

Anti-apocalypse: the Postclassic period at Lamanai, Belize

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The ancient Maya site of Lamanai in northern Belize is unusual because it was not abandoned like many sites in the ninth century and flourished in the subsequent Postclassic period (AD 900–1450). Lamanai was the centre for an elaborate ceramic style and more than three decades of research at the site have produced an outstanding collection of highly decorated vessels. What do the Postclassic ceramics of Lamanai tell us about life at the site in the Postclassic, and about the Postclassic Maya world?

In his 2007 film *Apocalypto*, director Mel Gibson presented a vision of Classic Maya society on the verge of collapse. Despite the many inaccuracies of the film,¹ Gibson's depiction of a corrupt and decadent society undergoing complete disintegration reinforces a popular view of the Maya collapse that is in many ways the result of archaeological writing. During the 19th and 20th centuries archaeologists and others puzzled over and debated the causes of the abandonment of many sites in the southern lowlands around the ninth century, a phenomenon that became known as the Maya collapse (Fig. 1). As we begin the 21st century, however, a new consensus appears to be emerging among Maya scholars: the Maya never really “collapsed” at all.²

There are hundreds of abandoned cities across the Maya region of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Many of the most spectacular ones, such as Calakmul on the dry Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, Tikal in the Peten rainforest of Guatemala, and Caracol in the Maya Mountains of Belize, were indeed abandoned rapidly in the last century of the Classic period (AD 250–900). However, beginning with the Carnegie Institution of Washington's work at the



Figure 2 Postclassic period sites in the Maya area are concentrated in the northern lowlands of Belize and Mexico.

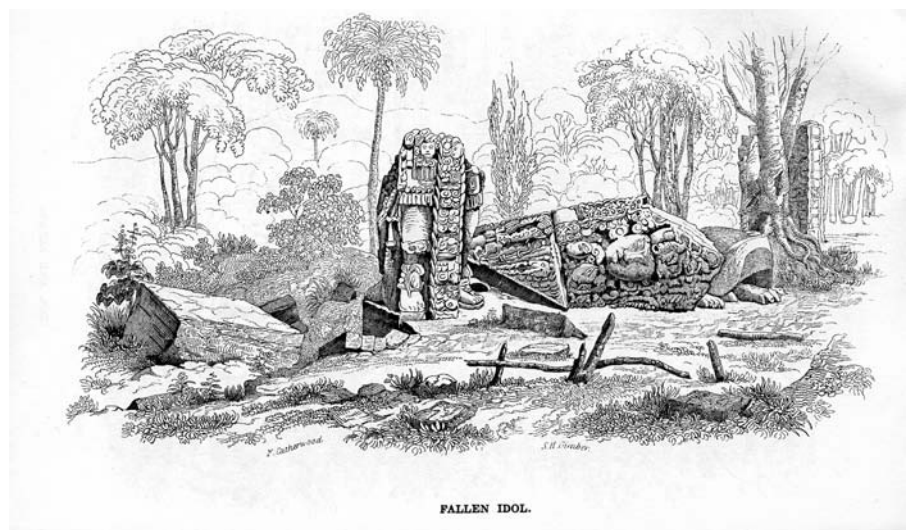


Figure 1 Frederick Catherwood's atmospheric drawings of Copan helped create the idea of the total Maya collapse. From J. L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841).

Late Postclassic (AD 1250–1450) site of Mayapan in the early 1950s evidence has emerged that the collapse was neither as widespread nor consistent among sites as once believed. Subsequent research, including mine on the Early Postclassic (AD 900–1250) in the Belize Valley,³ has shown that the so-called collapse varied greatly throughout the Maya world, and in fact many sites continued to thrive through this period, and beyond.

From collapse to transition and transformation

What did disappear at the end of the Classic period was the institution of divine kingship and many of its material correlates, including large carved stone stelae and hieroglyphic inscriptions glorifying the prowess of god-kings. The reasons for this varied by region and even by site. At Copan, the site of Stephens' account, we have evidence of environmental problems just before the site's centre was abandoned: soil erosion from over-farming on the valley's hillsides. In the Petexbatun region of Guatemala there is no such evidence, although archaeologists have searched for it. There, warfare was the prime cause of site abandonment, and this occurred two centuries before the collapse of Copan.

Despite the collapse of many of the southern lowland Maya sites, some sites continued and new ones emerged, especially in the northern lowlands (Fig. 2). The Postclassic sites are rarely as spectacular as those of the Classic, but one exception is Lamanai (Fig. 3), in northern Belize.⁴ While sites around it declined at the end of the Classic, the people of Lamanai continued to build and renovate structures, and the site thrived throughout the Postclassic. At sites like Lamanai we see that important elements

of Maya civilization continued, and that some activities, such as trade, flourished. The presence of high-quality “Fine Orange” pottery from the Usumacinta River drainage of southeast Mexico, for example, indicates that Lamanai was part of an extensive trading network which also included many sites in the northern lowlands.⁵ Lamanai's survival may be linked to its strategic location on the New River, which would have provided a link between the Caribbean coast and the inland southern Maya region.

In 2003, a publication on the Postclassic Period in Mesoamerica⁶ articulated a vision of the Postclassic Maya world that strongly contrasts with an older view of cultural decay that once led archaeologists to call the Postclassic the “Decadent Period.” In this new view a number of cultural processes integrated a vibrant Postclassic Maya region into a new Mesoamerican world system: “These processes include an unprecedented population growth, a proliferation of small polities, an increased volume of long distance exchange, an increase in the diversity of trade goods, commercialization of the economy, new forms of writing an iconography, and new patterns of stylistic interaction.” As our understanding of

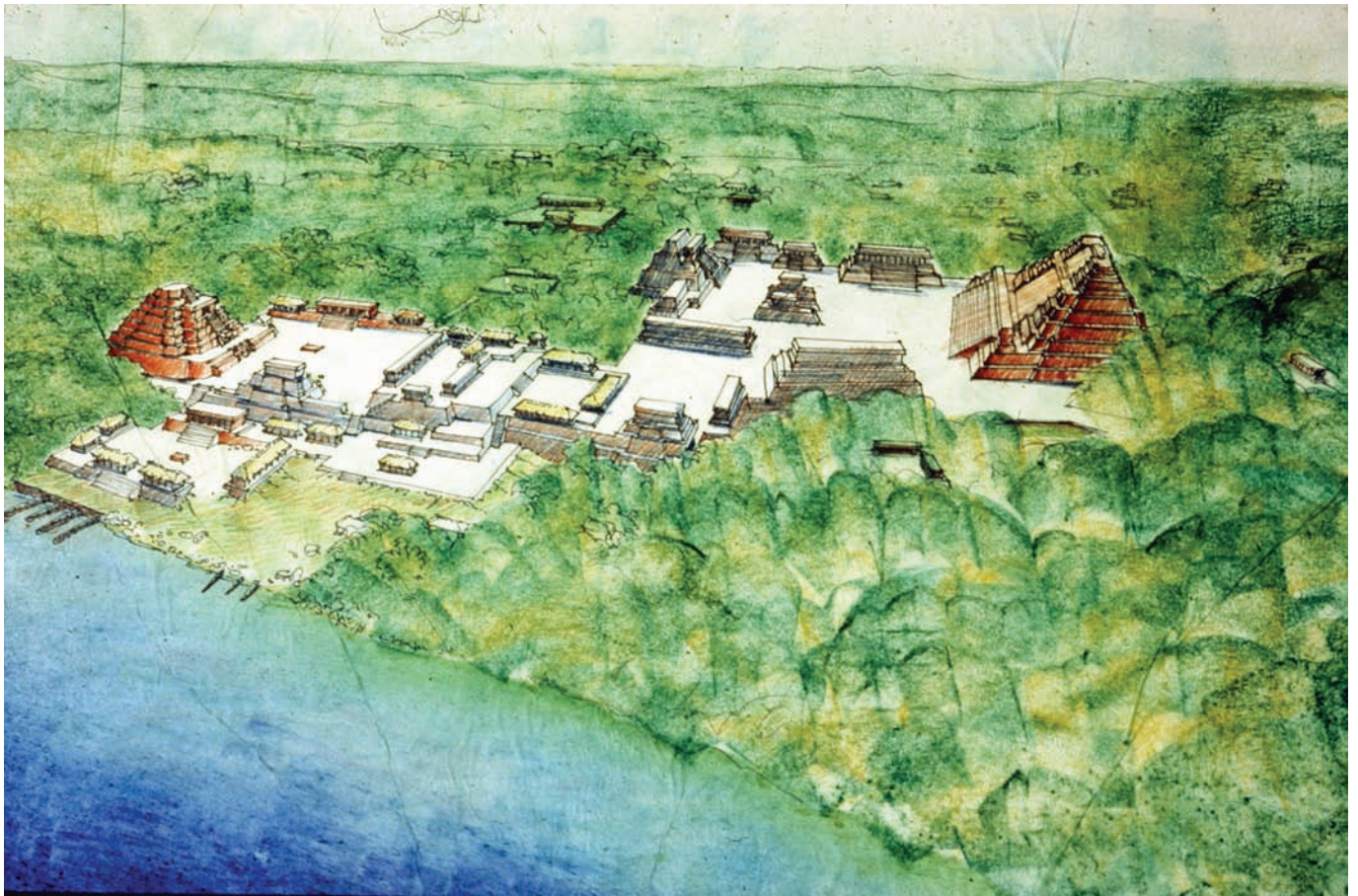


Figure 3 Reconstruction of Lamanai by H. S. Loten.

the Postclassic matures, archaeologists need to assess the nature and degree of interaction among Postclassic sites. One of the most ubiquitous and informative artefact categories at Maya sites is pottery – which is why I am examining Lamanai’s assemblage of Postclassic ceramic vessels. This material has been excavated by David Pendergast, Elizabeth Graham and others since 1974 and includes several Maya masterpieces (Figs 4 and 5).

Lamanai’s ceramics are a distinct local manifestation of what has been termed a “Postclassic International Style” characterized by widely shared symbols (iconography) that spread across Mesoamerica after the Classic. Style can be defined as “a form of non-verbal communication through doing something in a certain way that communicates information about relative identity.”⁷ Distinct social identities often emerge in periods of interaction and competition as in the Postclassic, and both style and iconography were actively used by various Maya subgroups to express their identities throughout Maya history. Although part of the Postclassic International Style, the Postclassic ceramics of Lamanai were the result of stylistic choices made by producers and consumers in a community with specific interests and affiliations. I have been using ceramic style to map Lamanai’s affiliations with other sites and

to develop hypotheses about regional economic, political, social, and religious change after the Classic.

The curse of the ware

While conducting this research I have had to struggle with an old and complex problem in Maya ceramic methodology that has hindered comparison among sites: the ware problem. This problem is a good example of how archaeological classification systems can facilitate or obstruct our ability to understand the past, regardless of the quality of our evidence (which, in the Maya area, is very good). Since the late 1950s Mesoamerican archaeologists have used *type-variety* classification to sort pottery hierarchically into *wares*, *groups*, *types*, and *varieties* based on stylistic similarity with wares at the top of this hierarchy. Wares are supposed to be determined by both the surface finish of the pottery and its paste (i.e. clay plus temper) and have been thought to represent technological traditions linked to specific sites or regions. Although this appears simple, the definition of ware has created taxonomic contradictions that have been recognized for 30 years but have not yet been resolved.

The problem with ware is that surface and paste vary independently. Petrographic analysis at Lamanai by Linda Howie has shown that vessels that look

very different and would be classified as distinct wares (and thus distinct types due to the hierarchical nature of type-variety) based on their surface finish, sometimes have identical pastes, showing that they were made at the same location. In contrast, some vessels that look identical and would thus be grouped in one ware can have very different pastes, suggesting they were made in different locations.

This has led to inconsistencies in how the concept has been used. Some archaeologists have defined wares by surface treatment alone, and therefore ceramic types that look the same on the surface but have different pastes have been classified as the same ware. Other archaeologists disapprove of this because it ignores paste variation, which can indicate how and where vessels were produced. Due to the hierarchical nature of ware-group-type-variety designation, a given type cannot occur in more than one ware, so these archaeologists have placed stylistically similar ceramics with different pastes in site- or region-specific wares and created different type names. This approach has created a profusion of ware and type names that have made it very difficult to understand broad stylistic trends in Maya ceramics. Both approaches can lead to incorrect assumptions about where pottery was made and have slowed and confused inter-site comparisons.



Figure 4 David Pendergast excavated this spectacular vessel depicting a hunchbacked man from one of latest elite tombs at Lamanai, probably dating from the late 15th to early 16th century.

Furthermore, it appears that most Lamanai ceramics were produced near the site, although they often resemble exotic styles. Given that most vessels were made locally, that paste and surface finish do not consistently co-vary, and that ware has been applied differently across the Maya area, I find ware more of a liability than an asset. Still, I need a way to group stylistically similar pots because this can provide clues about interaction in the Postclassic. In grappling with this problem I noticed that type-variety as originally developed in the 1950s includes two taxonomic levels designed for inter-site and inter-regional comparison: ceramic system and ceramic sphere. Oddly, the first of these has never been used in Belize.



Figure 5 This vessel representing a monkey was found in the same tomb as the hunchback vessel.

Ceramic system designations provide a way to group similar types at different sites based on surface treatment and decoration. By ignoring paste, ceramic systems give us a way to track the movement of stylistic influences across the Maya area because they focus on the stylistic choices made by potters. Ceramic systems can link local Lamanai ceramics to the very numerous known types elsewhere without problematic ware designations.

Spheres operate on an even more general level. Ceramic complexes can be assigned to ceramic spheres if they share a majority of their ceramic systems. Because style is a result of choices made by producers and consumers, systems and spheres both provide information about ceramic production, trade, and regional integration. Since there are few imported pots at Lamanai we must assume that the spread of styles was through the interaction of people, not the movement of pots. How intense was this interaction? Are there differences in stylistic sharing amongst different types of pottery (e.g. domestic or ritual) suggesting different degrees of interaction in different realms of Maya life? These are the sorts of questions I have been asking using ceramic systems.

Ceramic systems and cultural interaction

One of the changes in the Postclassic is that the most important Maya sites are located in the northern Maya lowlands rather than the southern Maya lowlands as they had been in the Classic. Lamanai straddles these two areas and seems to have had ties to both. Preliminary experiments with Elizabeth Graham in classifying the Lamanai ceramics by system⁸ suggest that Lamanai was interacting differently with the northern Maya lowlands than with the south, the heartland of Classic Maya civilization. Notably, systems assignments for fine burial vessels (Fig. 6) and incense burners (Fig. 7) suggest strong religious-ritual connections with newly powerful northern sites like Mayapan and Tulum. Utilitarian/domestic vessels like water jars showed stylistic connections to southern sites as they had in the Classic, suggesting continued social identification with that region even after the famous “collapse” there. A tentative explanation of this is that although the everyday lives of the Lamanai Maya did not change much after the collapse, their religious lives did. This is what we might expect after the collapse of divine kingship.

Goods, people and ideas moved through Lamanai in the Postclassic and the community’s richly decorated ceramics show this. Politically and economically, Lamanai was probably the capital of the region or province of Dzuluinicob in the



Figure 6 David Pendergast termed this form a “chalice” due to its high pedestal base. These large, elaborate vessels are characteristic of the Postclassic period at Lamanai and were frequently smashed over burials.

Late Postclassic.⁹ Trade goods from across Mesoamerica¹⁰ suggest that the site was as a buffer or a gateway centre¹¹ between the Caribbean and the Petén due to its location on the New River. Whatever changes may have occurred after the Classic, the site maintained a productive and creative group of potters during the Postclassic, although there does appear to be some decline in quality near the end of the Postclassic. All of this implies what David Pendergast has called “stability through change.” Robert Fry, working at the smaller centre of Chau Hiix nearby, has noted that only areas with fairly stable populations could maintain elements of the relatively complex Classic ceramic production system. All indications are that the Lamanai region was one of these areas and the production system appears to have remained relatively stable through the Postclassic.



Figure 7 Censers like this one depict human figures in cotton armour. They closely resemble examples from Mayapan, Mexico, but are executed in a distinctly Lamanai style.

The style of the Lamanai ceramics place the site squarely within the integrated and vibrant Postclassic world system we now see for all of Mesoamerica. Lamanai shows us that the Maya did not collapse entirely. Rather, some polities were transformed while others failed to transform and then declined after a crisis in the Classic period. Linda Howie's work with petrography at Lamanai promises to shed important light on how pottery was produced at the site and possible sources for imports. My work is focused on the consumption of pottery and it is already clear that stylistic choices by potters and consumers at Lamanai linked the site with others in a web of stylistic emulation indicative of the sites' interregional affiliations. The strong stylistic ties of Lamanai to Mayapán and coastal centres including Cozumel, Tulum, Ichpaatun, Marco Gonzalez, and Santa Rita are clear. Detail about the exact nature of these ties can be teased out by using ceramic systems, which will also eventually help us to give Lamanai sphere designations. Meanwhile, other analyses such as petrography, iconography, modal analysis and contextual analysis all promise to add layers of evidence to be used in constructing our understanding of this site and its role in a thriving Postclassic Maya world.

David Pendergast directed excavations at Lamanai from 1974 to 1986. The Lamanai Archaeological Project is currently co-directed by Elizabeth Graham (UCL) and Scott Simons (University of North Carolina).

Notes

- 1 J. J. Aimers & E. Graham. "Noble savages versus noble savages: Gibson's apocalyptic view of the Maya", *Latin American Antiquity* **18**(1), 105–6, 2007.
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- 4 E. Graham, "Collapse, conquest, and Maya survival at Lamanai, Belize", *Archaeology International* **2000/2001**, 52–6.
- 5 D. M. Pendergast, "Stability through change: Lamanai, Belize, from the ninth to the seventeenth Century", in *Late Lowland Maya Civilization: Classic to Postclassic*, J. A. Sabloff & E. W. Andrews V (eds), 223–49 (Albuquerque: School of American Research, University of New Mexico Press, 1985).
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- 10 D. A. Pendergast, "Up from the dust: the central lowlands Postclassic as seen from Lamanai and Marco Gonzalez, Belize", in *Vision and revision in Maya studies*, P. D. Harrison & F. S. Clancy (eds), 169–77 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).
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