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Stability Through Change: Lamanai, Belize, from the Ninth to the Seventeenth Century

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The conventional wisdom regarding the Postclassic has always been that the six centuries before the arrival of the Spanish were a time of decadence, a sort of descent into the pit from the heights achieved in Classic times. This is, of course, a view rooted in archaeocentrism, which is to say that it rests on the belief that the Classic embodied all that was good and true and noble and beautiful in Maya society, from which it obviously follows that anything in the way of a change must have been a spiral down from the pinnacle. The view is also understandable historically, for among the sites that saw early excavation were several at which decay and collapse had undeniably occurred. Where the cataclysmic events at the end of the Classic were followed by anything at all, it seemed only a feeble glimmer of what had gone before.

Our understanding of the ebb and flow of life at many Maya sites has done much in recent years to dispel the notion of a simple rise-and-fall progression through the Lowlands. For the Central Lowlands, however, one would until recently have been hard-pressed to make a case for the Postclassic as much more than a fast slide down into a very murky sea. The excavations at Lamanai from 1974 through 1982 have provided a body of data that supports a different view of events

in the tenth century A.D. and afterward; although the Lamanai data appear unique in many respects, they surely also reflect events that were characteristic of the Postclassic as a whole.

The contrast between Lamanai and Altun Ha, just 40 kilometers to the east (Figure 7.1), in the Terminal Classic and Postclassic is instructive because of its sharpness. Altun Ha saw abandonment of temples at the end of the Classic, and probably of palaces as well. Disappearance of the elite population is strongly indicated not only by the abandonment but also by the desecration of all readily accessible tombs (Pendergast 1979: 183–84, 1982a: 139). Later residential use of at least one temple probably involved nonelite families; ceramic evidence suggests that the temple occupants were the descendants of those who had seen the Classic come to an end not long before. Occupation and some construction continued in outlying areas beyond the final throes in the site center, but the aftershocks of Classic collapse seem to have brought all reconstruction and use of small buildings to an end by or before the early eleventh century.

Following full abandonment of the site center came several burials, and offerings that include a small lot of vessels that are almost certainly of Lamanai origin. Among the vessels are one or more censers and the highly distinctive “chalice” form that marks the twelfth to fourteenth centuries at Lamanai (Pendergast 1982a: 140). Though the vessels’ source is clear enough, the identity of their users remains beyond our grasp. Trade between the people of Lamanai and a remnant population at Altun Ha is obviously a possibility, and probably just as likely as pilgrimage by Lamanites to an ancient, totally abandoned city center for the purpose of depositing a single offering atop what must by then have been an almost featureless mound. Whatever the nature of the event, though, it is clear that the offering did not signal any renaissance of Altun Ha society; the site core was just as dead a place after the ceremony as it had been before.

When life finally revived at Altun Ha, its pulse was weak and its span was not great. The resuscitation took place primarily in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, apparently a time of Postclassic presence at many other sites in northern Belize. At Altun Ha, the occupation was unquestionably a break with the past, and it appears highly likely to have involved people not directly related to those of the Classic and Terminal Classic. Evidence for the presence of the Late Postclassic people consists primarily of Tulum-related ceramics of the Uayeb phase,

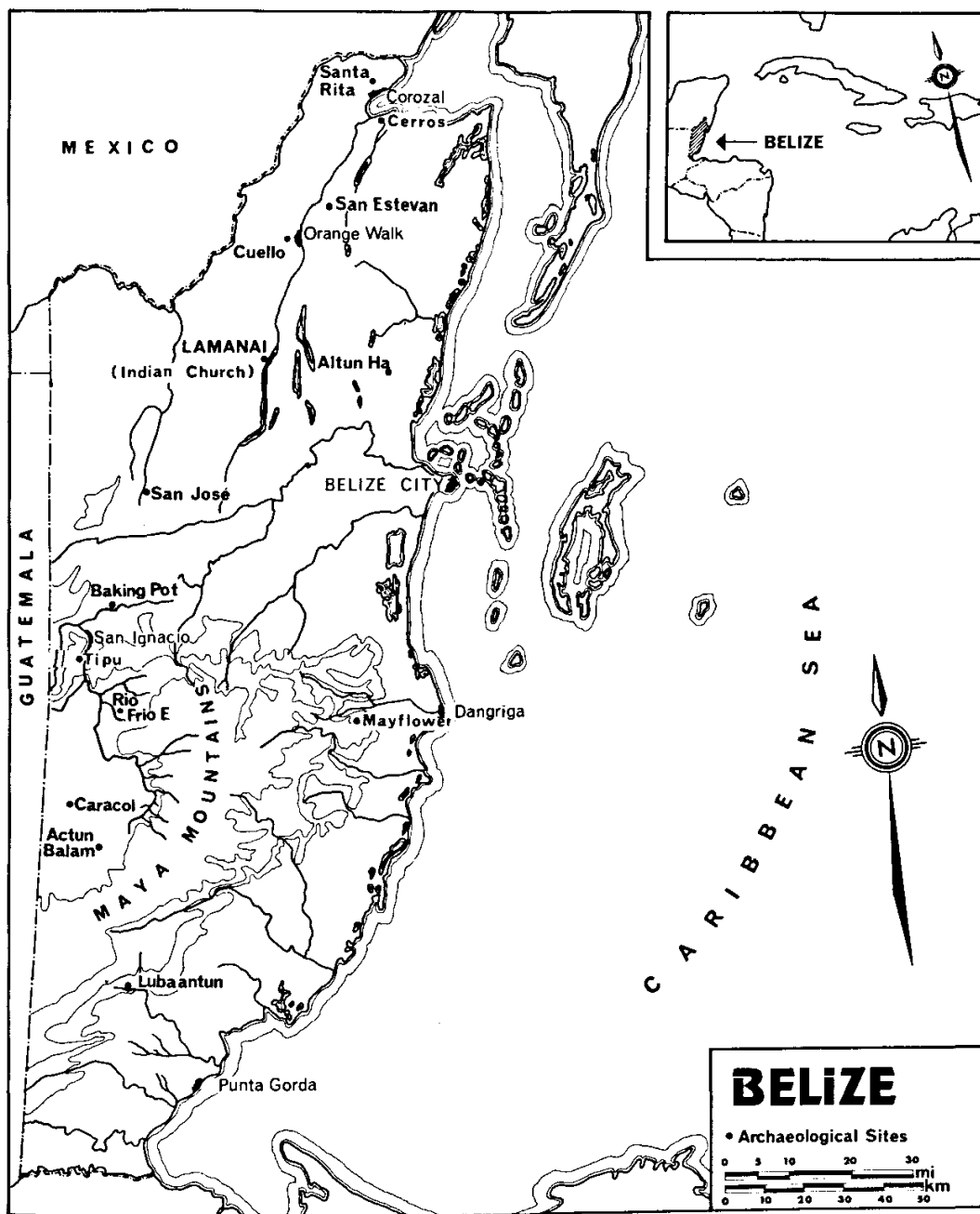


Figure 7.1 Location of Lamanai.

a designation that implies the existence of an appreciable body of data. In fact, most of the material is a thin scatter on and in the humus strata atop residential and other small structures in neighborhoods both near and at some remove from the Central Precinct. It is probably true in all cases that Uayeb use of Classic Period structures involved erection of a thatched building atop what was seen by the builders as

a mound high enough to be up out of the swamps and mosquitoes, rather than as the remains of an earlier residence.

Late Postclassic use of Altun Ha, and likely of other northern Belize sites, was quite clearly more than a matter of pilgrimage, and may well have been stimulated by the presence of the resources that attracted earlier settlers, perhaps water supply in particular. The data unfortunately do not permit determination of the extent of the occupation, how long it endured, who the people were, or how their activities were related to Postclassic events of quite a different sort near the end of the long occupation span at Lamanai.

At the moment, Lamanai has the seemingly unique distinction in the Central Lowlands of having seen continuous occupation from at least Middle Preclassic times until A.D. 1675 or later, a distinction that is difficult to explain in the face of events in nearby areas during the Postclassic. Lamanai could scarcely have remained a viable community in a vacuum created by collapse of political and social organization at neighboring Lowland centers, with the accompanying dissolution of intersite networks: it is therefore likely that the pattern of events at the site was repeated, at least in its main aspects, elsewhere in the area. Until sites with similar histories are discovered, however, we are forced to take Lamanai as the lone example of a course that may have been followed by a good many Central Lowlands Postclassic communities.

Classic and earlier developments at Lamanai have previously been summarized (Pendergast 1981a: 34–43), and it is only necessary to note here that there are at least as many idiosyncratic features of architecture and ceramics here as at other sites, with the possible exception of Altun Ha and its remarkably catholic taste in buildings and offerings. The earlier centuries at Lamanai were marked by the sort of repetition of architectural and offering components that appears more characteristic of sites in the Peten than of those in northern Belize, and architectural affinities are generally with the Peten. The degree of uniformity present in many facets of the Classic Period archaeological record suggests relatively rigid control over the populace by the ruling class. At the same time, the differences between Lamanai and other Classic centers point up the futility of approaching the period as though all leaders in all communities ruled with similarly heavy hands, or found identical solutions to the myriad problems confronted by their people.

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The apparently ordered life at Lamanai seems to have differed from that at Altun Ha, where a more flexible existence appears documented by the great variety in material culture. One might have expected Altun Ha, with its greater potential resilience, to have survived into the Postclassic, but in fact it was Lamanai that bridged the transition with scarcely a ripple. Events at Altun Ha may be partly explainable in terms of the very strongly ceremonial nature of the site, and the characteristics of the ruling group that such a nature produced; one cannot, however, simply view Lamanai as the reverse side of the coin, and use the view as an explanation of what occurred at the site from the late ninth century onward.

At Lamanai, many of the patterns of Classic times continued without change until at least the early tenth century, and some may have persisted with little alteration until nearly the end of the Postclassic. Alongside the retained traditions appeared elements that marked shifts in direction, but were clearly the outgrowths of what had preceded them. The period from about A.D. 850 to 925 was, in fact, a time of continued vibrance, whereas the mood of the times was clearly one of pessimism elsewhere in the Central Lowlands, and with very good reason. The growth at Lamanai in the late ninth and early tenth centuries paved the way for the ongoing vitality of the community in the centuries that followed.

Although a relatively large volume of construction took place in the southern part of the site center in the ninth and early tenth centuries, these years may also have seen the beginnings of withdrawal from the northern and central parts of the zone, from The Harbour southward to the group dominated by Structure N10-43 (Fig. 7.2). It is clear, however, that at the same time small residential groups were being established on the peripheries of the zone, so that **it appears that withdrawal was largely or wholly a matter of cessation of major temple renewal, rather than abandonment of the zone in its entirety.**

The changes in the site center, and perhaps in portions of the northern residential zone as well, were accompanied by an increased concentration of energy expenditure in the south, the area that was to become the principal focus of the Terminal Classic and Postclassic community. The shift surely had a significant effect on patterns of life at the site, but the inhabitants of Lamanai obviously did not go through the late ninth century staring collapse in the face, nor did they experience any perceptible disruption of their existence as the tenth

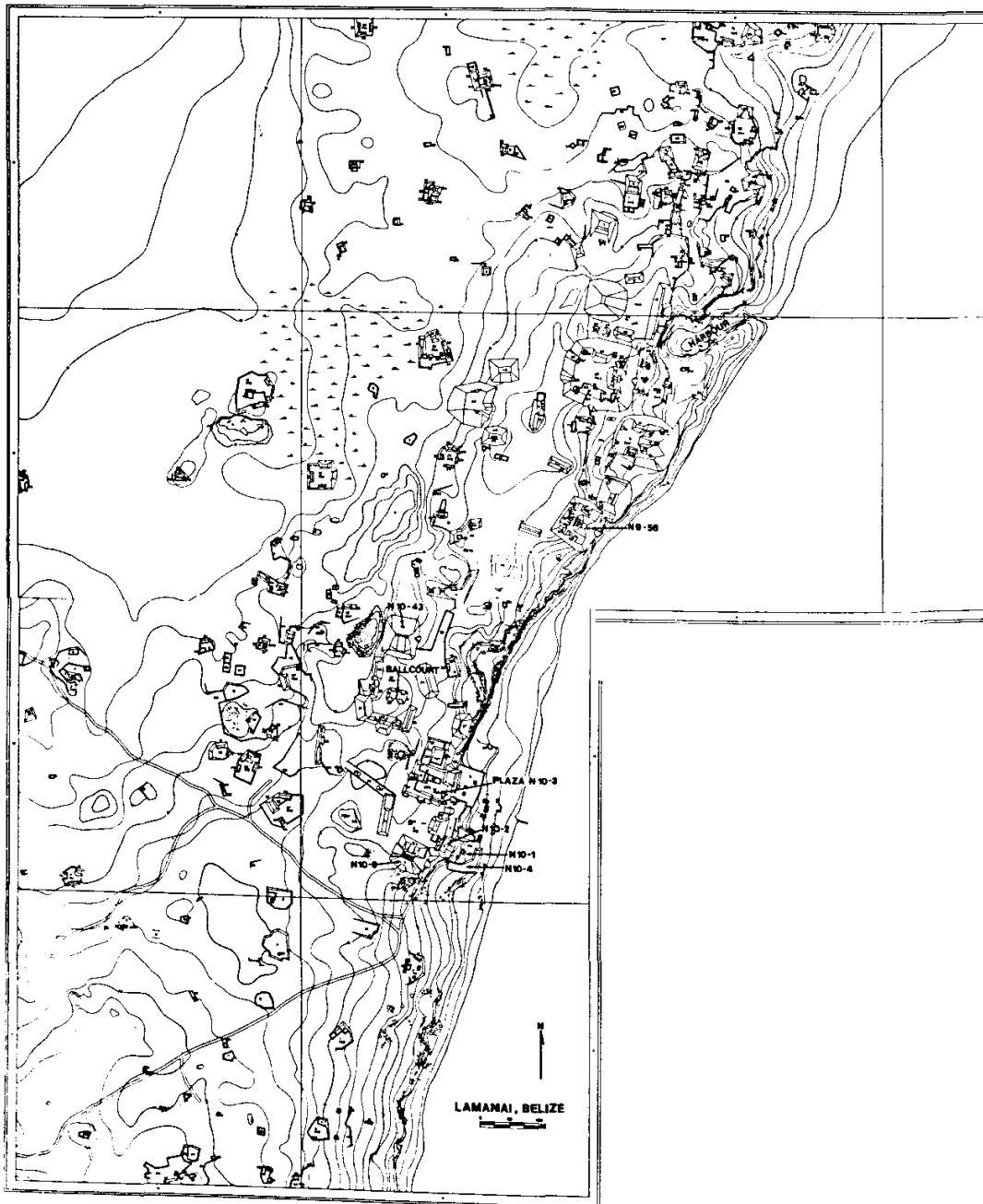


Figure 7.2 Plan of the central portion of Lamanai. Plaza N10/3 ("PA 3") lies immediately north of Structure N10-7.

century opened. The impossibility of distinguishing between terminal Late Classic and early Postclassic, in combination with the events of this period in northern Yucatan, argues forcefully for adoption of the term Terminal Classic to refer to events from the late ninth or early tenth century until A.D. 1200. The flow of events past supposed break points was so smooth at Lamanai that the site's occupants were probably no more aware of archaeologically separate stages prior to A.D. 1200 than they were on or after that date.

While the reduction of ceremonial construction in the northern and central portions of the Central Precinct was taking place, and nonelite residences were making their appearance in territory previously too sacrosanct to have served as a dwelling site, the northern residential zone seems to have seen only comparatively minor change. In some groups, evidence suggests continued occupation from the Preclassic through the very late years of the Postclassic, while in others there is no indication of construction, or of use, beyond the Terminal Classic, probably about A.D. 1100 at the latest. One could argue on the basis of evidence now in hand that abandonment of more northerly groups in the Northern Zone occurred by mid-Terminal Classic times as part of a general shrinkage in the physical extent of the community that affected the northern and central parts of the Central Precinct as well. What cannot be determined is the sociopolitical relationship between northern residents and those in the far south from the tenth to the sixteenth century.

It was in the south that Lamanai saw the greatest amount of new development from the late ninth century onward, in which innovation was coupled with a strong sense of continuum. The most striking introduction in architecture at the outset of the Terminal Classic is the lone ball court at the site (Fig. 7.2), from which an offering was recovered that included 9.6 cubic centimeters of mercury (Pendergast 1980: 4). Ceramics from the offering fix the time of court construction in the late ninth or early tenth century, with a date toward the end of that span the more likely. The mercury, the first reported occurrence in the Lowlands, is probably from Honduran sources (Pendergast 1982b: 534), and its presence suggests trade links between Lamanai and Copan or other sites in western Honduras at about A.D. 900–950, a surprisingly late date in view of events at the Honduran centers. The riverine settings of both Lamanai and Copan suggest a water route as the one most likely traveled by the mercury, though of course the metal itself

does not constitute evidence in support of such a suggestion. The importance of Lamanai's setting to trade not only in the tenth century but throughout the Terminal Classic and Postclassic is a matter to which we shall return in due course.

Beyond the trade ties, the ball court shows clearly that the inhabitants of Lamanai were intent on, and capable of, undertaking fairly large-scale ceremonial construction at a time when such building had nearly or entirely ceased at many neighboring centers. The court represents less construction than that essayed in the years when its neighbor N10-43, the N9-56 group, and other northern Central Precinct buildings were undergoing periodic face-lifts; from this we can conclude that the labor tax exacted from the populace for ceremonial construction in the tenth century was significantly less than in earlier times. Hence the community's psychological ability to undertake the work emerges as more meaningful than the physical effort expended. This is, as we shall see, true of other Postclassic ceremonial construction; what was vital to the community's continued existence was not simply the presence of a manageable labor force, but rather the spirit required to persist in the face of what must have been appalling news from neighboring sites.

Farther south, Structure N10-9, the only identifiable large Classic temple at the south end of the site, saw continuing use throughout the Terminal Classic and on into the Postclassic. The last major modification of N10-9 in the Classic was probably undertaken not later than the eighth century; from then through the early to mid-eleventh century, maintenance and use of the structure continued with no more than minor changes in the building's form. The continuum of use surely argues for a continuation of at least some of the practices for which N10-9 served as a backdrop during the Classic. From this we can infer that part, if not most, of the structure of Classic religious belief and practice survived into the eleventh century or later with relatively little change.

Maintenance of N10-9, coupled with use of the newly built ball court, seems to have formed the principal element in the ceremonial life of Lamanai during the period in which the larger buildings in the northern and central parts of the Central Precinct were undergoing abandonment. It is of course an inescapable feature of data on structure abandonment that the particulars of the activity and the span of time represented are unlikely to be determinable. For all large central and

northern buildings in the heart of Lamanai that we have examined, we know only that there is no evidence of construction following the middle Late Classic, and hence we are free to see abandonment as simultaneous or serial, instantaneous or gradual, as we wish.



It is in the area of residential construction, rather than in the ceremonial face of Lamanai, that evidence on the early portion of the Terminal Classic is most extensive. Work in the large complex immediately north of the N10-9 plaza (Plaza N10/3) has revealed a sequence of construction that spans the period from about the late ninth century to late Postclassic times, with the bulk of the buildings datable to the tenth and eleventh centuries. The structures represent the later stages in the development of an assemblage that had its beginnings in the middle Classic or earlier; while the forms of buildings changed over time, the assemblage enjoyed a continuum of use that bridged the Terminal Classic, and saw the greatest volume of construction during this very period.



By the late ninth century, the group consisted of a series of structures arranged around two contiguous courtyards. While the three eastern structures of this period are typical of the Lamanai Classic in dimensions and other construction characteristics, the masonry is largely or wholly reused material from earlier structures, a reflection of the problem that beset a good many sites in Belize during the Late Classic: lack of stone suitable for facings. The most distinctive feature in the eastern courtyard group is Structure N10-28, the latest of the three structures, which was distinguished by upper-zone stucco decoration that was of complex and highly sophisticated modeling, and painted in a very broad range of colors. This sort of facade treatment has not been encountered in Classic Lamanai, but it resembles an early tenth-century upper zone at Altun Ha, and one of similar date from Seibal (Sabloff, personal communication). The appearance of facades with strong iconographic content in nontemple settings may in all three instances represent a restatement of religious values at a more personalized level, perhaps as part of retrenchment in the face of the upheavals that afflicted many Central and Southern Lowlands sites. The facade at Lamanai may indicate the emergence of semipublic, residence-related religious practice at the outset of the Terminal Classic; at Lamanai, in contrast to the two other sites, such practices may have been an element in the successful staving off of Classic collapse.

The western portion of the residential assemblage resembled its

eastern counterpart in that it consisted of three structures, but with the significant difference that the three sat atop a common platform that bordered the court on three sides. While masonry characteristics are essentially those of the Classic, **the enclosure of a courtyard with a single multipart platform is a marker of the late Terminal Classic and the Postclassic in parts of the Yucatan.** The appearance of the tripartite platform at Lamanai before A.D. 900 might be taken as evidence of the origin of the architectural concept in Belize, but at the moment it is safer to say simply that the occurrence in the architectural form is not peculiar to Yucatan alone.

Whatever the significance of the **tripartite platform** in Lowland architectural development, its presence at Lamanai bespeaks the existence of innovative approaches to building at the start of the Terminal Classic, blended with techniques that were securely rooted in the Classic. **One could argue that use of vertically set facing stones in stair risers of the platform presaged Late Postclassic platform facing construction, but here the relationship is at least as tenuous as that between the joined platform and its northern parallels.** A second apparent innovation early in the Terminal Classic was the use of colonnades, although only one structure has yielded reasonably secure evidence of a columned entryway, and we cannot be sure whether the feature was incorporated into the ninth-century assemblage or formed part of the modification that followed.

By the middle or late part of the tenth century, or at the latest by about A.D. 1025, the original Terminal Classic form of the courtyard assemblages was in the process of radical transformation, and it is at this stage that we are best able to assess the construction-labor capabilities of the Lamanai community. As the initial step in the modification, the builders razed the upper portions of all structures but one, and capped the remains with part of the material used to fill both courtyards to a depth of approximately 2.5 meters so as to create a single large platform top. The partly razed rear faces of the northern structures were abutted by a huge platform, with a volume of roughly 3,000 cubic meters, **while the west side of the tripartite platform was cased with an extensive new face,** and additions were made to platform units peripheral to the principal group. The total volume of construction was approximately 9,860 cubic meters; the weight of core stone in the several units is roughly 21,000 metric tons.

The transformation of the courtyard group was clearly an effort of

such magnitude as to have engaged the energies of a very large work force over a very considerable period. Data from a variety of offerings in the core of the courtyard fill indicate that the better part of a century may have been taken up in this effort. During the period, the lone remaining building of the earlier complex, a masonry-walled building probably with wooden roof (Structure N10-15), was also undergoing numerous internal and external modifications, while at the east and west ends of the new large main platform the builders erected residential structures that differed radically from each other and from their predecessors.

The northern extensions of the complex were probably built shortly after the courtyard filling, perhaps in more than one stage, while ceramic evidence from core of the western addition shows that it was almost certainly the last element in the modification, built in the twelfth century or later. The gigantic size of the effort, coupled with the fact that earlier construction must have brought about depletion of core-material sources, means that the rebuilding of the group must reflect the presence of an elite still fully capable of marshaling the populace for a massive undertaking that probably spanned, in all, at least a century and a half. That this was the work of a vigorous, vital community with its goals clearly in view is surely beyond question.

The new architectural endeavors of the early Terminal Classic were accompanied by ceramic developments that followed the same pattern of blending the old with the new. The inventory of vessel forms in the period comprised not only the familiar pedestal-base medial-angle orangeware and redware dishes of San José V (Thompson 1939: fig. 78; Pendergast 1974: fig. 5b, 7a, 10c, d) as well as the distinctive bottles (Thompson 1939: fig. 79a; Pendergast 1970: fig. 11a) and other forms and slips standard for the period, but also tripod bowls of what elsewhere are identifiable as late Terminal Classic or Postclassic shape and foot classes, with paste and slip typical of the Late Classic. Burials accompanied by late ninth- or early tenth-century vessels exhibit the pattern of pre-interment breakage that was to be so omnipresent and headache-producing a characteristic of burials in later centuries. There are, in addition, offerings and burials that mingle early Terminal Classic vessels with pieces that feature shape and surface treatments which appear to be precursors of those of the twelfth century and later at Lamanai.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from examination of the early Terminal Classic ceramics at Lamanai is that previously held

concepts regarding the time span represented by San José V-related ceramics are likely to be too short by a considerable factor. Many of the forms introduced in the late ninth or early tenth century persisted in use through much or all of the eleventh century as well, though analysis may reveal subtle changes in shape and slip characteristics that will permit us to refine the use of ceramic time markers in the early Terminal Classic years.

The second conclusion based on ceramics is evident in architecture as well; these two classes of material culture, and others to a lesser extent, show that life at Lamanai did not conform to archaeological pigeonholes in the ninth to eleventh centuries any more than did life at any site at any time. Ceramic, architectural, and other traits refused to come to neat ends to be supplanted by another set; instead, there was a flow of interrelated techniques and ideas, some coming to the end of their time while others showed more staying power.

Both architecture and ceramics demonstrate that passage across the Terminal Classic bar was followed by vigorous development throughout the period and on into the Postclassic, with changes in some areas of life that seem of considerable magnitude but were probably of no greater impact than many that occurred during and before the Classic. One of the changes occurred in the use of N10-9, a structure that was an important part of the traditional aspect of early Terminal Classic life. At some point before the middle of the twelfth century, a part of the tradition was abandoned, as upkeep of the main platform terraces ceased while the building front clearly continued in use. At first glance, abandonment of the temple's body to the forces of decay seems to indicate that the rulers of late Terminal Classic Lamanai were no longer able to bring together a labor force sufficient to keep the now-antiquated building in usable condition. In fact, however, the neglect may reflect an even greater focus on the primary axis than had existed in the Classic, accompanied by the beginnings of a new center of attention and effort on ceremonial construction in the area just east of N10-9.

That N10-9 continued to be an important element in the ceremonial life of the community is demonstrated by the final major modification to the structure, new stair-side outsets sharply different from their Classic predecessors (Pendergast 1981: fig. 14), built sometime between the mid-twelfth century and the mid- to latter part of the thirteenth century near the close of the Terminal Classic. The modification

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altered no other parts of the structure's front, and this suggests that at the end of the Terminal Classic there was still at Lamanai a strong link with the past, both in building form and in ritual practice.

By the time of the last major addition to N10-9, work was under way in the area immediately east of the plaza, on Structures N10-1 and N10-2 (Fig. 7.2). The area appears to have seen use as early as the Early Classic, but may have lain partly abandoned until work was recommenced on what became a focal point for the Terminal Classic and Postclassic community. In N10-2, the late Terminal Classic saw construction of the first in a series of four structures, all a sharp departure from the architectural traditions of early ceremonial construction, but with one feature that suggests a link with one of the Plaza N10/3 buildings. **The first of the N10-2 structures (Fig. 7.3), the only one on which we have something that approximates full evidence, was colonnaded, and therefore seems to resemble the Plaza 3 structure, as well as contemporary and later buildings in the Northern Lowlands.** The resemblances cease at this point, however, for the Lamanai structure was a single-room building with wattle-and-daub walls and a floor that amounted to little more than a thick coat of whitewash over the ballast.

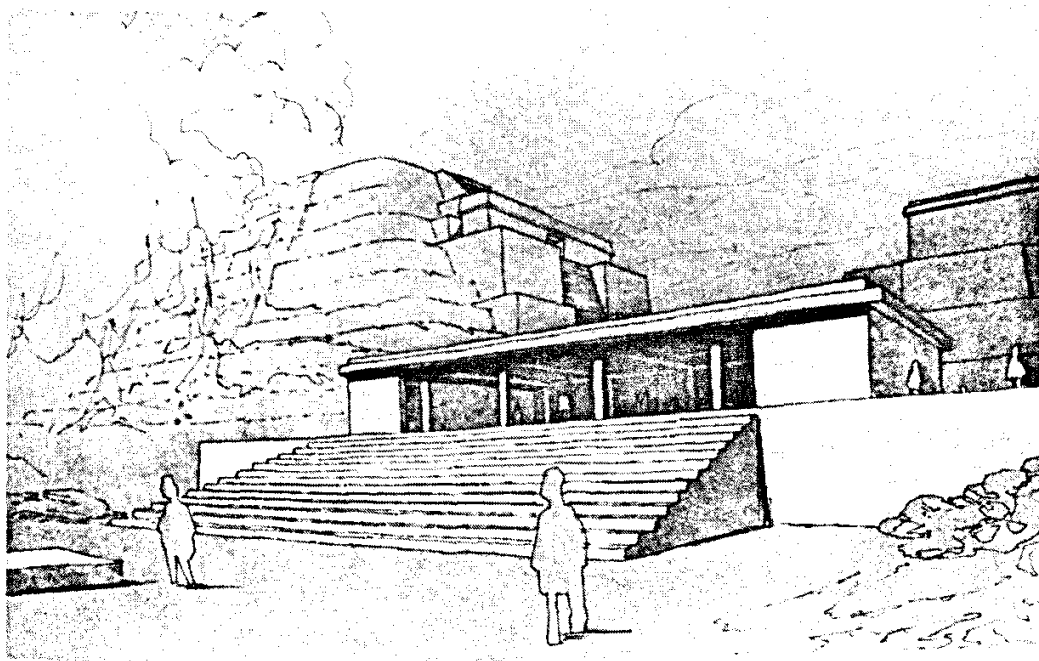


Figure 7.3 Structure N10-2 in the late Terminal Classic.

Identification of the N10-2 series of structures as ceremonial rests on the presence of a small altar at the rear of the room, the only masonry unit in each of the buildings. The placement of N10-2 almost side by side with N10-9 (Fig. 7.3) must have enhanced the visual and psychological effects of continuity accompanied by change, and may suggest related religious practices in the two structures. The juxtaposition of old and new, probably intentional, seems a concrete expression of Lamanai's vitality during a period when a good many neighboring centers were very far along their path to disappearance beneath the forest.

The architectural innovations of the twelfth century were paralleled by the introduction of new forms and surface treatments in ceramics, which, like the buildings, were almost certainly drawn out of earlier traditions. A cluster of radiocarbon dates from N10-2 shows that by about A.D. 1140 there was at Lamanai a fully developed range of distinctive forms, some precursors of which can be seen in burial ceramics from the initial construction in N10-1, a small platform east of N10-2. While a burial in the primary N10-1 structure yielded a combination of locally manufactured and imported vessels not in the full late Terminal Classic tradition, the interment from an addition to the platform was accompanied by vessels closely related to datable N10-2 ceramics (Figs. 7.4 and 7.5), and a single specimen of Silho (Chichen) Fine Orange (Fig. 7.5a). The presence of the Fine Orange vessel demonstrates that by the twelfth century Lamanai was part of a trade network that included many sites in the Northern Lowlands. It is, however, abundantly clear that Lamanai was not part of the Chichen-dominated Northern Lowlands sphere, whereas El Pozito, just 30 kilometers north of Lamanai, shows unmistakable Chichen-sphere ceramic relationships (Ball, personal communication, 1982).

The characteristic vessel forms of the mid-twelfth century and later include large pedestal-based censers with segmented flange, tripod bowls with a broad range of highly inventive foot treatments, and the apparently unique "chalice," a shallow dish set atop a very high pedestal base (Fig. 7.4, and Pendergast 1981a: figs. 15, 20, 26). All of these, as well as a very wide variety of jar, drum, and other forms, are red to orange monochrome, frequently with incised decoration, much of which was originally filled with black pigment. The very small amount of absolute duplication among the more than 600 whole and reconstructable vessels from the twelfth to the early fifteenth cen-

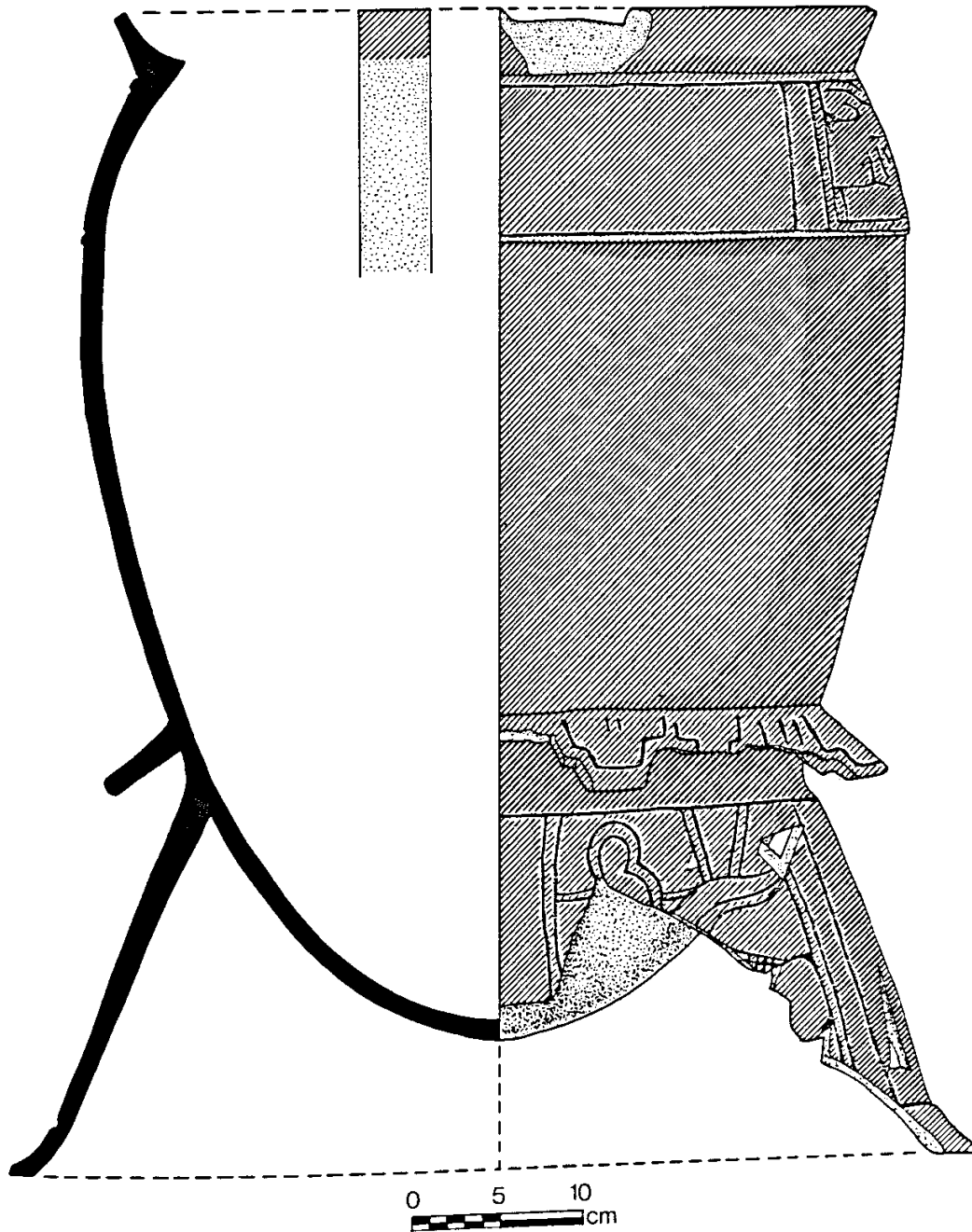


Figure 7.4 Giant pedestal-base censer that contained Burial N10-1/1, and sat atop the vessels shown in Fig. 7.5 Height 66.2 cm.

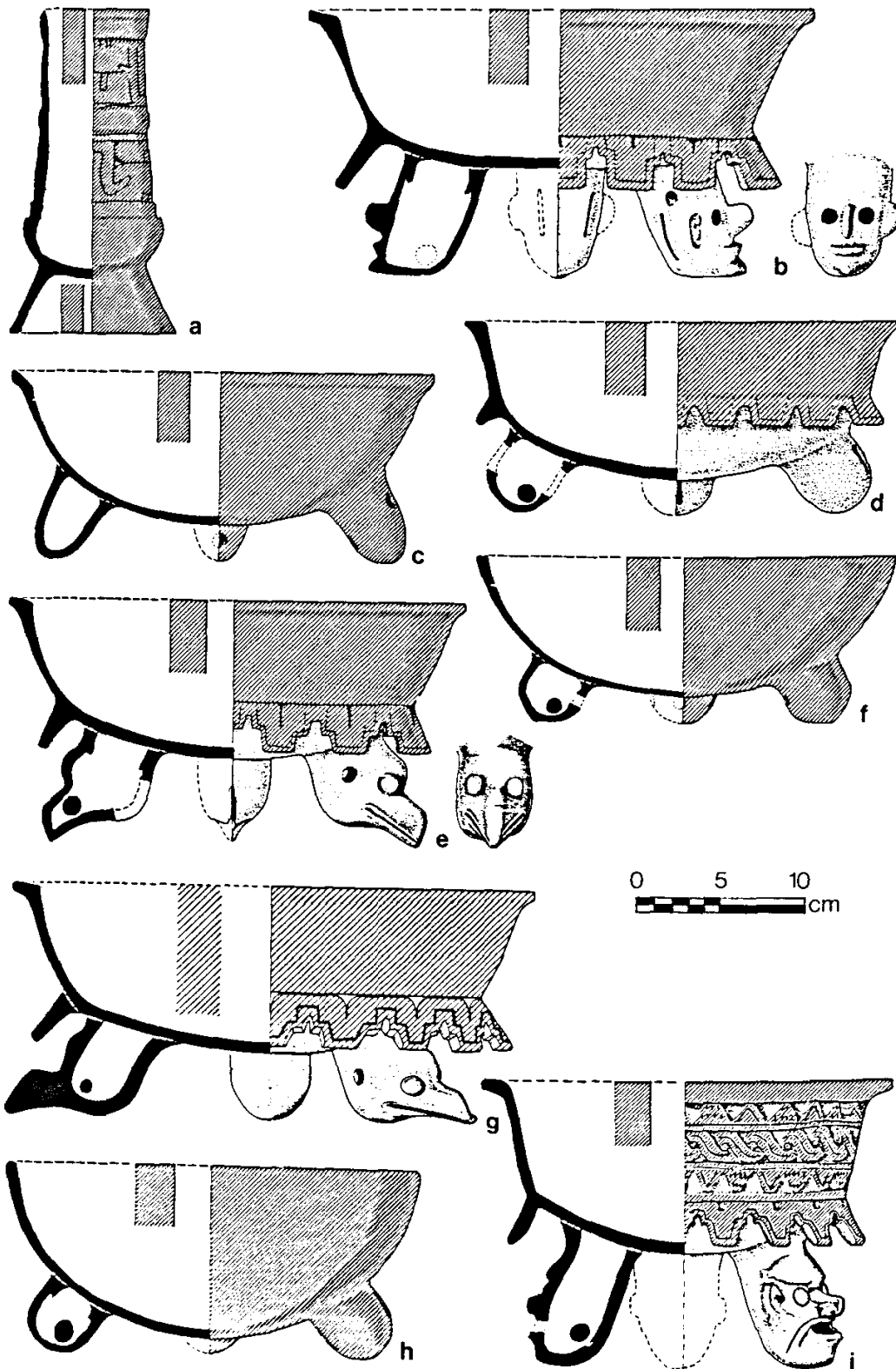


Figure 7.5 Silho Fine Orange (a) and other vessels from Burial N10-1/1. Scale 1:4.

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ture conveys the strong impression that individual freedom in manipulation of form and decoration was greater in the Postclassic than it had been at any time in the past.

While construction, together with interment of large numbers of individuals accompanied by vessels broken and strewn atop the graves, was continuing in N10-2 and N10-1, the neighboring Early Classic Structure N10-4 was seeing use as a graveyard, a use that continued until very near the end of the Postclassic. To the north, Structures N10-17 and N10-18, at the east and west ends of Plaza N10/3, remained in use, perhaps as the principal elite residences of the period. Scattered around their perimeters is midden that contains ceramics and other objects similar to those from burials in N10-1, N10-2, and N10-4. The amount of refuse is considerable, but scarcely enough to represent the full span of use of the buildings. It therefore appears quite likely that the structures were among the sources of a gigantic midden that was deposited as early as the fourteenth century.

The relationship between the midden and Structure N10-2, which it came to abut after filling the east side of the N10-9 plaza, indicates that a fair period of accumulation is represented, and that much of the amassing of the heap took place after the later stages of N10-2 had been built. The huge quantity of ceramics, likely in excess of 300,000 sherds, closely resembles material from N10-2 and N10-4 burials, as well as that associated with N10-18; this suggests that the sources of the refuse were at no greater remove from the deposition site.

The midden bespeaks an attitude toward ceremonial structures that seems rather unusual, as it is apparent that the refuse dump engulfed portions of N10-9 and N10-2 while a bit of the former building and all of the latter were still in use. Its volume also indicates the presence of a considerable population at the south end of the site center, and the nature of the ceramics is a strong argument for ceramic conservatism in the early Postclassic, with retention of form and surface treatment modes that emerged in the final century of the Terminal Classic. As with early Terminal Classic ceramics, it may eventually prove possible to recognize gradations in the sequence, but we are in fact probably seeing long-term persistence of a specific set of attitudes toward what constitute appropriate pottery forms and surface treatments. This is a kind of conservatism also detectable in the N10-2 architectural sequence, but in ceramics the conservative streak ran only as deep as the broad shape and decoration modes, while within

those boundaries the potter's imagination continued to be allowed to run riot.

In addition to the chalice and censer recovered at Altun Ha, fragments of a Lamanai-related censer and chalice come from postabandonment strata atop the principal structure at Mayflower, in the Stann Creek District (Graham 1983: 569–70, fig. 169a, b). The Stann Creek occurrence is part of the meager evidence for early Postclassic presence in the area, but in this instance, in contrast with the Altun Ha material, paste characteristics indicate that the vessels were locally made. The significance of the ceramic relationship between Lamanai and Mayflower clearly cannot be assessed on the basis of such limited evidence, but the Stann Creek data suggest that we may eventually be able to identify Lamanai-related ceramics in other parts of the Central Lowlands at some distance from the place of their heaviest occurrence.

While some of the vessel forms of Early Postclassic Lamanai are not known to be duplicated elsewhere, much of the pottery of these times has clear affinities with that of Mayapan. The early radiocarbon-based date for the Lamanai assemblage, coupled with the fact that the beginnings of the distinctive concatenation of traits obviously precede A.D. 1140, appears to document the primacy of Mayapan-style ceramic characteristics at Lamanai. The idea of passage of ceramic innovations from Belize to northern Yucatan is supported by strong indications that the twelfth-century and later Lamanai pottery tradition was a local development, in which earlier techniques overlapped with new concepts. This surely shows that Lamanai was not simply an island in a have-not area, dependent on outside sources for all of its new ideas, but rather was a developing-ground for new ideas as well. The flow of concepts, as of materials, is likely to have been two-way, or in fact multichanneled, as is true of almost all intergroup contacts.

The flow of materials into Lamanai is demonstrated most clearly by the presence of metal artifacts in burials of twelfth-century and later date. Apart from some sheet-gold artifacts, the objects are all of copper, and typological data indicate that most are likely to be from the Oaxaca area. Other sources for metals in the Lamanai area may be identifiable as well, since the presence of a Veraguas-style gold bell in a context of unknown date at El Pozito indicates trade in metals from the south as well as from the north.

While many trade contacts obviously continued to enrich life at Lamanai during the early Postclassic, there is evidence that the im-

portation of obsidian had greatly diminished in volume by or before the end of the twelfth century, if it had not ceased altogether. Obsidian provided everything from a few flake blades to as much as 15 kilograms of cores for Middle and Late Classic offerings, whereas Postclassic offerings and burials are almost entirely devoid of the material. The contrast between Classic and later domestic utilization of obsidian is much harder to determine, but it appears likely that here, too, change took place. Classic and earlier middens generally yield larger pieces of obsidian than those of the Postclassic; much of the obsidian from late Terminal Classic and Postclassic contexts, especially from very late Postclassic middens, consists of small pieces that may represent reuse of material imported to the site in earlier centuries. The breakdown of the obsidian trade is a phenomenon that has received considerable attention as an aspect of Classic collapse; the evidence from Lamanai suggests that if such breakdown occurred, it was probably not earlier than the fifteenth century, though it was preceded by a long period of declining commerce in the highly important material.

In the later part of the Postclassic, some facets of life at Lamanai unquestionably underwent change, although it appears highly likely that both N10-9 and N10-2 continued in use until the fifteenth or early sixteenth century. While use of N10-9 involved only the construction of two tiny units at the structure's base, each faced with typical vertically set facing stones, the relationship of the units to antecedent construction shows that at least the lower portions of the central stair and its flanking outsets had not been allowed to fall into ruin in the preceding centuries. Maintenance of part of the vital primary axis area seems to have been continued despite the fact that much of the stair was strewn with chalices and other pottery deposited during or soon after the final ceremonial use of the upper parts of the temple.

Meanwhile, N10-2 saw a succession of modifications that repeated all the essentials, and perhaps almost the identical form, of the late Terminal Classic structure; rebuilding probably extended through at least the early fifteenth century. Elsewhere in the southern part of the site, new ceremonial construction was essayed in the form of an extensive, low platform in the plaza in front of N10-9 and a pair of small platforms that supported uncarved stelae, west of Plaza N10/3. Construction features indicate that all three platforms are of fifteenth-century date, and artifact matches suggest that all were built simul-

taneously as part of an extensive ceremonial renewal of the area.

Late ceremonial activity was obviously focused in the southern part of the site center, but was not limited to that area alone. An offering at the base of N10-43 points to at least minimal Late Postclassic religious activity in the central portion of the Central Precinct, while at N9-56 evidence indicates continuing importance for a building that was unquestionably in ruins. Several small platforms that resemble those farther south were built at the base of N9-56; the central one supported a resited Late Classic stela. Atop N9-56 lay a mass of Mayapan-style figurine censer fragments, the products of ritual smashing of between 50 and 100 censers probably at the time of construction of the small platforms. Late Postclassic ceramics elsewhere in the northern and central parts of the Central Precinct suggest that other major temples may have seen ceremonies as impressive as that carried out on the decayed mass of N9-56, but there is no other large body of data on ceremonial activity in this period.

The censers blend the general Mayapan form with a range of specific features of costume, posture, and facial characteristics that are not those of Northern Yucatan. The mixture points to local manufacture, with alteration of a northern pattern to conform to local tastes. One cannot argue from this, any more than one can from the ceramic evidence of preceding centuries, on either side of the question of whether Lamanai was politically bound to any center in the Yucatan, and it is impossible to determine whether the network boundary between El Pozito and Lamanai in earlier times persisted into the Late Postclassic. **Indeed, it is impossible to extricate specific evidence on Postclassic political structure at Lamanai from the architecture and other artifacts, and hence to attempt to extend the data northward would be highly dangerous, though it would have the ideal archaeological quality of erecting a hypothesis incapable of proof.** What can be shown is that the Mayapan style is reflected strongly in the censers, as it is in some other vessel forms, which demonstrates that Lamanai was linked with Northern Yucatan through ideas in the Late Postclassic, if in no other way.

What are assumed to be links with the north persisted to the end of the Postclassic, in the form of Tulum-related ceramics. The significance of Tulum-style pottery, especially in the Central Lowlands, is impossible to assess at present; at Lamanai, combination of importation with local manufacture seems highly probable. Tulum ceramics

appear to have predominated over, but not replaced, locally developed wares in burial accompaniments; the principal interment in N10-4, probably of late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century date, exemplifies such a combination (Pendergast 1981a: 47, figs. 21, 22). At the domestic level, Tulum-related ceramics initially formed a smaller part of the inventory than in burials, but near the end of the Postclassic Lamanai potters were producing a wide range of Tulum imitations, and also utilizing the Tulum style of incised decoration on wares sharply different from those with which the motifs are usually associated.

Much of the latest Postclassic life at Lamanai continued to be centered on the area that had served as the heart of the community in immediately preceding centuries, but the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also saw what appears to have been expansion into the far southern part of the site, at least one kilometer south of N10-9. Evidence for such an expansion includes a pure Tulum platform (Structure N12-11) which is the earliest construction at its locus. Though the building was extensively damaged in the early Historic Period, its architectural affinities are clear, and they constitute evidence at least as strong as the ceramics regarding relationships between the Tulum sphere and Lamanai during the Late and Terminal Postclassic.

Finally, there is the Early Historic Period occupation, for which some parallel data are emerging from Tipu in the Cayo District, but are otherwise not identifiable elsewhere in Belize at the moment. At least the southern portion of the Postclassic settlement was still a functioning community in the second half of the sixteenth century, and it is possible that the Spanish arrived about 1570 to find the entire Lamanai community little changed from that of several centuries earlier. Yet placement of the Spanish church about three-quarters of a kilometer south of N10-9 may indicate that the southward extension of the community in immediately preceding centuries had led by or before 1550 to a real southward shift in focus, which was retained until the settlement's dissolution. It is highly likely that the community which surrounded the church was as altered socially and politically as it was structurally, but to date we have been largely unsuccessful in attempts to recover evidence of that alteration.

The tradition of occupation in the southern part of the site may have been a factor in use of the church as a residence by the Maya following its desecration in 1640. From 1641 or slightly later until

near the end of the seventeenth century, one or more families dwelt in the masonry chancel of the church, casting their refuse in and around the buildings and burying their dead and their offerings where the chancel floor had been. The midden includes Spanish ceramics as well as a range of locally made pottery that includes at least one reconstructable vessel (Pendergast 1982c: fig. 3). The ceramics illuminate a facet of Postclassic life that is both instructive and unsettling: the materials appear to be indistinguishable from those of immediately preceding centuries, and are identifiable as Historic only because of their context.

The church material includes no identifiable Tulum-related ceramics, but does comprise a considerable sample of Mayapan-like material, among which are numerous figurine censer fragments. The censer material, together with small Tipu-type shrines built in the ruined nave and the offerings from below the chancel floor level, indicates that those who lived in the remains of the church viewed the building both as a sacred spot and as a conveniently sturdy shelter. The absence of "Lacandon-type" censers in this partly ceremonial context raises some questions about the use of such vessels as markers of the Terminal Postclassic or Early Historic Period, although they seem to replace Mayapan-style censers elsewhere in the Central Lowlands.

The nature of the church ceramics points to conservatism in pottery design and manufacture akin to that of the Postclassic, though the sample does not include some of the forms and surface treatments that appear in the late Postclassic middens at the south end of the site center. The retention of prehistoric pottery shape and surface treatment modes in the Historic Period means that recognition of sites of the period in the Central Lowlands, and perhaps elsewhere, may have to rest on a foundation other than pottery, and may therefore prove impossible in a great many cases.

I would not argue that events at Lamanai from the ninth through the seventeenth century are a microcosm of the Postclassic in the Central Lowlands or even in northern Belize, for it is clear that the course of life at many, or perhaps almost all, sites in neighboring areas did not parallel that we have just examined. The Lamanai data do, however, unquestionably give the lie to the view that the Postclassic in the eastern part of the Central Lowlands was entirely a time of stagnation. They also make it clear that the region was not one in

which everything of consequence in Postclassic development stemmed from outside sources. It seems to me that the evidence from Lamanai also goes a long way toward dispelling the myth of the Postclassic as decadence writ large; the vitality of the community through much or all of the period, both internally and in its contacts with the outside world, was that of people who were not on a steep descent, but rather on a course different from that of earlier times. Lamanai was, in fact, exactly what one would expect of any community that continued to function in the Terminal Classic and Postclassic: an essentially indigenous development out of Classic and earlier roots, into which ideas and materials from outside sources were introduced as necessary, with the degree of alteration required to make them blend into the local pattern.

The external sources that were of principal importance to Lamanai during the Postclassic seem to have been primarily in the north, as one would expect given the course of events elsewhere in the Lowlands during the period. The exclusion of the site from the Chichen ceramic sphere in the Terminal Classic appears to argue for Lamanai's role in an exchange network yet to be defined. It was this network that brought in the Silho Orange, as well as other materials; what it took outward from Lamanai remains to be determined. Near the end of the Terminal Classic, a shift in network seems to have brought Lamanai into closer contact with northern Yucatan; here, as elsewhere, we should surely view the avenues of communication as two-way streets, which is what one should find in interaction between equals or near-equals.

The maintenance of communications between Lamanai and centers in northern Yucatan and beyond is one of the few critical aspects of Postclassic life at the site that admits comparatively simple explanation. Sitting at the head of the Dzuluinicob or New River, Lamanai had open to it a route of travel that is still one of the more attractive in the rather forbidding northern Belize coastal lowlands. The route must have offered to Postclassic merchants, as it did later to the Spanish, an ideal means of quick movement through the area with minimal outlay of energy. Recognition of the importance of marine and riverine travel as one of the keys to Postclassic interchange and survival not only may provide part of the explanation for events at Lamanai, but also suggests that we should look to other Central Lowlands riverine sites for evidence of a similar Postclassic history.

We are still a very long way from being able to identify the range

of goods and information that passed along the Yucatan coast and the Dzuluinicob and from being able to assess the economic significance of that passage to Lamanai. Though we have no way of knowing whether the raised-field system at the northern limit of the site continued in use during the Postclassic, archaeobotanical data show that maize agriculture was practiced at the site throughout the Postclassic, and material from various middens indicates that the community probably came as close as any of this or earlier periods to being self-sufficient insofar as most comestibles were concerned. Here, too, the lagoon and river had a role to play, for turtles and fish provided a high percentage of the animal protein consumed by the Postclassic community. The diet was enriched by importation of a small amount of marine foodstuffs, and the people of Lamanai obviously depended on outside sources for salt, as they may have done for other important foods. It is likely, however, that they had no great need to look to exchange systems to supply themselves with agricultural staples and with most of the meat required by a healthy populace.

Beyond the area of foodstuffs, the people of Lamanai were probably neither better nor worse off than their Postclassic counterparts in other functioning Lowland communities. Cotton and other fibers are likely to have been available locally, while some of the chert used for tools could have been obtained within relatively easy walking distance. Stone for metates was surely an import, but some other basics were almost certainly not. Neutron activation analysis of Postclassic Lamanai ceramics shows that the vessels are an essentially homogeneous group, probably distinguishable from pottery made elsewhere; this does not permit identification of the potting clays as local in origin, but it suggests that something approaching self-sufficiency in this area of the economy existed in the Postclassic, as it had done in earlier times.

I have intentionally omitted cacao from the overview of Lamanai's economic condition in the tenth to the seventeenth century, because there exists at present no shred of solid evidence that cacao was grown at or near the site, or that the site served as any sort of way station in the transport of cacao from the Belize Valley to the northern centers made easily accessible by the river. Absence of evidence is often a help rather than a hindrance in attempts at theorizing, but it is not particularly useful when one is trying to characterize the economic base on which Lamanai depended for its obviously rich Postclassic existence.

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If cacao was a part of that base, it may always remain a piece we cannot fit into the picture with any sense of certainty.

Lamanai's river avenue to the outside world surely served not as the lone lifeline that kept the community's head above the waves of collapse, but rather as a means whereby an internally strong southern community was able to obtain what it required from outside, and to send out in exchange whatever it possessed that could be used at centers elsewhere in the Lowlands. Hence an understanding of communications between Lamanai and other centers takes us only partway along the path to **an explanation of the community's survival** in the face of the forces that were at work in other parts of the Central Lowlands during the Terminal Classic and the Postclassic.



No simple environmental explanation for social phenomena is any more satisfactory than a monocausal view of the Classic collapse, or the idea of monodirectional flow of ideas and materials from site to site. The difficulty in moving beyond discussion of environmental bases for survival is that we enter an area in which intangible factors, generally impossible to recover through excavation, surely played as large a part as any economic considerations in Lamanai's ability to weather the ninth and tenth centuries and to continue as an active community in the years thereafter. If we see the high degree of uniformity in Classic Lamanai architecture and offerings as an indication of an essentially conservative, supposedly stable community with a social structure and world view that resembled those in the Peten, then we cannot adduce peculiarities of the Lamanai situation as the cause for the community's survival. This might, in fact, be equally true if we could recognize such peculiarities, since we have no means of imputing survival potential to factors of this sort, nor indeed to any aspect of a community's structure.

The most intangible factor of all, obviously not quantifiable from the archaeological record, is the community's psychological ability to survive, and, as I have suggested, it is precisely this ability that was surely the most important in seeing Lamanai through the transition period. The welding together of individual optimism to form a positive collective will is the function of community leaders, but the techniques used in performing that function leave no archaeological traces.

It is the role of governments everywhere to continue to assure the populace that all is well when a quick glance around shows that disaster

is nigh; it is, however, extremely difficult to see how even the most optimistic pronouncements from the Lamanai leaders could have made the difference between success and failure when other Central Lowlands centers were toppling left and right as the Classic drew to a close. That toppling must have resulted in breakdown of intersite relationships enjoyed by Lamanai during the Classic, and this cannot have failed to alter many aspects of life at the site. Yet somehow the community withstood the effects of it all, and kept on forging ahead. The phenomenon can be described, but not explained, as is often true in archaeology, and it is because of this that it would be eminently unwise to see in Lamanai some sort of paradigm of Postclassic life in the eastern Central Lowlands, if one accepts that there were other sites in the area left essentially unscathed by events in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The question remains of whether we can draw from a combination of Lamanai and other site data some sort of model for the Postclassic as a whole. I think that the answer is that we cannot, and indeed should not. It is not simply that we are, especially in the Central Lowlands, a long way from having sufficient data for establishment of a model; it is, rather, that the data from Lamanai combine with those from elsewhere in the Lowlands to suggest that we should see the Postclassic as a time in which various subregions, or in some cases individual communities, pursued various courses, just as they had done in the Classic. There is obviously a level at which unifying features can be recognized among subregions and communities, but it is a level so general, or with concomitants so poorly understood, that it is of little use in explaining events during the last eight centuries of pre-Hispanic Lowland Maya life. It seems to me as true of the Postclassic as it is of the Classic that, especially at our present level of knowledge, we can derive more profit from focusing on the variety in the archaeological record than we can from seeking some means of submerging that variety within a single unifying theory. For the Postclassic in particular, variety may indeed have been the spice of life, a spice that did not just add tang to existence but rather lay at its very core.

I said at the outset, and have repeated several times, that one has to take a very particular view of prehistory in order to see the Postclassic as a time of decadence. No one can deny that many sites in the tenth century and afterward saw not just decay but a decline into oblivion; yet where communities survived, what they experienced was a period

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of changes in direction, and of life that was in some ways less rich than that of the Classic, but perhaps in other ways was richer. It is only if we persist in seeing the Classic as the embodiment of perfection in all aspects of life that we can view the succeeding centuries as all dross and dreariness.

If one can judge by ceramics alone, as we are often wont to do, there may have been more freedom of individual expression in the Postclassic than ever existed in a Classic community. People may have been no less priest-ridden, but the burdens imposed on them by their rulers in the way of ceremonial construction were, at least at Lamanai, far lighter than they had been in previous centuries. Population in the Central Lowlands was in many instances considerably more dispersed than in earlier times, but where communities hung together, they may have had something of the quality of a solid neighborhood, and for many, or for most, life may in fact have been neither markedly worse nor significantly better than it would have been in Classic times, but simply different. If we reject the idea that the difference is equatable with decadence, we will have come a long way toward a real understanding of what life at Lamanai and elsewhere in the Lowlands from the tenth century onward was all about.