

# The 1980 Excavations at Lamanai, Belize

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Excavations at Lamanai, in northern Belize (Fig. 1) were begun in 1974, and are expected to extend through 1983. Work in preceding seasons at the site has revealed extensive evidence of a previously undocumented rich Post-Classic occupation spanning the period from ca A.D. 900 to approximately A.D. 1675, and involving locally developed traditions in both architecture (Fig. 2) and ceramics. Radiocarbon dates from Structure N10-2 indicate that ceramic traits known from Mayapan may have developed at Lamanai as much as a century to a century and a half before their appearance in northern Yucatan; there is considerable additional evidence of trade links between Lamanai and sites in the north, as well as with centres beyond the Maya Area. In the latter category are copper artifacts and a small amount of gold, both very probably from the Oaxaca area.



Fig. 1: Map of Belize, showing location of Lamanai and other archaeological sites.

In addition to the Post-Classic materials, there is evidence for a long and large-scale earlier occupation, extending back to 600 B.C. or earlier. Excavations in Structure N10-43 in 1979 showed this to be the largest securely dated late Pre-Classic structure now known in the Lowland Maya Area, with a height of about 33 metres and a construction date of ca 100 B.C. (Fig. 3). Of similar age is the earlier portion of the Structure N9-56 sequence; one of the construction units is adorned with masks that closely resemble those encountered at Cerros, in northern Belize (Freidel 1979:45-46, figs. 7 and 8). This structure also yielded a tomb, of 5th century A.D. date, built in a manner not previously recorded in the Maya Area, with a wooden framework around the burial, covered with textiles soaked in red pigment and plaster. Although data from the Late Classic are not as extensive as those from earlier and later times, there is ample evidence of a continuum from the Pre-Classic through the time of the collapse of Classic society at other centres, and on into the early Historic period. It is as a result of occupation during the Historic period, and the construction of a church at the south end of the site about A.D. 1570, that we know the ancient name of the site, and know also that the ceramics of Lamanai in the 17th century were not significantly different from those of two to three centuries earlier.

Work in the 1980 field season was focused on structures

that had seen investigation in earlier seasons and appeared to hold promise of yielding additional information. It was our intention to combine these efforts with a very considerable extension of work on small structures of residential and other character, and despite the volume of excavation required on large buildings we succeeded in meeting both aims before the season closed in June.

The large structures that required further investigation included N10-43 and N9-56, in the latter case extending to a number of related buildings in the platform group of which N9-56 is a part. Because both of these structures had yielded evidence of Pre-Classic date, deep probing into both seemed likely to extend our understanding of early use of the site centre. At the same time, clear evidence of late Post-Classic use of the N9-56 group indicated the desirability of pursuing work in small structures near the base of the early building. While this work was in progress we undertook investigation of buildings in the vicinity of the two major structures, extending work northward beyond the limits of the Central Precinct as excavation of the larger structures ceased or diminished in scale. The result of this work was that by season's end we had not only expanded our knowledge of construction and related events in Pre-Classic and Early Classic times, ca 300 B.C. to A.D. 500, but had also added an important new dimension to the picture of late Post-Classic activity both in the site centre and in the northern residential zone.

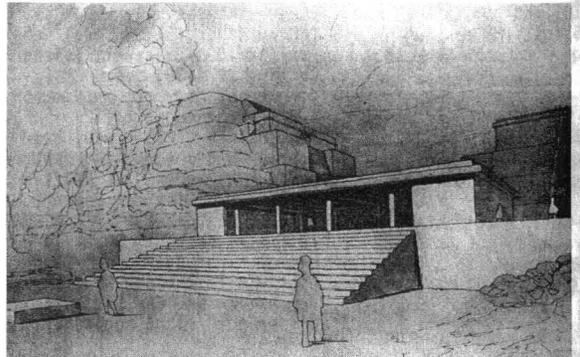


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of Structure N10-2, ca 12th century A.D.; N10-9 is at the right rear.

In structure N10-43, the early stages of work in 1980 confirmed the Pre-Classic date of the bulk of the construction and gave us a much fuller view of the form of the early structure. In addition to recovering an offering that included jade and shell carvings related in style to the Olmec tradition, we cleared portions of construction antedating that previously investigated. Though the upper portions of all structures in the sequence have suffered considerable damage, we are now able to produce accurate drawings of all major elements in the series (Figs. 3,4), and to date almost all on the basis of associated offerings. Given the date of the early stages of N10-43, it is clear that by late Pre-Classic times Lamanai was a centre of major importance, with a population capable of undertaking construction on a very large scale. The scale of such work was maintained until the Late Classic (Fig. 4), but like many other buildings in the Central Precinct N10-43 was abandoned not later than the early years of the Post-Classic.

In an attempt to extend the sequence data in N10-43 to the beginnings of construction on the spot, we probed deposits underlying the plaza floor series with which the structure is associated. This work revealed a very low early platform abutted by a plaster floor, overlying a packed earth use surface in which a small firepit was encountered. Ceramics from the plastered surface indicate late Pre-Classic dumping of refuse from the platform, and material of similar age was recovered from the firepit. Probing into and beneath the platform and

associated features revealed a single burial, without grave goods, and also yielded a small sherd collection from what appeared to be a levelled ancient land surface. These data indicate that the area beneath N10-43 saw residential use immediately preceding construction of a monumental temple. Because the change in use was a drastic one, and because the earliest strata appear to offer the possibility of yielding additional data on early construction in the site centre, we hope to probe neighbouring areas in 1981.

At N9-56, complicated tunnelling into the heart of the structure revealed construction earlier than the buildings previously encountered, but by season's end we had not recovered any solid data bearing on time of construction. The newly discovered building antedates that with Cerros-type masks, which suggests a date earlier than 100 B.C. An offering from the stair of the platform on which N9-56 and four other major structures stand appears to confirm the late Pre-Classic date of the Cerros-like building; excavation has not yet been extended into earlier construction underlying the stair. No further work on the early structure in N9-56 is contemplated, but we intend to clear two of the Cerros-type masks in 1981 in order to record them completely and assess their relationship with Cerros iconography.

The outer platform stair of the N9-56 group also yielded a highly unusual group of offerings, each enclosed in a pair of nearly identical unslipped large bowls. Whereas the normal offering pattern involves a single cache set on the midline of a stair, we encountered five almost alike in contents, set on both sides of the central axis. In several cases, the two members of a pair of objects were found in separate caches, confirming the contemporaneity of the five offerings. All are of Early Classic date, probably ca. A. D. 450-500, contemporaneous with the N9-56 tomb.

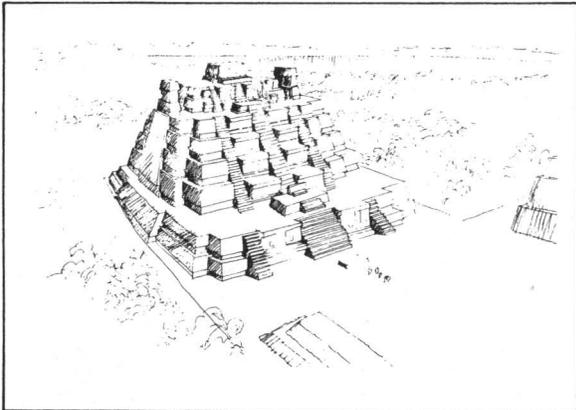


Fig. 3: Structure N10-43, ca 100 B.C.; height 33 m

In addition to the offerings, a flanking stair of the N9-56 platform yielded the second elite tomb encountered at Lamanai. Though similar in construction to the N9-56 tomb, this interment was placed in a deep pit cut into bedrock, a position that permitted groundwater to enter the crypt. As a result, perishable objects that had accompanied the burial were recognizable only as smears in the ground, except for a few areas on the crypt walls that retained impressions of the textile cocoon which once encased the burial. Fortunately the grave goods included two vessels, one of which is a blackware footed and lidded cylinder of unquestionable Tzakol 2 affinities; this fixes the date of the tomb in the 5th century A.D., roughly the time of the N9-56 interment. Because the placement of the tomb in a flanking stair is aberrant, we hope to be able to check similar spots both in the N9-56 platform and elsewhere, in order to see whether the N9-56 occurrence typifies Lamanai, both in the Early Classic and in other periods.

Apart from the work on Early Classic and earlier materials in the N9-56 group, we undertook investigation of a group of small platforms in front of the main structure, which on architectural grounds we knew to be of Post-Classic date. One of the structures provided support for a Classic carved stela, obviously re-sited in Post-Classic times; this was cased and moved to permit investigation of the platform. The results of the work included re-

covery of a single concentrated offering and a large mass of vessels, clearly deposited as a second offering; among the vessels is one in the form of an ear of corn, sadly incomplete. The ceramics confirm the late Post-Classic date of the construction; it appears likely that this and neighbouring small platforms were built in conjunction with the deposition of a huge quantity of Mayapan-type figurine censers (Fig. 5), found scattered over N9-56 and its associated platform. We therefore have a much clearer picture of the scale and nature of ceremonial activity in the site centre at a time when the buildings of Classic date had fallen into decay, and the focus of ceremonial life was apparently in the southern part of the old Central Precinct, involving structures such as N10-2 (Fig. 2).

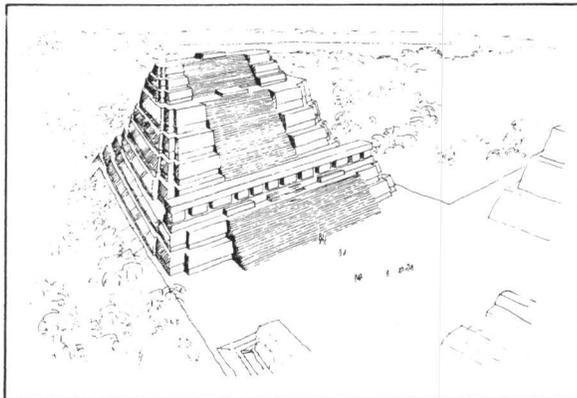


Fig. 4: Structure N10-43 as modified ca A.D. 600

Other work in the central part of the site included raising of a re-sited altar in the plaza fronting N10-9, just west of the main area of Post-Classic activity. N10-9 has provided the strongest evidence for a continuum in architectural modification from the Classic into the Post-Classic (Figs. 6 and 7), and the plaza at its front saw activity throughout the last centuries of the site's occupation, including deposition of a very large mass of midden along the east side of the area. The altar appeared to have been put into position in very late times, after the full soil profile now in existence had developed. Work beneath the altar revealed a series of offerings made up of material



Fig. 5: Mayapan-type figurine censer, one of perhaps 50 broken and scattered over Structure N9-56

likely to have been scavenged from earlier caches; included among the offerings was a group of Altun Ha-type flints (see Pendergast 1979:figs. 22 and 23), and an assemblage of three middle Classic vessels, all in fragmentary condition. The date of the re-siting of the altar could not be confirmed by the artifacts recovered, and hence is likely to rest entirely on the stratigraphic situation of the object.

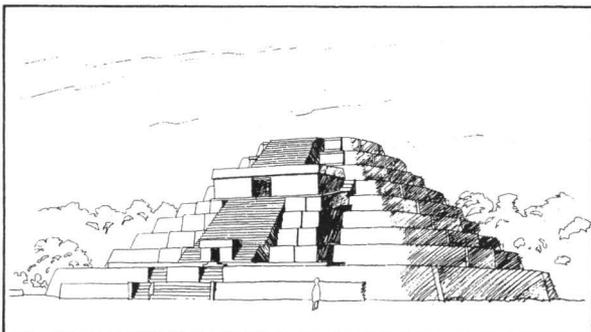


Fig. 6: Structure N10-9 during the Late Classic, a form termed the "Lamanai Building Type"

In order to examine an obvious discontinuity between boulder core beneath the altar and the sequence of floors and core units revealed at the base of N10-9, we trenched deeply into the area below the altar. The trench sectioned approximately four metres of core, taking us well below the level that we identified as base soil in the N10-9 excavations. At the bottom of the core unit we encountered, to our very great surprise, a low platform and perimeter plaster floor. Weather conditions, which remained unfavourable almost throughout the season, prevented investigation of the platform due to accumulation of water in the trench, but we hope to pursue the matter in the dry months of the coming season.

Elsewhere in the site centre we completed investigation of the ballcourt that lies south of N10-43. Though the structure was excavated in earlier seasons, we had not been successful in raising the giant marker disc at the centre of the playing surface, the last remaining spot where an offering might be found that could fix the time of the court's construction. Raising of the 1.7-metre disc did indeed reveal an offering consisting of a lidded bowl containing two miniature vessels, a quantity of cinnabar, and small objects of jade, shell and pearl, all resting atop a pool of 131.9 gms (9.7 cc) of mercury. While mercury has been reported from four sites in the Highlands of Guatemala, the ballcourt offering is the first known occurrence of the material in a Lowland Maya site. The presence of the material is of great interest, but the container vessel and two fragmented dishes on which it rested are of more importance in that they indicate a construction date at the end of the Classic, probably in the late 9th or early 10th century A.D. Together with the data from N10-9, the ballcourt information demonstrates conclusively that there was a continuum in ceremonial construction from the Late Classic into the Post-Classic that involved major new construction as well as renewal of existing buildings. This indicates that the community at Lamanai was still a strong one in the 9th century; unfortunately we cannot identify the sources of that strength at the present time.

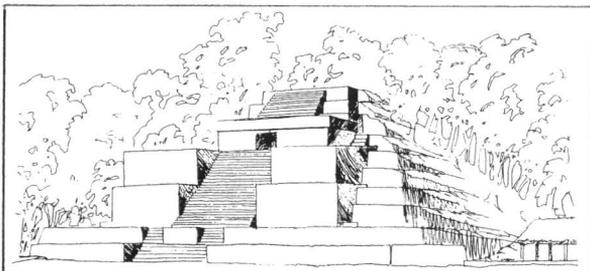


Fig. 7: N10-9 as modified by addition of new stair-side outlets in Post-Classic times, ca A.D. 1100-1200

In the northern part of the site centre, we undertook

testing of two small structures atop the largest construction unit at the site, a platform 90x110 metres on the top and approximately 18 metres high. The testing was designed to yield information on the date of latest construction atop the platform, to permit us to determine whether Post-Classic ceremonial activity might have occurred here as it did in the area of N9-56. One of the structures yielded no sherds or other material, despite extensive probing; the other produced sherds in quantity from the surface, but virtually nothing from core. If the surface material can be taken as an indicator of time of use, the structure was not in use after the Early Classic. There was no evidence here or on the second building of any Post-Classic activity, nor were there clearly identifiable Late Classic ceramics. It appears that a very large part of the giant platform may be a single construction effort, but our best opportunity for dating the effort will likely be to test the stair at the west side, rather than to continue investigation of units at the top.

In addition to the giant platform, we tested a very large range building that borders the feature we believe to have served as a harbour. The presumed harbour is now dry except in the rainy season, but removal of accumulated soil and debris in the bottom would permit water from the lake on which the site fronts to flow into the feature. Pollen cores from the bottom of the area indicate specialized use, as corn pollen is many times more frequent than normal; this, too, may support identification of the feature as a harbour. Because of the location of the platform west of and above the harbour, and also because of its unusual conformation and length of 93 metres at the top, it appeared likely that the building was designed for specialized use, perhaps associated with the harbour. Testing at the structure's top and in the centre base stair has thus far yielded slightly uncertain evidence of a middle Pre-Classic date of construction of the outermost major modification; we propose to extend testing in 1981.



Fig. 8: Post-Classic pottery maskette (ca A.D. 1150) showing a deity (?) wearing a crocodile head-dress. Height 10.9 cm

North of the site centre, our efforts were concentrated in one zone in which a variety of structures exists, some of which were tested in 1979. The testing last season showed that one of the structures had seen use in Post-Classic times, but the structure itself appeared to be of earlier date. Work in 1980 included full excavation of the structure and a Post-Classic midden abutting it; the building, a large platform without a masonry unit atop it, can now be shown to have been built in late Pre-Classic times, probably before 100 B.C. From core of the outermost shell of the platform and from earlier units came extremely large samples of late Pre-Classic ceramics, including a few reconstructable specimens; this has given us a sample of pottery from the period large enough to permit fair characterization of Lamanai ceramics in the last centuries of the Pre-Classic, and to allow comparison of material from a residential zone with that from both major structures and small platforms in the site centre.

Facing the Pre-Classic platform across a small plaza is a

structure (P8-9) which from its shape and size appeared to be a small ceremonial building. Investigation of it produced information on a style of architecture sharply different from that of Central Precinct structures, involving a platform unlike those of N9-56 and N10-43, with a thatched building at its top. Burials encountered in core of the two main construction efforts indicate a date for the earlier of about 300 B.C., and for the later of perhaps 200-100 B.C. The earlier burial was accompanied by an ideal ceramicist's sample of seven different vessels, including one that bears the earliest known representation of a crocodile, a creature that appears frequently in Classic and Post-Classic (Fig. 8) iconography at Lamanai. This seems to strengthen the identification of the reptile as a special creature or deity at the site, and to support the reading of the site name as Lama'an/ayin, "submerged crocodile".



Fig. 9: Mask located at the southwest corner of Structure N9-56, Lamanai, Belize. C. A. (Photograph: Hal C. Ball)

Immediately south of the area of Pre-Classic construction lay a platform that supported a small structure and had at its perimeter at least three others of very small size. We investigated the platform, two of the appended buildings, and the structure atop the platform; by so doing, we spanned a period of at least two millennia. An offering from the base of the platform indicates a construction date of about 400-500 B.C. or earlier; reconstructable vessels from one unit of the platform core suggest that additions to the structure were made during the last centuries of the Pre-Classic. As far as we were able to determine, no major changes occurred in the structure until the 7th century A.D., when the first of the appended buildings was constructed at the north. Burials from this structure fix the time of construction, but neither they nor the building's features indicate its use. Unfortunately the condition of the main platform's surface prevented us from determining what sort of structure might have originally stood atop the unit, but the size of the platform top is sufficient to have supported several residential structures of standard dimensions. The assumption that the northern appended structure represents an expansion of residential space required by a growing family is reasonable, but absolutely unprovable with the data recovered.

Long after the middle Classic addition, the platform saw further modification in the form of a structure atop it at the east, and small appended platforms at the south and west. Both the east and the west structure were built in late Post-Classic times, probably in the 14th or 15th century A.D. They represent the first evidence of construction in the north during the Post-Classic, and it is not inconceivable that the midden mentioned above was deposited by residents of the structure atop the platform, though this structure too was surrounded by sherds and other refuse. The nature of much of the sherd material here and around the small western appendage suggests that ceremonial activity may have been carried out in residences, as it appears to have been at Mayapan. During the time of late construction, an offering in the form of a lidded shell-man vessel was deposited in the middle Classic added platform; this suggests that the structure was either renewed in the Post-Classic, or had fallen into disuse earlier, and

was renovated to serve as the base for a Post-Classic thatched building.

The data from the platform group demonstrate that Post-Classic construction occurred north of the site centre, as it did at the south; this makes it appear that there were two physically separate units of the Post-Classic Lamanai community, set on opposite sides of the decaying Classic site centre. The distance between the two late occupation zones might have made them functionally separate communities, though the links in both economic and ceremonial areas of life are likely to have bonded the two units into a single whole. Work in the north, in residential areas west of the site centre, and in the area of the 16th-century church at the south will continue in 1981 in conjunction with completion of our investigations in the site centre outlined here. These investigations and those scheduled for the following two years should add materially to our knowledge of the long and rich occupation sequence revealed by our excavations in 1980 and the six preceding seasons. By the time the project draws to a close in 1983, we should have a reasonably clear understanding of the occupation history of what was clearly a centre of major importance in the Central Maya Lowlands from Pre-Classic through Post-Classic times.

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#### Note:

All architectural drawings by H. S. Loten

(Anmerkung der Redaktion: Lamanai wird in der älteren Literatur als "Indian Church" bezeichnet.)

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Ausgrabungen in Lamanai, Belize im Jahre 1980. Seit 1974 werden in der Maya-Stadt Lamanai Ausgrabungen durchgeführt. Die Grabungssaison von 1980 erbrachte weitere Erkenntnisse über die baulichen Aktivitäten in der Stadt und die ununterbrochene Besiedlung von etwa 600 v. Chr. bis in die Kolonialzeit. Die Ausgrabungen sollen bis 1983 fortgesetzt werden.

**Resumen:** El artículo trata sobre las investigaciones arqueológicas realizadas en Lamanai, Belize, en el año 1980. Desde 1974 se están llevando a cabo excavaciones en la ciudad-Maya Lamanai. La temporada de 1980 reveló muchas evidencias de gran importancia para la historia de la ocupación humana. En este sitio arqueológico se registraron actividades de construcción; la secuencia de ocupación se extiende sin interrupción desde 500-600 AC hasta el período colonial, el siglo 17 DC. Los abundantes hallazgos del postclásico son de especial importancia. Las investigaciones serán continuadas hasta 1983.

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#### NEUERSCHEINUNG (1980)

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