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LAMANAI 1979: PROLEGOMENA TO A TREATISE ON THE PARAMETERS OF EUPHORIC DISORIENTATION AS A MEASURE OF DIS-FUNCTIONAL COMPLEXITY IN THE TROPICAL ECOSYSTEMIC LOGISTICS/EXCAVATION INTERFACE

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Fig. 1. March 10th: The rigours of life in the jungle sometimes beggar description.

A formidable thing, the logistics of an archaeological undertaking in the tropics. Trips in boats with motors that often break down must be scheduled so as to coincide with the arrivals of chartered planes at remote airstrips, the latter having been timed so as to connect with commercial flights which only occasionally arrive on schedule at the international airport. Beyond this, truck transport must be arranged so that the workmen can be

brought to and from their village at a time when only the Rain God can determine whether roads will be passable. Food in quantities to stagger the imagination must be procured and transported; the search for uncommon comestibles may require several days. And of course there are supplies to be bought: knives and forks, paper plates, champagne glasses.....

Champagne glasses? Aha! Your worst suspicions are confirmed! The ROM's Maya archaeological team has gone soft, both in body and in head; tales of the vicissitudes of jungle life are nought but the fantasies brought on by unimaginably decadent living. But wait, Dear Reader; did you think I was speaking of our excavation season? Not at all. I was describing just one facet of the preparations for an archaeological event of quite a different sort - the wedding of Elizabeth Graham, Archaeological Commissioner of Belize, to the author on March 10th. Alongside this event and the logistics problems which attended it, the excavation project pales into insignificance.

Though it was but four months ago, that singular event seems to have occurred either yesterday, if viewed from one perspective, or a very long time ago, seen from another vantage point. For, both before and after that memorable day, archaeological work has in fact been going on at Lamanai, and the rush of events in that sphere has sometimes made the days seem to fly by rather quickly - though that is a phenomenon more frequently noted in this past month than earlier in the season. Somehow, despite diversions and distractions of obviously monumental proportions, the Lamanai Expedition has managed to keep on its feet and moving forward, thanks largely to my assistant (and wedding usher), Claude Belanger.

We began the season with the intention of working our way back in time beyond the points reached in last year's digging. There were two obvious spots at which such probing might bear fruit: N9-56 (a.k.a. "Fut"), and N10-43 (the erstwhile "Lag"). You may recall from earlier Newsletters that in the former structure we had encountered a tomb of middle Early Classic date (about A.D. 500), while the latter appeared, largely on architectural grounds, to be a Proto-Classic or Pre-Classic building, probably of the 1st century A.D. or earlier. We therefore set crews onto both of the structures, with the intention of looking for earlier construction beneath that already revealed.

In N9-56, the tunnel which had struck the tomb was the route farther back into the past. As the tomb lay atop a plaster floor which antedated it, we thought it likely that an earlier building might repose somewhere east of where our excavations had ceased. But to investigate this possibility we first had to reopen a pit begun above the tomb, and continue the excavation downward until we reached the tomb chamber. This done, we could proceed in an atmosphere far less oppressive than that in the tomb last year, as light and air could now make their way down the shaft. We started a tunnel eastward from the tomb, and before we had reached the point where natural light was too dim to permit us to see clearly, we struck the base of what we were seeking.

Having found the bottom step of a stair, we began to create a veritable mole-mansion of tunnels, following the stair until we reached the terrace at its flank, and then pursuing the terrace until we came upon something we did not expect, a stair at the building corner. Up this stair we went, cutting a sloping tunnel in a manner which would have made our Welsh or Cornish mining ancestors (if any) proud indeed. At the same time, we began to climb the centre stair, in the light of specially rigged auto headlights. The former cut brought us into soft core, and tunnelling perforce came to a halt, but along the centre axis we worked upward until, to our surprise, we found ourselves fairly near the upper surface of the overlying structure, and still mounting stairs. At this moment, we have just finished cutting down from above into the tunnel, and in the process have discovered a floor with a mysterious black line painted on it, well above the surface of the tunnel-cleared structure. Much more moving of rock and earth lies ahead before we can explain the line, and reach the top of the building below.

Why so much effort to worm our way around the face of a concealed structure which we shall never be able to reveal to the light of day? The answers to that question are several. First, the position of the structure suggests an early date. Second, such features as the corner stair and the dimensions of terraces and steps support the dating suggestion. Third, the building seems almost perfectly preserved, a rarity at a site where extensive demolition usually preceded new construction. Fourth, the core overlying the structure contains masses of painted plaster, probably from a razed building which stood a bit farther west, and from this we are learning something about the motifs and palette used

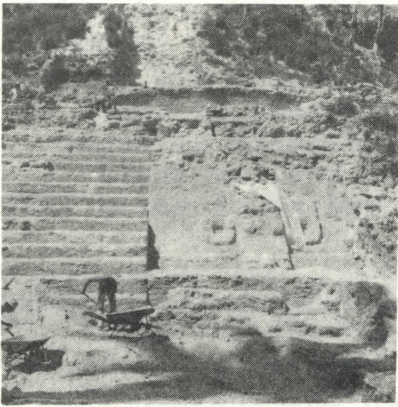


Fig. 2. N10-43 excavation in progress, a probable Pre-Classic stair and mask being cleared of overlying core associated with the room visible above the stair.

in early Classic building decoration. Finally, if we are lucky enough to encounter an offering or burial when we finally penetrate the structure, we may have evidence to confirm the indicated date, as well as a better sample than we now have of early artifacts.

Speaking of sampling, there is an interesting and important lesson to be learned from the tunnel work. We know from the tomb data that the core we are sampling is of approximately Sixth Century date, but the fairly numerous sherds from the core are uniformly late Pre-Classic, antedating the core by perhaps half a millennium or more. If our excavations had missed the tomb, we would never have known how misleading the core sample is, and would have placed the construction at least five centuries earlier than it actually occurred. The lesson taught here is one we have seen before, though never so clearly, and it argues for the greatest caution in using core sherds as a basis for dating; hence our hope for an offering or burial in the concealed structure.

Once we have seen as much of the concealed structure as our tunnels will permit, trenching into it may reveal a yet earlier structure, the first built on the N9-56 site. If we manage to find such a structure and have a look at its innards, we shall have, for the first and perhaps the only time at Lamanai, the full construction record for an obviously important ceremonial structure of moderate size. Such a record is, in fact, something of a rarity at any Maya site. With the excavation of associated buildings, which has progressed alongside the work on N9-56, we should have a fairly complete picture of the development of a ceremonial plaza group from perhaps late Pre-Classic times through to the Late Classic, with abandonment in the 9th or 10th century having been followed by 12th-14th century re-use of what was by then an assemblage of ruined buildings, possibly as thoroughly covered with trees as they were when we began work on them in 1977.

On N10-43, the period represented may be similar to that of the earliest known N9-56 construction, but the problems are much different. Here, in areas of the lower platform which last year resembled the scene of heavy shelling, we have encountered construction in excellent condition, including a centre stair and flanking terraces with mask decoration. Above these, forming part of a later structure which covered and preserved them, lies a huge single room, extending across the full width of the structure. The room probably repeats a feature of the earlier construction, though as yet we have not been able to examine the area beneath its floor. In any case, it is clear that the structure is a representative of the "Lamanai Building Type", in which rooms are set athwart centre stairs, and there is no chambered building at the platform summit. The other examples of this type are N9-56 and N10-9 ("Lip"); taken together, they may span much of the period of Lamanai occupation, as there is evidence to confirm (or refute) the dating, and will likely reveal at least one earlier structure, traces of which are visible in an old looters' tunnel in one side of the mound.

Our only other undertaking in the first half of the season has been another look at P9-2 ("Kambel"), given up as a "duster" - or what some-

one devoted to proper scientific terminology might call an Unproductive Preliminary Investigation Locus. Once again, the simple basic lesson of archaeology was brought home: when logic tells you to stop, dig on just a bit farther. A little work this year revealed a sequence of three construction efforts, the latest containing an Early Classic offering and the earliest probably Pre-Classic in date. Here, too, we shall begin tunnelling soon, hoping to augment our understanding of early life at Lamanai.

One does not learn all about Maya life by excavating temples, though. While ceremonial structures were a major part of every ancient Maya community, people lived out their years outside the religious precincts, and an understanding of the civilization must rest on examination of residences just as much as on probing of the great temples. In May we shall begin testing small structures around a natural feature (possibly modified by the Maya) which we call "The Harbour". As much of the early material at Lamanai has been found in the north, a move northward into the "Harbour" area may bring us to early residences. Even farther north lies a zone of small mounds which may be earlier still - and north of them are raised fields, part of the agricultural complex which will be investigated by a botanical team in May and afterward. Continuation and expansion of the testing programme in coming seasons may tell us whether, as now appears likely, the earliest settlement was in the north, with a shift southward as time passed and changes in the lagoon made northern areas less attractive for habitation.

At the other end of the time scale, we still need to locate residences of the Post-Classic people whose ceremonial structures and burials we have examined in past seasons. The focus of activity in the 10th to 16th centuries was at the south end of the ceremonial zone, and it is probable that investigation of mounds west of this area will tell us something of life in the last centuries before the Spanish arrived at Lamanai. As is true of work in the north, this investigation will have to span coming seasons as well. If luck is with us, we shall have by the end of this season a reasonably clear picture of where we need to turn, in both ceremonial and residential areas, to broaden our knowledge of the prehistory of Lamanai. Many surprises and significant discoveries undoubtedly await us in the remainder of this season, but whatever they may be, they cannot hope to match the event for which the first half of the 1979 season will always be remembered.

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