
24 CAUSEWAY TERMINUS, MINOR CENTRE, ELITE REFUGE, OR RITUAL CAPITAL? KA'KABISH A NEW PUZZLE ON THE MAYA LANDSCAPE OF NORTH-CENTRAL BELIZE

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Located 10 km inland from the larger site of Lamanai, Ka'Kabish poses an interesting enigma for researchers of ancient Maya socio-political organization. Lamanai is one of the longest continually occupied Maya centres and considerable attention has been directed at the site over the past 30 years. In contrast, little is known about Ka'Kabish beyond a rudimentary map and brief survey conducted in 1995 that revealed the site possessed disproportionately large architecture for the size of the two central plazas. Originally anticipated to be a small, and somewhat insignificant secondary site, recent work at Ka'Kabish now calls this assumption into question. Ceramic and architectural evidence indicate that the site may have had at least two monumental structures in the Late Formative period. Other architectural and tomb evidence suggests that the site had an important elite occupation. This paper, while arriving at no definite conclusions due to the early stages of research at the site, investigates several potential models that may help to explain Ka'Kabish.

Introduction

Research at ancient Maya sites in northern Belize has been an ongoing endeavour since the end of the 19th century when Thomas Gann first visited the site of Santa Rita Corozal (Gann 1900; Gann and Gann 1939). Despite over a century of, albeit sporadic, excavations in the region, large gaps still exist in our knowledge of this area. Archaeological research in this area has been conducted largely at primary or secondary sites (Lamanai, Cerros, Nohmul, and Cuello to name but a few), where investigations have been restricted almost exclusively to the area of primary occupation, with limited attention paid to sites in the periphery zone or inter-site relations at the polity level (Hammond 1973, 1991a; Pring 1976; Robertson and Freidel 1986).

In the past decade, considerable research has been undertaken in the Orange Walk District to expand our understanding of smaller settlements. Most of this work has focused on the Three Rivers Region above the escarpment (Driver et al. 1997, 1999; Driver and Wanyerka 2002; Guderjan

and Driver 1995; Hageman and Hughbanks 2002; Lohse 2004; Scarborough et al. 2003; Sullivan 2002; among others), although some studies of smaller secondary or tertiary settlements also have been done on the Belizean Coastal Plain (Baker 1995; Guderjan 1996; Hammond 1973, 1991a; Masson 2000; Pring 1976; Rosenswig and Masson 2001, 2002; Smith and McField 1996). Work on small centres forms an important balance to research conducted at larger centres as it informs our understanding of Maya social organisation on a broader multi-scalar level. Yet, this type of research is most valuable when it can be integrated into the discussions of core-periphery relations for a unified polity (Chang 1968, 1983; Willey 1983). Willey's argument that "a king and his subjects may both be understood only in their relationships to one another" (Willey 1983:46) is equally important for understanding relations between sites in a single polity as it is for elucidating the relationships between individuals within a single centre, and may hold particular

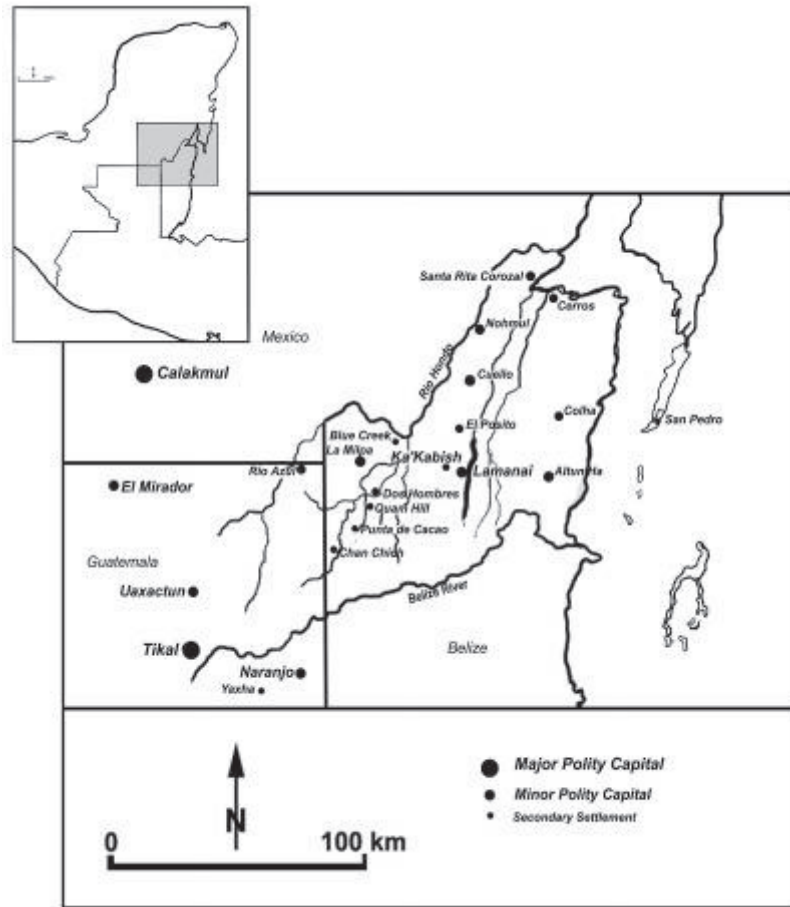


Figure 1. Map of Northern Belize showing sites of note

importance for understanding the function of Ka'Kabish.

Although research in north-central Belize, has contributed considerable new information regarding smaller settlements, it has focused primarily on the dynamics of a single site (Driver et al. 1997, 1999; Driver and Wanyerka 2002; Guderjan and Driver 1995; Hageman and Hughbanks 2002; Hammond 1973, 1991; Masson 2000; Pring 1976; Scarborough et al. 2003; Sullivan 2002), or exploring the relationships between members of differential social standing or particular social groups within these communities (Hageman and Hughbanks 2002; Hageman and Rich 2001; Lohse 2004). An exception to this being the

seminal work by Scarborough and colleagues in 2003 to unite the research conducted in the Three Rivers Region to investigate the possibility that Maya communities in this area were heterarchically organised (Scarborough et al. 2003).

Ka'Kabish, a small site in north-central Belize, presents us with a new opportunity to expand our knowledge of Classic period Maya socio-political organisations at subsidiary, secondary centres, as well as the ability to explore these dynamics at the polity level. The aim of this paper is to provide information about the site of Ka'Kabish that will help eventually situate this site on the ancient

Maya political and social landscape of North-Central Belize.

History of Research at Ka’Kabish

Ka’Kabish is almost exactly 10 km from the larger centre of Lamanai (at roughly 311 degrees magnetic north) (Figure 1), and from the top of the High Temple at Lamanai, the site is clearly visible on the horizon. Survey work conducted along the road that joins the modern towns of San Felipe and Indian Church (and subsequently the two ancient centers), reveals an almost continuous pattern of ancient domestic house mounds linking Ka’Kabish to Lamanai (Baker 1995). This pattern lends credence to the idea that Ka’Kabish was a part of the larger Lamanai polity. Yet, in contrast to the extensive research conducted at Lamanai (cf. Graham 2004; Pendergast 1981, 1985, 1986), little is known about the site of Ka’Kabish (Guderjan 1996).

Situated on a limestone ridge, one of several that undulate across this part of north-central Belize (Hammond 1973; Romney et al. 1959), the site sustained damage during the construction of a modern road and at least one building reportedly was completely destroyed and two other structures along with a section of the south plaza were removed during the brief succeeding use of the site as a quarry for road fill (Guderjan 1996). Additional damage to the site was caused by extensive looting operations, although currently the greatest danger to the site may be from the encroaching farmland. This last situation is undoubtedly exacerbated by the sites proximity to four growing communities – one in every direction – Indian Church to the east, Shipyard to the north, San Felipe to the west, and Indian Creek to the south.

Dr. David Pendergast, made the first known archaeological inspection of the site, in the early 1980s while working at Lamanai. He reported finding Early Post-

Classic ceramics on low mounds in recently cleared milpa fields immediately outside of the site core (Pendergast 1997: personal communication). However, the difficult conditions in accessing the site made continued work there unfeasible (Belanger 2007: personal communications). In the mid-1990s, Ka’Kabish was visited by archaeologists from the Maya Research Program who produced a functional, although rudimentary, plan of the site core that contained 27 structures (Guderjan 1996) (Figure 2). Additional structures were reported to the north but were not included on the original map.

Results of the 2007 Field Season

Using the original 1995 Maya Research Program map as a guide, the 2007 archaeological research focused on clearing and mapping the site south of the modern San Felipe/Indian Church road. As work progressed it quickly became apparent that the southern portion of the site was significantly larger than initially anticipated.

The largest group of structures south of the road was part of the 27 structures originally identified by the Maya Research Program; now labeled as Group D, the 2007 season survey added several new structures to this group as well as delimited the plaza edges and reconfigured the shape and arrangement of some of the structures (Figure 3). During the survey of the forest to the south and west of this group two smaller house mound clusters were discovered (Groups B and C), each with two chultuns and separated by an *aguada*. We also discovered two *plazuela* groups (Groups A and E). Group E, is located to the east of the main core area and consists of 10 structures, four of which are placed on a raised platform. This *plazuela* group has been impinged upon by the surrounding farm land and subsequently one structure

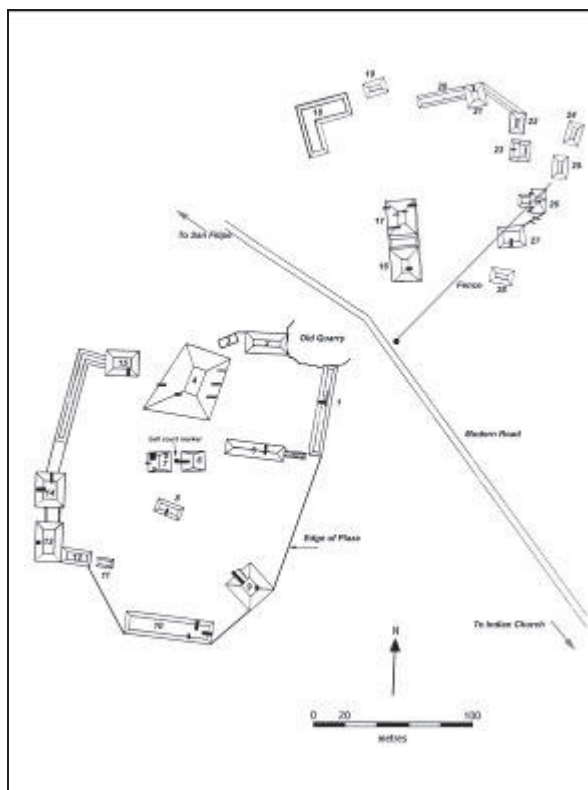


Figure 2. Original map of Ka'Kabish showing structures on both sides of the modern road (*adapted from Guderjan 1994*)

has been destroyed and a second severely damaged.

Group A, the furthest south of the complexes is comprised of eight structures (one of which appears to be a small temple) arranged around a small plaza. The immediately adjacent areas on the east, south, and west sides have been cleared and developed for cane farming, creating uncertainty regarding the original location of the lower edge of the plaza. Large sections of these fields, as well as fields to the north and west of the site, were either cleared of cane during our field season or were under new cane, making them ideal for surveying. In these areas we found evidence of numerous domestic house mounds (Figure 4). As the purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion as to the nature of this site, rather than detail every building at the

site, only those of particular note will be highlighted.

To date, the largest building at the site is Structure 4; rising roughly 21 m (70 feet) above the current plaza floor, it is the most impressive structure so far identified at Ka'Kabish in terms of sheer mass. Three looter's trenches penetrate the building, exposing several construction episodes that seem associated with earlier (lower) plaza surfaces. Ceramics recovered in 1995 by the Maya Research Program indicated that the constructions spanned the Late Formative period through to the Late Classic period, dates that appear to correlate with the architectural styles seen in the trenches. The central trench originally exposed what appeared to be the opening to a chultun or cave under the structure (personal observation). Unfortunately, the loose-laid construction fill used in this section has collapsed over the years – burying the possible chultun or cave and creating a large dome-shaped hollow in the centre of the structure.

At least one other temple (Structure 9) has been identified in the Group D complex; this temple is located in the south-east quadrant of the site and, like its larger counterpart, appears to have been constructed in multiple episodes. Ceramics from the earliest exposed layer of this structure, also have been dated to the Late Formative period.

The current configuration of structures divides the plaza space into two discrete areas – a larger L-shaped area to the south and west and a smaller square to the north-east. The construction fill of the building forming the south side of the smaller plaza (Structure 5) appears to indicate that it was built in a single episode and tentatively dated (based on an unusual tomb form) to the later part of the Early Classic. As the two temples (Structures 4 and 9) in Group D clearly were initiated in

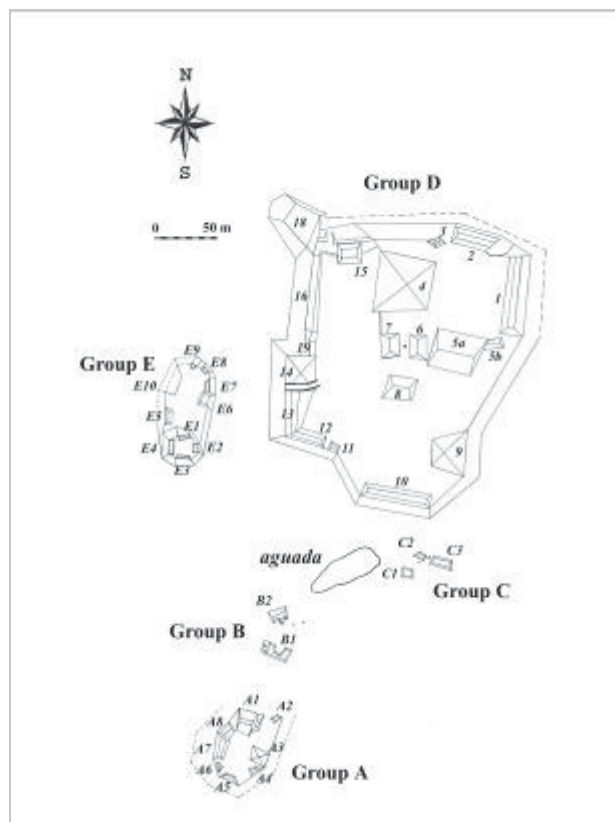


Figure 3. New site map of Ka'Kabish (southern portion only)

the Late Formative, it is likely that in its earliest incarnation this group was a single plaza that was later divided with the construction of Structure 5.

The purpose of Structure 5 is unclear. Configured as a long, wide range structure, at roughly 12 m tall it is far higher than any other structure of that type at the site. Ideas that the building may in fact be another temple are supported by the presence of an unusual tomb in the centre of the building. The tomb appears to have been constructed with a wooden hooped framework (now decayed) placed over the body (Figure 5). This framework was covered in fabric and layers of plaster creating a domed space around the body. Surrounding this inner tomb construction were layers of loose, fist-sized stone fill, and larger side stones; all of which was sealed with large capstones. This “cocoon-type”

tomb was first identified in structure N9-56 (the Temple of the Masks) at Lamanai by Pendergast, where, based on the associated ceramics it was dated to AD 500 (Pendergast 1981:38).

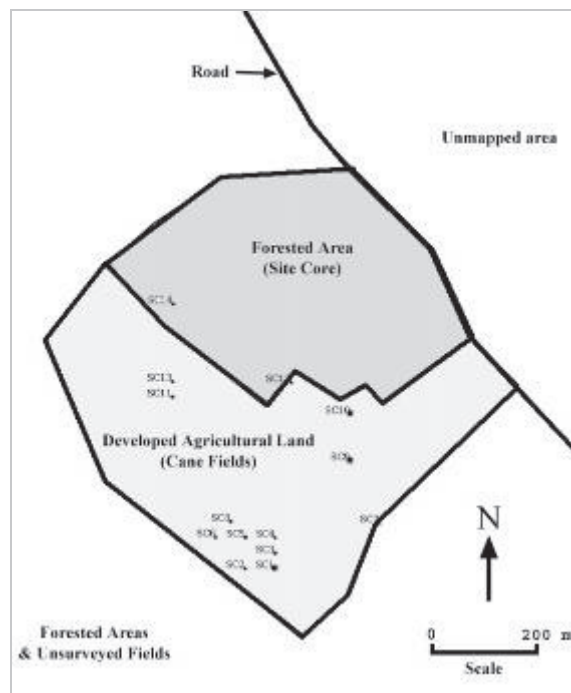


Figure 4. Map of the settlement zone immediately adjacent to Ka'Kabish (Patterson 2007)

A similar, but not identical tomb (S.D. P2B-2) was found at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1989, 2005). At Santa Rita Corozal Diane and Arlen Chase recovered the remains of a woman who had been wrapped in a large quantity of cloth and placed in a small east-west chamber (A. Chase, personal communication 2007). The walls of the burial chamber were stuccoed and curved over the body in a manner very similar to that at Lamanai and Ka'Kabish (A. Chase, personal communication 2007). Ceramics associated with this burial place the internment in the Early Classic period (D. Chase and A. Chase 2005: 112-114), contemporary with the Lamanai grave. Although no artefacts currently have been found in association with the tomb at

Ka'Kabish, based on the fact that the only two other examples of this tomb type both date to the Early Classic Period, we believe it is fair to assume that the Ka'Kabish tomb also dates to this period.

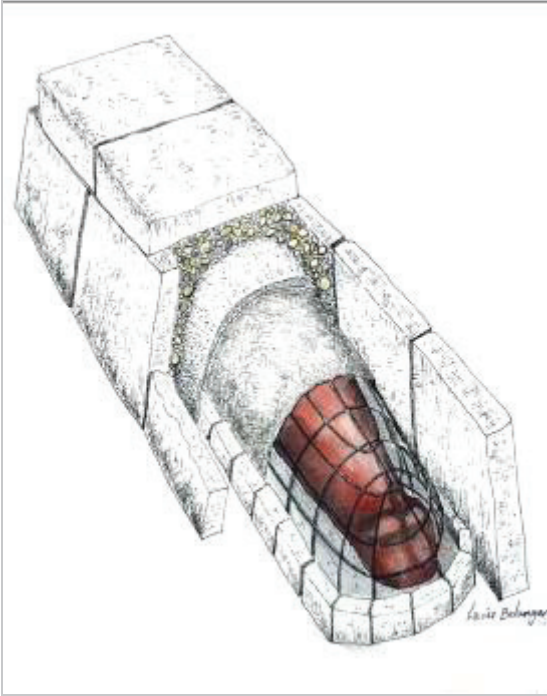


Figure 8. Illustration of 'cocoon-style tomb' in Structure D3, Ka'Kabish (Louise Belanger)

The close similarity between the Ka'Kabish and Lamanai tombs and the rarity of this tomb type, coupled with the close physical proximity of these two sites supports our idea that Ka'Kabish and Lamanai were interconnected. Consequently, the question under consideration has changed from 'was Ka'Kabish affiliated with Lamanai' to 'how were Ka'Kabish and Lamanai related'. We initially believed Ka'Kabish to be a relatively minor administrative centre dating primary to the early part of the Late Classic period. However, several unexpected surprises uncovered during the 2007 field season resulted in a reassessment of our ideas regarding Ka'Kabish and its role in the Lamanai polity.

Although only the southern half of the site has currently been mapped we have discovered that there was a considerably larger investment in elite and ceremonial architecture than initially predicted. Our first indication of this investment came in the form of fallen ceiling stones visible in a looter's trench in Structure E5. These building stones clearly indicated that at least one structure in this outlying plazuela group was constructed with a corbelled vaulted ceiling.

Originally, Guderjan reported finding evidence of two structures in the south-west quadrant of what is now Group D that may have had vaulted rooms. While we did not find the two structures reported we did find one structure with a pair of parallel north/south rooms, both painted red, in Structure D14. Based on the location of what is believed to be the edge of the central front door, this building is estimated to be roughly 20 meters in length. The two rooms appear to have been connected by a series of doors of varying sizes, and as only the front (east) chamber has been cleared to any degree it is currently unclear if the rear (west) room was also a long single chamber or sub-divided into a series of smaller chambers, each accessed from the main front room by way of its own door. The rooms appear to have been carefully packed with alternating layers of small stones and marl. Evidence from a second trench in the same structure that penetrated and cleared part of the rear chamber suggests that at least part of the rear room was exposed to a prolonged fire, either as part of the building's function or possibly as part of burning rite associated with the burial of the building (Belanger 2007: personal communication). The existence and treatment of this structure, combined with the presence of a ballcourt complete with marker, and numerous now-looted elite tombs (including one that was once painted

with glyphs) is forcing us to reconsider our idea that Ka'Kabish was simply a relatively minor administrative centre.

Site Discussion

In reconsidering the position of Ka'Kabish in the Lamanai polity four potential models present themselves; the first being that the site is the termini of a causeway, in effect a plaza outlier for Lamanai. It is also possible that the site was what Bullard defined as a 'minor centre'. Recently, Ball and Taschek have identified what were potentially long-term shifts in the location of dynastic power between Cahal Pech and Buenavista (Ball and Taschek 2001:167), and it is possible that the Lamanai-Ka'Kabish area might have undergone a similar shift with Ka'Kabish serving as a refuge for a cadre of elites if not the Lamanai royal court. The fourth model which has presented itself in recent years is the possibility that Maya polities were organized along heterarchical lines, with different sites within a polity serving different functions (Scarborough et al. 2003).

Although causeway termini are found at many sites in the Maya area, they are perhaps most clearly defined in relation to settlement patterns at Caracol, Belize. Here major causeways have been found connecting the epicenter to outlying complexes ranging from 2.5 to 7.3 kilometers away, with shorter intra-site causeways connecting elite groups between 400 m and 2 kilometers to the site core (Chase and Chase 2001:274). These more distant outlying complexes have been described as "special function termini" with plazas as big as those found in the epicenter although with different structural configurations, characteristics that fit with Ka'Kabish. However, the plazas in these termini are described as being surrounded by low structures, not pyramids, and

occasionally one or two range structures on raised platforms (Chase and Chase 1990:807), a description that does not correlate with the architectural design of Ka'Kabish. Moreover, these causeway termini were found to lack many of the features of epicenters (i.e., monuments, palaces, temples, and ball courts), features that are present at Ka'Kabish. Consequently, unless we expand our definition of causeway termini to include complexes that appear to replicate structural and possibly ritual or administrative functions of epicenters we must conclude that Ka'Kabish is unlikely to have been a causeway terminus site. There is also the issue of the absence of a causeway connecting Lamanai and Ka'Kabish, although, this may be due to the currently incomplete survey of the site and surrounding region.

It is also possible that Ka'Kabish may have been a Minor Centre. Bullard describes these centers as commonly including "one or more pyramidal structures, which are assumed to have been small temples, arranged in company with lower building around one, two or three adjacent plazas" (1960:360). Although Bullard also notes that "none of the many Minor Centers explored during the survey contained stelae, altars or ball courts" this survey was conducted some 50 years ago and in the intervening time we have found many sites that while fitting with the former description also included ball courts. Therefore it is possible that Ka'Kabish was a type of 'minor centre'. Yet, as this designation is more a definition of size rather than of function or socio-political power it doesn't help explain the role that Ka'Kabish played in the larger polity nor provide information about the nature of the polity socio-political organization.

The idea that Ka'Kabish may have served as a refuge for a cadre of elite from

Lamanai, possibly even the royal court has also been raised. An increase in inter-site warfare and acts of aggression has been documented at the end of the Early Classic and start of the Late Classic for many areas of the ancient Maya world. It is possible that Lamanai, spread along the western edge of the New River Lagoon, may have been deemed too insecure and indefensible if any aggressive activity was directed at the polity. The relatively short distance between the two sites would have afforded any elites residing at Ka'Kabish the ability to exert influence at Lamanai while providing a measure of security not found at the river site.

However, with the exception of the possibly deliberate burning and breaking of Stela 9 (likely a Post-Classic action [Pendergast 1988]), no evidence has been uncovered thus far at Lamanai to suggest that the site was under any threat during the Early Classic to Late Classic transition. Moreover, an early Late Classic date for the influx of elites to Ka'Kabish does little to explain the Late Formative period temples or the Early Classic 'cocoon-style' elite tomb and associated structure.

The final model that may possibly explain Ka'Kabish's role in the Lamanai polity entails a revision of our ideas of Maya political structure. Currently, we are entertaining the notion that the Lamanai polity may have been organized along heterarchical lines – with Ka'Kabish serving as an ideological or ritual capital and Lamanai serving as the political or economic capital. The idea that Maya polities may have used heterarchically structures is not new. It has been proposed for polities in the Three River's Region in North-western Belize (see Scarborough et al. 2003). Heterarchy, as defined by Crumley, is “the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in number ways”

(Crumley 1995:3). Power, should it be separated into its most basic divisions (economic, political and ideological [*sensu* Earl 1994]) and dispersed between sites would result in the potential for these sites to be ranked in different ways – more specifically heterarchically.

Identifying the presence of a heterarchical system for the Lamanai polity is difficult, particularly when many key features indicative of power, both economic and ideological, are replicated at the two sites: Both sites have large temples, (although the High Temple at Lamanai is indisputably much larger than Temple D4 at Ka'Kabish); both sites have elite tombs (although one at Ka'Kabish was painted with glyphs, a feature yet not found at Lamanai); both sites show evidence of economic wealth as manifested by the lavish use of obsidian in tombs at both sites and some caches at Lamanai. While vaulted architecture was present at Lamanai no deliberately preserved structures similar to Structure D14 at Ka'Kabish were discovered. Lamanai, however, has several stelae, objects yet to be recovered at Ka'Kabish. In both cases this may simply be the result of recovery issues and additional work at both sites may redress this discrepancy. Clearly we are at too early a state in our investigations to confirm or refute the possibility of this type of organizational system.

So what is Ka'Kabish? Is it a causeway terminus, a minor centre, an elite refuge, or a heterarchical ritual capital? As investigations at the site are still in their incipient stages there is still have much to do before the exact function of Ka'Kabish or the nature of the relationship between Lamanai and Ka'Kabish can be ascertained with any confidence. What is clear is that Ka'Kabish, with its surprisingly elaborate architectural assemblage, spatial extent, and proximity to the larger site of Lamanai, is an

intriguing new puzzle on the Maya landscape in Northern Belize.

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