

# *Lamanai, Belize: An Updated View*

DAVID M. PENDERGAST

One of the expectable results of long-term intensive investigation of a single site is that the understanding of events in the community's history will change, often significantly, from year to year. This sort of change is exemplified by the contrast between our knowledge of ancient Lamanai as presented by Stanley Loten after six seasons of excavation, and the knowledge we possess now, after completion of ten seasons of fieldwork. Because the picture of the Postclassic given in 1979 lacked several critical pieces that have been supplied by subsequent excavations, an update of that presentation seems desirable if readers are to be able to assess the full significance of Lamanai data to reconstructions of lowland Maya life from the tenth through the seventeenth century.

Among the facets of Lamanai's history about which little could be said in 1979, perhaps the most important, both to our view of internal dynamics at Lamanai and to our perception of the broad lowlands patterns of Postclassic development, is the transition from Classic to Postclassic. While Loten quite correctly alluded to the sense of both continuity and discontinuity that suffused the Lamanai data as of 1979, excavations of the past three years have strengthened the evidence for continuity to such an extent that the distinction between Classic and Postclassic has become as difficult to make on typological grounds as it is to fix temporally. It is now clear that the period traditionally seen as a time of decay and collapse was marked at Lamanai by construction and other activity on a scale at least equal to that in preceding centuries. During the period, which encompassed roughly the mid-ninth to early twelfth centuries, we can see what in fact we should expect in any functioning society: the maintenance of traditions alongside innovations, the sort of blending of old and new that is essential to orderly development.

Concentration in 1981 and 1982 on an assemblage of elite resi-

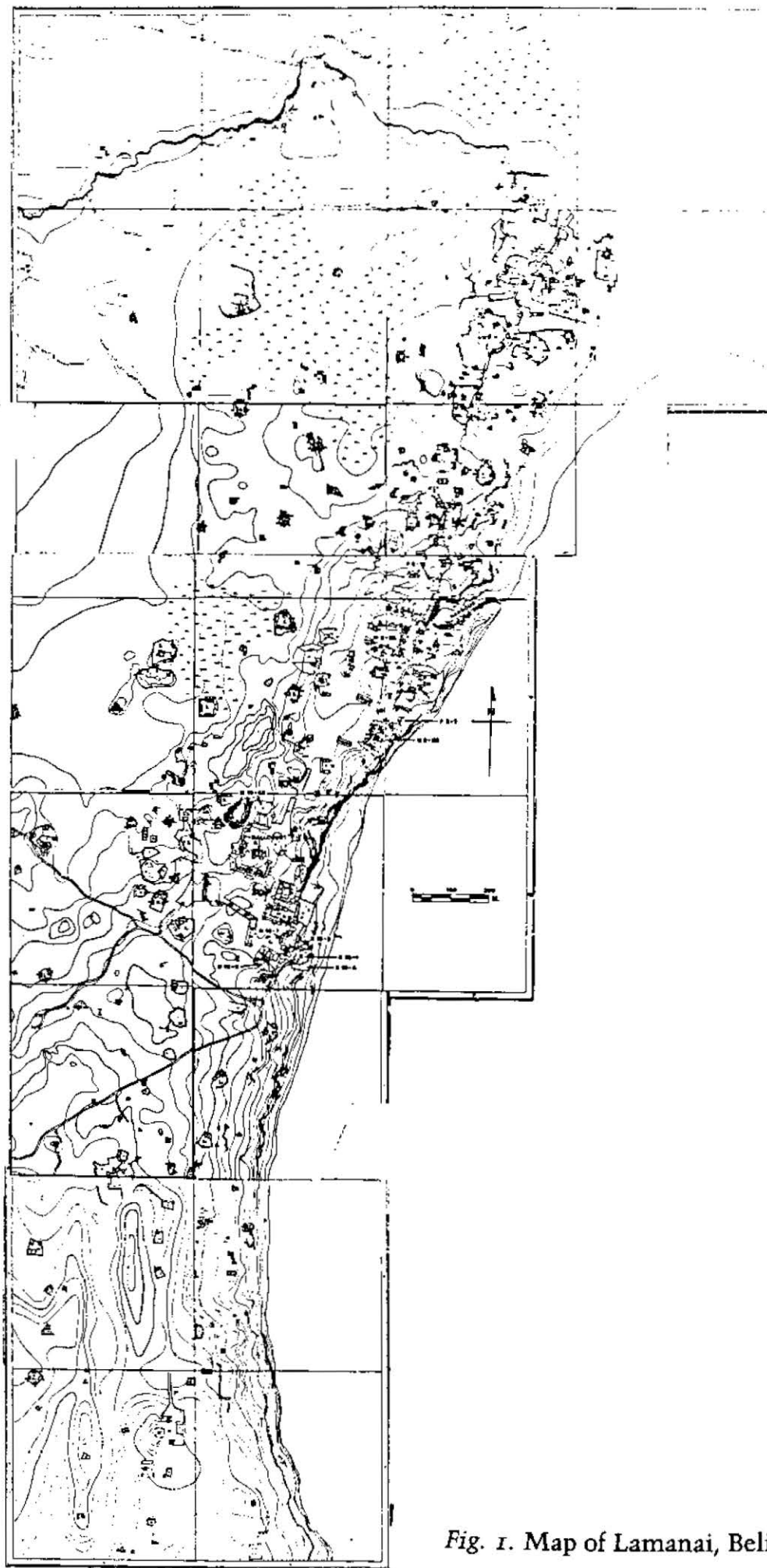


Fig. 1. Map of Lamanai, Belize.

dential structures (Plaza N10/3) north of the plaza bordered by Structures N10-7 and N10-9 (fig. 1), combined with examination of small-structure groups elsewhere in the southern portion of the site center, has given us a reasonably clear picture of domestic life in the transition years. This was a time in which, as Loten notes, the traditions of Classic ceremonial architecture were largely giving way to forms and techniques foreign to earlier centuries. In contrast, domestic architecture of the period is in most respects a continuation of earlier traditions, although with innovations both in form and in facade treatment that are of significance to our perspective on Postclassic building in general.

In its mid-ninth-century form, the elite residential group consisted of at least six structures, two of which appear to have rested directly on the surface of a large underlying platform, while the remainder were raised on two-terrace platforms. The three structures that formed the western end of the group had the distinction of sitting atop an unusual triple joined platform, a feature that prefigures Postclassic construction in northern Yucatan, but not at Lamanai as far as we are now able to determine.

An additional anticipation of Postclassic construction, both at Lamanai and elsewhere, may be present in the form of a partly colonnaded structure at the northwest side of the group, built during an extensive alteration of the assemblage in the late ninth or early tenth century. It is obviously impossible to characterize either the joined platform or the colonnade in terms of functional relationship to similar features found at other sites, especially as colonnaded buildings are known to occur in the Classic in northern Yucatan as well (Roys and Shook 1966: 5-11). The Lamanai features stand, rather, as part of the pattern of overlap and innovation that was clearly one of the community's strengths from Late Classic times onward.

At the northeast side of the assemblage is Structure N10-28, probably the last major addition to the group, constructed about A.D. 925-950. Plan and exterior surface features suggest that the structure did not serve as a dwelling, but rather may have functioned as a semipublic element in the group, perhaps with a combination of secular and ceremonial use. The structure originally boasted a highly elaborate upper zone, decorated with modeled stucco with very rich polychrome painting. Portions of the front panel of the upper zone stucco were recovered in 1981 from beneath core for later construction that concealed the partly demolished structure; these indicated that the decoration had included larger than life-size human and/or deity figures, set amidst panels of latticework and curvilinear motifs.

In 1982 we encountered most of the panel from the building's

west side, dumped between the structure platform and the building immediately to the west. Conditions of recovery permitted reconstruction of significant portions of the panel, including a large center cartouche that contains a seated human figure. The excellent preservation of painted surfaces has enabled us to discern an extremely wide range of colors, among which are deep red, lighter red, pink, deep green, medium green, light green, light and dark yellow-green, yellow, dark blue, medium blue, light blue, blue-green, and black. Some, but not all, surfaces are highlighted with specular hematite, and a number of areas exhibit changes in modeling and in color in one or more additions. Although full reconstruction of the panels is not likely to prove possible, the material even in fragmented state constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of iconography and color symbolism in Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic Maya society.

In addition to its iconographic content, the general form and many of the individual motifs of the upper zone decoration permit the linking of this facade sculpture to examples from the Terminal Classic at Altun Ha (Structure E-7, 1st; Pendergast, n.d.b) and Seibal (J. Sabloff, personal communication, 1982). The appearance of such decoration in the early tenth century at several lowlands sites suggests an attempt at a strong visual restatement of religious precepts, perhaps in the hope of recapturing some of the vitality that had been lost in the preceding century or two. Though the contexts at Lamanai and Altun Ha differ in some respects, they both suggest a shifting of focus away from major temples as media for the expression of religious values, perhaps as part of the abandonment of large-structure modification in the northern and central parts of Lamanai's Central Precinct. In any event, the hopes bound up in the elaborate tenth-century stuccoed facades came to nought at other lowlands sites, while at Lamanai this new sort of public, or semipublic, iconography can be seen as part of a successful bridging of the transition period from which the community emerged with its strengths largely intact.

Perhaps almost contemporaneously with the erection of the stucco decorated structure came construction of the lone ballcourt at Lamanai, in a plaza north of the residential complex (fig. 1). Whereas the stucco facade seems a combination of introverted and extroverted approaches to the visual affirmation of faith, the ballcourt cannot have failed to be a fully public ceremonial statement, albeit in a setting that may already have been characterized by buildings in various states of neglect or decay. Together with the scale and nature of the construction, the presence of mercury, possibly from a Hon-



duran source, in an offering beneath the center marker disc (Pendergast 1982b: 533, fig. 2) bespeaks the importance of the undertaking in the ceremonial life of Lamanai, just as it documents a trade link between the site and the Maya highlands.

Offerings in the elite residential complex, as well as midden dumped around a highly complicated dwelling (Structure N10-15) immediately west of the stucco decorated structure, add materially to the picture of persistence of Terminal Classic ceramic forms and surface treatments well into the Postclassic. This pattern is duplicated in small-structure groups both in the southern and in the northern suburbs, where we can see Terminal Classic vessel shapes in Classic wares, alongside San Jose V shape and surface treatment classes (fig. 2a-2g), accompanied by entirely new forms. Outstanding among the introductions that were joined with typical San Jose forms are remarkably tall blackware cylinders (fig. 3a and 3b) which, like some other ceramics of the period, seem to have had very short use spans. The ceramic data reduce the utility of some San Jose V vessel types as restricted time markers, but at the same time they tell us a great deal about the interplay of continuity and change in tenth- and eleventh-century pottery making.

In addition to data on the longevity of some ceramic techniques in the transition centuries, Structure N10-15 has yielded an almost unmanageably large body of information on a dwelling of the ninth to eleventh centuries that saw a greater number of modifications than any we have previously examined. While many of the alterations and additions to the building took standard forms, later changes were very frequently a matter of demolition followed by reconstruction of a bench, doorway closure, or other feature that duplicated what had just been destroyed. The data seem a persuasive argument for modifications dictated by ceremonial considerations rather than by practical necessity; this is something one can assume for earlier times as well, but its seeming intensification in the transition years might be seen as part of the increasing internalization of ceremonial practice suggested by other evidence.

Following the last modifications to the various structures in the elite assemblage, the entire two-level courtyard on which the buildings fronted was filled as part of an undertaking that transformed the multifaceted group into a single huge platform, atop which sat only a few single-terrace platforms that appear to have supported perishable structures. The courtyard filling, apparently begun in the late tenth century and carried on over as much as two hundred years thereafter, seems to have been part of a major reshaping of a large area that extended from the residential group northward to the south

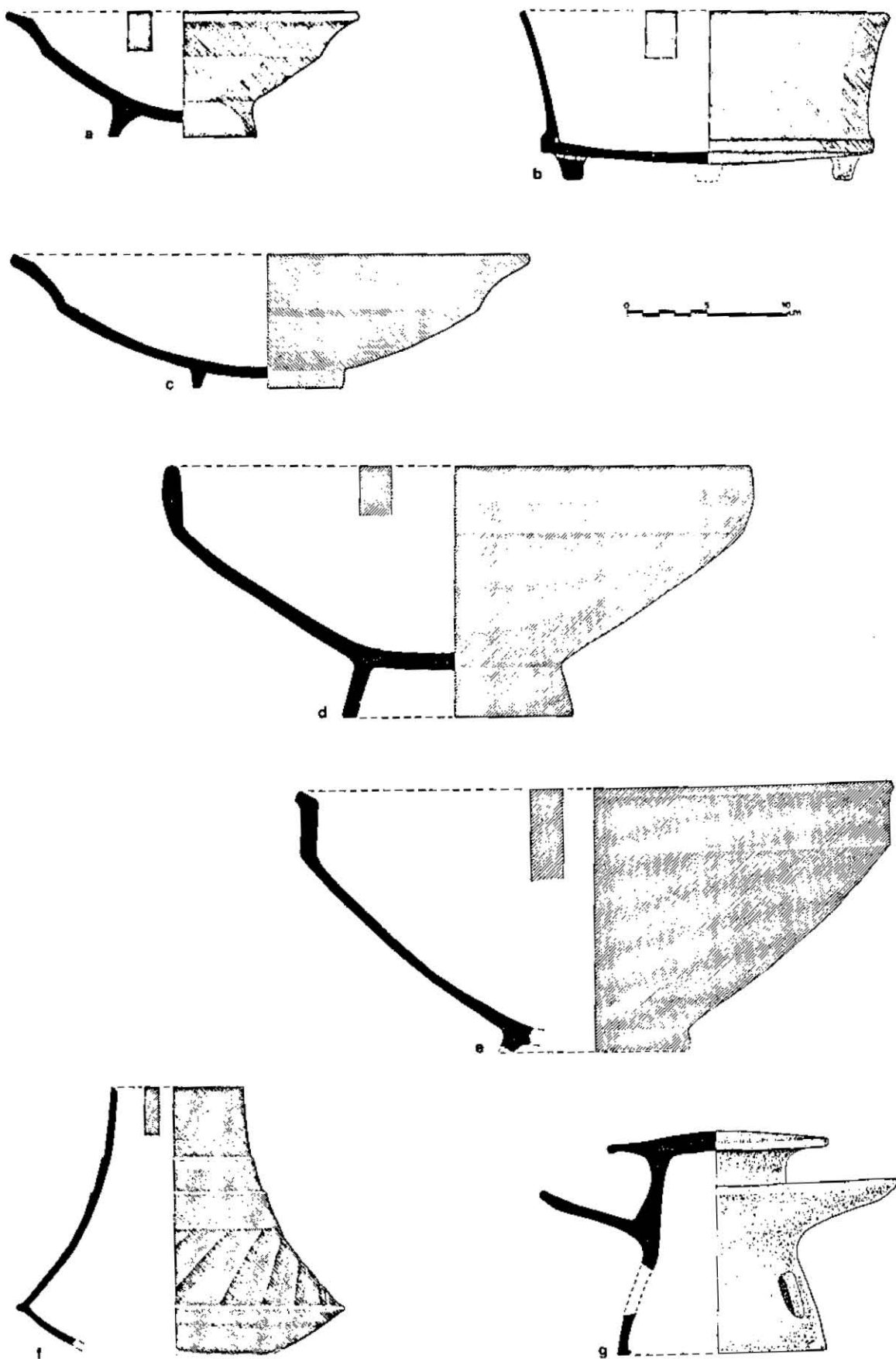


Fig. 2. Terminal Classic vessels from burial, cache, and surface contexts in the northern suburbs and southern site center. Vessels a-e are typical San Jose V forms; f is a variant of the San Jose V "bottle"; and g is a specialized "fire platform" from an offering in courtyard fill of Plaza N10/3.

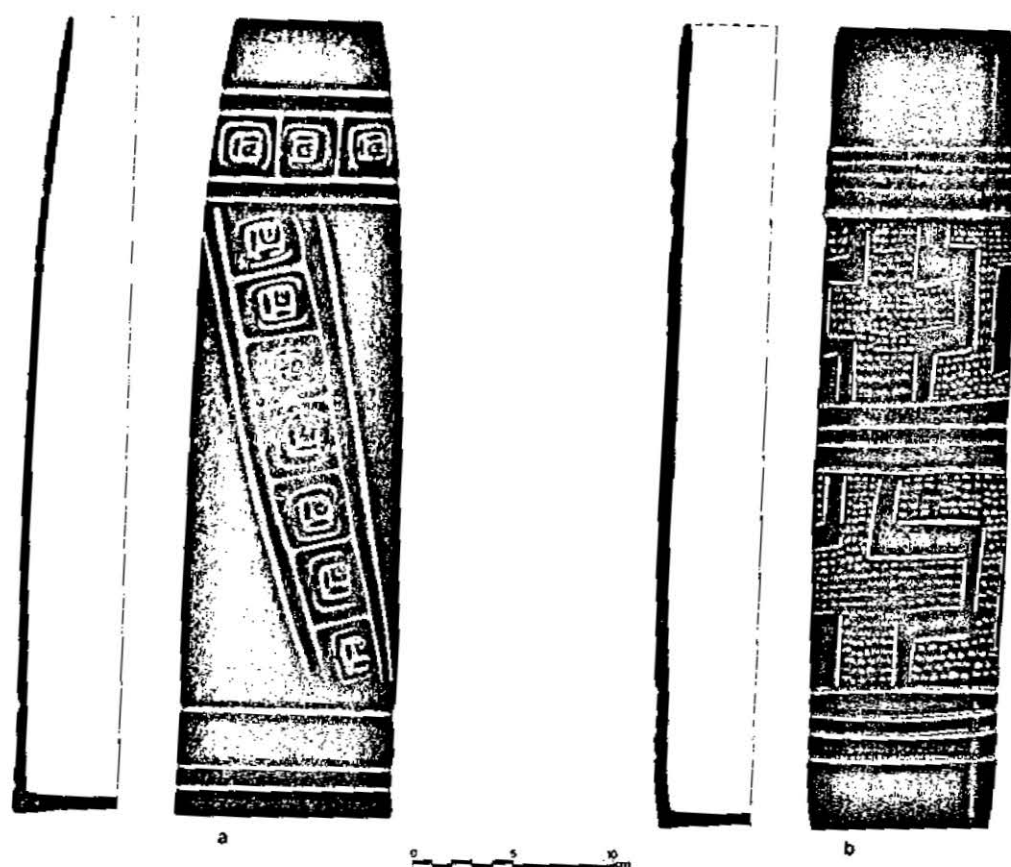


Fig. 3. Terminal Classic cylinders from small-structure burials near Structure N10-9 (a) and in the northern suburbs (b).

side of the plaza that contained the ballcourt. If all of the complex platforms in this area are in fact contemporaneous, as their forms and construction suggest, this tenth- to twelfth-century transformation of the southern site center embodied approximately 21,000 metric tons of core stone. This was clearly the work of a fully functioning community, and it probably exceeded the scale of any individual large construction effort of earlier times at the site.

By the twelfth century, the elite residential assemblage had been completely altered, but still served as the dwelling place for families whose rank in the Lamanai community we cannot judge at present. The occupants of houses here probably contributed to the large midden mentioned by Loten, which closed off the east side of the plaza south of the residential complex (fig. 1) and engulfed part of the base of Structure N10-9. The huge quantities of pottery from the midden appear to be of twelfth century and later date, but close checking of vessel fragment distribution in the meter-deep mass has shown that, as one should expect in a refuse accumulation, there is no stratigraphic basis for separating portions of the deposit, nor is there any solid evidence on the time depth represented.

The presence of the midden certainly indicates diminution of ceremonial activity related to N10-9, although the last major frontal modification of the structure occurred in the twelfth century or later, and minor construction at the base of the building's center stair continued until perhaps as late as the fifteenth or early sixteenth century. By or before the twelfth century, the principal focus of ceremonial activity in the site center had shifted to the area described by Loten (Structures N10-1, B10-2, and B10-4; see fig. 1), where it was apparently to remain until late in the Postclassic. At the same time, ceremonial and residential construction, as well as a range of non-construction activities, continued in various parts of the Central Precinct where abandonment of major buildings had taken place in Terminal Classic or Early Postclassic times.

By the mid- to late fifteenth century, the center of domestic life at the south end of the Central Precinct seems to have been the lagoon littoral, south of the abovementioned ceremonial structures. The margin of the lagoon is marked by an extensive midden as much as 50 centimeters deep, accompanied by burials that appear randomly placed at present, but were probably associated with small, perishable residences. The presence of unquestionably nonresidential construction beneath the midden documents a change in use of the lagoon edge from Classic to Postclassic; similar changes are in evidence in portions of the site center to the north and west, where domestic use of formerly ceremonial areas was revealed in 1983 excavations. In the absence of Middle and Late Postclassic residential data from the western suburbs of the site, we cannot judge whether the shore area and neighboring material represents concentration of the bulk of Lamanai's population along the lagoon in the southern site center during the Late Postclassic; however, evidence recovered in 1983 suggests a strong lagoon-side focus for both domestic and ceremonial Postclassic life throughout the southern portion of the site.

By the time of establishment of the littoral residential area in the southern site center, all modification of N10-9 may have ceased. Yet in the vicinity of the N10-9 plaza, and within the plaza itself, ceremonial construction of a moderately ambitious nature was under way. At the plaza center, a large, low platform was constructed, perhaps to support a perishable structure; near its south end stood a small platform, its facings of masonry typical of the period, with a core deposit of fragments of a very large number of Mayapan-related figurines and censers. Accompanying this construction was a pair of stela platforms, just west of the old elite residential complex. The two platforms duplicated the masonry style of the plaza area struc-



ture, and the core of one likewise yielded large quantities of Mayapan-related ceramics, as well as a portion of a near life-size stone mask of which a second fragment was recovered from the small plaza structure.

Each of the two platforms supported an uncarved stela, but it is not clear whether the monuments were produced as part of the construction process or were relocated, as were several Classic monuments (Pendergast 1981a: 51). The platforms are clearly part of the continuing Postclassic focus on the south end of the site center. Though unimposing, they document the interest of the fifteenth-century Lamanai inhabitants in maintaining the traditions of earlier times, and the ability of the community to marshal the labor force necessary to translate that interest into concrete form.

While the southern portion of the site was the primary focus of activity in the Postclassic, other parts of the site saw intermittent ceremonial activity, some of which has previously been described (Pendergast 1981a: 51). Construction at the base of Structure N9-56 (see fig. 1) is characteristic of the Late Postclassic, and vessels recovered from core of the main platform in the group (fig. 4b-4i) confirm the dating. Viewed against the background of events at the south end of the site center, the northern construction can perhaps be seen as a small scale attempt to revive former foci of ceremonial activity outside of the main Postclassic zone. The attempt was considerably above the level of pilgrimages to abandoned centers, such as may have occurred at Altun Ha just before this period (Pendergast 1982a: 140), though the ruined state of buildings like N9-56 must have given the effort some of the appearance of just such a journey.

In the northern suburbs of the site, excavations in 1980 and 1981 revealed late Postclassic construction of residences and related structures, over and around buildings of Preclassic and Classic date, just beyond the northern limit of the Central Precinct. Work farther north in 1981 showed abandonment of a residential complex not later than the end of the eleventh century, with no subsequent construction or reuse of any structure. This may indicate general abandonment of the northern suburbs early in the Postclassic, with reoccupation centuries later only in limited areas nearest the site center. The data now in hand do not permit judgment as to whether the northern settlement was functionally separate from the southern one, but ceramics from the structures (fig. 5c) make it clear that inhabitants of the north were not entirely cut off from the ceremonial practices of their southern confreres.

South of the Central Precinct, in the area of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish-dominated community (see fig. 1), re-

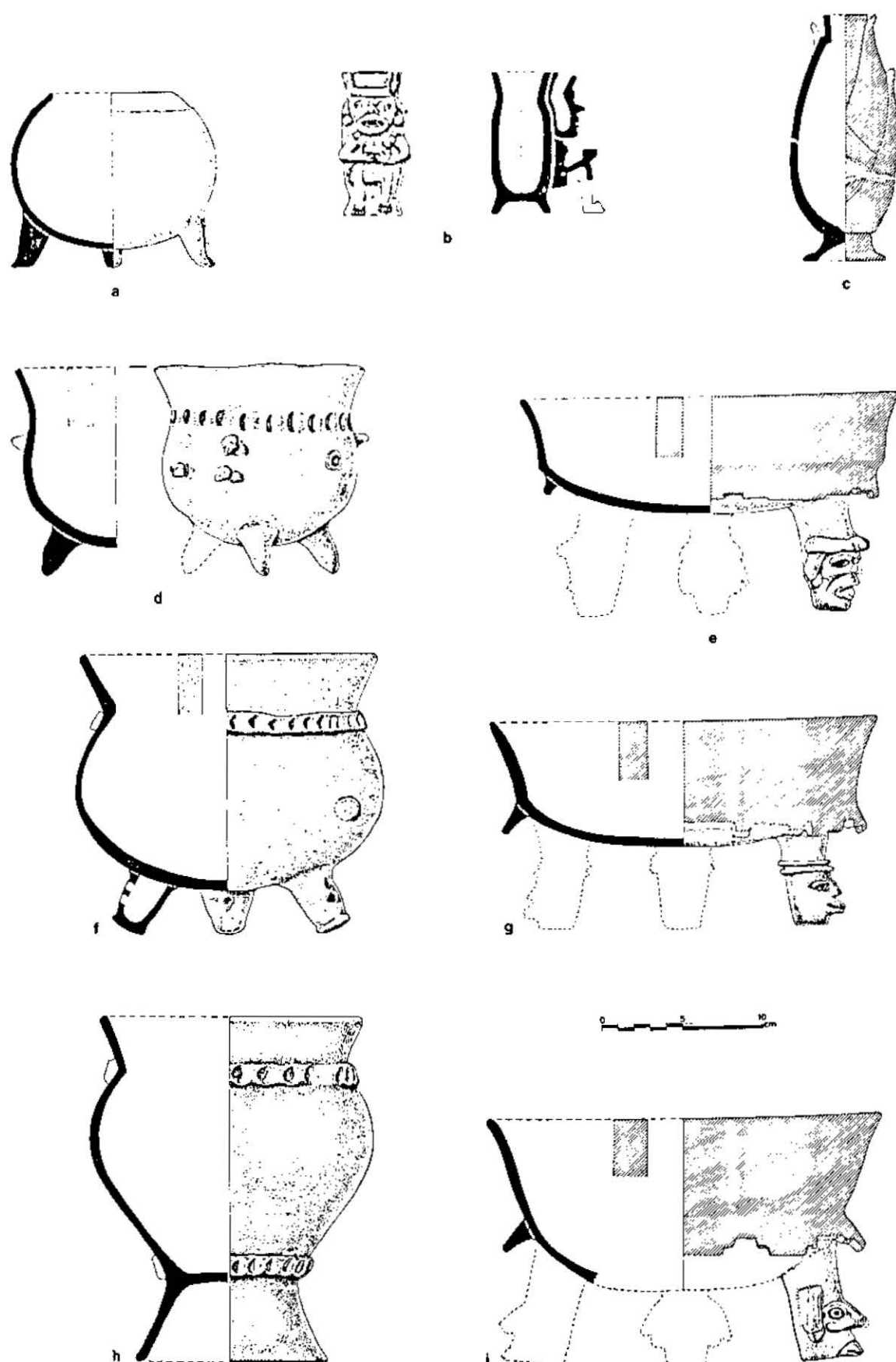


Fig. 4. Late Postclassic vessels from offerings in the core of platforms at the base of Structure N9-56.

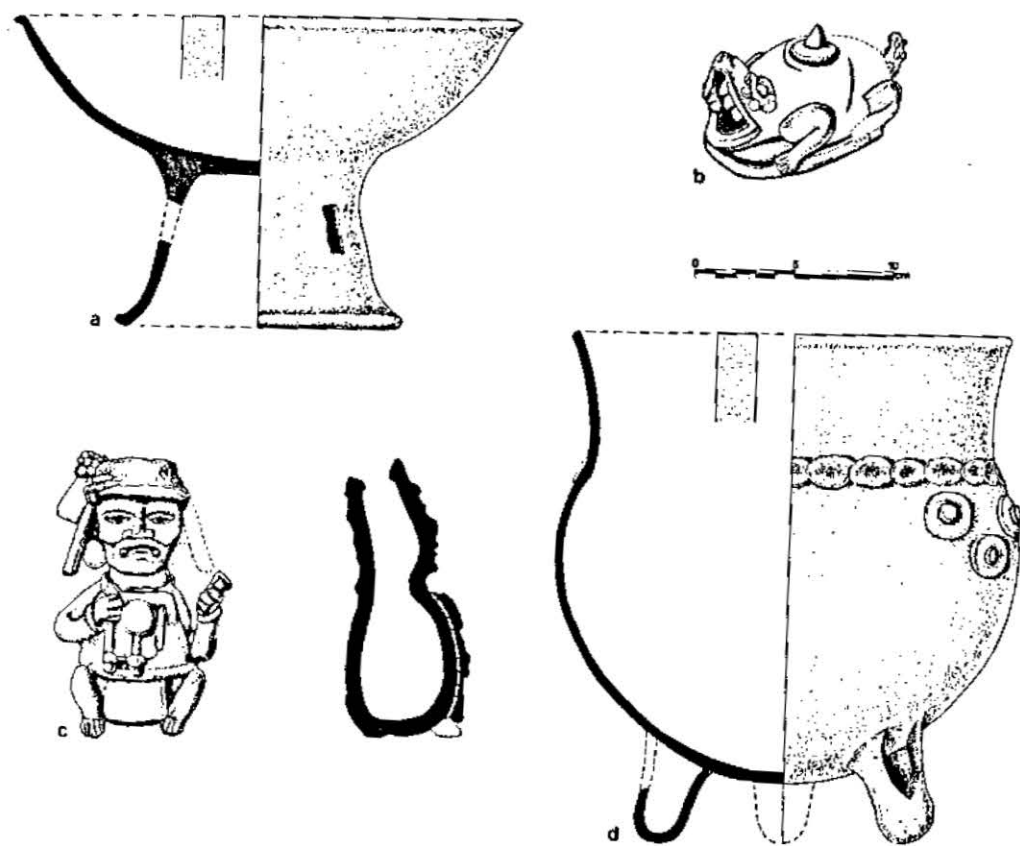


Fig. 5. Late/Terminal Postclassic vessels from an intrusive burial in a late Plaza N10/3 structure (a), an offering in a northern suburb residence (c), and post-A.D. 1641 vessels from a substela cache (b) and deposit through the chancel floor (d) at the church.

cent investigations have expanded our understanding of events at the close of the Postclassic and in the first century of the historic period. Excavations in 1982 and 1983 have revealed the existence of two Spanish churches, the earlier of which closely resembles that at Negroman-Tipu, in the western Cayo District of Belize. Archival evidence indicates that the earlier church is likely to date from A.D. 1568 (G. Jones, personal communication, 1983); the later, much more impressive structure may therefore have been built near the end of the sixteenth century. Within the platform of the first church are the remains of a Tulum-style structure that was demolished in preparation for construction of the Christian edifice; plaster from a similar structure, found in a great spread west of the sanctuary of the later church, indicates that at least two ceremonial structures stood on the site of the Christian churches, and presumably served as an important focus of Late Postclassic activity south of the Classic site center.

The church area has also yielded an impressive number of his-

toric period offerings, as well as at least one burial and one small shrine that must, from their contexts, postdate abandonment of the later church in 1641. The materials document continuing ceremonial activity in the ruins of the church, related to residential use of the building that followed its desecration. Loten has referred to the apparent impossibility of distinguishing ceramics of this period from those of immediately preceding centuries, and reconstruction in 1982 of a vessel recovered earlier from a deposit cut through the church floor (fig. 5d) underscores the prehistoric–historic continuities in pottery manufacture. No terminal date can be assigned to the domestic use of the church, but it is very likely that occupation and ceremonial activity extended to at least the end of the seventeenth century.

Investigation of the structure at the north side of the later church has substantiated the Middle Postclassic or later date expectable on grounds of proximity to the aforementioned Tulum–style structures; unfortunately, the ministrations of Dr. Gann to the building left us with no clear evidence regarding use of the platform, though midden at the structure's perimeter certainly documents domestic use in Late Postclassic and/or early historic times. Here and elsewhere in the church area we have recovered considerable numbers of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Spanish jar sherds, as well as one fragment of a shallow bowl or dish. Maya-Spanish contact is otherwise not in evidence in the archaeological record save for a single European glass bead, probably of early historic date, recovered by a local settler during posthole digging in a platform that we have not been able to investigate. Burials from the earlier church, which now number more than 110, have thus far yielded very little cultural material, none of which could be securely identified as historic were it not for the context. The principle that applies here is the same as that recognizable in the case of ceramics from the later church: separation of late prehistoric and historic materials may prove impossible except in those cases in which context resolves the problem.

As I said at the outset, it is to be expected that continuing excavation will broaden one's perspective on a site's history. I have summarized here only the principal areas of knowledge of the Postclassic in which such broadening has occurred since Loten's presentation. While an increase in breadth does not necessarily foster an increase in understanding, it seems to me that discoveries since 1979 have gone a long way toward turning isolated collections of data into something that approaches a coherent picture of the Postclassic at Lamanai. From that picture we can begin to draw inferences regarding the lowlands Postclassic as a whole. One such infer-

ence may be that we should begin to view events at Lamanai as one of the several alternative courses followed by the Maya in Post-classic times, rather than as a marked aberration in the otherwise standard progression from the heights of the Classic to the depths of collapse. The experiences of the past few seasons at Lamanai should, however, teach caution in the drawing of inferences, whether within or beyond the site. We can expect that the changes in our understanding of the community's history that have occurred as a result of recent seasons' work will be paralleled by equally significant alterations of our wisdom as the excavation program enters its final stage, and that the picture of Lamanai life we are ultimately able to present will differ in many particulars from that outlined here.