



*Up From the Dust: The Central Lowlands Postclassic as Seen from Lamanai and Marco Gonzalez, Belize*

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I have written elsewhere of the long-held view that the Postclassic was a descent into the dust, and of the beginnings of a change in that view that resulted from the early years of excavation at Lamanai, in northern Belize (Pendergast 1986a). That thirteen-year project is now at an end, and the results of the work provide an even more convincing argument than they did some years ago for a revision of our assessment of Postclassic events. Just as the Lamanai work was drawing to a close, Dr. Elizabeth Graham and I began a much smaller-scale project at the comparatively tiny site of Marco Gonzalez, at the swampy south end of Ambergris Cay, the northernmost coral island on Belize's barrier reef (E. Graham and Pendergast 1987; Pendergast and E. Graham 1987). Despite its size, Marco Gonzalez has also shed important light on Postclassic life, and added to the basis for a new evaluation of Maya life from the eleventh century until the Conquest.

It is common practice to take the Classic Maya as one's standard, and to view what followed the Classic as a decadent expression of all in Maya life that was of merit in the esthetic, and perhaps also the social, sense. Such a judgment is perfectly acceptable as long as it is understood as a statement of taste based upon a specific set of values, but it leads automatically to the ascent-pinnacle-descent model with which the terms Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic are traditionally associated, and is very likely to prevent any valid anthropological or humanistic assessment of events from the tenth century to the arrival of the Spaniards.

The earliest data-based syntheses of Maya prehistory drew their inspiration regarding events in the southern half of the lowlands almost entirely from

excavations in the Guatemalan Peten. As a result they pictured the years after the tenth century as a time of desolation and abandonment, from which the survivors emerged to found, or to contribute to the resurgence of, a complex social order in the north. This reconstruction of Maya prehistory divided time and space into Old Empire and New Empire (Morley 1947: 50–97) and obviously ruled out the possibility that anything of significance had occurred in the south after the fall. Less obvious was the debt such a view owed to the perception of cycles of grandeur and decay that was then current in the archaeology of Western Asia. Today we know that neither the Maya nor the peoples of the Near East followed the paths discerned half a century ago in the archaeological record, but the legacy of those early views remains with us nonetheless.

The view in more recent times has been that the southern lowlands were very severely destabilized, and the population decentralized and perhaps driven northward, by the collapse (Culbert 1973). This view owes just as much to the history of archaeological research in the area as does the earlier reconstruction of Maya prehistory. The focus on work in the Peten not only produced the concept of the area as the core of the south and all else in the area as periphery, but also adduced the social processes reflected in the Peten archaeological record as a model for the entire southern lowlands. Based on what was known of Maya sociopolitical structure, the likelihood of the existence of a core/periphery dichotomy, and of a geographically encapsulated model for southern lowlands prehistory, should have been recognized as very small. Instead, the paradigm of rise and fall was seen by most as universally

applicable in the south. Out of this perception grew the evaluation of the southern lowlands Postclassic as a time pervaded by decay, with no qualities to parallel those that had made the Classic so grand an era.

The most vocal modern proponent of the idea that the Classic embodied all that was best and brightest in Maya prehistory was J. E. S. Thompson (1966). He surely chose his title quite consciously to recall Gibbon's (1783–90) in order to hark back to the Classical world and set in the reader's mind the image of a Roman level of grandeur in the Maya Classic and a barbarian level of dissolution in all that followed. Thompson's view was very probably that collapse in the southern lowlands was a blessing in disguise, for he saw the Postclassic as a time of unregenerate moral, and perhaps technological degradation where society survived (Thompson 1966: 110–16).

Like others, Thompson wrote off the southern half of the lowlands as a participant in any significant events that followed the collapse, and like others before and after him he may have been led by this assessment to misinterpret the uppermost part of the stratigraphic record. If one is certain that the Postclassic was a time of somnolence born of decay, it follows automatically that all material from the top stratum, especially if it includes dramatically new artifact types, cannot be later than Terminal Classic in date (Thompson 1939: fig. 82a,b). The approach has persisted in more recent times; in the upper Belize Valley the existence of an Early Postclassic occupation is recognized, but the collection includes material of later date (Sharer and Chase 1976). Such interpretations may not only compress a span of centuries into a far briefer period but also eradicate the possibility of evaluating the artifacts, and the society they represent, in their own terms rather than as measured against the standards of the Classic.

The move away from a simplified version of Postclassic events in the south can be said to have begun with the assertion of complex and differing forces as the causes of the collapse (Culbert 1973) and the recognition that a polycasual event is very likely to have had multifarious effects. Yet the sense of the Classic as the yardstick against which all later achievement had to be measured was still strong, and can even be detected in spots in the most recent

syntheses of data on the Postclassic (Chase and Rice 1985; Sabloff and Andrews 1986). The belief in the Classic as the best of times, at least in the material and esthetic realms, remains to this day the linchpin of many assessments of Maya culture (Culbert 1985: 61), though countervailing views have begun to be given currency in such places as the exhibition that gave birth to this volume.

It is my view, and I think that others engaged in the study of Postclassic and early Historic Maya remains generally concur, that the Postclassic was not nearly the descent into the dust it was long thought to have been. Furthermore, it is evident that we gain much more by studying the Postclassic on its own terms than we do by measuring it against the standard of earlier centuries. Behind the general principle regarding study of the Postclassic lie very considerable bodies of data from Lamanai, Santa Rita, Negroman-Tipu, and now Marco Gonzalez, that document the richness, vibrance, and variety of Postclassic Maya life. These excavations, together with work in the Petén, tell us much more than we knew a decade ago about the fabled collapse and its aftermath. At present Lamanai is the only site at which a continuum from the Classic through all the centuries of the Postclassic and on into the early Historic period is clearly in evidence. However, unbroken occupation will very probably be fully documented by further work at Negroman-Tipu, in the Cayo District of Belize, and may well have marked other excavated southern lowlands sites.

Continuing intensive use of Classic sites through the Postclassic years may in fact have been more the rule than the exception in some areas. It is the present impossibility of defining the geographic extent of such Postclassic use that leads me to employ the partly outmoded term "Central Lowlands" to avoid the implication that the phenomena observable at Lamanai and some other Belizean sites were paralleled at most or all southern lowlands centers. The data do not indicate that the collapse did not occur; instead, they argue for revision of our view of the disintegration as pervasive in the southern lowlands, and for reevaluation of events in the centuries that followed.

As work in Belize has revealed masses of new information on the Postclassic, it has made clear the effect of the history of Maya archaeology on our assessment of the region's prehistory. It is to the early

focus of research in the Petén that we owe the standard assessment of the extent and impact of the collapse, as well as the view of the time from the tenth century onward as a period of dross and dreariness in the southern lowlands. If excavation had begun in the eastern part of the southern lowlands rather than in the central Petén “heartland,” we might long ago have characterized the collapse as an important but not unvarying phenomenon that had its greatest effect in some of the larger centers of the central and western Petén, and was felt to a lesser degree, or at least in spottier fashion, elsewhere. Acceptance of this view would immediately have weakened the argument for a picture of scattered hardy souls wandering about among ruined temples in the Postclassic years. That picture surely reflects reality in many sites but not, as we used to believe, in all.

Just as the Lamanai excavations have contributed to revision of our view of the collapse and its effects, this and other investigations have done much to alter our perception of the nature of life in ensuing centuries. Nevertheless, it is still widely held that the years from A.D. 900 onward saw Maya civilization tumble rapidly and painfully down the rough slope of decadence, both in the areas where Mexican intrusion took place and farther to the south. The same body of thought maintains that no one who savors Classic material culture can possibly see anything other than the unsavory in the products of later times.

For at least two decades we have known that a number of southern lowland sites still had a considerable amount of life left in them as the Classic came to an end. At Altun Ha, for example, at least one ceremonial and administrative structure near the site center was given its final form about A.D. 850–875, and saw some minor modifications thereafter, while neighboring and distant residences were also being rebuilt (Pendergast, in press). Such efforts were carried out in the face of mounting evidence that the fragmentation of Classic society was rapidly spreading to the heart of the fabric; in some cases, at least, life among the ruins seems not to have been a very daunting prospect for ninth- and tenth-century Altun Ha citizens. By about A.D. 1100, however, the burdens had become too much to bear, and Altun Ha, like other sites that suffered the collapse, yields no further evidence of inhabitants.

The picture that emerged from the Lamanai excavations is sharply, and at first glance surprisingly, different from that recognizable at Altun Ha and most excavated southern lowlands sites. There is no conclusive evidence of major change in social structure in the latter part of the Late Classic; transformation of religious practice was clearly less than total, though it is reflected by the decline in or cessation of maintenance of most of the major temples in the Central Precinct. In the late ninth and early tenth centuries, when any percipient Lamanai resident would surely have been aware that political control was disintegrating in many neighboring communities, several parts of the southern end of the site center saw major renewal. The building efforts appear to reflect a focus on the southern part of the site as more northerly temples fell into disuse, but there is persuasive evidence in the and volume of Terminal Classic construction that this internal shift was not accompanied by any significant reduction in Lamanai’s population. To all appearances, the community, though changed in shape, was as vibrant both in terms of population and construction activity in A.D. 950 as it had been in A.D. 650.

Although it is possible to document Lamanai’s survival through the time of disintegration elsewhere, it is far from possible to pinpoint the sources of the community’s strength in the face of hardship. The availability of food resources superior to those obtainable in some communities clearly conferred an advantage on Lamanai’s residents, as did the presence of a riverine highway to the outside world, but these or any other environmental factors do not suffice as an explanation of the city’s successful passage through the difficulties that marked the ninth and tenth centuries.

Because much of the major-structure modification at Lamanai following the Early Classic, and in fact during this period as well, consisted of the refronting of existing buildings, it is quite likely that the community’s leaders demanded smaller amounts of labor from the populace than did the elite at many other centers; this, too, may have contributed to Lamanai’s stability during the lowland upheavals. Finally, the quality of leadership, often fundamental to the preservation of communal confidence during confrontations with disaster, may well have been high enough in ninth- and tenth-century

Lamanai to buttress a social structure that might otherwise have toppled. Though possibly as much of a factor as any other in Lamanai's survival, the nature of the community's leaders through the critical years is, of course, undocumented in the archaeological record. There may be other elements of the picture that are equally undetectable, but what we can see surely bespeaks a multifaceted procession of events for which the causes are likely to have been legion.

The clearest expression of Lamanai's apparent confidence in the future during the years of upheaval elsewhere lies in architecture. Whether large or small, the construction efforts of A.D. 900–1000 unquestionably mirror a population still planning for the years ahead; in the case of the largest known effort of the period, the evidence also tells us something about the organization that permitted translation of such plans into stone-and-mortar reality. The greatest undertaking occurred in the southernmost residential and administrative assemblage in the Central Precinct (Plaza N10-3) a complex that had been important for at least 400 years (Pendergast 1986a: 231–32); here the renewal, probably begun in the second half of the tenth century, involved amassing about 21,000 metric tons of stone in a reshaping of the group that was ultimately to span at least a century and perhaps as much as 200 years. The labor represented was obviously at least as staggering as any demanded in earlier times; the work must have consumed much of the community's energy, as well as a considerable amount of wealth deposited in numerous offerings, through much of the Early Postclassic. The ability of Lamanai's elite to marshal and guide communal effort, and the existence of resources equal to those of peak times in the Classic, are both clearly documented by the size and nature of the work; based on these data, one can scarcely fail to conclude that the community's structure and energy continued undiminished through the time of collapse at other centers.

Of much smaller scale, but equally significant as a statement of optimism regarding Lamanai's future, is the ball court (Structures N10-40 and 41) built near the end of the Classic, with its massive marker disc and offering that included the only reported mercury from the Maya Lowlands (Pendergast 1982a; 1986a: 229–30). The court's meaning in the

life of the community is difficult to assess fully because no earlier ball courts appear to have graced Lamanai's Central Precinct; one might therefore see the introduction of the ceremonial game as an attempt to stave off the disaster that was befalling other centers, though the ball game is not known to have possessed this protective quality. However, the proximity of the court to the massive construction described above argues for identification of the structure as yet another part of the statement of strength made throughout the site's southern zone in the opening years of the Postclassic.

The vigor of Early Postclassic life at Lamanai reflected in architectural endeavour was paralleled in many other areas of material culture. Continuation of Terminal Classic or earlier forms into the eleventh century was accompanied by innovations of the sort that bespeak a vitality equal to that of preceding centuries; the Maya of Lamanai were clearly still examining, modifying, and inventing, while proceeding along a path that had not diverged greatly from the one they had trod for a great many lifetimes. If they were conscious of upheaval, it must have been almost entirely a matter of news from the outside rather than problems at home.

Continuity through the years of disaster elsewhere seems also to have marked at least some aspects of religious practice, although abandonment of most temples in the Central Precinct might have meant neglect of some gods or the shifting of their sites of worship to far less prepossessing surroundings. In the area that saw greatest activity in Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic times, however, maintenance of the southernmost great temple in the Central Precinct continued not only in these years but in limited form throughout the Postclassic (Pendergast 1986a: 234–35, 241). This surely connotes maintenance of the beliefs and rituals with which the building was associated; whether it also serves as evidence of a tighter religious focus, perhaps on a single deity or related group of deities, is something we could only judge if we understood the relationship between temples and gods at any point in Maya prehistory.

The strengths of Lamanai in the opening centuries of the Postclassic obviously must have rested on a solid economic base. Archaeobotanical studies at the site document continuation of corn production in the Postclassic, and trace-element and stable-

isotope analyses of skeletal material show that, following an apparent diminution in its importance near the end of the Classic, corn reemerged as a dominant element in the Lamanai diet by or before the twelfth century (White 1986: 153, Figure 15). These palaeonutritional data do not, of course, shed specific light on the quality of Postclassic diet, since corn might have achieved its preponderant share of the food spectrum simply because other foodstuffs grew scarce. Overall, however, vegetable and animal protein intake appears to have been adequate, and the role of the large lake that fronts Lamanai as a source of fish and turtles was surely significant in this dietary quality. Studies of the Postclassic skeletal material indicate a generally healthy population; this is supported by data from Negroman-Tipu, where the Early Historic population enjoyed surprisingly good health (Cohen et al. 1985). We cannot tell whether Lamanai's agricultural production involved continued maintenance of the small raised field system at the site's north limit, but it is beyond question that the community's Postclassic population found means to assure the stability in food resources necessary to individual and societal good health.

Just as in foodstuffs, Lamanai continued successful exploitation of other local resources required for the variety of manufactures that marked the Postclassic. In addition, it is clear that the site benefitted from trade connections that extended far beyond the local area, with flow of goods—and surely ideas as well—in both directions. Obsidian from Guatemalan sources, a very small amount of ceramics from northern Yucatan, marine shell, and numerous other items reached Lamanai in the Postclassic, probably via the great avenue afforded traders by the New, or Dzuluinicob, River. By the twelfth century, the trade items reaching Lamanai had begun to include copper objects from sources in western and central Mexico, Oaxaca, and lower Central America; though probably a trickle at first, the flow increased in Middle and Late Postclassic times to such an extent that the 152 metal artifacts from the site now constitute the largest collection from controlled excavations in the Maya area, and one of the larger from all of Mesoamerica. Though few items other than the obsidian may have been vital to maintenance of Lamanai's way of life, the quantity and variety of trade goods tell us much about the com-

munity's prosperity and about its status in the eyes of traders and manufacturers elsewhere in Postclassic Mesoamerica.

Trade outward from Lamanai is somewhat more difficult to document, but it surely must have equaled the inflow, since the Lamanai city-state could hardly have afforded the balance-of-payments problems that beset many modern nations. Concepts of pottery design and decoration were almost certainly part of the trade package that was transported from Lamanai to sites in the northern Yucatan (Pendergast 1986a: 240), and Lamanai ceramics themselves made their way in small to moderate quantities to the other Belize sites of Altun Ha (Pendergast 1982b: 42, 140, Fig. 81d), Mayflower, in the Stann Creek District (E. Graham 1983: 569–70, fig. 169a,b), and Tipu, in the Cayo District (E. Graham, 1987). No raw materials can be securely traced to a Lamanai source, and to date we have been unable to identify any artifact type so distinctive of the site that we can be certain of its origins when it appears elsewhere. However, despite the fact that the established inventory of outgoing products and ideas is very far from extensive, there can be little doubt that Lamanai contributed significantly to the Postclassic economy of the Maya Lowlands as more than just a consumer of goods manufactured in northern centers.

The Lamanai trade data bear on a larger issue regarding the nature of the Postclassic, which is that the period is often characterized as a time in which commercial interests held sway—a time of merchants rather than god-kings. The characterization frequently suggests greater emphasis on maritime trade than existed in earlier times, and sometimes identifies the Putun as the prime entrepreneurs of the Postclassic years. Though it is not at all unlikely that waterborne transport played a large role in Lamanai's Postclassic commerce, as it had presumably done in the Classic and earlier, there is nothing at the site that points to specific traders, or even argues persuasively for a more dominant role for merchants after A.D. 1000 than they had had before. As in so many other respects, the community's passage from Late Classic to Postclassic times seems not to have brought with it radical change—though with many former trading partners no longer accessible, the patterns of Lamanai's trade, especially westward, must have been altered beyond all recognition.

What we have examined thus far demonstrates that Lamanai enjoyed a fairly stable existence in a time of instability elsewhere in the lowlands, and managed to maintain a high level of activity and a diversity of external contacts in the Postclassic centuries. It seems to me that there is a solid basis for seeing the quality of life at Lamanai, although different in the Postclassic, as no worse than in the Classic, and perhaps better in some respects. A decrease in population may be reflected in the abandonment of many Central Precinct structures, though a refocusing of energies is an equally plausible explanation of the evidence; in any event, a smaller population does not necessarily reduce the quality of life, and may in fact enhance it. The great variety in pottery vessel form and decoration suggests greater freedom than had existed earlier, and I suspect that here we are on firmer ground than we may be elsewhere in equating ceramics with society. However, it is to esthetic quality that many refer when they speak of the Postclassic as a time of decadence, and it is here that matters of taste are most clearly at issue.

It has been said that no one, having admired the great painted cylindrical vessels from eighth-century sites in the central lowlands, can turn to Postclassic ceramics and fail to conclude that the final centuries of Maya prehistory were a time of decadence. It is my contention that while one may indeed judge a Postclassic vessel to be less attractive, or less well potted, than a Classic piece, that esthetic judgment should not be confused with a culture-historical assessment of Maya achievement. If we are to attempt to evaluate and understand the endeavours of the Maya in the Postclassic, or indeed in any period, surely we must do so within the context of the times rather than by setting the achievements at some point on a personally devised scale.

I see the Postclassic years as a vital and vibrant time in at least some parts of the Maya area, and both the pottery and other manufactures as clear reflections of those qualities. I suspect that an eighth-century Maya would have been appalled by a standard vessel from the hands of his thirteenth-century descendant—a fair judgment when made by the bearer of a tradition that he assumed would live forever, who is suddenly thrust into a world he cannot comprehend. It is equally probable, in my view, that the thirteenth-century potter would have

found his ancestor's work effete, bound by excessive restrictions, and perhaps too dainty for words. This, too, would have been a valid judgment, based on culturally moderated individual taste and without any pretense to cultural or historical explanation. Though these two judgments are perfectly acceptable, they are precisely the opposite of the approach required if the material achievements of the Maya in any period are to be appreciated for what they were: functioning parts of a complex cultural system.

Viewed in their own terms, many of the products of Lamanai's Postclassic people can be seen to have the same range that one encounters in the Classic, or the Preclassic; differences in potting ability, in carving skill, in the patience required for stone polishing, and in countless other aspects of quality abound. Here judgments regarding quality are as fully meaningful as they are in any other cultural context, but of course they measure only individual skill and talent, and do not characterize the culture as a whole. Matters of individual variation are the concern of the humanist, and almost an anathema to the social scientist except insofar as they can be subsumed under some larger cultural themes. Luckily the Lamanai data, like those from other Postclassic centers, admit some of the sorts of generalizations that give us a sense of the values on which the culture rested.

Although Postclassic pottery making rarely involved production of vessels as thin-walled as those of the seventh century, there are many superlative examples of the potter's art in the inventory of the period. Many of these involve a sort of confectionary approach to pottery, and it is their complexity rather than their delicacy that posed major challenges for their makers. Overall, however, Postclassic pottery is not as well made as that of earlier times. Censer bodies are often set askew on their bases, bases of these and some other vessel forms had little smoothing after they were "wired off," and rims are often roughly finished. Many vessels vary greatly in thickness, and thicker portions tend to be poorly fired at the center; many are also markedly out of round, perhaps due to a combination of reduced care in finishing and use of clays with undesirable characteristics. At the same time, experiments in form, especially in the feet of tripod vessels and the body shapes of deep bowls and jars, were extremely common, and the quality of carved deco-

ration embodying reptilian and other naturalistic and geometric forms remained high. What seems to be in evidence is, at least in part, a shift in emphasis, both within the pottery-making tradition and in the role of pottery in Maya society.

Most or all of the aspects of lower quality in Postclassic pottery are very probably attributable to a single cause, which is greatly increased production. The potters of Classic times seem to have labored hard until one examines Postclassic middens and burials, where the quantities of ceramics are truly staggering. Any major increase in domestic vessel use is very likely to have been ceremonially dictated, since durability of household wares seems to have remained high enough to obviate the necessity of greater turnover due to increased breakage; hence religion was probably a factor in higher midden ceramic content during the Postclassic. For censers and other specialized forms there is no question that great numbers were required to meet ceremonial needs, and the appearance of mass-produced work is strongest in these vessel categories. The Postclassic inhabitants of Lamanai must have made the same compromise with which we are so familiar: if they wanted more, they would have to settle for lower quality.

In some other areas of portable material culture, the same sort of shift in emphasis, and perhaps the same sort of compromise in quality, can also be documented. In lithics, however, what we can see is surely a combination of changes in resource procurement patterns and the reshaping of the modes of other activities. Sources of jade seem to have diminished or dried up almost entirely, so that the material's previously important role in the economy and in religious practice dwindled very considerably, and often involved re-use or recarving of earlier pieces. By the fifteenth century obsidian also appears to have grown scarce, and both the quantity and the size of artifacts decreased accordingly, with reshaping of small pieces a common feature in late pre-Conquest times. These sorts of resource problems obviously had major impact on life at Lamanai, but their effect may not have been as extensive as that of the single greatest shift in Postclassic lithics, which was from larger projectile points to the characteristic, nearly universal small arrowhead.

The production of small points, generally of chert and most frequently side-notched, had its begin-

nings just as the Classic was drawing to a close, but did not reach its peak until the Middle Postclassic. The quantities at that time, and through the Early Historic period, suggest manufacture on as large a scale as in the ceramic sphere, but here no particular compromise with quality was necessarily involved. As with pottery, the increase in production was designed to meet a specific need, created in this case by a sharp change in the nature of the activity itself. With spears, the standard weapon of the Classic, the hunter has a reasonable chance of recovering the missile and using it a good many times, since the size of the shaft makes location relatively easy even in the jungle, and the sturdiness of the point reduces the chance of breakage. With bow-and-arrow hunting, breakage probably increases somewhat, and loss becomes a major problem; hence higher production levels are required of the point maker, and to some extent a less carefully crafted artifact may result. The throwaway nature of the object presumably made absence of top-quality craftsmanship unimportant; perhaps, in a sense, the same can be said of ceremonial pottery, meant for short-term or even single use and therefore without the need of the full range of the maker's skills.

Together with the great amount and variety of local manufacture and imports from many sources, the Lamanai Postclassic inventory includes a very considerable number of objects that represent really major artistic and technical achievement. They demonstrate that the atmosphere that encouraged fine craftsmanship, and the resources that made such work possible, were present in the Postclassic just as they had been in earlier times. It would be a mistake, however, to hold these objects up as the lone examples of high quality in Postclassic manufacture; in fact, quality is a matter of the degree to which an object fulfills the purpose for which it is intended, whether that purpose is utilitarian, ceremonial, purely esthetic, or a combination of all three.

The Maya enjoyed the advantage of an absence of advertising, and so presumably never knowingly produced any object that had no function in the material culture. To approach an archaeological assemblage with this in mind is to recognize that understanding of the workings of the culture is permitted only by assessment of the artifacts in context. In this sense, all classes of objects in the Postclassic

Maya cultural assemblage possess adequate quality, and it is only the individual artifacts themselves that vary as the talents of their makers differed. The important point is that Postclassic society embraced a great range of such difference, so that we are able to see the exalted and the pedestrian handling of a particular object just as clearly here as we can in earlier assemblages.

The Lamanai material gives us a considerable number of insights into the form of Postclassic society at this single center, and a less complete picture of the place of the community in the larger Maya sociopolitical and economic structure. To a great degree, however, the Lamanai data would be reduced in meaning if it could be shown that the survival of the community through the Postclassic was an isolated event in the southern lowlands. The data from Santa Rita and Tipu make it clear that for at least part of the Postclassic other centers functioned much as Lamanai did, but the former site shows few relationships with Lamanai, and the amount and significance of Lamanai links at Tipu remain to be made fully clear. Now, however, we have a body of data from a rather unlikely source that sheds important light on Postclassic life in the lowlands, both in the south and in the north.

The 1986 excavations at the very small site of Marco Gonzalez, at the extreme southern tip of Ambergris Cay on Belize's barrier reef, revealed the presence of a community that had its beginnings in the Late Preclassic, and was very probably still lightly occupied at the time of Spanish entry into Belize in 1544. We cannot yet document continuous occupation over this span of at least 1700 years, but it is clear that the community was functioning in Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic times; trade to the site in that period included plumbate pottery and ceramics from northern Yucatan, and may have extended to central Mexican green obsidian as well. However, this was not the peak period for Marco Gonzalez; its time of greatest construction activity, and probably maximum population, came in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the community was closely allied ceramically with Lamanai.

The peak period at Marco Gonzalez was not simply a small swell in an undistinguished sea; in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the community saw construction, rebuilding, or at the least intensive use of every one of its 45 structures, and the

amount of hard-goods production, as well as resource exploitation and intersite trade, was exceedingly high. Despite the site's small size, Lamanai-related ceramics occur in quantities greater than those encountered in the richest Lamanai middens; beyond this, the pottery is not simply a trade item, but appears to be of local manufacture. Though the forms and decoration are generally those characteristic of Lamanai, both paste features and vessel sizes, as well as some decorative motifs, distinguish the Marco Gonzalez material from that of its large sister site. In turn, the Lamanai collection contains very small quantities of pottery with motifs that are prevalent at the reef community, so that two-directional exchange may be in evidence.

Trade also linked Marco Gonzalez with more distant locales; Maya Mountains granite sources in Belize provided material for grinding implements, and central Mexican green obsidian was certainly arriving at the site in significant quantity during the Middle Postclassic. The architecture of the period was most unprepossessing, and as might be expected in such a setting, it included no masonry-chambered buildings; but the overall impression at Marco Gonzalez is one of real florescence during a time of great richness at Lamanai.

The Lamanai link, since it is not in evidence at sites along the New River, suggests some special function for Marco Gonzalez that may have been related to Lamanai's control over trade in the headwaters area of the river, and perhaps beyond. Since Marco Gonzalez lies in a logical spot for the exercise of control over the leeward waters around Ambergris Cay, and hence over the water route to Lamanai, it appears quite likely that the small reef site played a part in the Postclassic trade network in which Lamanai was obviously an important element. This tells us that the Postclassic developments at Lamanai had a more extensive effect than could be judged at the major center itself. Together with data from Santa Rita and Tipu, the Marco Gonzalez material suggests strongly that survival through the time of collapse and subsequent flourishing in what used to be thought of as a time of decay may have been a fairly widespread phenomenon in Belize, and perhaps in neighboring areas as well.

Both Marco Gonzalez and Lamanai experienced some decline in population, and in construction ac-



tivity, as the Postclassic drew near its close, and in fact the reef site has thus far yielded only a few bits of ceramic evidence that point to sixteenth-century occupation. At Lamanai, a principal settlement in the southern part of the site and a smaller, separate village north of the Classic Central Precinct were the scenes of development of a new and distinctive ceramic assemblage (Pendergast 1985; E. Graham, 1987) around the beginning of the sixteenth century, and at least the southern community was still an important force in the area when the Spaniards arrived (*see* Pendergast 1986b). That importance is reflected in the establishment of a church at Lamanai, and the subsequent construction of an imposing masonry and thatch building that persisted in use until the uprising of 1641. Maya occupation at Lamanai ceased late in the seventeenth or early in the eighteenth century, a date that marks the effective end of the Postclassic, since Spanish presence eradicated neither the material culture nor the religious belief and practice of pre-Contact times.

Though the sixteenth-century Lamanai community was smaller than its earlier Postclassic counterparts, it still enjoyed extensive trade contacts in pre-Spanish times, with metal artifacts as the most striking element in the package. There is, in fact, evidence to suggest that here, as at Tipu (E. Graham 1985), production of copper artifacts developed late in the prehistoric period (Pendergast 1985). This may have been an element in Lamanai's economic importance in the area, but we are far from being able to assess this or any other aspect of the relationship between Lamanai and other centers in the last few decades before the Spaniards appeared on the scene.

The data summarized above should suffice to make it clear that the Postclassic was far from a decadent time, and indeed in some cases may have

been a time of real florescence. Excavations in the past dozen years have shown that what we call the Classic and Postclassic periods in the southern lowlands possess information of equal value, which cannot be judged in terms of "quality." That Maya society underwent change from the patterns of Late Classic times to those of the Postclassic is beyond question, but we can now see those changes as no greater than many that preceded them, and as part of a period of evolution that began in the Preclassic and continued through the time of Spanish rule.

I have criticized judgments made in the past that the term Postclassic could only be equated with decadence, and have suggested that a kind of archaeocentric view, which hailed the Classic as the time of everything fine in Maya society, lay behind this assessment of the years after A.D. 950. In fact, given the history of Maya archaeology, the judgments are entirely understandable; hence the real criticism should be leveled at the fact that archaeologists allowed the "decadent" rubric to affect their approach to the study of site settlement, chronology, economics, and indeed all aspects of Maya culture history from the tenth century onward. As a result, evidence for Postclassic occupation in the southern lowlands has not, until recently, been treated very effectively or rigorously. Now we can see that evidence as not only important in its own right but also a potential source of information about the Classic, since it provides us with a picture of strategies for survival once the Classic ceased to be. We should understand life after the tenth century as simply different from that of preceding times, a matter of choosing a somewhat divergent track in the broad path of Maya prehistory. We may like or dislike the period's art and architecture as we choose, as long as we recognize that the Postclassic is there, and has its own vital story to tell.