

Lamanai Stela 9: The Archaeological Context

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ALTHOUGH 1974, the initial season of the Royal Ontario Museum excavations at the northern Belize site of Lamanai (Fig. 1), was marked by the discoveries of the complete Stela 1 and the lower half of Stela 2 (see Figure 2 of the accompanying paper [Reents-Budet 1988]), evidence of monumental stone carving at the site was exceedingly limited for almost a decade afterward. By the beginning of 1983, a total of eight stelae and a single altar, plus fragments of a second altar deposited in building core, had come to light. Of these, however, only the altars and two of the stelae were carved, and all four monuments had been removed from their original locations in Prehispanic times.

The Lamanai altars once bore hieroglyphic texts, but extensive abrasion and other damage has rendered them indecipherable. The condition of the inscription on Stela 1 is even worse than that of the two altars, and the only portion of Stela 2 recovered bears no glyphic text whatsoever. The epigraphic and iconographic aspects of monument production at Lamanai were therefore very poorly represented until 1983, when our available data on these important areas of study increased dramatically.

That season, investigation of Structure N10-27 was begun as part of a program designed to extend work completed during the preceding year in a residential and administrative complex at the south end of the Lamanai's ceremonial precinct (Fig. 2). The surface contours of N10-27 permitted identification of the building's front, but provided no clues either to architectural specifics or to the presence of the excellently preserved, finely carved stela that was encountered early on the very first day of excavation (Pendergast 1983:1-2). The monument, designated Stela 9 in the Lamanai series, is of epigraphic and iconographic significance not only within the limited corpus of the site, but also in the larger sphere of lowland Maya monumental art. For this reason, description of its context and its iconographic and epigraphic content appears warranted in advance of the portion of the final excavation report that deals with the entire complement of stelae and other carved stones from the site.

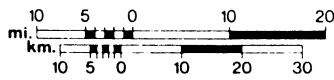
Approximately the upper half of Stela 9 lay face down at the foot of the structure's stairway, concealed by 30 to 35 centimeters of humus and debris (Fig. 3). The nature and volume of the material beneath the stela demonstrated that the monument had come to rest on steps and plaza floor that were free of collapse debris. Consequently, there is no question that the stone toppled from its original position while at least the stair and related building elements were still enjoying regular use and maintenance.

The cause of Stela 9's fall was indicated in part by the multi-angular fracture that severed the carving on the obverse surface just below the waist of the personage depicted. Spalling

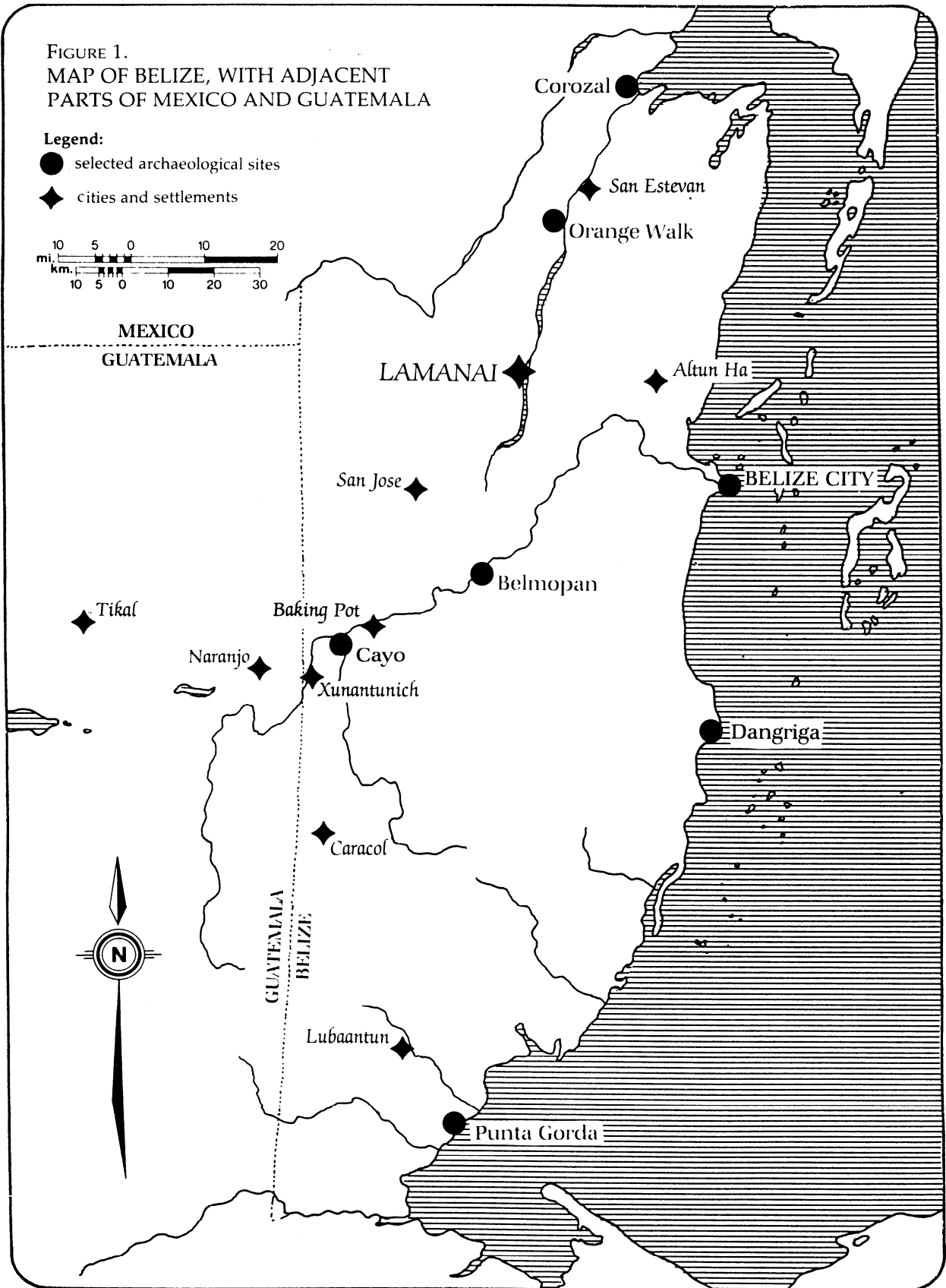
FIGURE 1.
MAP OF BELIZE, WITH ADJACENT
PARTS OF MEXICO AND GUATEMALA

Legend:

- selected archaeological sites
- ◆ cities and settlements



MEXICO
GUATEMALA



above the fracture line, clearly not produced by the tumble down the stairs, suggested an agent other than heavy impact in the breakage. In addition, the dense, partly crystalline limestone exhibited no signs of the sort of massive blow that would have been required to snap a stone of such strength.

Excavation farther up the stairway revealed the butt of the stela, set facing west on the primary axis of Structure N10-27 (see Loten and Pendergast 1984:3), in a single chamber athwart the stairway (Fig. 4). That portion of the monument found *in situ*, which included the feet of the personage depicted, bore evidence of fire damage on the front and sides, manifest in blackening and crazing of the stone and the loss of some areas of carving from spalling. The plaster floor was also calcined in the immediate vicinity of the stela base, and the lower portion of the room wall behind the monument was blackened. Clearly, a fire of considerable intensity was responsible for the breakup of the monument. It also was probably responsible for the destruction of those portions of the carving that remain missing, despite thorough screening and the checking of all material from above, around, and below the stela, and from the area between the room and the base of the stair.



Photograph courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum

FIGURE 3. THE UPPER PORTION OF LAMANAI STELA 9 *IN SITU*

Investigation of the floor that surrounded the basal portion of the monument showed unequivocally that emplacement of the stela occurred at the time the enclosure was built. The plaster of the floor showed no signs of a cut or a patch, and was marked by an indisputably primary “turn-up” around the full perimeter of the stela base. Though the relationship between the stela and its housing is clear, there is nothing in either the condition of the monument or in other aspects of the data that absolutely rules out the possibility that the erection of Stela 9 in the chamber was a re-setting. However, all available chronological information argues persuasively that the enclosure was indeed the original location of the stela. To my knowledge, no other stela placement of this kind—on the primary axis of a building within a room set athwart the stair—has been reported from the Maya lowlands.

Excavation revealed that the room and the stairway below, as well as small rear flanking stairs at each end of the chamber, were an addition atop a previous configuration of Structure N10-27 that did not include a similar enclosure. The addition transformed the structure into an example of the Lamanai Building Type (Pendergast 1981:36-37), an architectural form that appears to have come into vogue at the site around A.D. 600. Many of these Lamanai-type buildings erected in the seventh and early eighth centuries continued to be used through Terminal Classic times (ca. A.D. 950-1000), but there appear to have been no major additions to their number after about A.D. 700 or 725. A seventh-century date for the erection of Stela 9 could therefore be posited, even if we had no epigraphic grounds for assigning a date to the monument and its enclosure.

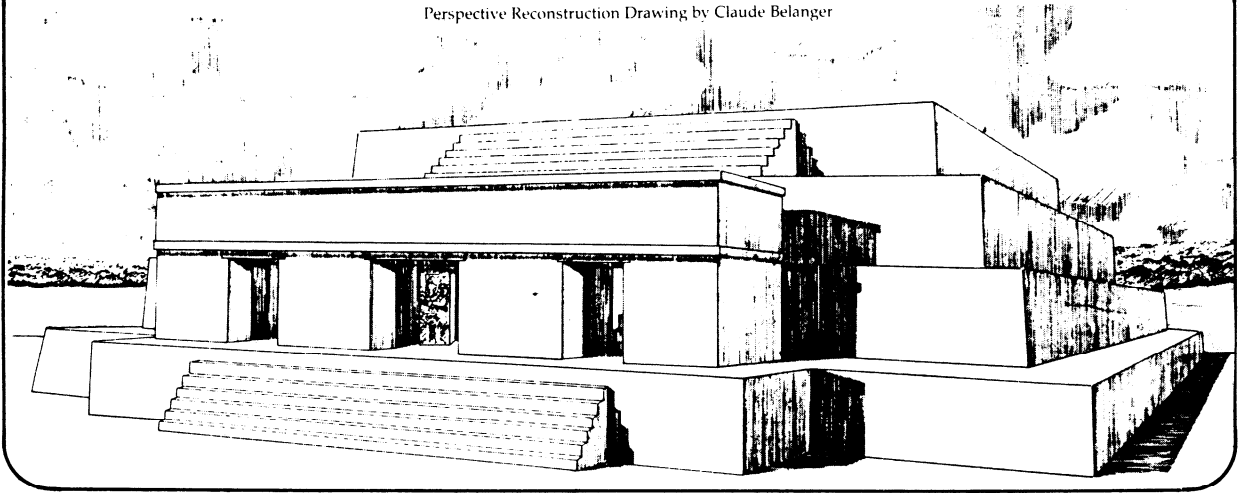
Unfortunately, evidence from the core of the platform that supported the stela enclosure provides no direct substantiation of the date established on the basis of architectural characteristics. Sherd content was low, and included only one section of a blackware bowl reconstructable from a number of scattered fragments. The presence of several portions of the vessel may indicate that the piece is approximately contemporaneous with the construction, especially in view of the small core sample size that was dictated by reconstruction concerns. On the basis of data from other Lamanai contexts, the vessel is very likely to have been manufactured between about A.D. 550 and 700. Though far from the solid evidence that would be provided by a structural dedicatory offering, the bowl at least adds indirect support to the architecturally based temporal bracketing.

As is the case each time a monument is found in place, there was the hope that the dating of the erection of Stela 9 and the construction of the enclosure could be established by means of evidence from the sub-stela cache. Such a feature was indeed encountered beneath the uncarved butt of the monument that was set into the platform core, but its contents were something less than overwhelming as dating evidence. None of the 16 artifacts in the offering is sufficiently restricted in temporal distribution to buttress or offset the other evidence, and the remaining materials are anomalous, both at Lamanai and in a broader context.

Placed at the base of the offering pit, 48cm below the bottom of the stela, was a stemmed lanceolate bifacial brown chert blade 25cm in length. It was surrounded by very soft dark brown soil that unquestionably represented decayed organic remains. Atop the blade and whatever perishable objects may have formed the lower part of the cache were the badly fragmented remains of three infants who appear to have ranged in age from newborn to less than two years. The three, all of whom may have been secondary interments, surrounded a fourth child, probably seven or eight years of age, who was apparently placed in a seated position, facing in the same direction as the monument. Slightly above the seated child lay the shattered skeleton of a fifth, less than three years old, accompanied by 15 shell beads of six different forms. This last individual in the group was capped with 17cm of soil, above which lay 12cm of chert and obsidian in the form of irregular flakes and chipping waste, a feature associated with other offerings at Lamanai, and with both tombs found at the site, where it appears above the roof slabs (Pendergast 1981:38-39).

FIGURE 4. LAMANAI STRUCTURE N10-27 WITH STELA 9 IN PLACE WITHIN THE ROOM

Perspective Reconstruction Drawing by Claude Belanger



The conclusion that the five children were sacrificial victims is virtually inescapable, though the skeletal remains bear no signs of violent death. Nowhere else at Lamanai is there evidence of human sacrifice, either of children or adults. Unfortunately, we have no other monument in its original location, and hence cannot assess the implications of the sub-stela pit contents as regards the general question of ritual connected with monument erection at the site. However, it is clear that the offering of children as part of the dedicatory activity that preceded the setting up of stelae was not common at any time or place in the Maya Lowlands. It is therefore quite likely that the Stela 9 cache had a special significance in Maya ceremonial practice that cannot now be identified.

The congruence between the variety of archaeological evidence and the epigraphic data leaves no doubt that the erection of the monument coincided with, or occurred very close to, the later date in the inscription, which Closs, in the accompanying paper (1988:1), notes as A.D. 625. From the time of its placement in the chamber, Stela 9 surely remained an object of importance for a very considerable period, perhaps until as late as the tenth or eleventh century, and conceivably for some time thereafter. However, evidence from the area of the small stairs at the ends of the room shows that significant change in the pattern of use of the structure itself had begun by A.D. 950. The access ways—and thus surely the portion of the structure to which they led—had fallen into disuse by this time, and both stairways were serving as garbage repositories.

In addition to the material on the side stairs, the plaza surface at the sides of the main stair and at the adjoining terrace faces received massive deposits of Terminal Classic pottery and other refuse. The heavy trashing documents abandonment of major portions of the structure by the late tenth century, but the restricted distribution of the refuse argues that some parts of the building must still have been fully in use, and hence that abandonment was not triggered by the destruction of Stela 9. Though partial abandonment seems inconsistent with the reverence accorded functioning ceremonial structures, Lamanai Structure N10-9 unquestionably saw abandonment of its flanks while the primary axis area was maintained, and modified, as a site for ceremonial activity (Pendergast 1981:43-44). The absence of garbage and collapse debris beneath the fallen portion of the stela shows that maintenance of the central part of the lower façade of N10-27 continued until burning brought the monument down; unfortunately, nothing fixes the span of that maintenance, or establishes the date of the fire.

In the twelfth or thirteenth century, inhabitants of Middle Postclassic Lamanai built a small platform, apparently of material that had fallen from N10-27, on top of the collapse debris

and Terminal Classic refuse in a level area abutting the south front terraces of N10-27. The source of material for the platform, as well as the structure's residential character, may indicate that the construction took place after ceremonial use of the primary axis zone of the temple had ceased. However, the presence of a fairly extensive plaster floor around the small platform suggests that the structure was part of a considerable construction effort that may have been related to continuing maintenance of the primary axis of Structure N10-27 as the ceremonial focus of the area. It is possible, therefore, that Stela 9 stood in a maintained enclosure for as long as six centuries, but was surrounded by decay for the second half of that period.

At a subsequent time, probably in the fifteenth century, at least one small platform, and possibly several, which presumably supported thatched houses, were built at the front of Structure N10-27, partly on top of Middle Postclassic refuse. The proximity of one of the platforms to the temple's primary axis argues strongly that maintenance of the structure had ceased by this time, and that Stela 9 lay in its final resting place. The fifteenth century was a time of monument relocation elsewhere at Lamanai, and the fact that Stela 9 remained undisturbed may be evidence that the great stone was fully concealed beneath collapse debris by the time of the last construction at the base of N10-27.

During the initial stage of excavation it appeared that upon the fracturing of the stone, the upper part of the stela fell forward and slid, face down, to the base of the stairway. However, the extent of the platform in front of Room 1 makes it clear that the fire's destructive effects would simply have brought the stela down onto the floor in the doorway or immediately in front of the entrance. Human effort was unquestionably required to move the stela from its first resting place to the edge of the top step, where with a bit of tilting the great stone could be sent down onto the plaza floor.

Evidence that the descent of Stela 9 to the plaza was a controlled event is provided by the condition of obverse surface of the monument. The carving shows no striations, impact fractures, or other damage of the sort that would surely have resulted from a high-speed slide down the steps. Human involvement in moving the monument to its final location is also reflected in the presence of a moderately large fragment of the stela at the north end of the stair. The distance from the primary axis shows that the piece could not have come to rest at the side of the stair as a result of impact during the stela's journey from the platform surface to the floor below. Unhappily, the relationship of the fragment to refuse farther north along the terrace face did not show which had been deposited first, but it is clear that human beings cast the piece to the side, perhaps because it broke away from the main body of the monument during the trip down the stairs.

Although the evidence that bears on the handling of Stela 9 after the fire is reasonably clear, the circumstances that surrounded the fire itself cannot be reconstructed from the data available. It is possible, on the one hand, that destruction of the monument was the result of a burnt offering that went awry. The fear born of the message in so momentous a disaster might well have dictated ritually prescribed disposition of the damaged monument, followed by abandonment of the temple. On the other hand, the destruction of the stela may have been intentional, but the suspicion of intent does not lead to identification of motive.

Unless one conjures up a picture of continuing use of the temple while the fragmented stela lay at the base of the stair, it is not possible to see the felling of the stela as a seventh-century act of the successor to the personage portrayed. Willful or unwitting destruction of the monument after preservation for three centuries or more is therefore the most likely possibility, but even in the best of circumstances the details of such an act are very unlikely to be discernible in the archaeological record.

In summary, we know something about the course of events that marked the history of Lamanai Stela 9, but have no solid grounds for choosing among several alternatives regarding the time of those events, or for identifying the religious or political thinking that preceded and

followed the desecration of the monument. Luckily that act destroyed only a portion of the stela's iconographic content, and none of its epigraphic information. As a result, a nearly full exploration of the message imparted by the monument remains possible.

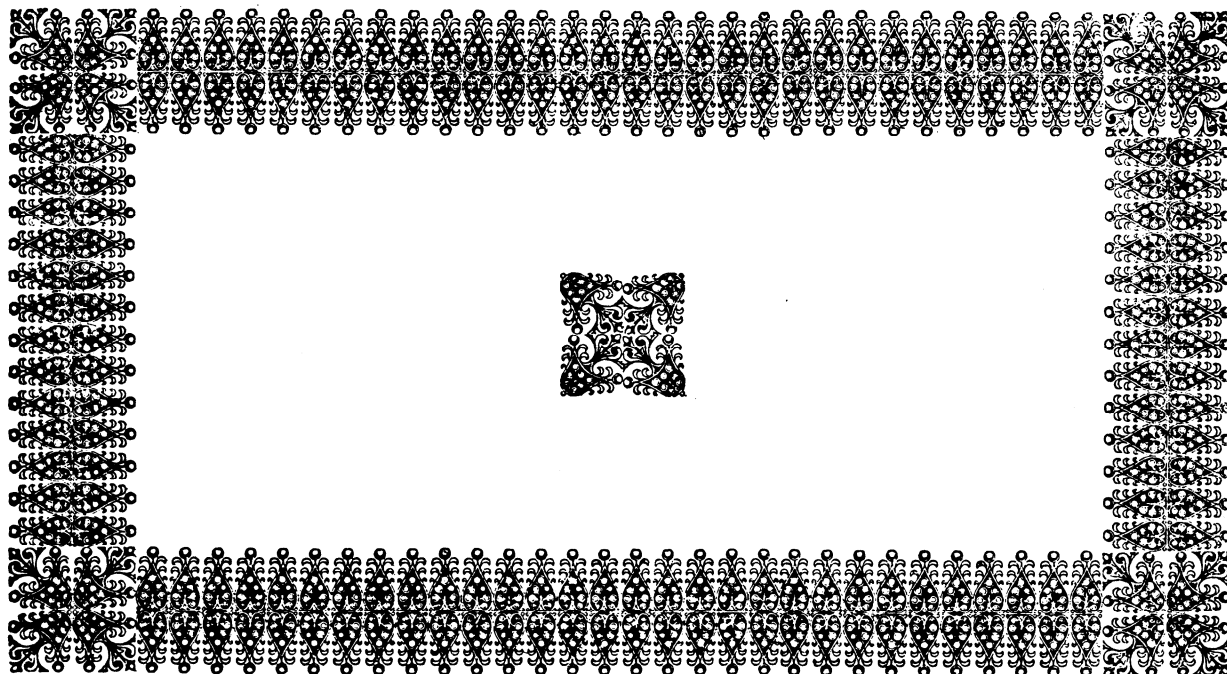
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