

Lamanai—The 1999 Field Season

REPORT OF EXCAVATIONS IN THE PLAZA [N10]3 COMPLEX ("OTTAWA"), LAMANAI, BELIZE --- Elizabeth Graham and David M. Pendergast

Institutional affiliation(s): Graham, Ph.D.: York University, ROM, LFRC; Pendergast, Ph.D.: ROM
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Part of the north side of the Ottawa group, 1999.

Work during the LFRC Maya architecture field school session at Lamanai from July 12th through 31st focused on the northern units of the Plaza [N-10]3 complex of residential/administrative structures, and on a portion of the plaza that they border. In addition to the students' excavation of a variety of modifications to the basic forms of Structures N10-15 and N10-28, such as doorway seals, room additions, and benches, Claude Belanger and David Pendergast covered the costs of a crew of 10 to 12 labourers whose primary focus during the three weeks was the removal of a further part of the great filling of the plaza that was put in place during Terminal Classic and later times, and was partially examined and removed during the excavations of 1981 and 1982.

The students' work included examination of two masonry benches in the rooms of Structure N10-28 and one in Structure N10-15. In each case the examination provided information on construction characteristics and sequence, and in addition two of the three produced evidence of previously undetected earlier benches, almost entirely obliterated by succeeding construction events. In N10-28 the probing of a series of bench units and a related doorway seal revealed an unusual stair-access bench that followed initial bench-building in the room and was succeeded by further bench construction and the sealing of one of the room's doorways. Stair-access benches are also known in N10-15, but are very rare in the Maya area as a whole; together with smaller bench details and many aspects of both platforms and Buildings, the unusual access form bespeaks an idiosyncratic approach to construction that is pervasive in the complex, and clearly warrants fuller examination in future years.

Elsewhere in N10-28 excavation revealed evidence of a room addition at the eastern face of the platform, an event not recorded elsewhere at the site and extremely rare, in fact unreported in this configuration, in the Maya area as a whole. Time limitations prevented complete excavation of the room owing to the mass of later core that overlies the unit; further work on the feature is obviously desirable, and will be included in scheduled efforts when prospects for additional investigation of the entire complex become clear.

Beyond the data on room modification and addition, student excavations yielded significant evidence regarding the demolition of the rear (northern) face of the N10-28 Building in Terminal Classic times, part of a major step preparatory to the filling of the plaza. At the same time, labourers' efforts at the front of N10-28 made possible the recovery by students of portions of the structure's demolished moulded and painted stucco upper zone, much of which was revealed in 1981-1982 excavations at the front and the west side of the building. At the rear, removal of further core in an area initially examined in 1982 permitted provisional assessment of the condition of the N10-28 platform at this side as well as preliminary judgement regarding the construction sequence in the area. As in other circumstances, the data recovered argue strongly for extension of the investigations both to clarify construction dating and to reveal additional structural features that would enhance visitors' appreciation of the plaza complex.

Structure N10-15 received less attention than N10-28, owing partly to the complexity of its construction history and partly to the very heavily damaged condition that characterises most of the rooms of the Building. Student efforts, which were concentrated mainly on elucidating bench and floor construction sequences, made clear not only a previously indecipherable series of events in the structure's northern rooms but also a structural stability problem in the original northern perimeter wall that confronted the Maya builders. Here, as in the western rooms of N10-28, students and labourers undertook considerable clearing of earth, stone, and mortar from filled rooms, with result that N10-15 now stands as a somewhat more comprehensible residence, while N10-28 has been made vastly more understandable to visitor and archaeologist alike.

While the students worked largely within the two structures, the hired crew strove to remove material that filled the plaza, to extend work carried out in 1981 and 1982. Commencing at the west front of Structure N10-28, the crew lifted out of the plaza a mass of boulders and earth 3 metres and more in depth and ranging from 2.5 to 4 metres in width, extending from west of the N10-28 stair to the easternmost portion of the N10-15 stair. The excavation, which resulted in removal of approximately 40 tons of stone, brought the amount removed to between 20% and 25% of the total core mass that fills the plaza. It also revealed the western part of the N10-28 platform front, cleared additional space in the interval between the structure and its western neighbour, and revealed for the first time the eastern front of N10-15 as well as part of its stair. The 1981-1982 excavations cleared part of the west end of the N10-15 stair, but only with the work in 1999 did we come to have sufficient data to produce a full plan of the feature.

Although all excavations undertaken in 1981 and 1982 were fully recorded, and all structural elements revealed were planned, both the recovery of new data and the opportunity to train students in complex architectural recording dictated that Structures N10-15 and 28 be re-planned. The work, directed by Claude Belanger, resulted not only in complete new plans of both buildings, which can be compared and integrated with the 1981-1982 plans, but also in the production of long transects and sections not created during the earlier work. The latter recording allows us for the first time to begin to create a comprehensive picture of the entire group and its development through time, a process that will serve importantly in any future excavations that may be undertaken.

The numerous 1999 excavations, though separated by moderate distances in many cases, all confirmed the Terminal Classic date of the major revision to the complex that began with the filling of the plaza. Important new additions to the ceramic inventory from the period resulted from several of the excavation efforts, especially at the north side of N10-28. Furthermore, near-surface excavations produced further evidence of Late and Terminal Postclassic (15th-16th century A.D.) use of the area, as well as of the Middle Postclassic (13th-century) presence that was well documented in the 1981-1982 work. Although neither caches nor burials emerged during excavation, the concurrence of evidence from many individual excavation efforts provides important new support for the chronological frame indicated by the earlier investigations. What is lacking at present is secure dating evidence bearing on the construction of Structures N10-15 and 28, which excavations of the sorts carried out this year might have been expected to yield. At other sites, benches might be expected to yield burials, and offerings might be expected to have accompanied some construction efforts, but neither of these patterns is widespread at Lamanai, and neither is in evidence in the structures examined. It is therefore clear that deep probing of building core will be necessary if secure dating evidence is to be recovered.

During and after excavations both the labourers and the students engaged in extensive cleaning of the two structures, including removal of accumulated organic rubbish and soil, clearing of floor surfaces not fully excavated in 1981-82, removal of dark earth from selected wall tops and other surfaces, and collection of facing stones excavated in earlier years and reserved for reconstruction use. In addition, the labour crew undertook cleaning in other areas of the complex. This work has materially enhanced the attractiveness of the complex for visitors, and will enable them to appreciate the structures far more fully than has been possible until now. This should add an important element to guides' presentations on the site, and their requests for information have set in motion the production of an augmented site brochure that will provide basic usable information on the complex while it adds to the information available on other structures and groups at Lamanai.

The work in the Plaza [N10]3 complex has lent great additional emphasis to the recognition of the group's importance in Lamanai's history that emerged from the 1981-1982 investigations. Limitations in time and funding, as well as the necessity of examining other parts of the site's physical and chronological record, forced a halt to the initial investigations well short of the point at which a clear picture had emerged. Although of short duration, the 1999 field school work has now added many significant features to that picture, sufficient in number to argue very convincingly for the mounting of a comprehensive project focused on the clarification and expansion of the knowledge already recovered. Full excavation of the complex would provide us with extensive data on a group of buildings that are replete with features atypical of the Maya architectural repertory; it would give us a solid chronological sequence for upper-echelon elite residential construction in a highly important ancient social and political centre; it would very probably tell us a great deal about succession and the wielding of power in Classic and Postclassic times; and it would certainly leave Lamanai with a greatly enhanced element in its attractiveness for tourists. It is our hope to develop a project with these and related aims.