

Structure N10-4. A workman clears away backdirt after excavation of Burial 46. Beyond him is the dark stratum which held earlier Post-Classic burials.

## An Ancient Maya Dignitary

**N**O EXCAVATION IN THE MAYA LOWLANDS of Central America can fail to produce significant and exciting new information, since each site differs from all others in many respects. It is usually true as well that no dig of any duration can fail to recover objects of great significance and interest, though many such objects have value which may be visible only through an archaeologist's eyes. The artifacts with which we deal most of the time are the mundane things of everyday life, but they often hold clues to the rise and fall of Maya civilization at least as important as those contained in the burial chambers of the society's rulers. Occasionally, though, we discover artifacts that combine archaeological significance with great aesthetic quality.

Lamanai, where we began work in 1974 (see "The Church in the Jungle", *Rotunda* 8:2, 1975, pp. 32-40), has yielded its share of striking discoveries; one outstanding example is the jade mosaic mask described in "A Face from the Past" (*Rotunda* 10:1, 1977, pp. 4-11). We still have two or possibly three seasons to go before the excavations draw to a close, so it is not yet time for selection of the expedition's outstanding discovery. There can hardly be any, though, that will exceed in archaeological and aesthetic significance a discovery made during excavation of a cemetery structure in 1977.

*A Work of Art  
from the ROM's  
Excavations at  
Lamanai, Belize*

David M. Pendergast

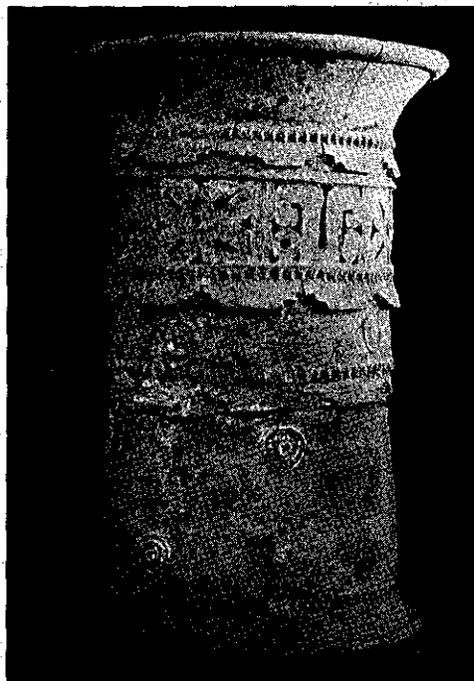
Of the many buildings at Lamanai which seemed on the surface to hold little promise of yielding important information and materials, few if any were less prepossessing than Structure N10-4. A low, featureless pile of stones and earth, the structure was distinguished only by its location at the margin of the lake on which the site borders; it was in a group of buildings which we knew to be of Post-Classic (11th to 16th century A.D.) date, and therefore of major interest. Lamanai is the only known site in the Central Maya Lowlands of Belize and the Guatemalan Petén that saw intense occupation in the Post-Classic, a period in which other sites were abandoned or very lightly inhabited. At Lamanai, however, life in the Post-Classic was a continuation of what had gone on in the 1,500 to 2,000 years before, and the nature of and reasons for that continuum are the principal subject of our investigations.

Having encountered ceremonial buildings and numerous burials of the Post-Classic in neighbouring structures, we turned to N10-4 to expand our knowledge of the period; almost immediately we came upon burials, which eventually reached a total of forty-four. Burials are of interest because they are usually accompanied by a range of artifacts, and when many interments occur in a single construc-

tion unit the grave goods provide evidence on contemporaneous styles in pottery and other classes of objects, which in the Post-Classic include metal artifacts of various kinds. The burials in N10-4 were all in one addition to the building, but were certainly not all interred at one time. At the time of excavation we had, and we still have, problems in determining the sequence of events in the history of the structure; nevertheless, the large quantity of ceramics and other artifacts recovered made N10-4 an invaluable source of additional information on the Post-Classic. Because of this, we extended our excavations over the entire cemetery area, completing the work (or so we thought) in 1975.

In 1977 we returned to N10-4, not to search for additional burials but to try to clarify events in the history of the building before it was put to use as a mortuary structure. Pottery accompanying one burial found just below the Post-Classic mortuary stratum indicated that the underlying building was constructed in the Late Classic, probably in the 8th century A.D. To learn what we could of this early stage of the structure, we set out to cut a section trench through what remained of it after the Maya chopped off the top of the building in preparation for its conversion to cemetery use.

The first portion of our trench told us little beyond



Above: Stuccoed cylindrical censer; its base can be seen at the extreme right of the photograph on the opposite page.



Burial 46 seen from the northwest. In the foreground are the secondary burials.



some details of construction; then, near the planned western limit of our cut, we struck another burial, set far deeper in the structure than any we had encountered two years earlier but obviously of Post-Classic date. Forced by this discovery to widen our trench, we decided to carry the enlarged cut back eastward through the area already sectioned. The result was that we had a basic lesson of archaeology forcibly impressed on us once again, when by digging beyond where we had planned to stop we came upon the most important, and possibly the latest, of all the burials in N10-4.

Burial N10-4/46, the largest and most complex of all the burials in the structure, lay in a grave nearly two metres long by one metre wide and about 175 cm deep. Within the pit were the remains of at least five individuals, including a teenager placed face down at the bottom of the grave with his arms spread outward in a manner not found in any other Lamanai burial. As the youth was the first person buried, it is logical to view him as the most important member of the group, in whose honour the other individuals were interred. This assumption seems to be supported by the fact that many of the accompanying artifacts were clearly or very probably associated with the youth.

The large number of individuals sets Burial 46 apart from other burials in the structure, as does the grave location, centred almost exactly on a line we term the primary axis. This vital spot, an imaginary line extending along the building centre from front

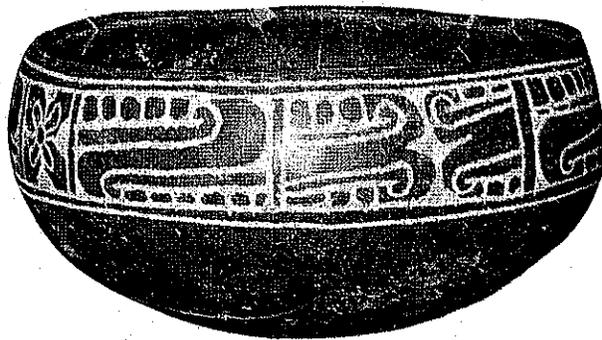
to rear, seems to have been seen by the ancient Maya as a sort of lifeline, connecting the structure to the gods who controlled the community's existence. Because of this, the primary axis was generally chosen as the spot for offerings, and placement of a burial on the axis was obviously a mark of great distinction.

The importance of Burial 46 is further attested by the nature and variety of the grave goods. This fact was apparent almost from the moment we began the several days of painful work required to excavate a complicated burial at the bottom of a large grave. Set on all sides of the skeletons were pottery vessels forming an assemblage unlike any encountered in other burials at the site and clearly a reflection of the rank or status of at least one of the grave's occupants. Among the vessels was a unique giant pierced stuccoed cylinder, apparently a censer, which had been broken in two; one half was placed at the southeast corner and the other at the northeast corner of the mass of bones, for reasons that I fear we shall never fathom.

In addition to the cylinder there were ten other vessels set around the burial, including two matched pairs of red tripod dishes, unusual occurrences in themselves in that almost all ancient Maya vessels seem to have been individual productions, even in the more standardized ceramic manufacture of the Post-Classic. Each member of the undecorated pair (drawing, e and f) has three animal-head feet, while the pair with incised decoration on the body is highly unusual if not unique in that each vessel has

Right: Pedestal-base jar-censer, identical to the one labelled a in the archaeological drawing, except for the shape of the vents in the base.

Below: Redware carved bowl found inside the pedestal-base jar-censer (c in the archaeological drawing).



two human-head feet and the third foot in the form of an animal head (g). There is yet another redware dish, with large human-head feet (d), which unlike the other dishes had been broken and scattered in several areas of the grave, in the fashion of earlier Post-Classic times.

At one corner of the burial mass, near the teenager's right hand, stood a large pedestal-base redware jar or censer with carved and pierced decoration; curiously, it was buried with one section of the rim missing. At the opposite corner lay pieces of a similar vessel (a), differing from its companion only in the form of the pierced pedestal ornamentation. Within the whole jar-censer was an undamaged round-side bowl of similar ware and decoration; a mate to it in shape, but not in decoration, sat at the left elbow of the teenager (b and c). The jar-censer also contained the fragmentary remains of a stuccoed bowl or gourd, inside which the redware bowl appeared to have been nested. The body of the object had rotted away completely, leaving only bits of stucco coating decorated with red paint on a light green ground. In addition to all these vessels there was an undecorated redware bowl, set beside the base of the giant stuccoed cylinder. All in all a most impressive lot of vessels, but far from the total assemblage in the grave.

As well as the ceramic artifacts, the grave contained two jade beads, such oddities as a shark tooth, two animal teeth, a crab claw, and a very large chert dagger. The dagger was identifiable as such because the white hafting glue somehow avoided the destruction that was the usual fate of such material,

and shows clearly that the stem of the beautifully chipped blade was fixed in a broad handle rather than in a spear-shaft. We also found a single pear-shaped copper bell and three small gold sheet objects, all badly damaged; these had probably been coverings, or at least front facings, for wooden discs or other objects, but their original forms could no longer be determined. Together with the pottery, these artifacts surely denote the status of at least one of the individuals in the grave, just as they tell us a considerable amount about the wealth of the late Post-Classic community at Lamanai.

The pottery vessels fix the date of the interment with reasonable precision, since some of them, particularly the two pairs of tripod dishes, are of a ware known as Tulum Red, named for a famous late Post-Classic site on the rugged coast of Quintana Roo, north of Belize. The presence of this ware indicates a date in the 15th or early 16th century, and of course this date can be applied, with a few of the usual equivocations employed by archaeologists, to the other pottery accompanying the burial. This is an important point, for the whole and the fragmentary carved redware jar-censers and the two similarly decorated bowls are of a ware not previously reported, and might not have been datable had they not been found in association with the Tulum material.

Evidence for trade among the Burial 46 grave goods includes the copper bell, the gold, and perhaps even some of the Tulum vessels, while contemporaneous local manufacture is represented by the stuccoed cylinder and probably the other redware

vessels, as well as by the large knife. One could scarcely have a better illustration of the sorts of information, over which I have skimmed very lightly indeed, that are lost when associations such as those in this burial are destroyed by looting.

Many of the objects mentioned have some beauty in addition to their value as pieces in the archaeological puzzle, but none approaches in aesthetic quality an object which lay at the very edge of the grave bottom, almost as though it had been placed there as an afterthought. It was a carved bone tube and as fine a piece of work in this medium as has ever been found in the Maya area.

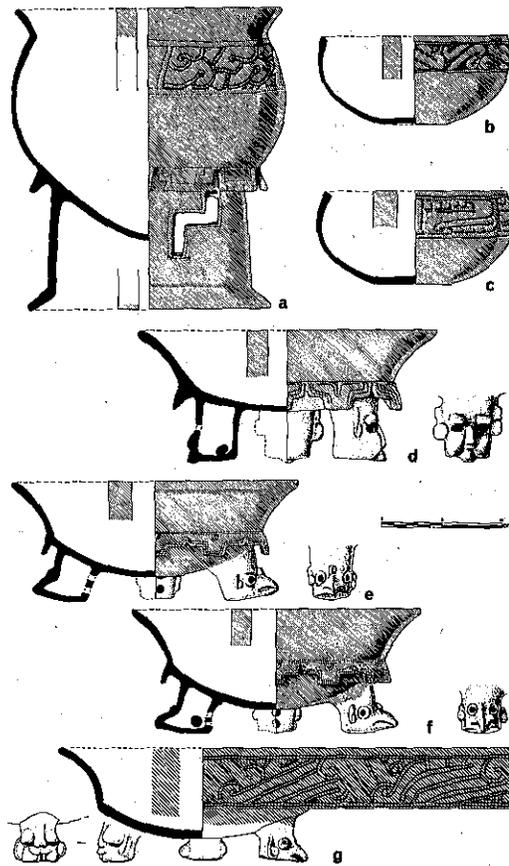
The preservation of the finely carved tube is probably due largely to the position chosen for its burial, away from the bodies in the grave. Though hard and moderately durable, bone will succumb to decay if the circumstances are right; witness the condition of a fine carving in manatee rib from Altun Ha, the lower portion virtually destroyed because the object was in direct contact with the corpse it accompanied. The Burial 46 tube, which appears to be made from a human tibia, luckily escaped such a fate; apart from a break in the upper portion and some loss along the lower edge on one side, it is essentially in pristine condition. We were fortunate in this case, but I do not think that we can go on to assume that there were once great lots of similarly elaborate objects which have disappeared in the tropic dampness. Rather, it appears that major bone carvings were comparatively rare to begin with, and have been further reduced in numbers by the ravages of time.

The personage depicted in the fifteen-centimetre-high carving is clearly an important dignitary, judging by his costume. He seems to be a human being rather than a deity, though it may be that all major figures in the power structure of ancient Maya society were imbued with at least some godlike qualities. In any case, the depiction seems to be generally realistic rather than symbolic, though it is as likely here as in representations of human beings on pottery vessels (see "People on Pots", *Rotunda* 4:1, 1971, pp. 26-35) that the carving does not portray an actual individual.

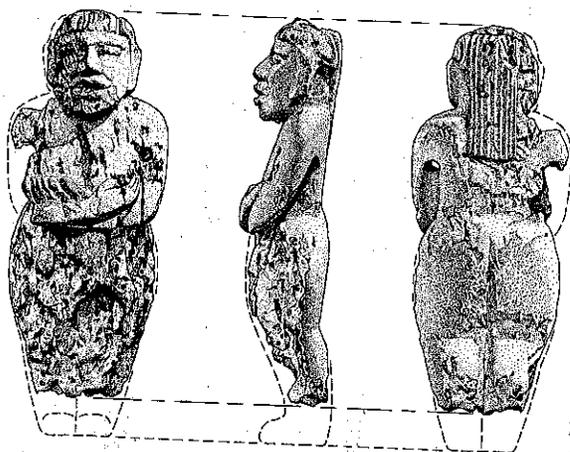
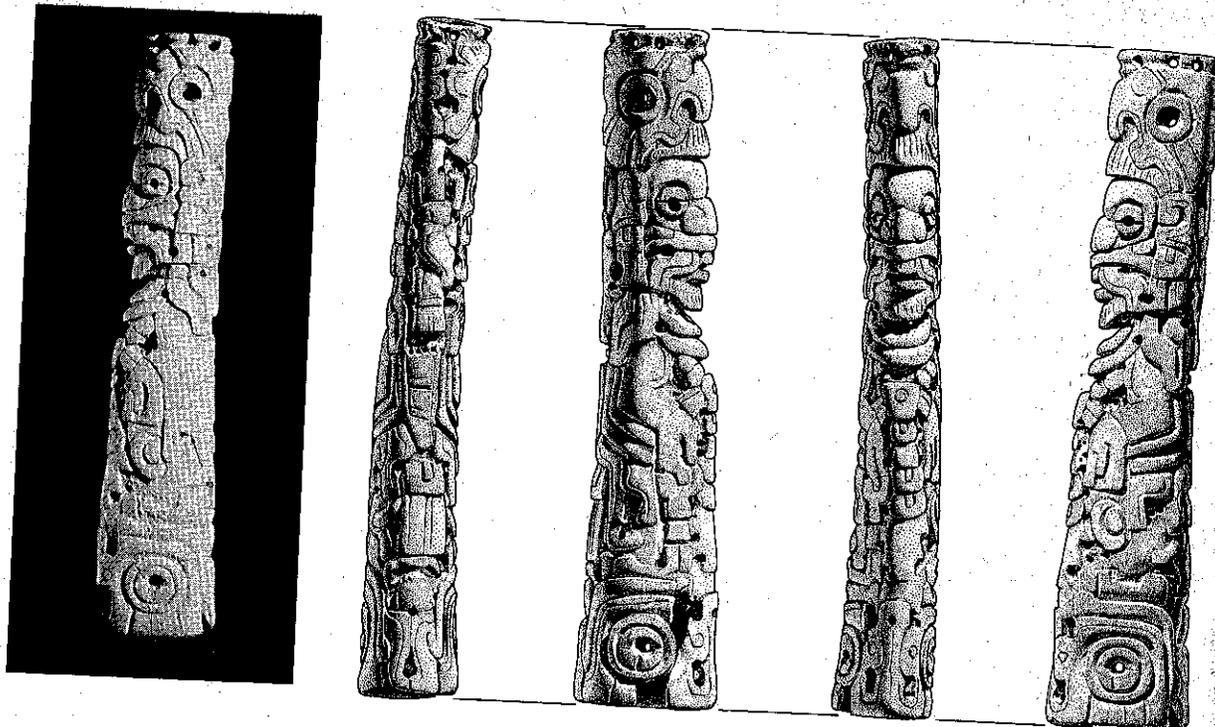
Atop his bobbed hair, the individual wears a large headdress in the form of a stylized bird's head, perhaps that of a macaw if one can judge by the shape of the beak. His ears are concealed beneath large, complex ear ornaments with scrolls at the top and dependent curved lower elements which appear to extend down onto his shoulders. Possibly attached to the ear ornaments is a bar, bifurcated at the ends, which passes beneath his nose and has curved elements extending down over the cheeks. Apart from the strongly depicted eyes and the characteristically prominent nose, the most striking feature of the figure's face is a fairly luxuriant beard, which appears to be squared at the bottom. Beards have had various connotations in various societies, perhaps some-

times changing as frequently as they have in our own culture. Their occurrence in Maya naturalistic depictions of human beings is not extremely widespread, but it is far from unknown, as a figure from the famous Actun Balam Vase from Belize attests.

Beneath his chin the dignitary sports what appears to be a double gorget or complex chestplate. It lies over part of a necklace of large beads from which hangs a massive ornament consisting of a quadrangular pendant with side bows or ties, above an arrangement of four overlapping elements with a large side-notched object at their base. Such neck and chest jewellery in Classic depictions is often thought to represent jade, though of course there is no colouring to substantiate such an identification. In this case, the beads of the necklace obviously could be meant for jade, or for almost any other material out of which a bead can be fashioned. The remainder of the ornament, however, seems unlikely to represent that prized green material which to the Maya symbolized fertility; the shapes and sizes of the elements argue for identification as something other than jade, and again almost any material might be represented.



Vessels from Burial 46 (drawn for archaeological publication). Vessel g is one member of the second matched pair.



Above: Carved manatee rib figure from Altun Ha; height 11.1 cm.

Top left: The carved bone tube; height 15 cm. See cover.

Top right: The carved bone tube as seen through the eyes of Department of New World Archaeology staff artist David Findlay.

Photos: pp. 5, 6 left, 7, 8 (2) David Pendergast, ROM; pp. 6 right, 10 top right and bottom David Findlay, ROM; p. 9 Georgina Hosek; p. 11 Leighton Warren.

The figure's arms are shown at his sides, bent at the elbows with the hands inclined downward, the fingers curled and the palms apparently turned towards the front, in an odd and presumably uncomfortable position. His right hand seems to grasp an object shaped very much like the body of a slingshot, but in fact the position of the hand may indicate that the object is a support rising from below. Over his back he wears a layered cape, portions of which are folded or pleated in such a way as to conform to the crook of his elbows. The garment is divided at centre rear, where a large two-element tassel hangs down to or below knee level; at each side are shorter tassels suspended below a heavy border element. The front of the cape and its fastenings are unfortunately concealed beneath the chest ornament.

The figure's lower limbs are not shown, since he stands on or in what appears to be a highly stylized animal head, its eyes in the form of large discs with centre perforations and its jaws rising to a point not far below the base of the chest ornament. While the nature of the depiction leaves identification of the creature open to some question, the carving is probably meant to represent a serpent. Serpents played a role in Maya art disproportionate to their numbers in the lowland jungles; this was especially true in the Post-Classic, when scarcely a decorated vessel was produced without a snake's head somewhere on it, at least until the Tulum style of ornamentation such as can be seen in the drawing (labelled g) came into vogue. If the bone gentleman was in fact carved at the same time as the vessels were manufactured, it would seem that the disappearance of ophidian

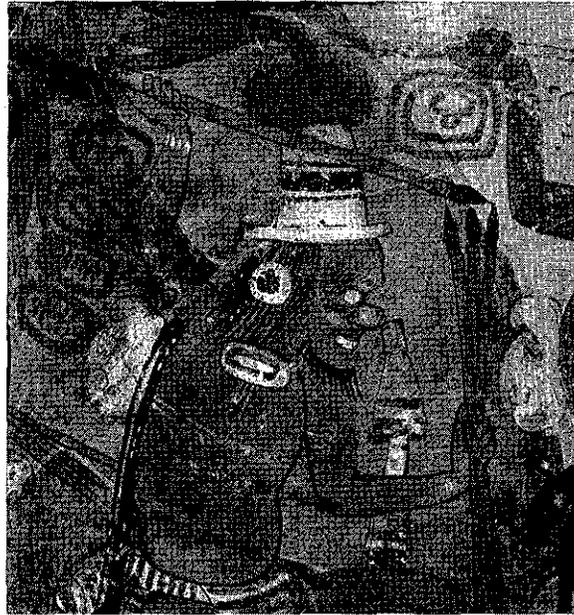
heads from pottery did not mean their complete erasure from the iconographic scene.

Scattered throughout the carving are numerous drilled pits and perforations which at first glance do not seem to have any recognizable pattern or function. Some, especially those between the hands and the chest ornament and in a line at the rear edge of the object below the figure's right hand, appear to be traces of the manufacturing process, but given the quality of finish which marks most of the carving it is possible that the pits were made for a specific purpose. Purposeful production of small depressions is in evidence elsewhere in the carving, though the use for which the indentations were intended cannot be determined. It is possible that the pits were part of a lily-gilding in which pigment or some other material was used to increase the decoration of a carving which scarcely seems to need further adornment. The numerous perforations piercing the figure from the top of the headdress to the mouth of the probable serpent could likewise have been for attachment of additional ornamentation, but all evidence on this point is now far beyond our grasp.

While there are many areas of uncertainty regarding the carving, we can be sure of one thing: it is the work of a real master, whose handling of obsidian and other delicate tools produced not only a beautiful delineation of features but also a great deal of low-relief embellishment of the major forms. Such an effort required not only talent but time; both were vital features of Maya art, the first because both the artist and the users of an object obviously sought the highest quality in such pieces, and the second because the work of producing a special object was very probably in itself a kind of offering to the gods. Such a view of the bone figure puts the carving in that great archaeological catch-all category of ceremonial objects, but both the nature and the quality of the artifact suggest that this is a case in which the designation is quite likely to be correct.

Classification of an artifact as a ceremonial object is usually the archaeologist's way of saying that he has no idea whatsoever of how the object was used, but that its elaborate nature indicates a connection with religious belief and practice. In fact, very few objects, even in our society, have features that clearly indicate use, if it is the details of that use that

*A bearded ceremonial hunter from a vase of probable 7th-century A.D. date, Actun Balam Cave, Belize.*



concern us. For a carved bone object that clearly had no utilitarian purpose, use must remain a mystery. It could have been set up on an altar, carried in processions, worn as part of a ruler's raiment—there are certainly perforations which would have permitted suspension of the tube from a cord or necklace—or employed in any one of countless other ways. The simple fact is that we can never know the particulars of the carving's use, any more than we can determine the identity or rank of the person it portrays. What we are able to do is to assess the archaeological significance of Burial 46 and, building on this information, to reconstruct some facets of life in the late Post-Classic both at Lamanai and in the Maya Lowlands in general. We can also appreciate the bone figure as evidence of the abilities of a gifted carver who, perhaps less than a century before the arrival of the Spaniards, created one of the true masterpieces of ancient Maya art.

David Pendergast joined the ROM in 1964 and is Curator in the Department of New World Archaeology. Since joining the ROM he has directed excavations in Belize, first at Altun Ha (1964-1970) and now at Lamanai, where the Museum will be at work through 1984. He is now beginning the eighth season at Lamanai, having just completed the second of five volumes of the Altun Ha final report; Excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, 1964-1970, Volume 1 was published by the ROM in 1979.

