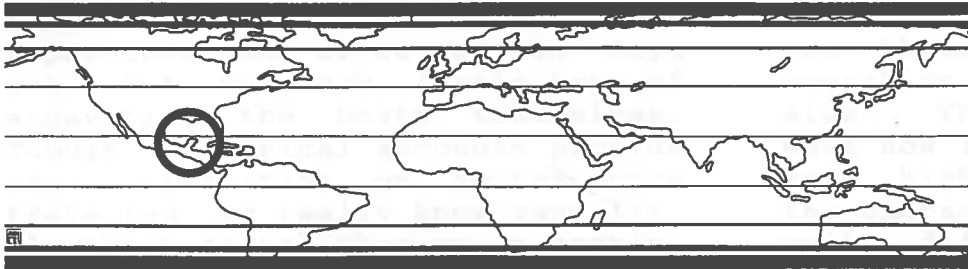


# ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER



The Committee for Field Archaeology  
 Royal Ontario Museum  
 100 Queen's Park  
 Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C6

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Series II No. 18, January 1987

## CAYS TO THE KINGDOM

Elizabeth Graham and David M. Pendergast, *New World Archaeology*

The ancient Maya never formed a kingdom in the Arthurian sense. However, it is probably correct to say that there were, throughout prehistory, a number of coexistent kingdoms that rose and fell in the jungle lowlands. Offshore, the tiny islands, called cays (pronounced "keys"), that are strung out singly or in clusters through Belize's coastal waters truly opened doors of trade and communication for the mainland communities that would otherwise have remained shut. Any sustained access to the denizens of the reef would have been restricted, and the nature of maritime sojourns would have been different and perhaps more arduous, without these numerous sea-girt spots at which one could stop, rest, fish, or trade.

Fishing stations were established on some cays as early as 300 BC, and the presence of the cays certainly helped the Maya to maintain dominion over the barrier reef and its teeming fish population. The reef also provides a measure of protection for the Belize coast. Depth of water over the reef barely reaches 30 feet, and is often much less; the calm inside

the reef contrasts strongly with the rolling seas beyond, and the shore bears no resemblance to that of our wave-battered Maritimes.

In ancient times, Belize's blue-green waters were dotted with bright white, turtle-back islands covered with grasses, palmetto, mangrove and sea-grape, punctuated occasionally by stands of mainland trees wherever the Maya left behind enough organic refuse to permit them to grow. There were no coconut palms to sway in the windward breezes; this remarkable fruit was yet to come from the Far East with 16th-century seafarers. Maya fisher-folk must have made do with oils from other palms, or from the fat-rich manatee. Around the islands one can imagine canoes of all sizes, some with sails and some without, wending their way to and from the coast, steered by fishermen or traders and their families. Some are loaded with dried fish, others with produce from the mainland such as processed corn or dried fruit, or with pottery or woven cloth. Others have luxury goods such as jade or feathers, or raw obsidian, chert, or granite for the production of stone tools.

Do we have evidence of all this? Yes and no. There are representations of canoes in Maya art, but we have little hope of excavating the boats themselves. Though historical accounts provide some information on routes once travelled, we really know very little about travel then or in prehistoric times. But the recent focus on Belize's cay sites is yielding a wealth of information on the extent and intensity of island exploitation which helps us to envision the panorama of Maya prehistory not as a single scene, but as a series of overlapping frames, with people and events changing through time, and society re-integrating as conditions altered.

Our most recent archaeological work has focused on a site in swamp at the southern tip of one of Belize's best-known vacation spots, Ambergris Cay, not far south of the town of San Pedro. The small mangrove-ringed site, known as Marco Gonzalez, contrasts strongly with the mainland city of Lamanai, where we have recently completed thirteen years of excavation. Any one of the major civic and ceremonial buildings at Lamanai would cover most of the habitable surface of the cay site. In fact, all of Marco Gonzalez would fit neatly into one of Lamanai's larger plaza groups.

Despite its comparatively small size, Marco Gonzalez is no less interesting than Lamanai. So far, there seem to be about 2000 years of prehistory condensed in its 355 x 185 m area. The earliest material, from about 300 BC to AD 300 or so, lies below present sea level. This is because, according to Drs S.J. Mazzullo and Al Reid, geologists who have been studying

the cay's geomorphology, sea level has risen about 60 cm in the past two thousand years, accompanied by accretion on the island's windward side. This means not only that what now lies immersed in water was once high and dry, but also that the character of the site was once quite different, and the habitable zone was likely open to windward breezes, though protected by a narrower beach front than now exists.

We have little from the earliest times except pottery to tell us that people were at least present on the cay, but from AD 300-500 we have a wide range of crockery--storage jars, bowls, painted dishes and vases--as well as the remains of floors, platforms and burials to suggest that the site was utilized fairly intensively, and may well have supported year-round occupation based largely on exploitation of marine resources. How much the site may have served as a trade station, we cannot yet say, but the variety in vessel forms and surface treatments suggests access to a range of ceramic-production centres, most of which must have been based on the mainland, though we have not yet ruled out the possibility that some pottery was made on the island.

From the pottery and the presence of obsidian and chert, we can envision an early Christian-era community actively involved in networks of communication and exchange that extended to several places on the mainland--a community that was very probably one of many scattered over the cay. We know from other excavations conducted by Graham at cay and coastal sites farther south that the period from at least AD 100 to 300 was a time of flourishing coastal trade, and the evidence

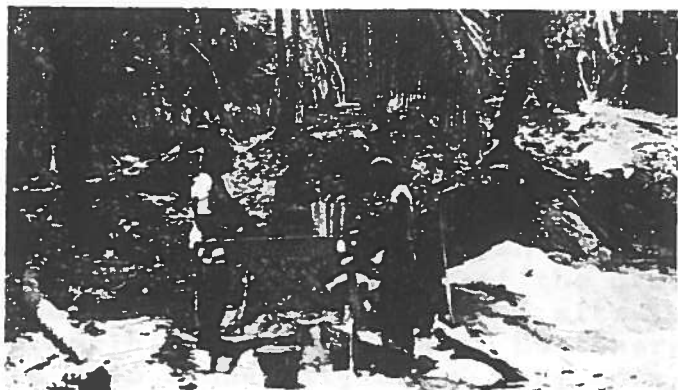


Figure 1. Digging and screening in progress at a partly looted 13th - century platform.

from Marco Gonzalez shows us, not surprisingly, that Ambergris Cay shared in the hubub of the times.

The most remarkable discoveries at the cay in 1986, however, concern not the early years but the 10th through the 13th centuries. The cay was certainly occupied in the intervening years, and between AD 600 and 800 it appears to have served as a site for the collection and processing of salt. The saltworking is indicated by thousands of sherds from rather crudely made but uniform vessels that are very likely to have been used in evaporative extraction of salt from sea water.

Salt processing apparently diminished after about 800, but nevertheless we have evidence of an expanding, prosperous and substantial community in the years between about AD 1150 and 1300. Every one of the site's 45 structures yielded evidence in the form of surface sherds, or through excavation, of construction or use at this time, and the quantity of pottery is no

less than staggering. Ceramics occur densely packed in refuse heaps along with shells and fish bone, in construction deposits, and in offerings. What is of greatest interest to us is that the ceramics are so similar to those from Lamanai. The range of forms, the incised decoration, and the slip colours and treatments are like the pottery from Lamanai, but identical matches are rare; this suggests that shared cultural norms rather than direct trade were responsible for the similarities. Clearly, Marco Gonzalez was a flourishing community at a time when Belize was once thought to have been meagrely occupied due to the repercussions from the collapse of the great centres of lowland Guatemala.

In contrast with the multi-terraced, stone-built platforms, temples, and civic buildings at Lamanai, the structures at Marco Gonzalez are comparatively low platforms of earth, shell and stone faced with reefstone (coral) blocks. Atop the platforms once stood thatched houses, many of which were apparently large and multi-roomed. Refuse abounds around the platforms and rings the site, and it is from the piles of conch shells and dense concentrations of fish bone that we hope to be able to learn something about the kinds of marine resources exploited, and perhaps the ways in which fishing was carried out.

We know from burial evidence, offerings, and the nature of their refuse that the people of Marco Gonzalez maintained ties with communities farther afield than Lamanai. Slate-ware pottery ties the site to northern Yucatan; the presence of what is known as plum-bate pottery points to trade with

Guatemala and probably El Salvador. A bat-effigy vessel, recovered from the grave of a middle-aged woman, is strikingly similar to four other plumbate vessels: one vessel comes from the site of Copan, in Honduras; the others come from sites in central Mexico, southern Mexico and El Salvador. Much of the grey and black obsidian from the site is from highland Guatemala, but there is also a quantity of a very distinctive green obsidian from the Valley of Mexico, almost 1300 km away. Clearly the period from AD 900 to 1300 and later was a time of wide-ranging contacts, in which Marco Gonzalez shared very fully.

From the period after AD 1300 we have an offering from the uppermost stratum of one of the site's larger buildings that included a large jade celt of abstract human form. The crude effigy vessel that accompanied the celt, and others found in fragments over the debris of the building's stair, are known, from comparison with vessels from other sites in Belize such as Lamanai and Tipu, to have been made from the late 15th century to the Historic period. There is other evidence of 15th-century or later activity; the visible construction characteristics of several cleared but unexcavated buildings are identical to those of 15th-century or later structures at Lamanai. Though the evidence so far is slim, it is almost certain that use of Marco Gonzalez extended into Historic times.

Our 1986 effort included test excavations only, and we hope to return soon to excavate Marco Gonzalez more extensively. Unfortunately, looting of the site has been intensive. It is our hope that the tide of looting can be



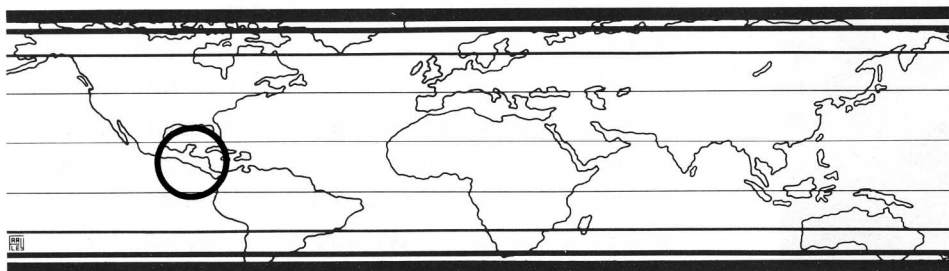
Figure 2. Footed bowl with appliqué figure, mid-15th century or later; diam. 27 cm.

stemmed for long enough to give us an opportunity to raise the funds needed for our return to a site that is far more important than we imagined when we began last season's probing.

What we have at Marco Gonzalez is Maya prehistory in microcosm; good things can certainly come in small packages. Sites such as Lamanai tell us about the organization of cities, the nature of hierarchies, and a society's pacts with its gods. Communities such as Marco Gonzalez tell us about the smaller-scale, but equally important, workings of Maya civilization: the ways in which environmental resources were exploited; the character of coastal interaction; how men and women made a living and raised children in specialized circumstances; and how both the conditions and the adaptations to them changed through time. In this respect, the offshore islands are indeed keys to the Maya kingdom, and in their way will tell us at least as much about how Maya life actually operated as would the excavation of the most impressive temple pyramid.



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*Editorial* On July 23rd we were informed that in the interest of budgetary economies our Membership Department would no longer be offering the Newsletter as an optional benefit of membership. In other words, the Membership Department will no longer be contributing to the cost of publishing the Archaeological Newsletter. Decisions such as this are being made throughout the ROM these days, as the institution's belt continues to tighten. We have already shrunk from 12 issues per year to six, each of which now costs approximately \$1500. to produce and distribute; with Membership support shorn away we have only half the \$9000. necessary for the six issues. Unless some source of funds emerges outside the museum we shall have to cease production of the Newsletter in March, just short of the 26th anniversary of the May, 1965 first issue. We are saddened to see the series approaching its demise, especially in view of the fact that \$4500. is not a huge amount of money. Much as I want to tell you otherwise, I have no alternative at the moment but to inform you that this is the third from last report you will receive on the ROM's archaeological fieldwork.

*David M. Pendergast*  
 David M. Pendergast

Series II No. 41, November 1990

AN ISLAND PARADISE (??): MARCO GONZALEZ 1990

David M. Pendergast and Elizabeth Graham, Department of New World Archaeology

Take one well-to-do family, establish it in a manse for 350 years or more, give its members the usual human penchant for remodelling, and you will have a tangled architectural history of the family's fortunes. Add to this mixture a range of non-standard building materials, abandon the building for almost seven centuries, and throw in the vicissitudes of a tropical climate. Now bring a team of archaeologists onto the scene and set them the task of excavating the remains of the manse and making sense out of

the family's history, and you have the 1990 York University/ROM Marco Gonzalez Project on Belize's Ambergris Caye.

The beginnings of the Marco Gonzalez Project in 1986 (*Archaeological Newsletter* Series II, No. 18) told us that there was a great deal to be learnt about ancient Maya life on the caye not only from excavation but also from a variety of environmental studies. This year we decided to attack the matter on both fronts, so



**Fig. 1:** Smoke rises on all sides as another workday begins on Structure 14

the team engaged in marine survey and botanical collecting as well as digging. Luis Godoy, a Belizean from Succotz, and Cathy Yasui, then from McGill, helped to supervise the excavations. Anne MacLaughlin of the ROM, together with Cathy, contributed the major portion of the architectural draughting. Josh Wright, from Vassar, joined the remainder of the Belizean contingent in uncovering the various levels of enigmatic buildings. Lori Wright, from the University of Chicago, supervised the lab processing of the human skeletal remains. Kitty Emery, from the University of Toronto, designed and carried out (with Lori when she tired of bones) a marine catchment survey to provide resource availability data for comparison with the archaeological sample. Finally, Terri Aihoshi, from York, ran the lab and carried out ethnographic work.

The hazardous botanical collecting was Cathy's job. She faced the worst plague of mosquitos we have ever experienced in Belize, as well as superabundant chechem (poison-wood), to which she is especially susceptible. Out in the bush and in the excavations we were all surrounded by smoke from burning termite

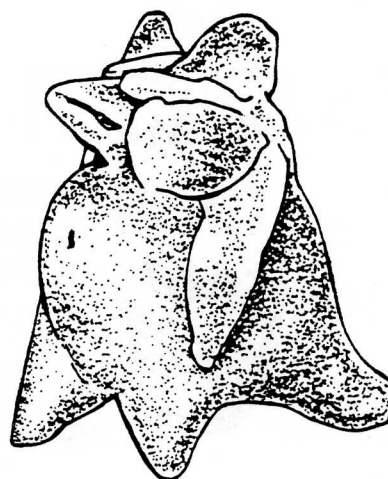
nests. The acrid smoke was our best protection against the humming hordes, but a hazard to eyes and lungs that leaves some of us suffering even now. Luckily these unpleasant working conditions were more than offset by the excavation results.

Our 1986 work focused on Structure 12, an apparent residence with a complex history that extended from perhaps A.D. 750 to the mid-sixteenth century. We planned to expand the work on 12 in 1990 and also to probe Structure 14, which abutted 12's west side. The relationship between the two buildings suggested that 14 might have been an adjunct to 12, possibly added late in the site's occupation. With this in mind we set out to determine 14's type, period of use, and relationship to its neighbour. This can usually be done by a combination of lateral clearing and trenching, and because of the relatively small size of 14 we hoped to have at least some answers by or before the midway point in the season.

As so often happens, our hopes were not borne out. In this case, however, what we expected was far less than what we found. Structure 14 had indeed been a residence, apparently of a family of considerable standing in the Marco Gonzalez community. Begun sometime before the tenth century, the house saw several major and countless minor interior alterations and additions, as well as at least two significant changes to the exterior of its platform, before it was abandoned around A.D. 1300. In itself the sorting out of the changes would have been a formidable challenge, but the gauntlet flung down by 14 was given even greater weight by the presence of a very large number of burials beneath the house's multiple floors. The building's history turned out, in fact, to be written more fully in grave goods than in architectural features.

When our season ended in mid-August the burial total had reached 31, a truly staggering number given the size of the crew and the total amount of time available for excavation. The grave goods proved to be remarkable sources of information on the family's wealth and on trade between Marco Gonzalez and many far-flung sources, but the graves left us with precious little of the house intact. In the area of heaviest concentration near the building's centre, burial cuts had destroyed all but tiny patches of early floors and, in combination with rainfall and tree growth, had virtually obliterated 14's final surface. Though every remaining piece of floor was pocked with postholes and other pits, nowhere did we encounter a surface sufficiently intact to give us a real sense of the house plan or even the intended uses of most of the pits. The situation was the reverse of what one would expect in most mainland sites: the people were there, but the greater part of their house was not.

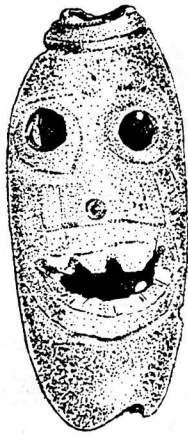
Like everyone in the island community, the occupants of 14 had no ready source of lime for plaster and so were forced to rely on less durable material for floors and wall surfacing. Instead of the rock-hard floors of formal mainland buildings the remains of 14's surfaces were great caked masses of thin strata composed of mud, grit, and lime from burnt shells. Because of their thinness and softness the strata were easily tramped down in spots where support was insufficient, and worn away where traffic was heaviest. The result was that patching went on almost continuously, and still each floor rolled and pitched wildly throughout the house. In addition, many separate surfaces had been compacted into one by foot pressure in intensively used areas, so that a series of floors recognizable in one place was quite likely to be unidentifiable nearby, but might be visible again some distance away. As an exercise in eye-



**Fig. 2:** Bird (owl?) effigy whistle (height: 7 cm), with traces of blue-painted stucco, from a pit in a Structure 14 floor

strain, mindstrain, and general frustration the excavation of 14 very quickly assumed truly classic dimensions.

Making sense of the main floors and their innumerable patches was of critical importance to every aspect of the operation. Without clear links between burials and floors we would have no idea which interments were earlier and which were later, except where one had disturbed another. Furthermore, tying of a floor to a burial with datable pottery would permit us to assign a date to the construction. Finally, the sequence of burials would tell us the age of undatable grave goods relative to others for which dates were known. Thus it was that while some laboured day by day on the skeletons themselves others spent their hours cleaning bits of floor, checking and rechecking their levels, and comparing their colour and composition, in the hope of bringing order out of the chaos left by the ancient family's burial practices. The practices themselves were particularly noteworthy; almost every individual was buried face down with the knees flaring and the lower legs crossed.



**Fig. 3:** One of several Olive-shell skull face beads (height: 4 cm) from a Structure 14 burial

The people who built the first version of 14, and the nine or ten generations who followed them, were unquestionably among the community's elite. The location of their house near the site centre may be an indication of their status, but it is the goods interred with their dead that tell the story most clearly. Among the objects are a good many jaguar teeth perforated for use as beads or pendants; the comparative rarity of large felid teeth in mainland sites such as Altun Ha and Lamanai, coupled with the fact that jaguars never existed in quantity on the caye, gives the objects special meaning as markers of high status. Elsewhere they appear, in fact, generally to have been badges of high rank, as they may have been at Marco Gonzalez as well. The burials also yielded a considerable number of large Olive shells carved and pierced to represent skulls (Fig. 3). Similar artifacts are known from Lamanai and other lowland sites, but usually in appreciably smaller quantities; hence the shell skulls seem to reinforce the message conveyed by the jaguar teeth.

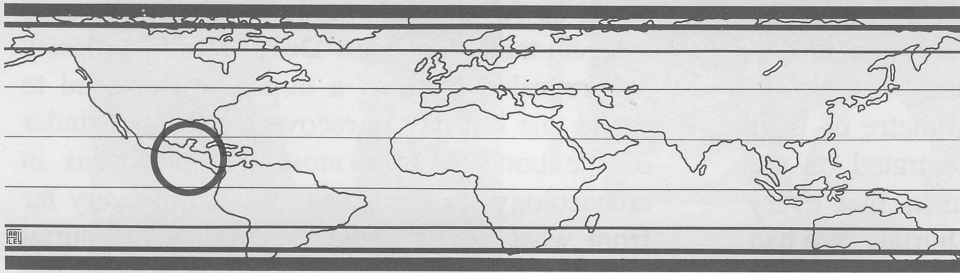
Among other small finds, imported items include Pacific coast shells and pieces of central

Mexican green obsidian. The most impressive element in the grave goods is, however, pottery. Some of the vessels are local products, but many come from the north and at least one can be tied directly to the great northern Yucatan centre of Chichen Itzá. As imports the vessels were probably rarer than their local counterparts, and so their placement in graves had a special significance. Fortunately a good many of the pots, including some quite fragile ones, survived intact, a great rarity in any burial situation. Together with other grave goods and small finds the pots have just arrived at the ROM, where their analysis and illustration will soon begin.

The most striking vessel also tells the most interesting personal story. A tenth century effigy vessel of plumbate ware from northern highland Guatemala, the pot depicts a kneeling hunchback with an extremely expressive face. The vessel lay beside a burial, but as a jumble of fragments in a tiny pocket in the soil. Once the pieces were cleared and extracted from the ground it became clear that we were not the first diggers to come upon the hunchback. In digging a grave, probably in the eleventh century, members of the family had stumbled upon an earlier interment and broken its accompanying vessel. Either because they recognized the importance of the object or because they did not wish to dishonour or anger their ancestor, the diggers scooped up every piece of the vessel they could find and deposited the lot in the freshly dug grave. Discoveries such as this bring us a bit nearer the people who once trod 14's floors. In future seasons (scheduled for 1992 and afterward) we hope to come closer yet to Marco Gonzalez's ancient inhabitants, and to the setting in which they played out their roles in Maya prehistory.



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Series II No. 45, September 1991

## THE TOWN BENEATH THE TOWN: 1991 EXCAVATIONS AT SAN PEDRO, AMBERGRIS CAYE, BELIZE

David M. Pendergast and Elizabeth Graham, *New World Archaeology*

Everyone knows how Maya archaeology is done: find a mass of ruined temples clothed in trees and vines, hack away for months to clear the place and get a camp established, then deploy a huge crew of excavators to reveal the ancient buildings in all their splendour and probe each structure's history. Because we are Mayanists, this must be a fair description of our 1991 season at San Pedro, must it not? Not on your tintype -- or perhaps not on your hologram, given the age in which we live. San Pedro is Maya archaeology of a different sort altogether, far more frustrating in most respects than anything the most isolated jungle site can toss at an unwary archaeologist.

The San Pedro site lacks everything one normally associates with ancient Maya communities. Originally a village of thatched structures strung along the beach ridge on the windward side of Ambergris Caye, it now consists of a metre or so of dark brown soil, the product of many years of living by a good many families. Excavation of a metre-thick midden deposit scarcely seems the challenging stuff of which glorious tales are concocted, but the chal-

lenge is there: the ancient site lies concealed beneath the modern fishing and resort town of San Pedro.

The tale of ancient San Pedro began last season, when we sandwiched salvage of material from three construction sites in among the days spent at the Marco Gonzalez site (*Archaeological Newsletter*, No. 41, Nov. 1990). The evenings and Sundays spent in collecting material from foundation trenches and backdirt piles told us that San Pedro was settled around AD 1400, shared storage-jar and other pottery styles with Lamanai in the sixteenth century, and -- to our great surprise -- had survived into the Historic period. Among the sherds we gathered up were two pieces of Spanish olive jar, a clear indication that the village was still in existence sometime after 1544, though it is not listed in any known Spanish records. Our hope in returning this year was to confirm the picture painted by the salvaged material and to gain a proper sense of the site's character through controlled excavation. We also knew from the 1990 work that burials occurred in abundance in more than one spot, so we anticipated being

able to add to the sample of about a dozen individuals recovered in foundation digging.

After suffering several landowners' denial of permission to excavate, the project sputtered into existence in June through the kindness of Don Rafael Nuñez and his wife Olguita, who offered us the opportunity to excavate in and around a concrete building that was slowly filling almost every square centimetre of their land. For one week we concentrated on the Nuñez property, where it seemed that every deep foundation trench struck a burial. We had recovered four burials, to the increasing interest of passing schoolchildren and tourists, and we were poised to open a trench in what appeared to be the most promising part of the property when the contractor, chafing at delays and crowding caused by our work, ordered us off the property. Don Rafael and Olguita were chagrined at this turn of events, but in our absence they kept watch on the work and recovered what they could, as did some of the workmen. In the end we had one more burial plus another sherd of Spanish olive jar to add to the important lot of material that had come out of the Nuñez land.

When the Nuñez opportunity evanesced we acted on the generous offer of Doña Elvia Staine and moved to property that was about to begin service as a septic-tank field for her well-known restaurant, Elvi's. At this stage our entire project consisted of a single metre-wide trench, 4.5 metres long, in a deposit that was disturbed at one end and appeared not to be as deep elsewhere as what we had seen on the Nuñez land. In order to expand the work beyond this depressingly small unit we began excavation in the northwestern corner of the town proper, on a spot well known to locals for its dark earth and archaeological content. Dubbed "Rosalita's" for the name of its occupant, the land lay outside the area of greatest threat to the site but had the major advantage of being largely free of buildings. On the negative

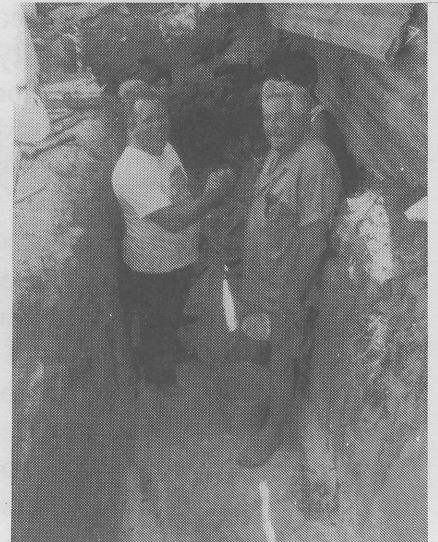
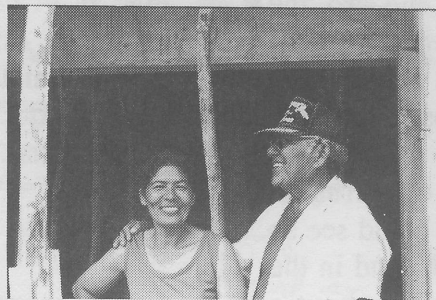
side, though, it had all been rototilled, so the hope of finding undisturbed material was gone.

The original schedule for work at Rosalita's called for the entire staff and crew, all nine of us, to concentrate on the locale until another could be found for investigation. But because a septic-tank trench on Doña Elvia's property had revealed parts of a burial, we decided to spend one last day in recovering the remainder of the bones. Like most such decisions in archaeology, this one had an outcome very far from what we expected. Work on the burial revealed a well preserved packed-earth house floor, which we proceeded to clear wherever it had not been destroyed by the septic-tank excavation and modern garbage pits.

In the end we had not only a fair portion of the floor but also five burials from under and around the structure. Interment of the dead beneath house floors was apparently common in San Pedro, as it was at Marco Gonzalez and at some mainland centres. Though only one burial, the first discovered, was accompanied by a pottery vessel, it was clear from the sherd yield that we were dealing with a late prehistoric or early Spanish period residence. This heightened the frustration caused by running out of floor and into plastic and Coke bottles, but in this sort of archaeology one must learn to accept the obvious fact that every human occupation will disrupt evidence of what has gone before.

Meanwhile, at Rosalita's and next door, where we dug alongside and beneath the Eddie Holiday home, an entirely different picture was emerging. Scattered in the upper part of the midden was material of twelfth and thirteenth century date, similar to that found at Marco Gonzalez and Lamanai, but most of the pottery came from the tenth century and earlier. Despite the rototilling we managed to clear a probable house floor and seven burials, and we also encountered one of those things that haunt





**Fig. 1:** Some of our San Pedro benefactors. L to R: Rosalita Portillo; Rafael and Olguita Nuñez; George Parham (R), shaking hands with San Pedro's mayor, Gilberto Gómez.

all archaeologists: an inexplicable feature. The enigmatic bathtub-like stone construction, plastered on the interior, was partly dug into beach sand and filled with ash, stones, and masses of poorly fired thin sherds. Clearly visible to passersby (whose numbers increased daily), it became the focus of every question-and-answer session. The trouble was that the question was always the same: "What is that?", and the answer was never forthcoming.

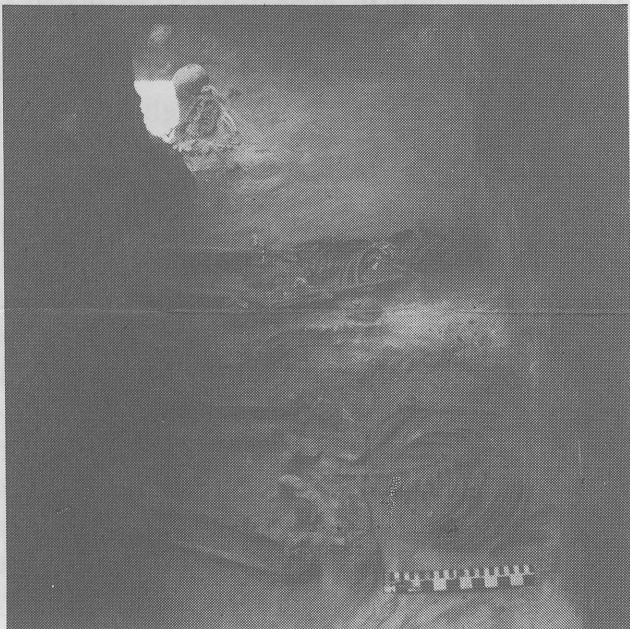
With a good sample in hand from an area that would clearly warrant further work in the future, the project moved back late in the season to the intended area of concentration in the centre of town. We were very fortunate indeed to have George Parham and his wife Marie give us permission to dig in two areas of their property, the Sands Hotel. The south side of the hotel land abuts the principal 1990 salvage site, where a concrete building now stands; the north side edges two pieces of land very likely to be important parts of the site, one completely covered with a store and hotel and the other not open to us through the owner's decision. Hence the Sands, which backs onto the Nuñez land, is a critical part of ancient San Pedro's central zone.

The first large area opened was as near the property's southern limit as we could get without risking collapse of the concrete property wall. We had the usual strata of modern to Victorian refuse to cut through, but these also contained Maya material because the nineteenth and twentieth century garbage pits are, of course, dug into the ancient midden. Sadly, it is the latest facet of ancient San Pedro that is most likely to be disturbed because it is closest to the surface; evidence of this consisted of more Spanish sherds among English earthenware and bits of glass. Beneath all this, though, we came upon remains of a house floor, with a packed sand perimeter surface that capped the burial of a very young infant. Midden continued below the floor and beyond its limits, and at a point perilously close to the line of the concrete wall we encountered a nearly whole tripod chile-grinding bowl, discarded because it had been struck on the rim and cracked partway through the body. The bowl and several other partly reconstructible vessels underscored the loss in 1990 when the adjoining part of the midden was swept away during construction.

The second area open for digging at the

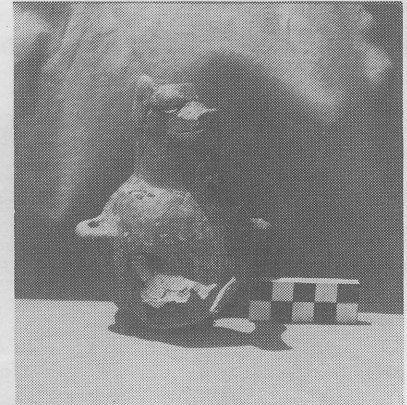


Sands seemed to be a near-copy of our first effort on Doña Elvia's property -- a trench one metre wide and four metres long. It, too, had seen modern disturbance at one end, so the effective trench length was reduced to 3.5 m. Sherds from the upper part of the deposit told essentially the same story as those from the southern unit, and the presence of another house floor in the area was more of a frustration than anything else because we could see so little of it. When we reached beach sand in the trench's south end we appeared to be about a day from completion of the work, but we were far from it. As work progressed farther north we struck a burial. In clearing that burial we encountered a second. Widening of the trench to reveal more of the second revealed a third, then a fourth. Preparation of a working area next to the burials struck a fifth, and then a sixth. Slight undercutting of the trench wall to clear the sixth revealed a seventh, then an eighth, and finally a ninth, the last (whew!!) of the lot. Contained in an area just two metres long by 125 cm wide at its widest point, the burials were about as cramped and difficult a lot as anyone could hope, or fear, to excavate.



**Fig. 2:** Some of the Sands Hotel burials await removal.

**Fig. 3:** A dog effigy jar, one of the miniature vessels from a Sands burial.



The cramming of so many burials into so small a space was not a one-time effort as a result of epidemic illness, but rather a sequence of interments below an excellently preserved house floor. The restricted space surely tells us that something in the house, which we shall never be able to identify, dictated choice of burial spot. The adults in the group are all extremely large by Maya standards, which suggests that the entire lot may have been members of a single family. Only one had been accompanied by objects, a group of as many as fourteen miniature jars and bowls. Unfortunately later grave and posthole digging scattered fragments of the vessels very widely, so that only a few are partially reconstructible. Nonetheless, they tell us that some members of the late prehistoric community were indeed interred with grave goods, so the possibility exists of adding to the ceramic inventory with further burial discoveries.

The potential in future work on the site is made even more tantalizing by Mr Parham's willingness to have us move a lightweight building that stands next to our trench, so that we can extend the excavation next year. We certainly hope to be able to return to continue work at the Sands, and perhaps on nearby properties, in 1992. What we have learnt this year, when fitted together with evidence from elsewhere beneath the town, should make a mosaic that, though it will inevitably be missing many pieces, will constitute a very real addition to our knowledge of ancient Maya life.



# ARCHAEOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER

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THE SANDS OF TIME: SAN PEDRO, AMBERGRIS CAYE, 1993

Elizabeth Graham and David M. Pendergast, *New World Archaeology*

Archaeology is almost always a matter of obtaining a sample, and then extrapolating from the evidence to produce a reasonably reliable picture of the part left untouched. This procedure results partly from the standard lack of sufficient money to cover the costs of complete excavation, but primarily from the need to leave portions of a site for future scholars to study when more advanced techniques are available. In sampling we assume, or at least hope, that the pattern within our trench continues beyond the limits of the digging; if the work has revealed three corners of a house foundation, we can be fairly secure in marking the spot where the fourth corner should lie.

In 1991, when a tiny trench in the Sands Hotel grounds in San Pedro revealed a Maya house floor and a tangle of burials (*Archaeological Newsletter* 45, June 1992), we hoped that further trenching would allow us to trace the floor, perhaps recover more burials, and possibly determine why so many individuals were packed into so small a space. In June of last year we returned to follow up on our assumption. Need we say that, as is all too often true in archaeology, what we hoped for was not what we got?

Digging in a town, especially on the grounds of a hotel, poses challenges far more formidable than

those we used to face on the mainland. Trenches must avoid shrubbery and paths, and the digging must not disrupt the quiet of hotel life. It was our good fortune that George and Marie Parham, the Sands owners, allowed us to tear up sections of their lawn in search of ancient occupation evidence. They may have regretted their kindness, however, as the dig covered most of the rest of the lawn with backdirt, drying racks, and sorting tables. Our main concern was, of course, the land near the 1991 trench. The part just west of the trench is covered by a fibreglass dome, but beyond lies a storage area that we were permitted to clear and excavate. With a level of naiveté that would benefit rank novices, we were almost certain that our work in this much larger excavation would be guided by the plan and section drawings made two seasons earlier.

Most of the 1993 North American team had worked on the caye before. John King, a York University Department of Anthropology graduate student, was back for a second season; Vassar graduate and two-season stalwart Josh Wright had worked at Marco Gonzalez and Santa Cruz in addition to San Pedro. Eva Fekete, a York Interdisciplinary Studies graduate student who studies ancient Maya women, status, and health, joined us to assist in burial excavation and recording, while

Scott Simmons, a University of Colorado graduate student veteran of Graham's Negroman-Tipu excavations, helped in excavation, recording, and lithics analysis. Anne MacLaughlin, former ROM technician, lent her expertise for the third season, and her husband Jim Nakashima put his talents to artifact illustration. At season's end Wichita State University geologists Sal Mazzullo and Chellie Teal arrived to interpret evidence for environmental change. The small, hardworking Belize contingent comprised Damaso Godines, Santos Martínez, Aron Medina, Augusto Morales, and David Peña.



**Fig. 1:** Sands Hotel guest John Rexses watches as the crew tackles the upper part of the Great Garbage Dump.

Day by day we kept our eyes on the part of the excavation near the dome. Try as we might, though, we could not distinguish anything in the face of the new cut that matched what we had seen two years earlier. What we soon discovered was that every feature encountered in 1991 died out somewhere beneath the dome; instead of a house floor and burials, what we had struck was a monster refuse dump (Fig. 1) with a tremendously complex deposition history.

As soon as it became clear that we were to spend the season sectioning an ancient garbage dump, a new set of questions emerged. First, when was the material deposited? Second, was it standard domestic refuse? Third, was the dump related to the "1991 house"? Finally, and most important, how – given the loose, sandy nature of the deposit and visitors' propensity for standing at the very edge of the trench – were we going to survive cave-ins long enough to answer Questions 1-3?

We came up with some answers to Question 1, but not the total picture. A tremendous amount of modern disturbance, everything from house-post collars to a well or waste disposal pit, had left post-Maya garbage at all depths in varying concentrations. Immediately pre-Conquest (15th century) Maya pottery dominated the lower levels, but nowhere did we find Spanish olive-jar sherds

or 16th and 17th-century Maya ceramics. This was a disappointment, because prior finds suggested strongly that Spanish-contact San Pedro was centred in the Sands Hotel area.

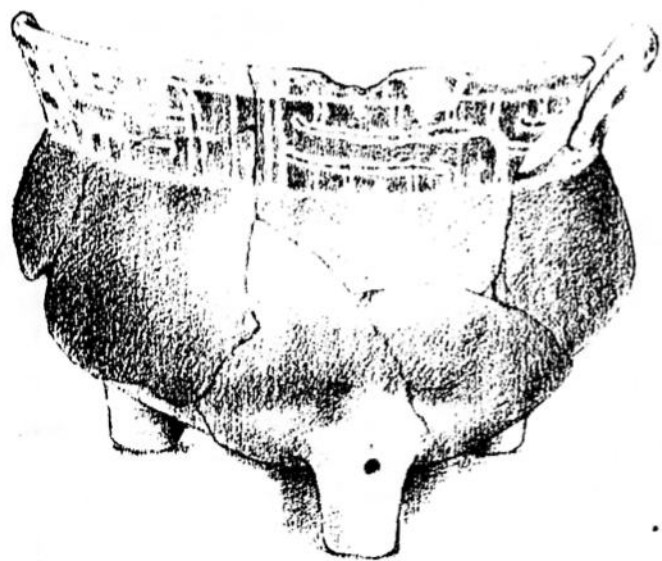
Throughout the digging, the frequent discovery of vessel fragments that fitted together and the occasional appearance of an appreciable portion of a pot (Fig. 2) increased our hope of recovering reconstructible ceramics. Each partial pot ignited a flash of enthusiasm around the excavation, which flickered out when no further pieces were forthcoming. Still, the portions of vessels pieced together produced a fascinating inventory of cooking and serving pots that strongly supports a 15th-century date for the refuse.

If we were not to have quantities of reconstructible vessels, what could we hope to glean from the midden? Because we were able to expose a large area, we could see that individual loads had been dumped in some instances, spread round in others, and strewn to the four winds in still others. The loads differed in colour and texture, so we were often able to trace them over the excavation and record and remove their con-



tents in natural units rather than arbitrary levels. Few of the units appeared significantly different in date, but at least we could dissect and examine them more or less as they had been deposited.

As we peeled away load after load it became fairly clear that the refuse had originated in homes nearby. In some places the angle of tipping suggested that material was tossed in from the north, and so either the "1991 house" occupants followed a circuitous route to their trash-pit, or the dump served more than one family. In addition to the excellent ceramic sample, the garbage yielded a small range of stone tools and a variety of other objects. The greatest treasure, though, emerged when we struck a load of burnt garbage. Out of the pile poured chunks of charred wood, some of identifiable species, in sufficient quantity to satisfy the greediest radiocarbon-dating fiend. With them was the real wealth: a huge variety of carbonised seeds, nuts, and other material. A specialist's analysis of the trove will add unexpected vegetable richness to the record of 15th-century Maya caye diet represented by the copious remains of fish, shellfish, and other animals.

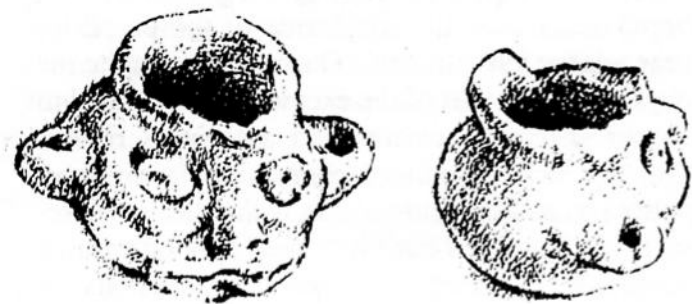


**Fig.2:** Reconstructed late 15th/early 16th century Tulum Red footed jar, height 12 cm. Drawing by Jim Nakashima.

When the refuse-pit digging neared its end we began work near the south side of the property, near a large 1991 trench. Once again, despite the physical limitations of the excavation, we hoped to encounter house remains and associated refuse. The top strata produced everything from Maya pottery to action-figure arms, with a heavy representation from the Late Victorian/Early Edwardian home of Mr. Parham's mother. Portions of possible 15th or 16th-century residences also emerged in the digging, but we could only record them in the sure knowledge that they extended beyond the hotel grounds on one side, and under several trees on the other. This frustrating work did, however, produce assuredly Colonial period remains in the form of 16th and 17th-century Maya pottery similar to kinds found at Lamanai. Somehow, though so close to the surface that they were barely protected by a cap of soil, several interesting objects survived intact, among them a miniature human-face jar (Fig. 3).

Besides adding to our knowledge about artifact inventory and refuse-dumping practices in ancient San Pedro, the 1993 work appears to have defined the community's Spanish-period north edge somewhere in the middle of the Sands property. The delimitation is very important because San Pedro's streets will be ditched for a sewer system later this year. This is far from ideal archaeological testing, but it will allow us to examine a part of the site that we would otherwise never see. We may not be able to be on hand to check everything tossed onto the spoil-heaps, so we need to know where to concentrate. The excavations have given us most of the answer; now we await the ditchers, which with luck will scoop up answers about San Pedro's past to add to the picture we have developed thus far.

Why is the recovery of information about San Pedro's past so important? To some people it isn't. With the rush to develop the tourism industry, construction often proceeds at such a rapid pace that more is destroyed than can be saved.



**Fig. 3:** Miniature vessel, probably 16th century, height 3.5 cm. Drawing by Jim Nakashima

We grant that archaeologists may seem weird to value the past so much, but this comes from our knowledge of the growth and decay of civilizations throughout the world. Successful societies find a

balance between economic expansion and respect for the past. An anchor to the past provides stability in a rapidly changing world, and can be a source of strength for people who wonder where they came from and where they are going. San Pedro's past, not just its 2500-year Maya span but its recent history as well, is what makes the caye different from any other place in the world. The town's unique heritage is reflected in its archaeology, but also in its architecture, its cuisine, its lay-out, and most of all in the spirit of its people. Someday the fickle tourist will tire of generic condos and hotels that look the same whether they are built in Miami, Ibiza, or San Pedro; it is then that San Pedranos will want their past back. We hope we can help ensure that it will be there when it is needed.

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