions were seen mainly on the public ceremonial stage. While the existence of the Ixchel-God N pair in the home may reflect changes in religious practice, it must also show how deeply the significance of the couple ran through Maya life.

The Lamanai piece may be the latest representation of the paired deities that has been found in the Maya Area, and is evidence that the conjoined gods maintained their importance as much as eight centuries after their earliest known appearance in Maya art. Sadly, the symbolism constituting that importance, together with so much of ancient Maya culture, has failed to survive the centuries; we are left with only the simple little figurine to show that Ixchel and her aged shell-bound lover once held sway at Lamanai.

David Pendergast, Department of New World Archaeology Curator, is seen here with his wife, Elizabeth, excavating an offering at Lamanai, where he has been directing work since 1974. The ninth season of the project is now under way, as the second volume of his final report on the Altun Ha excavations goes to press and the third nears completion. Volume 1 of Excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, 1964-1970 was published by the ROM in 1979.