

Patterns of Cache Composition and Placement at Lamanai, Belize

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Introduction

The results of the excavations at Lamanai, in the Orange Walk District of Belize (Figure 5.1), from 1974 through 1986 provide an opportunity to view a very wide range of processes and practices in the

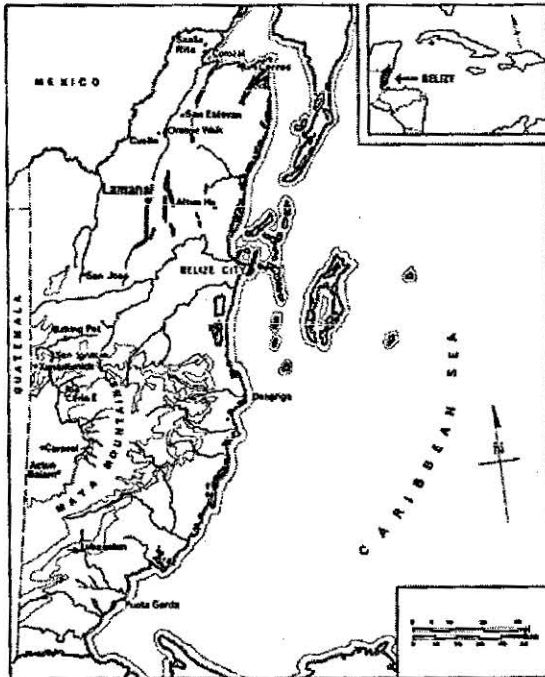


Figure 5.1 Map of Belize, showing the location of Lamanai.

perspective of more than three millennia of occupation (Pendergast 1981a, 1986a, b, 1990b, 1991). Among the practices, particular interest attaches to cache deposition because of the evidence cache contents appear to provide regarding conservatism and innovation in both material and non-material culture over time. This type of information yield is enhanced at Lamanai by the fact that we have data that very

probably span almost the entire period of the site's history, from ca 1500 B.C. to after A.D. 1640.

Presentation of a very considerable series of complex architectural sequences will obviously be essential to the full assessment of Lamanai's caches in the intrasite context. Nevertheless, the quantity and variety of offerings join with the site's very long occupation span to argue for synthetic treatment of continuities and changes in offertory practice in advance of complete presentation of the architectural data. It is therefore true that except for the rare instances in which the basis for temporal placement of a cache is inherent in the contents themselves, dating based on stratigraphic interrelationships will have to be taken on faith by the reader.

As is true at all Maya sites, Lamanai's caches fall into into three categories that are defined by context. The preponderant portion of the caches occurred in communally built structures that were, like the caches themselves, focused on public use and on the maintenance of connections with the realm of deities. The second group occurred in residential contexts, where offerings presumably had the same function but were usually if not always of a private rather than a public nature. The final category comprises monument-related offerings that, owing in part to their comparatively small number and in part to their context, had functions that are somewhat more difficult to assess than in the other two groups.

The categories would serve as the principal framework for comparison and contrast on a synchronic level, but because we did not recover data on the second and third groups from all periods the presentation that follows is organized on a chronological rather than a category basis. This summary of Lamanai's caches utilizes selected examples to illustrate offering form and contents over time, and does not pretend to provide a full exposition of cache contents. The focus

is on the significance of caches in the broad sweep of the community's history, rather than on the meaning of specific offerings in their individual contexts.

As is true of many other classes of evidence, the caches reflect the site's position within the mainstream of southern lowlands prehistory at the same time that they document qualities that set the community apart from all others examined thus far in the southern lowlands. Intersite comparisons and contrasts do not form part of this discussion, because through the end of the Classic they are generally so extensive as to require full treatment in final excavation reporting, whereas for the later periods they are most often either exceedingly thin or nonexistent. I have therefore restricted

caches give us glimpses of Lamanai as one of the vital elements in the socioeconomic structure of lowland Maya life.

The Preclassic

The earliest evidence of what can surely be identified as offering activity at Lamanai encompasses neither artifacts nor a context that is fully understandable. The data are nevertheless significant because of their implications regarding both the site's occupation span and the use of a major topographic feature that may well have played a critical role in the early life of the community. The

feature, which we have denominated The Harbour (see Figure 5.2), cannot now be shown to have been connected to the main body of New River Lagoon, but the fact that it contains water in the rainy season, and exhibits clear indications of silting-in of much of the entrance portion, has suggested the possibility of ancient use as a harbor or related facility. Coring of sediments in the entrance area has revealed evidence that certainly buttresses identification of the feature as having held a special place in the site's history, and suggests a kind of offering activity that is highly unlikely to have occurred on dry land.

The core contained corn pollen in a concentration several orders of magnitude greater than normal for the site (Richard Hebda, personal communication 1981), with absolutely

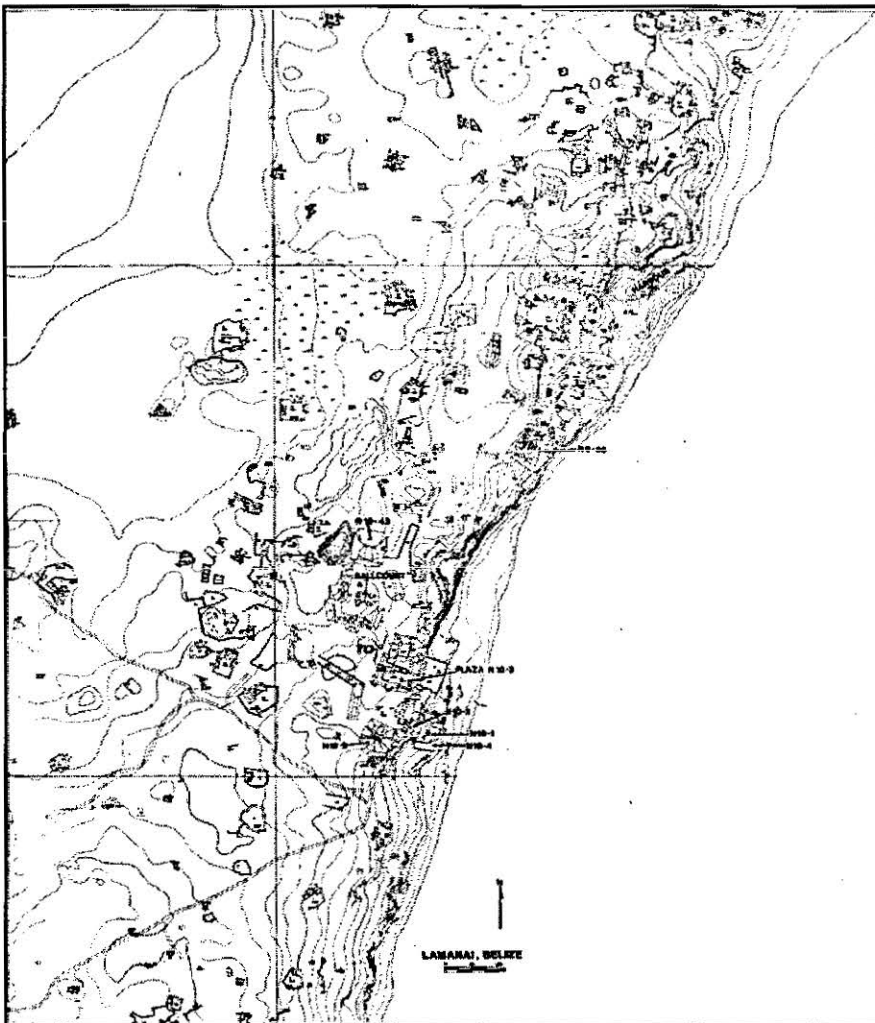


Figure 5.2 Lamanai site plan; survey by H. Stanley Loten and crew.

coverage to a consideration of internal dynamics at Lamanai rather than an exploration of the community's role in the southern lowlands over its 3200 years or more of occupation. Despite the restriction, however, the patterns that emerge from examination of the

no indication of architectural or other cultural association. The presence of such a high pollen count is surely evidence of non-standard activity, and offering of whole young corn plants tossed into the waters of the harbor seems the most likely explanation.

The possibility that coring could have struck a land locus at which such an offering took place is extremely minimal, especially in the absence of an architectural context for the event. Offering of corn from a boat or other watercraft is therefore very probably indicated.

The radiocarbon date from wood stratigraphically associated with the pollen has a mean of 1500 B.C. (Richard Hebda, personal communication 1982). The date is the earliest from the site, and on its face it indicates occupation of Lamanai during the Early Preclassic. In the circumstances there is, however, unavoidable uncertainty regarding the origin of the wood, including the possibility of a total lack of culturally significant association between the sample and the pollen. This means that the date does not necessarily fix the time of deposition of the corn pollen or provide solid evidence of human presence at Lamanai in the mid-second millennium B.C. Apart from this somewhat equivocal evidence, we have no data on Early Preclassic offertory practice at Lamanai. Use of the site during this period is, regrettably, documented only by random sherds from later contexts.

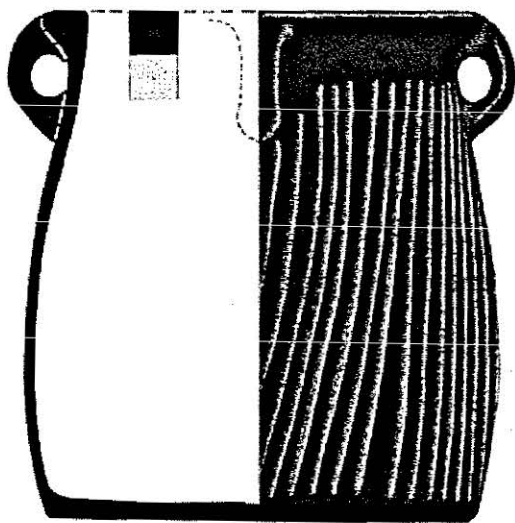


Figure 5.3 *Blackware vessel of Cache P8-9/1.*
Height 17.8 cm.

It is not until the Late Preclassic, probably 400 B.C. or later, that we begin to see offerings in architectural context, but unfortunately the structures are uniformly communal and ceremonial in nature. In the northern suburb of the site, ca 300 m north of the boundary of the Central Precinct, lie several buildings in the five to seven meter height range, of which we have excavated only one (Structure P8-9/1). From core of the structure we recovered a cache that exemplifies the pattern of

primary-axis placement, as opposed to transverse-axis or architectural feature-related placement, that remained the most common approach to offering deposition at Lamanai through at least Early Postclassic times.

Cache P8-9/1 consisted of a blackware vessel with form and surface treatment characteristics unknown elsewhere in the Lamanai ceramic collection (Figure 5.3), within which was an inverted small outcurving-side dish. At the east side of the dish lay two marine shells, and a single obsidian core rested south of the dish. Although the vessels are not characteristic of Lamanai's Preclassic assemblage, the use of pottery in caches was almost universal in this period of the site's occupation, and was to remain so throughout the site's history. The context of the cache was also typical of Lamanai; the container vessel simply sat in core, without surrounding cribbing or other protection.

Farther south, and perhaps slightly later, builders of a very large platform (Structure P8-12) that was very probably related to the harbor inserted caches in several modifications of the structure. Similar practice probably also marked the primary structure, but we were unable to penetrate the building deeply enough to recover data on this point. Three caches primary to construction were encountered in P8-12; all included vessels. The earliest of the three, Cache 5, included a badly smashed and only partly reconstructable redware bottle, a barrel-shaped jade bead, one lamina of crystalline hematite and a tiny fleck of jade. Possibly very shortly after deposition of Cache 5 came Cache 3, which consisted of two upright nested dishes, the upper one filled with a pile of small burnt stones (Figure 5.4). The latest in the series, deposited long before the final construction activity in P8-12, was Cache 2, a single blackware dish set upright in core. The remaining two caches from the structure were deposited after abandonment, and neither offers any solid clues to the time of deposition.

Besides the persistence of vessel caches, P8-12 provides an example of another common phenomenon at Lamanai from Preclassic through Terminal Classic times: the empty pit, often on or very near the primary axis, with every indication that use as a cache container was either contemplated or actually carried out. Such pits, which we came to know as "Lamanai Holes," were maddeningly common. The frequency of their occurrence suggests that they were not incorrectly placed offering pits for which correction was subsequently made, a phenomenon possibly in evidence at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990a:252). Many in fact occur without associated caches nearby. It is therefore very likely that the pits contained offerings

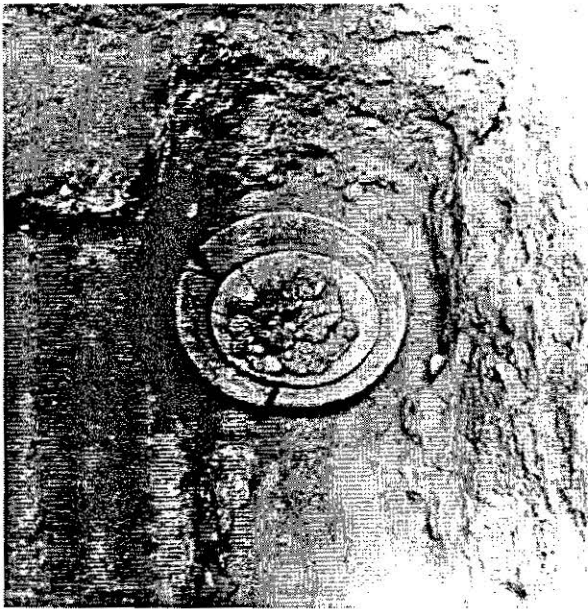


Figure 5.4 Cache P8-12/3. Diameter of lower dish 35.8 cm.

that were composed entirely of perishable artifacts or unmodified materials. In some cases such pits have a thin stratum of organic decay product at their bases, but not even this element is universal. Occasionally, as in P8-12, the pit is heavily burnt, and hence one can envision offering practice that involved combustion of perishables. It is obvious, however, that the amount of guesswork involved in assessment of the pits is greatly in excess of the data the features contain.

Structure N10-43 provides examples of Preclassic offerings in a major Central Precinct structure; the size and nature of N10-43 indicate, in fact, that the building was one of the principal foci of Late Preclassic ceremonial activity at Lamanai (see Pendergast 1981a:41, Figure 12). Here one might expect the summit of Lamanai's Preclassic offering practice, albeit in the recognition of the fact that at this site not even major-temple status guaranteed that a building would be graced by offerings. Witness the near-contemporaneous structure in the N9-56 sequence: although it was obviously an undertaking of very considerable significance, and was embellished with highly important stair-side outset masks, it boasted no offerings, insofar as our extensive excavations along the primary axis and deeply into core of the platform showed. Luckily N10-43 fared somewhat better in the offering lists, though even this imposing 30 metre-high structure can scarcely be said to have been overly endowed with caches.

The earliest effort in the N10-43 series, which initiated large-scale ceremonial construction on a spot that had previously seen only residential use, was graced with

a single primary-axis offering that seems of minor significance when set against the massive scale of the structure. The offering consisted of a lone flaring-side redware dish (Figure 5.5) that contained the skeleton of a juvenile bird from which the beak and frontal portion of the skull appear to have been removed. The most likely explanation for this type of mutilation is that the missing portions remained with the skin when it was removed intact, probably for longer-term ceremonial use. The vessel, which was placed upright in core of the lowest stair, also contained portions of the skeleton of a second bird, and possibly minimal remains of one or more additional birds. Although the contents were presumably of considerable ceremonial import, the deposition of the dish seems a minuscule dedicatory event for a building that set in motion such radical change in the area. If the years following this dedication effort saw some sort of topping-off ritual, our excavations failed to reveal it, and so the dish and its contents appear to have stood alone in marking N10-43's rise.

The first two major modifications to the primary structure of N10-43 seem to have gone unaccompanied by cache deposition or other dedicatory activity. It was not until the beginning of the third reconfiguration of the structure, which resulted in a new stair and significant changes in the main lower landing area, that the work was dedicated in proper fashion with an offering placed in a pit cut into the plaza floor at the base of the original stair.

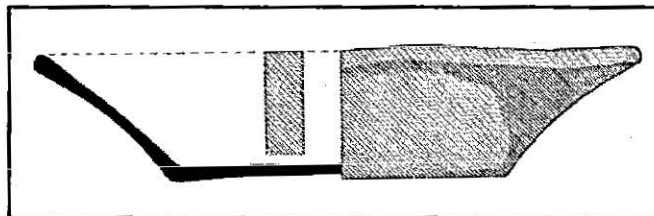


Figure 5.5 Redware dish of Cache N10-43/5. Diameter 47.4 cm.

Although situated on the primary axis and hence unquestionably a dedicatory effort in advance of the new construction, the cache scarcely raised the level represented by its earlier counterpart. In the pit lay two pairs of redware dishes, one pair conformal and the other of distinctly dissimilar shapes, with the upper vessel of each pair inverted over the lower. Only the dissimilar pair bore contents, in the form of a single tubular jade bead. This cache is the earliest documented occurrence of paired vessels as cache elements or containers at Lamanai.

A later offering in the same modification of N10-43 was a very considerable departure from its predecessors both in form and in contents, though its quality and size still seem less than commensurate with the obvious importance of the structure in both

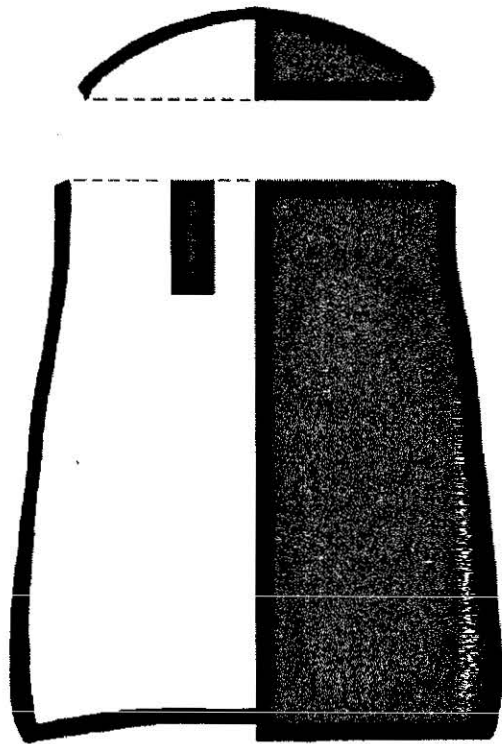


Figure 5.6 Blackware container vessel and lid, Cache N10-43/6. Height of container 20.2 cm.

religious practice and community planning. In what had been a landing at the top of the lowest stair the builders deposited an unusual lidded black cylinder (Figure 5.6) that housed two small figurines, one of *Spondylus* shell and the other of jade (Figure 5.7; see also Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:102).

The shell figurine is related, in the treatment of mouth and eyes as well as in the depiction of the legs, to Olmec-style infant representations, whereas the jade specimen is a bib-and-helmet figure related to others found in northern Belize, though with an unusually large pierced bib. The cache appears to have been deposited between about 100 B.C. and A.D. 100, with weak stratigraphic arguments for a date in the latter half of the two-century period. The elements of Olmec style may therefore indicate heirloom status for the shell figurine, or may document persistence of parts of the Olmec esthetic in the Lamanai artistic tradition until near the end of the Preclassic.

Data on Preclassic offertory practice outside the main

temples at Lamanai are limited in the extreme. From Structure P8-14, a small residential platform in the northern part of the site center near the apparent harbor, comes a single offering of two dishes that very closely resemble those from the second cache in N10-43, and are presumably of roughly equivalent date. Apart from P8-14 and P8-9, no other Preclassic structures in the northern suburbs of the site yielded caches. Elsewhere we encountered only remnants of Preclassic construction, engulfed by platforms of far later date and devoid of architectural features as well as offerings.

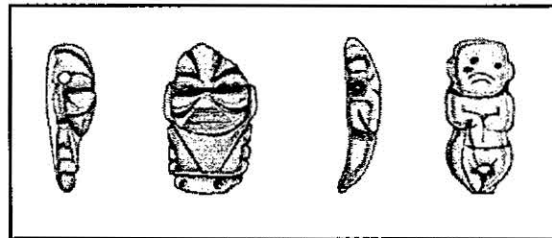


Figure 5.7 Contents of Cache N10-43/6. Height of jade bib-helmet pendant 4.7 cm.

Although the evidence that bears on Preclassic offertory practice is sharply limited, it shows quite clearly that the focus in the early centuries of Lamanai's occupation was on pottery vessels as the principal, and often the only, element in caches. With the exception of the single jade bead and the jade bib-and-helmet figurine from N10-43, no material imported from any great distance seems to have played a part in cache assemblages. One could deduce from the evidence that Lamanai's trade connections were less than extensive in the Preclassic, but the shaky foundation for such a deduction is readily apparent. It is equally likely that the seemingly parsimonious approach adopted for Preclassic offerings was simply a matter of preference, and in fact much of the later record seems to bear out this interpretation of the earliest cache data.

The Early Classic

We have no information on offerings during the Protoclassic, but the opening years of the Classic brought with them a considerable amount of building renewal and probably some building starts, with accompanying offertory activity in some cases. As in earlier times and indeed throughout Lamanai's history, there was clearly no hard and fast requirement that offerings be placed along the primary axis of new construction, or in any other context. A building renewal might contain an offering although its predecessor had none, and the presence of such an

offering did not dictate similar deposition in succeeding modifications. In contrast with Altun Ha, Lamanai's builders disregarded far more than half of the opportunities for cache placement, and only rarely did they create offerings as lavish as those deposited by their coastal neighbours.

Lamanai's Classic offerings resembled those of Altun Ha in one respect: the overall makeup of their constituent elements conformed to no pattern whatsoever, except during a brief period in the middle Classic and then probably only in two neighbouring structures. The absence of patterning in cache contents, combined with the seemingly erratic distribution of offerings, leads all too easily to the assessment of cache characteristics as a reflection of the relative importance of various construction efforts: a building modification with a cache must have been more important than one without, and a large offering must have reflected greater importance than a small one. In fact we have no knowledge of the rationale that determined cache size, or of the basis for choice of one piece of construction as an offering site and rejection of another. The variety in both of these characteristics is so great that it might as easily be laid to caprice as to conscious decision in Lamanai ritual practice.

Early Classic caches have the singular defect of lacking, in most cases, a secure basis for dating within the two centuries or more of the period. The problem here lies largely in the failure of Lamanai's inhabitants to include pottery vessels among offering contents. Unhappily, the basic archaeological concept of ceramic phase markers seems to have been of little consequence in the lagoon-side city's religious life. When vessels did form part of an offering they consisted of paired unslipped large round-side bowls that served as container and lid (Figure 5.8) and were unquestionably made specifically for cache use.

In most instances the vessels are roughly finished, with no smoothing of the irregular sharp lip margins produced by cutting of the clay or flattening with a non-flexible spatulate implement. The effects of "wiring off" at the base likewise generally remain clearly visible, with the result that most of the bowls would not only have scraped any surface on which they were set, but also have teetered rather precariously on bases too small and rough to provide adequate support. Finger impressions and marks of scraping tools are moderately common on vessel walls, and most of the bowls are so porous as to suggest widespread minor air entrapment, inclusion of small organics, insufficient manipulation of the clay throughout production, or a combination of all three. Every aspect of surface treatment bespeaks hasty production for one-time use, and the absence of congruent forms with similar

surface qualities in the sherd collection supports identification of the bowls as specialized cache vessels.

Because there are some differences in shape among the nine vessel pairs recovered, the sample appears at first to embody some potential for chronological separation on this basis. However, the largest group of contemporaneous twin-vessel caches, five from the stair of Structure N9-53, includes four different body profiles. Since some of the caches share members of paired jade objects, the conceptual links among all five must have been strong. Hence it is reasonable to attribute variation in vessel profile to potters' idiosyncracies rather than to subtle differences in shape significance. This circumstance shows that even when

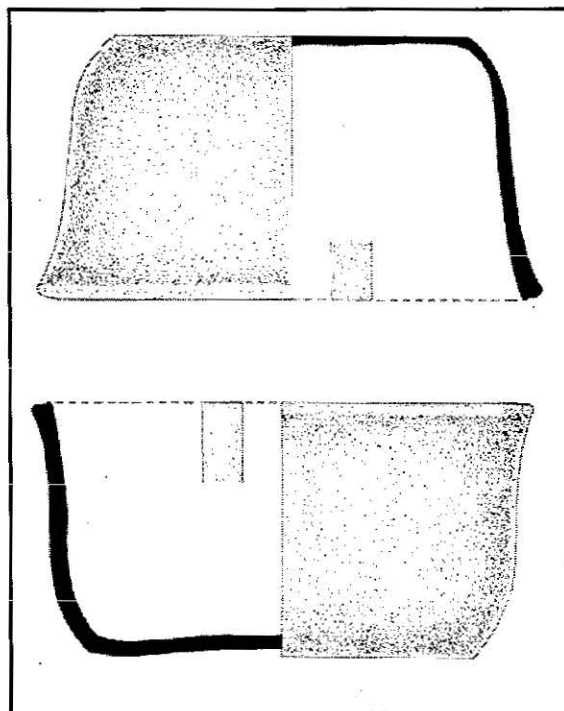


Figure 5.8 Lid and base vessels of Cache N9-53/4. Diameter of base vessel 25.2 cm.

some degree of uniformity is discernible in Lamanai caches, it embraces part of the variety encountered in the remainder of the site's offertory material.

Cache contents in all twin-vessel offerings consist of small jade or jade and shell mosaics, none reconstructable, usually accompanied by individual jade and shell objects, often in the ear-ornament category. One of the caches, in Str. P9-2, included fern spores (R. Hebda, personal communication, 1982), and the presence of apparent organic decay product in the bottoms of all container vessels suggests that ferns, flowers, and other decorative botanical materials may have formed part of this group of offerings. Unfortunately, none of the artifact assemblages

contains objects that can be assigned a restricted date; the organic decomposition products in some caches may provide samples for radiocarbon dating, but the possibilities in this area are limited. Hence dating rests almost entirely on relationships to architectural sequences, which in very few if any cases allow precise placement of the offertory activity in time.

As the Early Classic was drawing to a close, a major new temple building, Structure N10-9, was begun as part of the development of the south end of the site center (Pendegast 1981a:35-36). The new temple faced northward across a plaza to the Plaza N10/3 Group, a partly contemporaneous pair of joined courtyards bordered by residences and what appear to have been structures that combined private and public functions. Taken together, the two units of construction represented a very considerable areal expansion of the ceremonial precinct. In the temple and several of the residential structures offerings were placed in the middle or later stages of the construction; in common with efforts of preceding centuries, the buildings seem not to have begun with any equivalent of cornerstone-laying, unless this sort of ritual occurred well back in the area occupied by the construction, or was of such a nature as to leave no physical traces.

In the temple, the pattern of multiple offerings that marked Structure N9-53 was repeated, but in a form that differed almost entirely from that of the more northerly occurrence. Worshippers placed in the core of the upper part of the stair two separate mosaic objects, one of which, a large mask, survives nearly intact (Pendegast 1981a:Figure 6). Unfortunately the other object, which was of lesser total volume and does not appear to have been a mask, consists largely of patternless fragments. The mosaics can be seen as reminiscent of the much smaller objects that formed part of the N9-53 and other offerings, but this is surely true only in the broad sense of technique. The only other human or deity faces in mosaic at Lamanai, from Tomb N9-56/1, were of ear-ornament size and probably essentially two-dimensional.

The N10-9 mosaic offerings are unusual in the Lamanai Classic inventory because they were not contained in pottery vessels. Decreasing use of vessels as containers may in fact have been a phenomenon of the last century of the Early Classic, but in the absence of a large sixth-century cache sample this matter can only be judged on the basis of evidence from later years. It is clear,

nonetheless, that although as the Early Classic drew to a close there was some measure of shift in emphasis regarding vessels as cache components, the predominant Classic Lamanai perception of offerings remained one that included ceramics as an essential ingredient.

The Late Classic

With the arrival of the Late Classic came what appears to have been a significant leap forward in the opulence of offerings. The seeming augmentation of quantity and quality that took place about A.D. 600 was accompanied by a very considerable change in all but one of the basic characteristics of large-structure offerings. Retained from earlier times was the nearly ubiquitous use of paired vessels, now generally translated into a combination of a deep bowl as the container with a second dish-shaped vessel, probably not originally designed as a mate to the bowl, as its lid. A major cache of this class occurred in Structure N10-9, where a vessel pair housed dedicatory material for a transformation of the upper central stair through addition of a Lamanai-type chambered building. In



Figure 5.9 Cache N10-9/8 (LA-240), probably 9th century; lid black on red dish with animal at center, smashed atop black on red bowl containing shells, coral, jade, crystalline hematite, a pyrite mirror, and a single ceremonial flint.

addition, several examples both with and without vessel contents were associated with modifications of Structure N9-56 through approximately the first century and a half of the Late Classic.

Although these and other caches perpetuated one element of Early Classic offering practice, the standard contents of preceding centuries were gone. Their place was taken in a number of instances by groups of ceremonial flints and a variety of other objects that were usually of larger scale than those used in earlier times. The assemblages were often of very considerable size, as in the lower-level offering pit in Structure N10-9 (Figure 5.9). Similarly impressive groups were also deposited in N10-15, one of the elite residential structures in the Plaza N10/3 Group. A

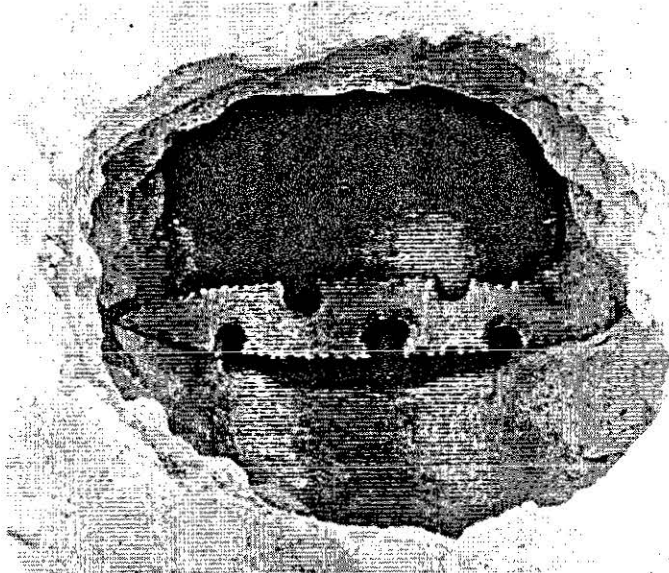


Figure 5.10 Cache N10-18/5. Length of flint 77.5 cm.

variation on the theme occurred in another residential unit in the same complex, Structure N10-18, where two vessels with comparatively limited contents rested atop the largest ceremonial flint known thus far in the Maya area (Figure 5.10; Pendergast 1982b:2-3; Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:190, Figure 147).

Apart from the flints, which with few exceptions closely resemble in form the large assemblage from Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979, 1982a, 1990a), the most striking new offering element was unquestionably obsidian. The material was often deposited in quantities above one kilogram, and was generally but not uniformly accompanied by one or more pottery vessels plus a limited number of other artifacts. The maximum amount in a single cache occurred in the seventh-century modification of Structure N10-43, where almost 15.6 kg formed the principal element in a primary-axis offering (Pendergast 1981a:41).

Much of the obsidian in every offering comprised exhausted and shattered flake blades, but in addition most lots included small to very considerable lots of polyhedral cores, generally also in exhausted or nearly exhausted condition. With limited exceptions,

however, the artifacts all retained some potential for re-use and hence constituted a certain measure of true wealth beyond the intrinsic value conferred on obsidian by the distance it had traveled to reach Lamanai. The message conveyed by the obsidian-based offerings was therefore surely as forceful as those embodied in earlier offerings of less utilitarian material, especially in view of the great bulk deposited.

The Late Classic also produced the single clearly datable monument related offering encountered at the site. Stela 9, which was erected in a room of Structure N10-27 about A.D. 625, was accompanied by a substela offering that was originally thought to have been largely limited to the remains of several young children (Pendergast 1988:5; Closs 1988:11). An opportunity for further examination of building core beneath the stela butt revealed a group of 13 ceremonial flints that underlay the skeletal material, and gave the offering a degree of similarity to a number of other Late Classic structural caches. A second monument-related offering, which consisted of a mass of chert chips, was encountered beneath an insecurely dated giant altar northwest of N10-27 (Pendergast 1983:3-4). Re-use of Classic ceremonial flints also occurred in the offering placed beneath an altar in Plaza N10/2 that was moved to the spot in Postclassic or later times.

The Postclassic

Postclassic offerings at Lamanai began with several large and relatively rich assemblages in both the structure- and the monument-associated categories. The variety of dedicatory activity combines with reshaping of the Plaza N10/3 Group, perhaps the largest single construction effort at the site (Pendergast 1986a:231-232), to indicate that the community retained very considerable vigor. The construction work was initiated with one of the larger offerings known at Lamanai, which involved massive burning of wood and possibly other materials together with the deposition of a large number of specialized vessels (Pendergast 1981b:4). The offering and the labor expenditure that ensued bespeak the community's strength during the period of dissolution at many neighboring centers, as does the slightly earlier offering of vessels and mercury beneath the marker disc of a very small ballcourt (Pendergast 1982c).

During the Middle and Late Postclassic, concentration and restructuring of the community created a focus in

the southern portion of the Central Precinct. In the period from the thirteenth century onward the use of quantities of artifacts in offerings was frequently but not always replaced by single vessels (Figure 5.11) or other objects. In addition to their standard dedicatory use, single-item offerings now came to be part of a focus on largely or wholly abandoned structures that stood in ruins. The reduction in offering size may have been partly a reflection of the decrease in the Lamanai polity, but it is dangerous to take the change as evidence of economic decline. Extensive proof of Lamanai's continuing internal and external economic strength suggests very forcefully, in fact, that reduction in cache size reflects a shift in values rather than a decline in means.

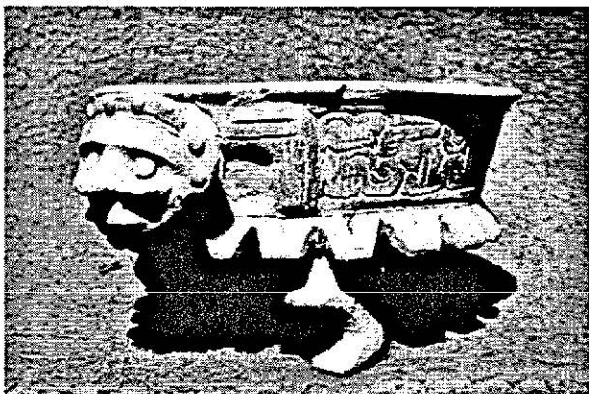


Figure 5.11 Single vessel of Cache N10-43/1. Diameter 19.0 cm.

Part of the evidence of Lamanai's Postclassic economic strength consists of large-scale termination ritual activity on the surfaces of buildings, beginning in the thirteenth century. The structures thus honored were either long abandoned, as was the case with N9-56, or in their final days of use, as was true of N10-9 (Pendergast 1981a:44, 51). As the smashing and scattering of 30 or more Mayapan-related figurine censers, both locally made and imported, over and around Structure N9-56 (Pendergast 1981a:51, Figure 27) attests, the use of high-value objects attained levels equal to those of earlier times.

The richness of the smashed and scattered material appears to suggest that the importance of termination rituals had outstripped that of dedicatory offerings by Middle Postclassic times. In fact, however, the smaller size of dedicatory offerings is not necessarily any better an indicator of reduced ritual importance than it is of economic decline. Like so many other facets of the Postclassic at Lamanai, the changes in offering contents and practice are best understood as part of a continuing evolution out of the Classic base, and not particularly likely to be illuminated by comparisons with earlier patterns at the site or elsewhere

(Pendergast 1990b).

The Contact Period

Archaeological evidence shows that the period of Spanish influence over life at Lamanai, which began about 1544 (Jones 1989:41-43, 301, 306), was marked by disruption of indigenous offering practice at the publicly visible level. The last identifiable sixteenth-century act in the Precolumbian tradition, the burial of a small bat effigy vessel, took place in circumstances of secrecy during construction of the first Spanish church at Lamanai. The insertion of the vessel into the partly demolished Postclassic structure over which the Christian building was being superposed is very likely to have been a single individual's attempt to appease the ancient gods and at the same time seek the favor of their European replacements.

The cessation of public offering deposition in Christianized Lamanai extended to the two churches, where a native attempt at placation of both Maya and Catholic deities might reasonably be expected. The apparent absence of offerings deposited in these two specifically Christian contexts during construction may be attributable to close Spanish supervision, which is especially likely to have been a factor in the later church (Pendergast 1993; Pendergast and Graham 1993). Extensive use of the earlier church as a burial place (Pendergast 1991:344) may have destroyed evidence of post-construction offering deposition, and it is possible that the period of Spanish-influenced use of the later church was too short to have permitted such activity until after the European presence was no longer felt. Evidence from residential structures suggests, however, that the effect of the Christian belief system on cache deposition in public settings may have been pervasive. Structure N11-18, the principal piece of residential construction of the period and probably the home of the Spanish-supported *alcalde* (Pendergast 1991:341-351; Pendergast and Graham 1993), yielded no evidence of cache activity. The nearby slightly smaller Structure N12-26, in all likelihood a contemporaneous residence, likewise contained no dedicatory material, and none was detected in any of the less imposing domestic buildings of the period.

The suppression of cache activity is an entirely predictable result of the impact of Christian precepts on Maya religious practice, if one assumes that the first Spaniards who reached Lamanai were already aware of the importance of cache deposition in pre-contact belief. The persistence of Precolumbian practice that was at least related to cache deposition, if it did not

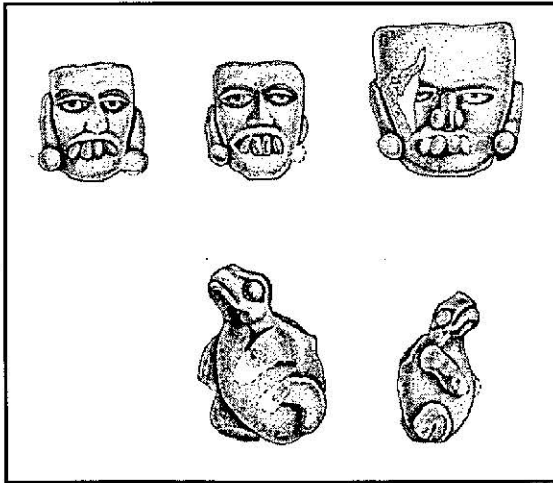


Figure 5.12 Group of miniature effigy vessels from Cache YDL II/4. Height of largest human effigy 5.1 cm.

include such activity, is nevertheless documented by numerous references to idolatry in the ethnohistorical record. Lamanai's role as a reduction center may have involved somewhat greater recurrence of Precolumbian practice than was standard elsewhere. It is obvious, however, that archaeology is very unlikely to provide solid evidence regarding clandestine continuation of proscribed offering practice.

Although the Christian proscription against native cache deposition appears to have held sway until the end of Spanish hegemony in 1641 (López de Cogolludo 1971[1688]:Bk. 11, Ch. 13; Jones 1989:214–224), there is clear evidence that pre-contact attitudes and esthetic traditions continued to be a powerful part of a bidirectional Maya/Spanish accommodation (Graham et al. 1989). The most obvious reading of the archaeological evidence is that the Maya, once freed of the pressures of the Christian belief system, reintroduced earlier practices that had been held in abeyance for roughly a century. It is far more likely, however, that the practices had continued throughout the time, but with context and focus that reflected the aforementioned bilateral accommodation. This interpretation is suggested by similarities in pre-contact and post-contact cache composition, and is given strong support by the fact that the settings for post-1641 cache deposition and other ritual activity were often determined at least in part by Christian considerations (Graham et al. 1989:1257; Pendergast 1991:346–347, 1993).

The strongest expression of the resurgence of Precolumbian practice in a partly syncretic form was the placement of a stela with accompanying substela cache in the ruined nave of the second church. The cache

contents, which included a resmoothed portion of an Early Classic jade full-face figure pendant, were of classes that would have been chosen prior to European contact, but the sacred space in which the activity took place was now defined by Christian belief.

Similar conjoining of Christian sacred space and Precolumbian cache practice is reflected in at least three of the other six caches placed within the nave and at the face of the church's masonry chancel. The remaining three offerings comprised one group of miniature human face effigies and animal figurines (Figure 5.12) and two ceramic mythical crocodilian creatures (Figure 5.13), surely a restatement of the crocodile association reflected in the community's name (Pendergast 1981a:31–32). The close resemblance of the figurines to ones deposited elsewhere in the community more than a century earlier is direct physical evidence of the maintenance of the Precolumbian tradition alongside Christian belief.

In addition to the other sorts of information they embody, the ceramic figurines in post-Spanish Lamanai offerings document the survival of detailed iconographic knowledge. This is true both of objects placed beneath the floor of the later church and of

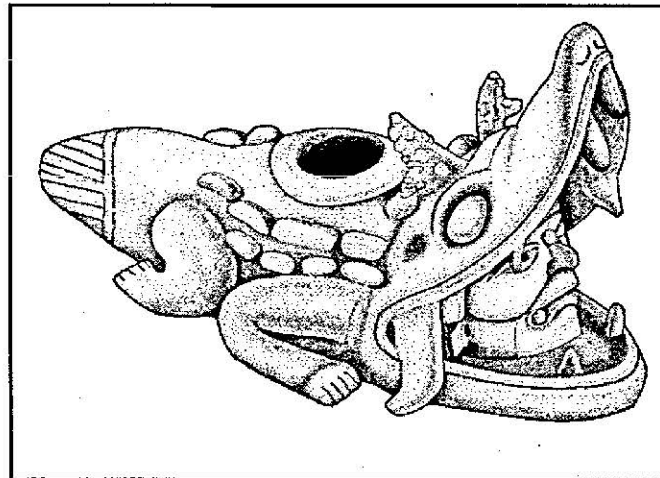


Figure 5.13 Cache YDL II/5 mythical crocodilian figure. Length 20.8 cm.

offerings in residential structures within the sixteenth and seventeenth-century community boundaries. At the same time there was limited re-use of earlier material, such as the resmoothed portion of a Classic jade pendant deposited beneath the stela erected within the church nave. Because no individual who had engaged in offering activity before 1544 was alive to guide resurgence of such practice in 1641, the continuities must reflect either maintenance of a strong and detailed oral tradition or perpetuation of Precolumbian activities throughout the time of Spanish

hegemony. Unfortunately neither the archaeological evidence nor the very limited ethnohistoric documentation allows a choice between these two equally plausible alternatives.

In contrast with the profusion of church offerings, axial and other caches are nearly absent in what is very likely to be either a Spanish-period or a post-1641 settlement zone at the south end of the site (Pendergast 1985:2). The scarcity of offerings may indicate diminished concern with dedicatory matters in residential context, but it is equally probable that it reflects an overall reduction in resources or the closing off of trade in some classes of material. These matters have so many ramifications in themselves that their full consideration goes well beyond the bounds of the present discussion. There is no question, however, that Historic-period offering practice bespeaks a Maya dedicatory tradition that was durable enough to withstand and accommodate to the onslaughts of a new belief system, and to survive into the post-European period with most or all of its essential elements intact.

Conclusions

It is abundantly clear from the record that the primary axis was the principal determinant of cache position in communally built structures. Evidence suggests that the Maya established this vital structure lifeline by visual identification rather than precise measurement. As a result the position of an offering might deviate slightly from a true measured axis, and the deviation was likely to be greater in upper portions of a structure than at the base, presumably because those depositing an offering found visual keys to axis position more difficult to encompass within their view.

One of the aims in placement of a cache on the primary axis can surely be understood as support for or enhancement of the function of the axis itself, which appears to have been dual. As related to the axis as structural identifier, a cache can be seen as purely dedicatory, especially if it lay beneath, or at a low level within, new construction. It is readily apparent that continuing focus on the primary axis should have led to rededication with every significant remodelling of the structure, but the history of cache deposition at Lamanai shows that this seemingly logical approach was far from uniform in application. The actual significance of a given construction effort, as opposed to the archaeologist's assessment thereof, may be at issue here. Significance was surely a ceremonial

matter for the Maya, whereas our judgment is with rare exceptions rooted in engineering and traffic-flow concerns because there are no readable clues to ceremonial impact.

Monument-associated caches at Lamanai may well have had both of the functions ascribed to primary-axis caches in communal structures. Uncertainty regarding this point arises out of limitations in our knowledge of the intended functions of the monuments themselves. If they were seen solely as statements on the part of rulers, associated caches are most likely to have had a purely dedicatory intent. If, on the other hand, either the power of the ruler or the power of a deity to whom he or she was linked also resided in the monument, then something of the amplification purpose may also have been served by a cache.

In recent years a number of additional caches have emerged from excavations carried out as part of a new research project at Lamanai directed by Elizabeth Graham (Graham 2001a, b), and it is very likely that more will be appearing not long after this volume goes to press. They have added, and unquestionably will continue to add, to the inventory of objects included in offerings, but there is every indication that they will leave unaltered the fundamental patterns evident in the material reported here.

The 126 caches recovered at Lamanai between 1974 and 1986 illustrate forcefully both conservatism and innovation in material and non-material culture over time. Of greatest importance, however, is the significant light that the data shed on the determinants and the motivations that lay behind offering activity at the site. Full assessment of the data will obviously not be possible until the offerings are set in the context of complete excavation reporting. Nevertheless I trust that the foregoing discussion of cache composition and placement provides an overview that will be of value both for comparative purposes and for reconstruction of the internal dynamics of religious activity over the course of Lamanai's very long history.

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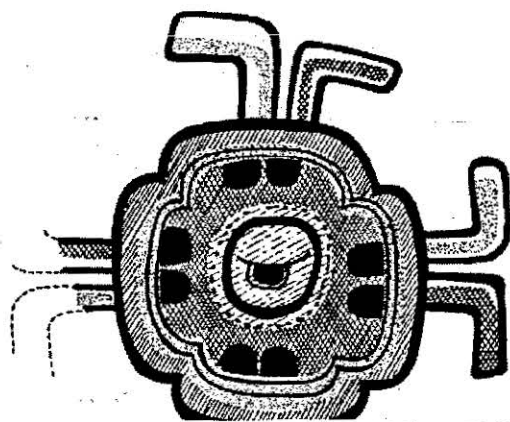
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