

Collapse, conquest and Maya survival at Lamanai, Belize

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The Maya civilization of Central America prompts visions of mysterious stone temples now buried in tropical forest. It is commonly supposed to have collapsed suddenly in the ninth century AD, but some Maya settlements, such as Lamanai, survived into the colonial period. Here a new member of the Institute's academic staff gives a personal account of how working in Belize transformed her understanding of Maya civilization and its aftermath.

The Central American nation of Belize is part of the British Commonwealth. Its colonial history reflects British rather than Spanish interests, but in the case of Belize, formerly British Honduras, it would probably be more accurate to say that disinterest was the most active force in British foreign policy. Thank goodness for that, many Belizeans might say, and so might many archaeologists, because Belize's Maya ruins went for many years unnoticed, at least in comparison to the attention given by archaeologists – and looters – to the ruins of Guatemala, southern Mexico and (Spanish) Honduras. Few indeed think of the English when they imagine Maya civilization and its modern trajectory. Yet, at Lamanai, a Maya site in northern Belize, some ruins of Maya residences are stratigraphically overlain by Victorian refuse, and there are house mounds (the buried remains of houses built on low stone-faced platforms) that are British colonial and date to the nineteenth century.

Maya civilization

This juxtaposition of British and Maya remains has a kind of cosmic irony. Maya urban life began, some 2500 years ago, when the ancestors of the British were – how shall I put this? – running around in animal skins and proud of being able to erect big stones in a circle without them falling over. But by the time the British came to Belize in the late 1600s, Maya cities were overgrown by forest, and Maya achievements – among them the most accurate time-keeping in the world prior to the invention of telescopes – had been lost instead to time's ravages.

The civilization of the ancient Maya is best known, both to archaeologists and to the general public, for its Classic Period, which extended from about AD 250 to 800. Because so much of what we know about the Maya is derived from the archaeology of the great Classic Period cities of the Peten region of Guatemala, the best known of which is Tikal (Fig. 1), we remain heavily influenced by the dynastic inscriptions of Classic Period stone monuments, called stelae, with their royal imagery and metic-

ulous chronologies (Fig. 2). The impression of grandeur is also created by views of towering Classic temples, often misleadingly called pyramids (Fig. 3), and broad terraced platforms supporting successive layers of residential and civic architecture.

The Maya collapse and beyond

Classic Period society and culture underwent a major transformation in the ninth century AD. Tikal and similar sites appear to have experienced a true collapse, at least of state structure, and evidence suggests that people dispersed from such high-density urban centres to join or to establish communities of lower density, which were commonly situated along lakes and rivers or near other easily accessible sources of water. Despite frequent references in popular literature and the media to the concept of the Maya collapse, it is clear that many communities did not in fact collapse. Several coastal sites in Belize fall into this category, as does the much larger inland site of Lamanai, where the buildings and urban landscape form a long ribbon-like strip along the shores of the New River Lagoon, one of Belize's largest freshwater lakes (Fig. 1).¹

Not only did Lamanai weather the so-called collapse, it also weathered the Spanish Conquest. The thriving post-Classic community at Lamanai was a focus of Spanish missionary efforts in the sixteenth century, and, under the British, Lamanai was chosen in the nineteenth century for the construction of a sugar mill. The site records a very long occupation by people whose language and culture has been Maya (or some form of what we now call Maya) for over 3500 years, a phenomenon of cultural continuity matched only, perhaps, in the Nile Valley or northern China.

Settlement at Lamanai and archaeological interest in the site

The earliest evidence for settlement at Lamanai comes from a radiocarbon date of about 1500 bc from a sample of wood associated with maize derived from a core of lagoon sediments. This core was taken when David Pendergast (Royal Ontario Museum) was directing excavations at Lamanai from 1974 to 1986.² I met David

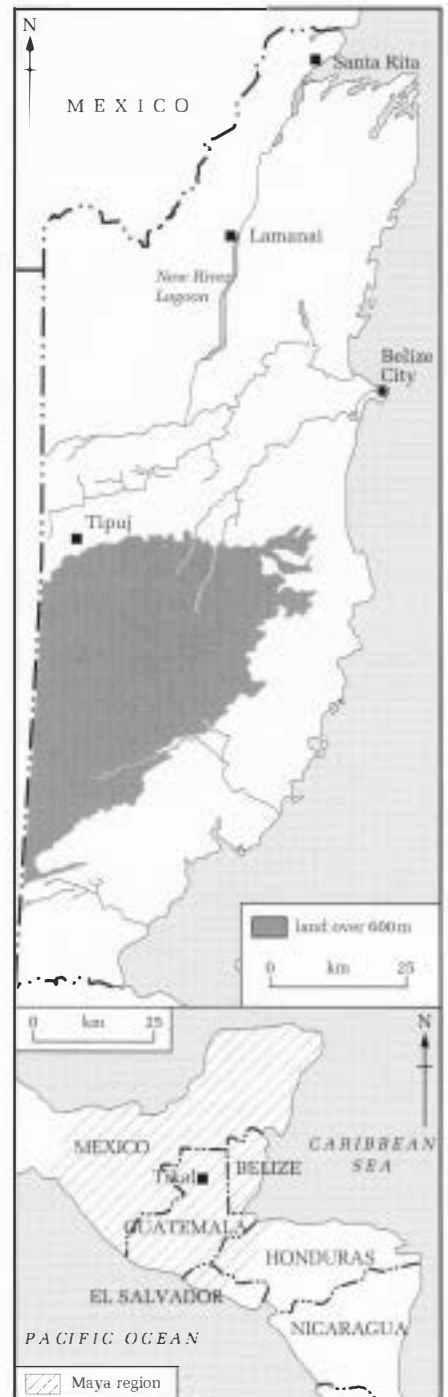


Figure 1 Belize and the Maya region, showing the location of the archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

during the time I served as Belize's Archaeological Commissioner, from 1977 to 1979, when I travelled widely throughout the country, registering artefacts, recording new ruins, taking looters to court, and, the most difficult task of all, managing foreign archaeologists. The easiest way to manage Pendergast was to marry him, which I did in Belize in 1979.

I have, in fact, excavated a wide range of sites in Belize, both inland and along the coast, and in 2003 I plan to turn my attention to the coastal sites to continue an



Figure 2 Stone stela 9 found at Lamanai.

environmental project that I began years ago. But Lamanai does have a particular fascination for me, in part because of its lagoon-side setting, in part because it has been designated an archaeological reserve and lies in a mature tropical forest, but mainly because of its astoundingly long history of occupation. One of the major phenomena that Pendergast brought to light in the 1970s was the extensive construction at Lamanai that bridged the period of the Maya collapse and continued through what is called the Postclassic Period into Spanish and British colonial times. But one hardly needed ruins to come up with the idea of Maya survival. One of the Maya caretakers at Lamanai, Nasario Ku, is always asked by tourists, "Why did the Maya die out?" To which he replies, "I'm not dead!" One could say that Lamanai is proof in more ways than one of Maya survival.

Although today more archaeologists are critically examining the phenomenon of the Maya collapse, few have had experience with the excavation of Maya colonial-period remains. During the 1980s, with archaeologist Mark Cohen (State University of New York at Plattsburgh) and ethnohistorian Grant Jones (Davidson College in North Carolina), I excavated the site of Tipuj in central Belize (Fig. 1), where the Spanish established a mission among the Maya in the sixteenth century. There is no doubt that my experience there drew me inexorably to consider the complex events



Figure 3 Structure N10-9 at Lamanai, a temple building of the Classic and Postclassic periods.

that brought the Maya into the modern period, and through the work at Tipuj I came face to face with a past that documented continuity to the present. Perhaps, I thought, this realization could help me to change the popular view of the Maya past as a mythical realm of the ancients – the New World source of so-called "hieroglyphic wisdom" and of visions of millennial truths for New Age tourists.

New research at Lamanai

After Tipuj, I felt compelled to turn back to Lamanai, where there was abundant evidence of settlement and activity through both of the major transition periods in Maya history: the Maya collapse and the colonial period. I re-opened the excavations at Lamanai in 1997 and have established an active programme of research there, which focuses specifically on the

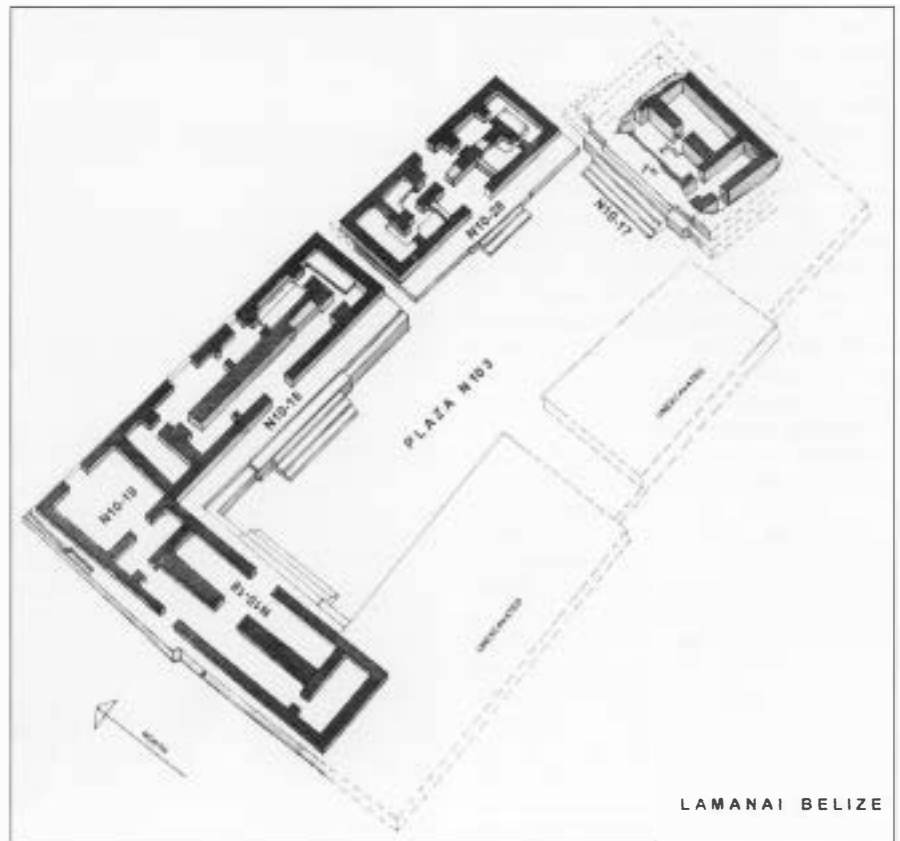


Figure 4 Plan of the Ottawa Group of buildings at the end of the Classic Period (in the early ninth century AD) based on the excavations to date.

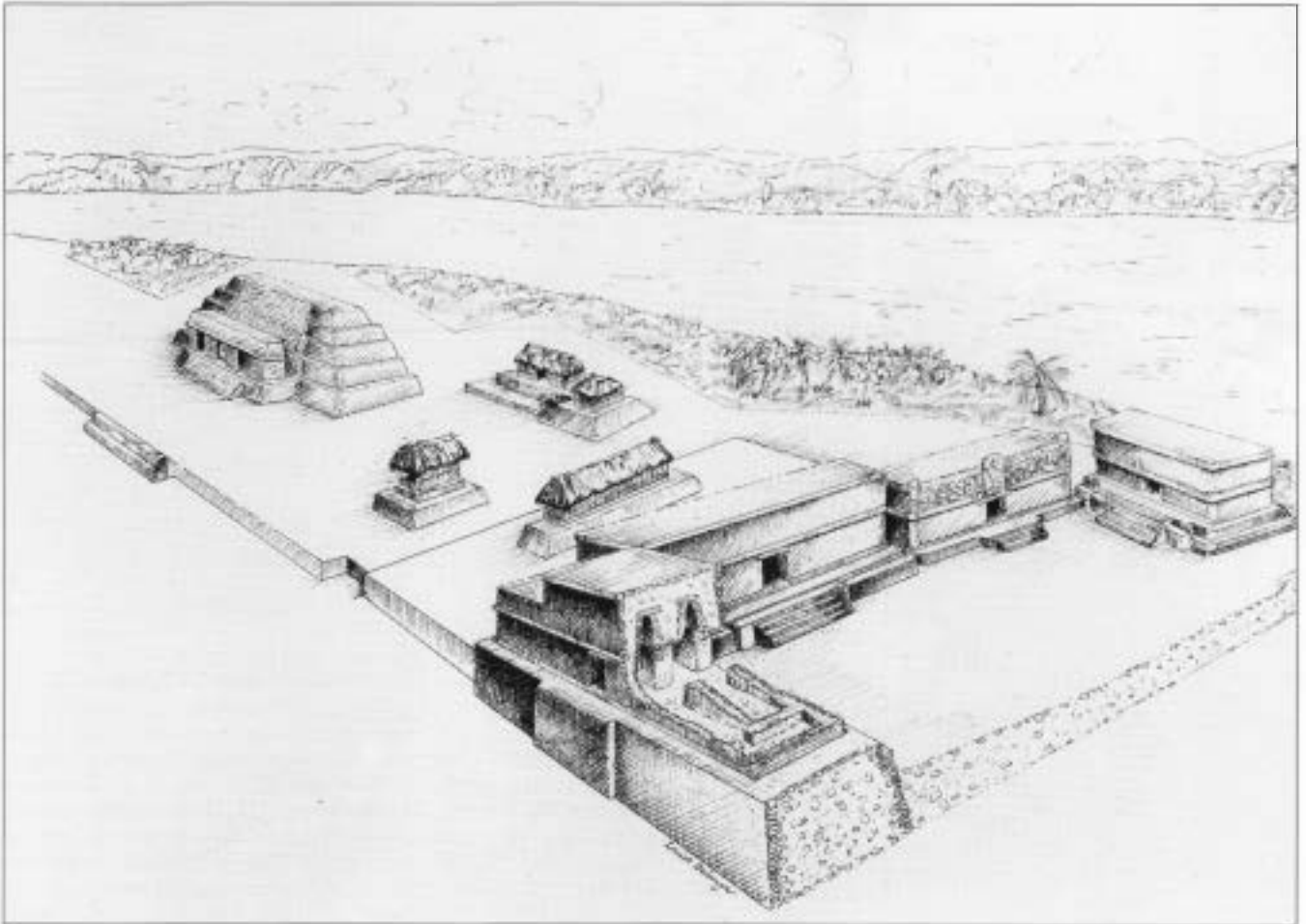


Figure 5 Reconstruction of the buildings of the Ottawa Group based on the plan shown in Figure 4; Stela 9 (see Fig. 2) can be seen in the distance in the doorway of the building (far left) known as structure N10-27, with the New River Lagoon in the background.

periods of transition that are so little known at other sites.³

One of our main goals in the next two years at Lamanai is the continued excavation of a palace-courtyard group, affectionately nicknamed the Ottawa Group by the students who, in 1974–75, originally helped H. Stanley Loten (Carleton University, Ottawa) to map the site. The Ottawa structures – originally a group of six buildings arranged around a courtyard, the southern end of which has not been excavated (Figs 4, 5) – probably had a civic administrative function or were residences of the elite, or both. They were closely associated with the rituals and ceremonies that took place in an adjacent plaza to the south, a plaza dominated by the temple known as structure N10-9 (Fig. 3). This temple was originally begun during the Classic Period, but it continued in use, and underwent further construction, into the Postclassic Period. For example, the faces of the terraces shown in Figure 3 are Postclassic additions. The Ottawa Group, like N10-9, was constructed during Classic times, although there are some indications from test probes made by Claude Belanger (the project architect and associate director) that there is a Preclassic (before AD 250) component as well.

Over the next two years we plan to investigate the sequence of construction that extends from the early ninth century until possibly as late as the fourteenth century AD (Fig. 6). Probably late in the

ninth century or at the beginning of the tenth, the Maya began a massive stone infill of the courtyard of the Ottawa Group, a phase we have nicknamed Boulders (Fig. 7). Because Maya buildings were



Figure 6 Two UCL research students, Norbert Stanchly and Mustumi Izeki, excavating structure N10-15 (see Fig. 4) of the Ottawa Group.



Figure 7 The courtyard of the Ottawa Group looking east. Structure N10-28 (see Fig. 4) is on the left. The ladder rests against the N10-28 platform, and the partial-height walls of the building supported by the platform can be seen just above the ladder on the left. Some of the Boulders infill has been removed to reveal the steps and platforms of N10-28 (left distance) and N10-17 (facing at the far end); remaining infill can be seen on the right.

constructed on terraced platforms (sometimes mistakenly described as truncated pyramids), this infilling served to cover the faces of the platform terraces and essentially brought the level of the surface of the sunken courtyard up to the tops of the partly razed walls of the buildings that stood on the platforms. At the same time, the platforms were extended around the outside of the Ottawa Group by the addition of the Boulders infill, a process that is best documented on the north side. This enlarging of the platforms, which brought the total mass to more than 20 000 tonnes

of stone, added considerably to the overall surface area and enabled additions to be made to the buildings. On the south side the evidence indicates so far that two buildings were amalgamated. One building, structure N10-28, on the courtyard's northeast side (Fig. 4) was razed to less than half its original height during this phase and its remains sealed by the Boulders infill. At the end of the Classic Period, it supported a stucco frieze, the remains of which were found in fragments amid the core stones of the infill. Dr Dorie Reents-Budet (research associate, Smithsonian



Figure 8 A Postclassic large pottery jar showing the distinctive iconography of the period, probably twelfth century AD.

Institution) and research student Mark Shelby (University of Alabama) have been engaged in recent years in the analysis of the elements of this elaborate frieze.⁴

In addition to the work on the Ottawa Group, we have begun to investigate a building that dates to the Spanish colonial period, as well as a midden or garbage dump that is amassed against the terrace faces of structure N10-27, a Classic Period temple. Lamanai's most important stela was found at the temple (Figs 2, 5), where it had been erected in AD 625 to mark an important ceremony in the life of one of Lamanai's rulers, Smoking Shell. But our recent excavations have been concerned with a much later and less regal phenomenon: the collapse of the temple and its transformation into the site of a very impressive garbage dump. This midden offers an ideal opportunity to study changes in pottery production through time, because the pottery and other artefacts in it date from the end of the Late Classic Period through to the Postclassic Period (to about AD 1200). Research student Linda Howie-Langs (University of Sheffield) is doing this by using petrographic techniques to determine the fabric composition and mineral sources of the pottery; and UCL research student Jenny Scarlin is studying the iconography of the Postclassic material (Fig. 8). Through these and other investigations we hope to build up a unique record of the detailed changes that took place in Maya life from the time of the collapse to the thirteenth century.

The Spanish colonial building that we have been working on is believed to have been the rectory used by the travelling priests or missionaries who periodically visited Lamanai in the sixteenth and



Figure 9 One of the crocodile effigy vessels found at Lamanai. A man's head is emerging from the creature's mouth.

seventeenth centuries.⁴ Its stone facings have long since been dismantled by seekers of limestone for building, and this makes it a very difficult structure to excavate and interpret. In the late 1970s one of Lamanai's many caches of pottery vessels in the form of crocodile effigies was found there (Fig. 9). They were made in pre-colonial and colonial times and are some of northern Belize's most characteristic and endearing artefacts. The largest collections of them, excavated by the early twentieth-century British explorer Dr Thomas Gann at Lamanai, Santa Rita (Fig. 1) and other sites in northern Belize, are in the Liverpool Museum and the British Museum.

Research plus

The new research at Lamanai was only part of what drew me back to the site. There was more that I felt should be done, including helping with the development of the on-site museum started by the Maya caretakers, and of which Nasario Ku is now curator. It wasn't the past alone that I was interested in. How could it be, when I saw at first-hand, as did Nasario Ku, that most non-Maya people are very selective about what aspects of the Maya past they choose to remember after visiting the site and reading about the Maya? Perhaps what happens to the material we excavate that will come to be associated with the past is as important as the excavations. What will people derive from our conclusions? What will happen to the site when we leave? Can the exposed buildings be properly cared for? How will the temples and monuments be presented to tourists? How will any of this affect the local community, and what privileged access to information, if any, should they have? How will the archaeological information be used? Indeed, is our information useful to everyone, or is it categorized and stored in a way that makes little sense except to other academics, and sometimes not even to them? Have we made it easy, or difficult, for research students and scholars to build on what we have made of the past?

These questions are being addressed, but in this short article this side of our

work cannot be fully described. We now have an active and what I hope will be a permanent research programme established under the aegis of the Lamanai Field Research Centre (LFRC). The LFRC also runs a field school for students and avocational archaeologists. In cooperation with the Belize government's Department of Archaeology, the LFRC and the nearby Lamanai Outpost Lodge, a fieldwork scholarship programme is run annually for local secondary-school students. With the help of a grant from the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (through the Canadian International Development Agency) we are supporting an initiative to develop local crafts, and there is also a range of educational programmes, for both local and foreign tourists, in natural and cultural resource management.

Over the next three years we will work closely with the International Development Bank's archaeological-site development project in Belize, a major initiative headed by Belizean archaeologists Jaime Awe and Allan Moore, both of whom received their doctorates at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. And last but not least, I continue to raise money for the on-site museum started by the Maya caretakers in 1995. Artefact display, conservation, and the training of a local conservator are some of our goals, but we also plan an artisans' workshop adjacent to the museum, where originals, moulds and copies of artefacts, including casts of stelae, will be made available to local craftworkers for design ideas. Thus, Maya survival at Lamanai continues, but is once again taking on a new face.

Notes

1. See 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: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); and E. Graham, "Terminal Classic to early Historic Period vessels from Belize", in *Maya ceramics*, P. M. Rice & R. J. Sharer (eds), 73–98 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 345 (i), 1987).
2. D. M. Pendergast, "Lamanai, Belize: summary of excavation results, 1974–1980", *Journal of Field Archaeology* 8, 29–53, 1981.
3. The new excavations at Lamanai are supported by a research grant from the Social and Humanities Research Council of Canada, with David Pendergast and myself as co-investigators. See the website of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
4. E. Graham, "Mission archaeology", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27, 25–62, 1998.