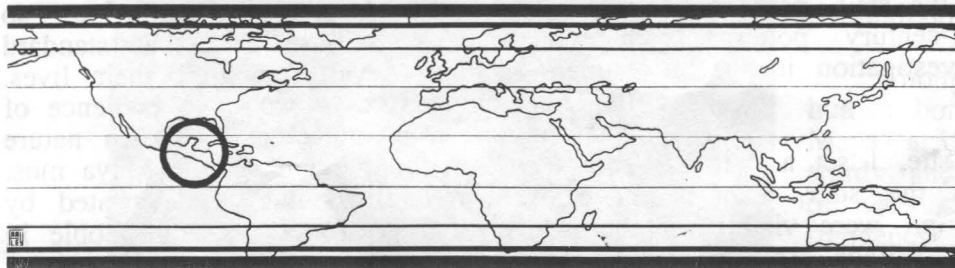


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THE LOVING COUPLE: A MYSTERY FROM THE MAYA PAST

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The more deeply I become buried in administrative tasks, the more my thoughts turn to what is surely the most interesting, and most enigmatic, burial of the 900 or so I have recorded over the years. The interment, discovered near the end of the Lamanai excavations, is unique in the Maya area in several respects, among them the feature that suggested the name "The Loving Couple" as soon as it came to light. Some of the unique qualities answer questions that have gone unanswered for years, but others cry out for answers that will never be forthcoming. As an illustration of how much we can know and yet know little, the Loving Couple serves better than any other burial, and indeed perhaps any other single unit of archaeological material, I have encountered.

In 1984, we were able for the first time to enter the area of southern Lamanai just north of the two Spanish churches that had been the heart of the 16th and 17th-century community. Here we found what one would expect in any settlement still endowed with some vitality: evidence of new buildings set among far older structures, some abandoned and others still in use after many years of change. Though the area was first occupied some time before the beginning of the Christian era, the oldest structure still standing was built about A.D. 950-1000.

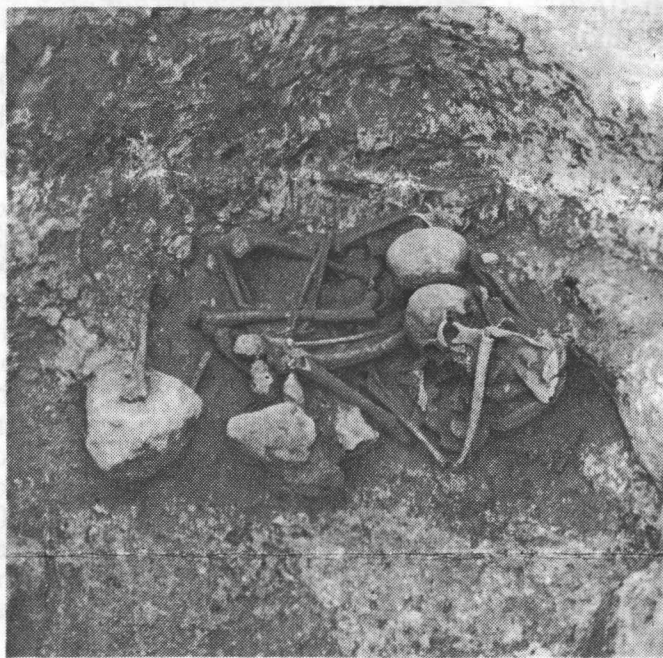


Fig. 1: The Loving Couple; the man is in the foreground

From all the evidence recovered around the platform of the oldest structure and from within its core, it seemed that the Maya of 16th-century Lamanai made no use of the building, despite its fairly central location. However, investigation of the

ruined stair on the building's lakeside face revealed pottery fragments from the 15th century, presumably the end-point of the building's history. At season's end, Stan Loten's architectural recording indicated the presence of a large pit in the stair, perhaps associated with the 15th-century pottery. We left the feature for investigation in the next year, the expedition's last.

On our return to the site, I set a pair of excavators to work on the stair, after explaining that traces of a pit were visible just below the upper step. Each time I returned to check the progress of the work, I beheld increasingly puzzled expressions on the excavators' faces. As the trench deepened, my face assumed the same appearance. Though Stan professed to have seen the pit clearly, not a trace of it was visible in the stair's heart, though we did find more 15th-century pottery as the work progressed. I had long since concluded that Stan's eyesight had been suffering from the sun, when we finally reached the base of the stair--and revealed the outline of a pit.

Thoughts that mild-mannered Stanley Loten, ace archaeological architect, might actually be Superstan, The Man with the X-ray Vision, crossed my mind. To this day neither he nor I can explain how the pit he saw disappeared, only to re-emerge almost two metres lower down. Whatever the explanation for this phenomenon, we were eventually able to determine that digging of the pit was part of a complete rebuilding of the stair that took place around A.D. 1450-1500. When the uppermost layer of soil was removed from the hole, we knew that the new stair was meant to seal a grave that appeared to hold two individuals.

Seated side by side against one wall of the 1.5 metre-square pit were the remains of a middle-aged man and an early middle-aged woman. Though the skeletons had collapsed over the years and become rather tangled, it was easy to see as I brushed the dirt away that the burial incorporated an expression of sentiment unique in recorded Maya inter-

ments: the woman, on the right, had her left arm around the man's shoulders.

The absence of affection in other Maya burials of couples seems to fit the common impression of the ancient people as so hidebound, so religion-ridden, that standard human feelings never flavoured their lives. In The Loving Couple we have evidence of what anyone who understands human nature knows even without evidence: the Maya must have been as caring, and as devastated by the deaths of loved ones, as any people in any time or place.

As excavation of the couple proceeded, additional unique features came to light. Around the man's right arm was a shell "horsecollar" ornament, a type of artifact found at several Maya sites but never previously encountered in a situation that gave evidence of its use. Though seemingly a bit small for a comfortable fit around a man's forearm, the horsecollar can now be recognized as something other than the chest ornament it was once thought to be.

It would be reassuring if we could make the leap from identification to an understanding of the ornament's significance --but why do archaeologists always assume that every object had some sort of formal meaning? Fad and frivolity, known determinants of much modern choice in ornamentation, cannot be quantified or described in analytical terms in an archaeological context, and so cannot be introduced as explanation if one wishes to be scientific. I am perfectly willing to be humanistic, and ascribe the man's adornment of his forearm to whim, rather than to culturally determined assertion of rank or status.

The man's second ornament provided yet another bit of previously unavailable evidence. Around his neck he had had a pendant, which in time came to lie in his lap. The pendant was a pair of round-bladed copper tweezers, to which a tiny bit of cotton cloth adhered (Fig. 2). It is very interesting that Dorothy Hosler, the leading



Fig. 2: Close-up of the copper tweezers, fallen from the man's neck into his lap

student of Mesoamerican metalworking, had identified tweezers as a probable badge of office or status, without any direct archaeological evidence to support her view. In combination, the tweezers and the arm ornament suggest that the man enjoyed a relatively high place in 15th-century Lamanai society, as the position of the grave itself indicates.

Apart from a jade bead, perhaps once part of his chest ornamentation, no other artifacts were placed with the man. The woman was laid to rest with even less; only a group of five copper rings, perhaps hair ornaments, accompanied her. Soldered together by corrosion, they lay at her right upper back, where long hair, possibly in a braid, might have lain. We know that she was clothed, or at least accompanied by cloth, because the copper corrosion salts preserved a small quantity of woven cotton material. The obvious importance of the grave probably means that many perishable

objects were placed around the couple, but no traces of them remained. Only a cut human thighbone and another worked human bone, probably from the upper arm, lay within the pit, near the side opposite the two individuals.

Though far from common, worked human bone does form a small part of the Maya artifact inventory. The material is sturdy and lends itself well to manufacture of various sorts of objects, but the low frequency of occurrence shows that humans were never seen as a standard source of raw material for tool making. Instead, each piece of worked human bone must have had special importance. This quality is difficult to discern in the two entirely plain pieces from the Loving Couple's grave, and equally so in two upper arm bones from the Hunchback Tomb (Rotunda 16(4): 5-11 [1984]) that have simply had their lower ends removed. However, special significance seems reflected in the elaborate carving of objects such as the human-figure tube from a 15th-century Lamanai burial (Rotunda 13(4): 5-11 [1981]) and its poorly preserved companion piece.

Many things might have given human bones special meaning as grave goods, but it is highly probable that every such object was a relic of some especially important individual, whether ruler, noble, or an ancestor of the person with whom it was buried. Perhaps someday genetic analyses will enable us to tie the bones in the Loving Couple's grave to the two individuals, but at present ancestry cannot be proved. Furthermore, we did not discover any royal or noble individual, or even commoner, at Lamanai who was interred with major limb bones missing, so the specific source of the objects from the Loving Couple's grave remains unknown.

It is unfortunate that we do not know enough about Maya attitudes towards human bone relics to give us some idea of what might have motivated the sawing through, smoothing, or carving of the objects. As a result, we cannot really determine the

difference in meaning between an unadorned bone and one that has been transformed into a work of art by a master carver. At the moment all we can do is recognize that, like the other grave goods and the location of the grave itself, the bones must bespeak the high status of the Loving Couple in Lamanai society.

Among the unusual physical features of the couple is the difference in their head forms. The woman's skull is very markedly deformed, with the front-to-back flattening characteristic of some other Lamanai burials, but the man's retains its natural shape. Observations made during excavation suggest that the man's face may have been misshapen, with his right eye lower than the left and severely distorted; his right hand also appeared to be malformed, perhaps missing some fingers. The deformities could have been the reason for absence of intentional shaping of his skull, and might also have given him special status in the community. It is thought that skull deformation was in itself a mark of high status or rank, and hence both members of the couple may bear skeletal evidence of the kind of importance that could have dictated their burial in a place of honour.

The greatest mysteries have to do with a third individual in the grave, and with what that individual's presence may mean. In the crook of the woman's right knee lay the bones of an infant of about eight month's gestation, who was clearly not within her body at the time of burial. Does this evidence tell us that the woman died in childbirth? It is very likely that she was near the end of her childbearing years, but this would not necessarily have lowered the probability of her survival. And if death from this cause, which leaves no skeletal traces, did indeed lead mother and child to the grave, how did the man come to his final resting place?

An easy, but presently unprovable, assumption is that the couple were the parents of the child. This possibility may

explain the links among the three, but it does nothing to explain the presence of both parents in the grave. Numerous reconstructions of events are possible, but none is capable of proof. A calamity, perhaps a fire, could have caused the deaths of both adults and the premature birth of the child. It is equally possible that, racked with grief at the loss of wife and child, the father took his own life. Logical arguments can be made both for and against these and other explanations, but the data neither support nor refute any of them.

The tale most appealing to the romantic mind would have the couple as illicit lovers, and death the penalty paid for transgression of society's rules, once the sin was made manifest. Giving free rein to a melodramatic imagination, one might see a small stone arrowpoint lodged behind the man's back as the instrument of his execution, though the only fact is the object's presence. Are we then to assume that the couple were given honourific burial despite their dishonour? Such an action was surely possible in ancient Maya society, as it is in any society ruled by passions as well as principles, but one could hardly expect physical proof that it actually happened.

It is disheartening, though entirely expectable, to learn how distant we really are from the Maya past, even though at bottom we can very nearly experience the emotions that attended death in those remote times. Our kinship with the Loving Couple is very real in a fundamental human sense, but as with other human links it cannot allow us to penetrate fully the mysteries of life and death in another time, another place, and another cultural setting. The lesson of this burial, which is the lesson of all archaeology, should give every one of us pause: motives and actions perfectly clear to us now will all too soon surrender their clarity to the passing years.