

Archaeological Newsletter

New Series, No. 199, December 1981

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

LAMANAI 1981 (II): BUDS, SWEAT AND GEARS
David M. Pendergast, Field Director

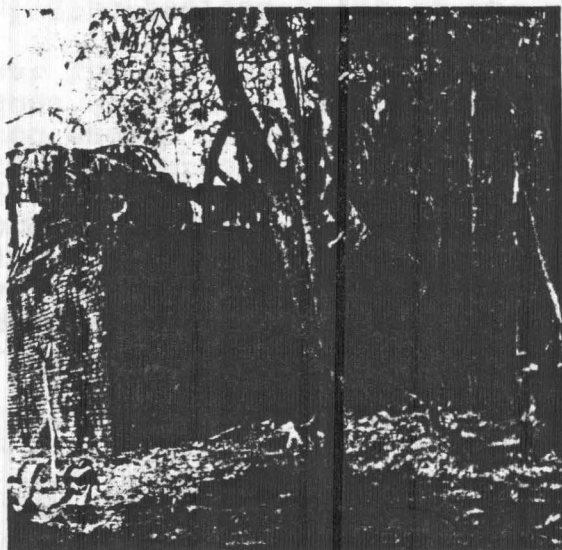


Fig. 1. An exercise in industrial archaeology; a workman (right foreground) clears a tank east of the 19th-century sugar mill.

Where in the annals of the Lamanai Expedition can one find an instance of predictions made early in a season and borne out by later events? Readers of Lamanai newsletters know full well that I am given to making firm statements about the directions to be taken by research, and equally given afterwards to producing lengthy explanations of the wide gulf between what was said and what actually happened. The 1981 season seems to have begun with the usual predictions, but to have gone entirely off the rails from April onward as the expected course of events turned into reality. All this goes to say only that the shifting of the spotlight from one ring to another in this year's circus went according to plan, and not that the work failed to produce discoveries as surprising as those made in the first half of the season.

The gears in this tale lie at the sugar mill, where we continued work a bit longer than we had planned, because of the emergence of unexpected features in every trench we dug. We thought that the level areas around the mid-19th century edifice were work surfaces without permanent construction, but digging revealed a great complex of brickwork channels, small tanks, and other features that are bewildering to a Mayanist but probably completely familiar to a sugar-mill specialist.

Masses of discarded ironmongery piled around the mill show that the operation became increasingly sloppy in the late 1860s and afterwards, as the enterprise began to fail. In the heap of metal there

are several sets of giant bevel gears with stripped teeth; here is an opportunity for the Direct Historical Approach to archaeological data, for not only do we know the nature of the event represented, but we can almost hear the words of the foreman to the chap who, for perhaps the fourth time, forgot to let the crusher stop its forward motion before shifting it into reverse. Would that we could be given such a clear picture of events in ancient Maya life by the artifacts we recover in prehistoric excavations; in any event, work at the mill, a sort of curious adjunct to our main undertaking, has now been carried as far as it can be unless we find special funds to support a further excursion into the realm of industrial archaeology.

Sweat is everywhere in tropical lowlands work. It pours from digger and archaeologist alike; it rains down into my glasses until the world becomes a collection of blurred images and I must shed my spectacles if I am to avoid damage to the burials and offerings I excavate; and it gives clothing, notebooks, and anything else with which I come in contact the appearance and feel of a sodden sponge. But it is not these everyday facts of tropical life that are referred to in the title of this piece; instead, it is an ancient circumstance in which sweat may have been a desirable product of the use of a very strange building.

You will remember from the last Newsletter (No. 192, May) that we were at work in a group of small structures denominated The Circus, far off in the northern suburbs of Lamanai. Our labours in a chultun and the structures east and west of its entrance had produced an amazing quantity of information by mid-season, and because of this we continued work in the group until June. We focused our attention on the north building, which on excavation proved to be not one but three small platforms, or so we thought once a fair amount of clearing had been completed. The centre structure was flanked by two narrow alleyways, from which we recovered enough potsherds and other ancient refuse to fill several 100-lb. (pardon, 45.4 kg) sugar-sacks. The pottery from the alleys showed clearly that the refuse was of early Post-Classic (ca. A.D. 900-950) date.

Fortunately the refuse included several fragmentary but reconstructable vessels, as well as a wide range of household goods, animal bones and other food remains, and an unusually large number of personal adornments. Among the jewellery was a shell pendant with a scratched scene on one surface that shows three individuals with what appears to be feathers in their hair, seated in such a way as to suggest that they are in a canoe or some other means of transport. This sort of slice-of-life depiction is uncommon in Maya art; usually the people portrayed are either rulers in all their finery or deities in the paraphernalia that express their identities. The rarity of its decoration combines with the date to give the pendant greater interest value than its size and style suggest it should have.

Since the alleyway refuse appeared to have come from the two flanking platforms and to indicate their age, we pushed on with clearing of the middle platform in the hope of finding clues to the time of its construction. All went well until we neared the centre of the south side, where the platform face suddenly disappeared, on a suspiciously regular line that looked for all the world like a doorjamb. Doorjambs do not occur in platform faces, so I began to think up explanations for the straight line, but was stopped by the appearance of its mate farther to the west. A little more digging showed that there was indeed a doorway, and that the platform was in fact a single-room building. To this extent, at least,

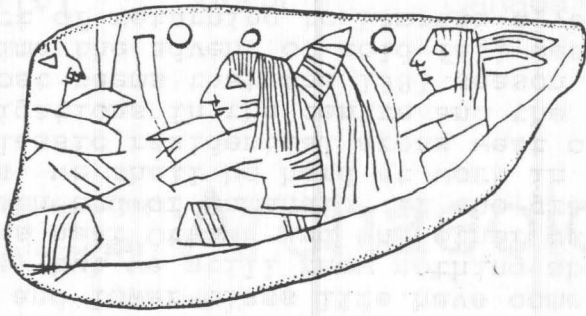


Fig. 2. Seated on a shell pendant 7.5cm long, these 10th-century chaps may be conferring, perhaps in some sort of conveyance.

the work ran true to form; when you are sure that things are at their clearest, you can also be sure that you are mistaken.

The building must qualify as one of the Maya Area's great architectural oddities. Square on the exterior, the structure is almost round inside, with the rear arc of the circle brought so close to the outer face that the wall is too thin to have borne much weight. Added to this oddity is the roof form; vaulting, now collapsed, ran up a short distance from the tops of the metre-high walls to a point where there must have been a flat roof of perishable materials. Masonry debris around the structure

shows that the roof must have mirrored the ceiling lines, so that the building had something of the appearance of a low thatch-roofed hut.

The curious features of the building may identify it as a sweat-house, a kind of ancient sauna where perspiring was for ritual rather than health reasons. The floor of the room is burnt, a fact that may lend weight to the sweat-house identification, but there is no evidence of a firebox, draft channels, or other features common in such structures. As Claude Belanger has pointed out, the building could have served equally well as a smokehouse, and with all the freshwater snails in the chultun perhaps we need to carry out an experiment to see whether smoked snails are more appetizing than the boiled version.

Excavation through the building floor revealed a burial with vessels made ca. 100 B.C. This shows that the structure was built when the chultun was in use, and that it was a thousand-year-old relic with at least its walls intact when the refuse was deposited on its flanks. We shall be at work here again next season, finishing investigation of the three northern structures, and then we shall move northward, as we intended to do this season, to have a look at the farthest reaches of the site's suburbs.

Besides the mill and the northern residential area, we kept on with Ottawa. As I predicted, that complex of structures has moved into the centre ring, where it will remain for some time to come. When we worked our way westward from the buildings cleared by mid-season, we found that construction of the great Boulders platform had been preceded by demolition of the upper part of a very elaborate building at the north side of the group; beneath the stones of Boulders, at the foot of the buried structure, lay toppled masonry and the remains of a complex, brightly painted stucco frieze that once adorned the building's face. Heads of several realistically portrayed individuals were mixed with arms, legs, pieces of torsos, and great lots of bosses, strapwork, and what look very much like flower-buds. These last may be water-lily buds, part of the extensive aquatic symbolism that runs through much of Maya art. The form of the stuccowork and the colours - red, bright blue, black, pink, and yellow - suggest that the building was built between A.D. 800 and 900, so it appears that most of what we have exposed dates from the

end of the Classic, when other sites were falling into decline. Because the decline obviously did not occur at Lamanai, continuation of the work on the Ottawa buildings is of great importance.

Further digging in Boulders itself yielded a burial from the 15th or early 16th century, accompanied by a large figurine censer, a copper axe-head and an amazingly well preserved pair of tweezers of the same metal, important additions to our inventory of metal artifacts obtained by the ancient Maya in trade with centres in southern Mexico. Not far from the burial lay a huge offering of earlier date, perhaps 11th century; work here made me look and feel like a chimneysweep, for the eight vessels of the offering rested atop what appeared at first to be a lens of ash but eventually turned out to be a huge bed of burnt material, with a volume of about one-and-one-half cubic metres. Here was enough material for almost endless radiocarbon dates, vital to fixing of the date of the start of work on Boulders. At the moment it seems impossible to determine the date on the basis of the pottery, since some of the vessels appear to be standard early 10th century types while others, mostly forms without parallels at Lamanai or elsewhere, have a later look about this. This rather subjective judgement can be substantiated or refuted by the radiocarbon dating, an ample repayment for the carbon stains that now adorn several sets of my digging clothes.

Ottawa
metal

On the south side of Ottawa we have begun to investigate a building that runs the full length of the group, and from its construction seems to be part of Boulders. Beneath the structure are the largely razed remains of earlier buildings, while among the huge rocks of its core there are burials of middle and late Post-Classic date. Offerings and burials seem to abound throughout Ottawa, a fact that makes us eager to have a look at the centre of the great platform, and to begin work beneath the residential complex at the west side. Such work holds great promise, for despite the large number of Post-Classic vessels and other artifacts recovered thusfar, each burial yields objects not represented in the collection. The virtual absence of duplication in the data may hold true when we excavate a small stela platform west of Ottawa, just discovered this year, that is almost identical to the one in front of N9-56 from which we recovered a very large group of late Post-Classic (probably 16th century) vessels.

Because Ottawa seems to be a combination of elite residences and ceremonial structures, work in the group will tell us much about life in the upper echelons of Lamanai society from the 9th century or earlier until very near the time of Spanish arrival. It is important that we know about upper-class existence, but equally vital that we learn about the lower strata of society as well. Some fragments of the picture of middle and lower-class life have come from excavations in the northern suburbs, but we still know nothing about the homes and lives of people in areas near Ottawa and the other centres of Post-Classic activity at the south end of Lamanai. If the grant is approved for the next two seasons, we shall be hard at work in 1982 and 1983 in an attempt to find Post-Classic residential areas west of the site centre, while we continue investigations in the centre and the northern suburbs. As I write this, it almost seems that the 1981 season just drew to a close, but at the same time the advent of cold fall weather to Toronto is fast making the prospect of returning to Lamanai a very attractive one indeed.

* * * * *