

30 “PLANT THOU NO ROSES AT MY HEAD”: A DISCUSSION OF THE MIDDLE FORMATIVE PERIOD BURIED DEPOSITS AT KA’KABISH, NORTH-CENTRAL BELIZE

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Recent investigations at Ka’Kabish have revealed that the site had a dynamic Middle Formative period occupation. Based on the recovered cultural materials it is clear that the inhabitants at Ka’Kabish were active participants in long-distance trade networks that saw the importation of a variety of exotic and high-status items into the settlement. The use of these goods, and others, suggests that the site was engaging in elaborate ritual activities including possible feasting events at this early point in time. Focusing on the on-going excavations into the Group D plaza, we will detail these recent discoveries and attempt to locate them into the broader socio-political landscape of Northern Belize during this dynamic developing time period.

Introduction

The Middle Formative period is increasingly being recognized as an important point in time when social stratification emerged in ancient Mesoamerica. As material from this period is often the result of the earliest occupation of a site, it is often difficult to recover. These deposits are frequently the by-product of small communities, making their location difficult to pinpoint under later Classic period “urban sprawl” and, when found, are often buried deep beneath centuries, if not millennia, of later constructions, thereby making large scale excavation and recovery of material problematic. Despite these problems, many sites in Belize, and throughout the Maya world, are adding annually to our increasing corpus of information about the Middle Formative period; research no doubt spurred on by increased realisation as to the importance of the Middle Formative period for understanding key aspects of social development.

At Ka’Kabish, deposits and possible structures dating to the Middle and Late Formative periods have been discovered at several locations in the site core (Figure 1). These areas include two discrete plaza zones (Group D Operations 1 and 8), within a major temple (Structure D-9), and potentially within two other temples (Structures D-4 and FA-6). Currently, Ka’Kabish consists of roughly 90 structures clustered in several discrete plaza groups, surrounded by what appears to be a large, and long-term domestic settlement zone. Regrettably, these groups now number only eight, as in the intervening time between our

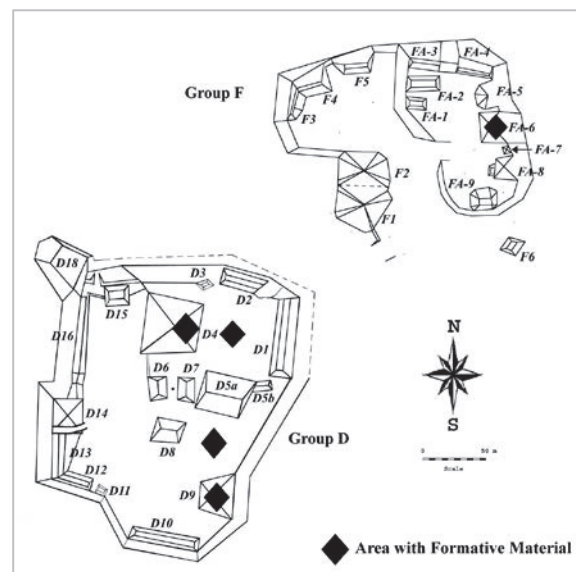


Figure 1. Ka’Kabish Site Core noting locations of Middle and Late Formative Period deposits.

2012 and 2013 field seasons we lost two groups due to agricultural development.

Geologically, the core area of the site is on a limestone ridge, approximately 100 metres above sea level, and over 75 metres higher than the site of Lamanai, its nearest neighbour, located 10 km to the southeast (Figure 2). To the west, roughly 25 km away, the land rises suddenly 80-90 metres to form the Rio Bravo Escarpment (Lohse 2004:121). The location of Ka’Kabish on this ridge top was likely strategic as well as practical. In terms of its practical location, the ridge top allowed the settlement to situate itself well above the rich dark alluvial soil which surrounds the site; this land currently is known to suffer inundations during heavy rains, and it is likely did so in the past as well.

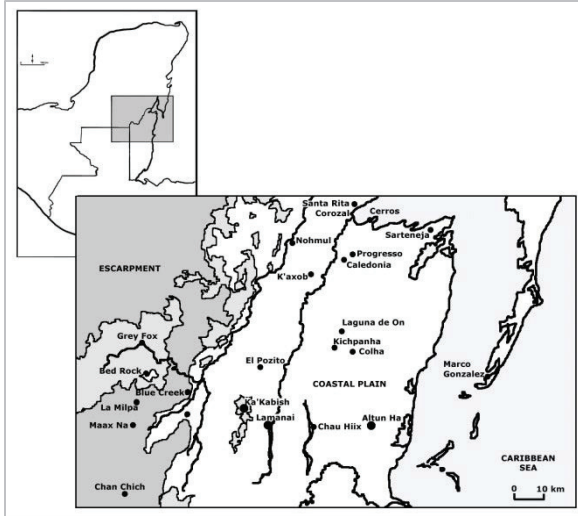


Figure 2. Location of Ka'Kabish and Select Other Sites in Northern Belize.

Strategically, the location afforded the occupants a vantage point from where they could see, and be seen by, inhabitants in the surrounding area. The site is clearly visible from both the Rio Bravo Escarpment and the top of the High Temple at Lamanai, as well as from several other cleared fields across the region.

Locations of Formative Period Deposits

The best evidence for Middle Formative period occupation at Ka'Kabish comes from the south-east quadrant of Group D. Investigations in this area focused on two areas, Structure D-9 and the plaza to the north of Structure D-9 (Operation 8). Work on the pyramid temple consisted of mapping and collecting of material found in a large looters' trench that penetrated the building (reported on at the 2011 BAS by Haines and Aimers, and more thoroughly in Ms. Cara Tremain's MA thesis). Investigations into the plaza just north of Structure D-9 consist of a series of contiguous 2x2 metre units, the first of which was excavated in 2010 with additional units being added each succeeding year.

Material recovered from these investigations suggest that this area of the site was not only the location of what is possibly the earliest occupation at Ka'Kabish, but also that the area remained important throughout the Formative period and into the Early Classic period. Excavations suggest there was an initial period of continuous rebuilding episodes during

the Middle Formative and into the early facet of the Late Formative period, followed by successively more infrequent constructions until the end of the Early Classic period. Recent excavations conducted this year suggest that the final occupation of the area may date to the early Post-Classic period, likely a domestic reoccupation of the area. The area evinced a lack of early Late Classic material, a factor noted in investigations of other areas of the site.

The material we will be discussing in this paper comes from the lowest three levels of the Group D, Operation 8, plaza excavations. Specifically, we wish to discuss the discovery of a burial and its associated artefacts that were placed in four pits carved into the bedrock. This interment and the accompanying mortuary items not only form the most conclusive evidence we have for Middle Formative occupation at Ka'Kabish but provides us with insights into broader questions of origins of social stratification, early trade and exchange, and ideas of place and place-making.

Plaza D Burial Deposit

Three circular pits and one long, north-south oriented trench comprised the extent of the burial deposit (Figure 3). Based on the clustered nature of the long-bones and dispersed nature of the teeth to both sides (north and south) of the clustered bones we believe the interment was of a secondary nature. Preservation of the human remains, by virtue of their location in the north-south trench on the bedrock and being surrounded by a dense, damp, clay-like soil was very poor, making aging and sexing of the individual impossible. That the individual was a personage of importance to the community is evinced by startling array of long-distance trade goods discovered in the trench around the body as well as in the three surrounding pits.

Over five hundred shell beads derived largely from *Strombidae* species, were recovered in association with the burial (Haines n.d.; Lockett-Harris 2013; Stanchly n.d.). Twenty-three relatively large, roughly shaped beads that appear to have been cut primarily from the outer walls of the *Strombidae* shell were recovered from the northern pit (Cluster 3), while an additional 37, more finely cut beads of various sizes were recovered from the pit to the east of

the burial trench (Cluster 1). Cluster 2, located in a side depression of the southern pit, contained the largest collection (i.e., over 150) shell beads. These beads were clearly part of a necklace on which an unusual jade pendant, to be discussed below, was suspended. Additionally, 300 beads were recovered during the course of excavation that could not be associated with certainty to any particular cluster or specific contextual location beyond that of the grave.

The grave and surrounding pits also contained a total of 17 “jade” or greenstone objects (Figure 3). Of these only four were found in actual association with the grave. The remaining pieces, nine were found in the pit at the south end of the burial trench while the exact location of the other four pieces could not be determined, having been found during sorting. The quality of the material varied dramatically from greenish-white flecked stone to pure-even coloured glassy materials. The colour of the material also varied and shades included the whitish-green mentioned above, deep green, bright apple-green, and even a few pieces of “Olmec blue” jade. These pieces included a series of small round-ish beads, several tubular beads, three pendant-style beads (one of which was “claw-shaped” pendant piece similar to the jade “bobs or pendants” noted in Plate 57 of Drucker and colleagues’ 1955 publication), eight chunks or semi-worked pieces, and three plaques. Each plaque was distinct with one being the pale Olmec-blue jade mentioned previous (centre), another being a deep green but polished so thin as to be translucent (upper right), while the third was a pale green “spoon-shaped” pendant (Figure 4). This latter piece, found in association with the shell bead necklace in Cluster 2, is perhaps the most noteworthy as these object, while not unknown, are quite rare.

Jade spoons are assumed to be associated with Olmec culture due to the discovery of numerous, smaller tri-lobed ornaments at La Venta in the late 1940s and early 1950s by Drucker (Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959). However, examination of the La Venta objects, while similar in shape, reveals that they not only lack the distinctive depression that characterizes these objects but many are convex in cross-section. Referred to as “spanglers” by Drucker

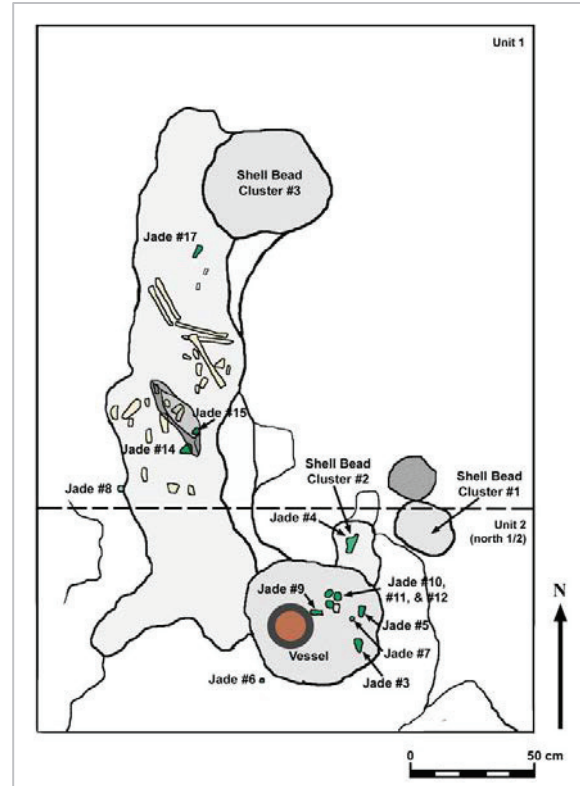


Figure 3. Plan Map of Bedrock Deposits in Operation 8, Units 1 and 2.



Figure 4. Photograph of Jade “Spoon” Pendant.

(Drucker 1952; Drucker et al. 1959) these pieces are quite small, the largest being 20.5 mm, and were likely sewn directly on clothing, based on the numerous holes which were drilled straight through the objects.

A few “spoons” have been noted with Olmec designs (see Benson and de la Fuente 1996: Catalogue #99), which along with the La Venta pieces, have resulted in these objects being generally attributed to the Middle



Figure 5. Photograph of Consejo Red-Striated Vessel.

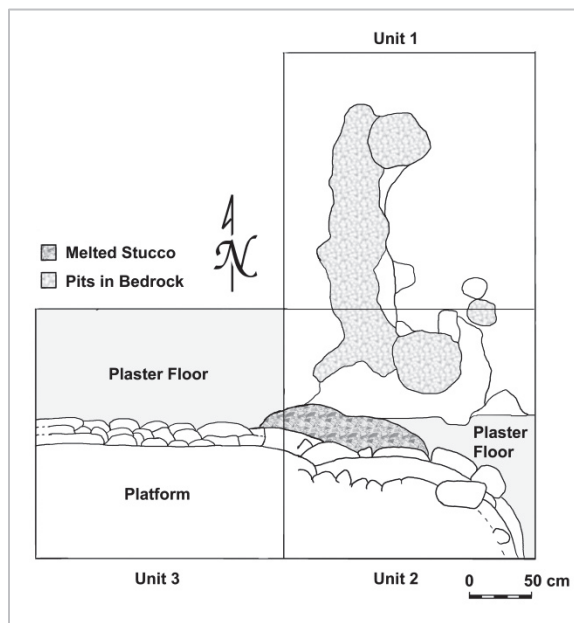


Figure 6. Plan Map of Low Platform in Unit 2 and 3 and Bedrock Pits in Unit 1 and 2.

Formative period (Andrews 1986:39; Coe 1965; Proskouriakoff 1974; see also Andrews 1987 for suggestion of a later date). However, the vast majority of these pieces, including the one from Guerrero, lack clear archaeological provenience, as they have been seized from looters, or purchased on the art market and donated to museums by private collectors, factors that make accurate ascription to a culture or time period speculative.

The few items with provenience include one from Uxbenka, Belize, that was recovered from a looters' trench and is now in the Belize National Museum in Belize City (Healy and Awe 2001), one from the Sacred Cenote in Chichen Itza from whence it was dredged in the

part of the last century (Coggins 1992), and a series of seven specimens Andrews was able to track to Chacsinkin in the Northern Yucatan where the looters who excavated them told him where they were found, although he himself never saw any in context (Andrews 1987). Two other potential "spoons" were recovered from burials at Chalcatzingo, Mexico, however, these were heavily worn and flattened making their form and function highly debatable (Thomson 1987). Other than the Ka'Kabish pendant, only one other similar pendant has been recovered from a secure archaeological context. This object was excavated at Ceibal where it was discovered, along with a shell pectoral, beneath an upside down cache vessel in a Xe-Real context (Castillo Aguilar and Inomata 2011:100; see also pp 104-105 figures 12.5 and 12.6). Although slightly earlier than the Ka'Kabish deposit, the Ceibal material substantiates the early date at Ka'Kabish and supports a Middle Formative period age for these pieces in general; however, I would note that, while these pieces may be Formative in date we should not yet presuppose that these are Olmec in origin.

The Ka'Kabish bedrock deposit also yielded a variety of ceramic material, including a single intact ceramic vessel, identified as a Consejo Red-Striated bowl by Dr. Sagebiel. This bowl was recovered in association with the burial (Figure 5). Placed in an inverted position the vessel was found to be devoid of any macro-finds. Other ceramic material from this lowest level below Floor 1 consisted of over 3,000 sherds, the majority of which are consistent with Swasey-Bladen ceramic Groups such as Copetilla (unslipped), Consejo (red), Machaca (black), and Chicago (orange) (Gomer 2013). The Consejo Group at Ka'Kabish consists of a bright red slip over a white underslip or well-prepared surface. The paste is consistently light brown/buff or light orange with angular calcite inclusions and a distinct gray core. The most common bowl form has flared sides, a direct rim, and a square or round lip. However, in this same level, there are also a significant number of sherds that belong to Lopez-Mamom ceramic groups, including Joventud (red), Chunchinta (black), Pital (cream), and Muxanal (red-on-cream). The tentatively identified Joventud Group at Ka'Kabish has a thick, dark red to

Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from Operation 8, Units 1 and 2 (NSF-AMS Arizona Facility).
(Note: Level 16 in Unit 1 is the same strata as Level 12 in Unit 2)

AMS Sample #	Project Sample ID	d13C	F	14C age BP	Calibrated 2 sigma	Context
AA96420	KKB-282-2011-2	-27.4	0.7374 +- 0.0034	2,447 +- 37	754-408 BC	Unit 1, Level 16
AA96421	KKB-353-2011-3	-28.8	0.7372 +- 0.0034	2,449 +- 37	755-409 BC	Unit 2, Level 12
AA96422	KKB-353-2011-4	-26.9	0.7400 +- 0.0034	2,418 +- 37	750-399 BC	Unit 2, Level 12
AA96423	KKB-353-2011-5	-26.1	0.7357 +- 0.0034	2,466 +- 37	762-414 BC	Unit 2, Level 12
AA100166	KKB-520-2012-2	-26.8	0.7424 +- 0.0048	2,393 +- 52	753-388 BC	Unit 2, Level 12
AA100168	KKB-438-2012-4	-26.3	0.7308 +- 0.0038	2,520 +- 42	799-511 BC	Unit 2, Level 16

purple, waxy slip on a pinkish paste, which may include crushed sherds or grog. Forms such as ovate spouts and dishes and bowls with outflared sides, widely everted rims, and round, thickened lips are common. Also common in this level are bowls of Guitara Incised that are decorated with the double-line break motif along the interior rim.

In this same level, along with clearly identifiable Consejo Red and likely Joventud Red, there are also sherds that may be transitional between Consejo and Joventud. In particular, there are Consejo Red sherds with grog inclusions, more typical of Joventud and Sierra, and Joventud Red sherds that appear to have a white underslip, typical of Consejo. This material, along with the intact vessel, and supported by radiocarbon dates, suggests a Middle Formative date for this deposit.

What was also quite notable about the burial, other than the wealth of jade objects and density of ceramic pieces, was that immediately above the burial, planted in the floor above the internment was a triangular “marker stone”. This marker projected roughly 35 cm above the floor, clearly a visible reminder to people in the plaza of the subterranean internment. The marker stone at Ka’Kabish also impacted, although less noticeably, on Floor 2, a refurbishment of the plaza surface. It is likely that it was even more noticeable originally as when we encountered it the top had been broken off.

Possible Evidence of Middle Formative Feasting Activities

Surrounding the stone at Ka’Kabish, in the fill between Floors 1 and 2, were the remains of 25 partially re-constructible vessels (with 50% or more of their rims intact) along with 12 intact or fully restorable vessels. These vessels were sealed below a thick layer of plaster that comprised the subsequent plaza floor. The majority of recovered vessels were small- to medium-sized shallow serving bowls, although a few deep bowls and jars were also recovered. These ceramics were a mix of Swasey-Bladen, Lopez-Mamom, and what appears to be transitional Joventud-Sierra or Sierra Group types. These Joventud-Sierra sherds have a mix of Joventud and Sierra attributes, most common are Joventud forms with a redder Sierra slip. These dishes may have formed part of a feasting ritual that took place as part of the plaza construction that sealed, and also obscured, the burial marker. Four carbon samples recovered from the fill in and around these vessels yielded a combined calibrated date range of 762 – 399 BC (2 sigma with +/- 37 yrs; AA96420, AA96421, AA96422, AA96423) with the period of overlap from these dates being 750-409 BC (Table 1).

Associated Architectural Features

In 2012, the excavation units in the Plaza-D south (Operation 8) area were extended to determine the extent of the Middle Formative ceramic deposit. However, rather than finding

more vessels, we discovered the floor that capped the deposit was associated with a low 35 cm high platform (Figure 6). The platform was built with three courses of roughly cut stones and coated in a thick, roughly 8 cm layer of plaster. Approximately 4 metres of the north side of the platform was cleared, exposing a rounded north-east corner of the building. Badly melted, heavy stucco was encountered on the face of the platform approximately 1 metre west of the corner, and directly in line with the earlier stone marker, burial, and ceramic deposit. It is possible that this is the remnants of stucco decoration. Also in front of this building, in the fill that buried it and immediately above the two previously discussed Middle Formative layers, we recovered an excellent sample of Late Formative ceramic material that we will discuss shortly.

The 2013 field season excavations focused on exposing more of this structure. However, in lieu of the expected building platform a much larger structure, one that had been remodelled at least once, was uncovered. It is possible that the building platform encountered in 2012 was a remodelling that put a forward extension on the front of this new platform. We have yet to recover conclusive dates for these platforms, although additional Late Formative material was recovered from the matrix that buried these new architectural features. Currently, it appears that what may be the initial primary platform continues below Floor 2 (the floor that caps our late Middle Formative deposit) suggesting that the building may date to that period. Due to the length of the field season and the expanse of the area excavated these units were unable to be completed to bedrock, rather halting at this level (Floor 2). Future excavations in this area are planned for the forthcoming field seasons.

The Late Formative plaza deposit excavated in previous seasons and originally examined by Dr. Jim Aimers, were re-examined by Dr. Sagebiel in conjunction with the related Late Formative deposits excavated during the 2013 field season (Aimers and Haines 2011; Haines and Aimers 2011). In these collections we recovered a large number of small (on average roughly 10 cm diameter) shallow bowls, mostly Sierra Red. Although further

investigations of the ceramics in Plaza D need to be made in order to definitively conclude that it was a persistent locale for ritual feasting, preliminary analysis of both the Middle and Late Formative collections suggests that feasting was going either at, or near, these structures.

Discussion

The discovery of Middle Formative Period platforms, while frequently difficult to access due to their being deeply buried beneath later construction episodes, are not uncommon. Contemporary examples of Middle Formative period platforms and deposits are known from both within the Northern Belize Swasey/Bladen sphere as well as in the Cunil cultural sphere to the south and the Xe-Real sphere to the west.

At the nearby site of Cuello, Hammond uncovered a series of low platforms – approx. 40 cm to 60 cm high – that were constructed during the Bladen period (ca. 900-650 BC). These platforms were placed above earlier, 20 cm high platforms that, like the one discovered at Ka’Kabish, were also constructed with rounded corners (Gerhardt 1988). At Cuello, two burials were found associated with one of their platforms. Interesting, neither burial contained jade ornaments although both contained shell beads. Small numbers of jade beads – usually one or two – were encountered in other Bladen period burials at Cuello. While no “spoons” like the one discovered at Ka’Kabish were recovered at Cuello, a semi-clam-shell pendant was recovered in the burial of an 8-year old child dated to 660 cal. BC (Hammond 1999; Hammond et al. 1992). This object, while superficially similar at first glance was actually “recut ... into a fat T-shape (an IK emblem?)” (Hammond 2013 personal communication) and lacks the distinct depressions or “bowls” of the so-called “spoons”. However, it, along with other jade objects recovered from Swasey/Bladen phase deposits at Cuello (Robin 1989), indicate that the importation of carved jade items this region of Belize during the Middle Formative period was a well-established practice.

Numerous other sites in Northern Belize also have deposits dating to the Middle Formative period including Blue Creek (Haines 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Haines and Blom 2001),

Cerros (Robertson and Friedel 1986), Chan Chich (Robichaux 1998, 2000; Robichaux et al. 2000; Valdez Jr. 1998; Valdez Jr. and Houk 2012), Colha (Buttles 1992; Sullivan 1991; Valdez Jr., 1987, 1994), Dos Hombres (Brown 1995; Houk 1996), K'axob (Lopez Varela 2004; McAnany 2004; McAnany and Lopez Varela 1999; McAnany et al. 1999), Lamanai (Powis 2002), Nohmul (Kosakowsky 1987; Kosakowsky and Pring 1998), and San Estevan (Rosenswig 2008, 2009) among others. The vast majority of material from these sites, with the exceptions of Cuello and Cerros, and a single burial at Lamanai are limited to domestic refuse reused as plaza fill. Material from these sites indicates that the occupants of these centres, including Ka'Kabish, were largely-participating in the Northern Belize Swasey-Bladen cultural sphere.

At Cahal Pech in the Belize River Valley, platforms in connection with Cunil ceramics were discovered at the bottom of Plaza B (Awe 1992; Cheetham 1998). One of these structures (B-IV 10c-sub) was slightly more elaborate, consisting of a 20 cm high stone and plaster platform on which a plastered pole and thatch building was constructed. The interior of this structure was decorated with red painted walls and housed a plaster bench and has been interpreted as having a "higher status" than the other platforms or being a "ritual structure" (Awe 1992). This evidence, along with material from Cival and elsewhere (see Estrada-Belli 2011 and Rosenswig 2010), highlights the fact that roots of social differentiation and ritual activity were firmly situated in the Middle Formative period.

Conclusions

Based on the recovered material it is clear that Ka'Kabish had a thriving occupation during the middle and latter parts of the Middle Formative period (ca. 800 – 400 BC). They were actively engaged in long-distance trade that brought a wealth of items, including unique pieces such as the jade spoon, into the community. Although we have focused our discussion in this paper strictly on the Formative period, preliminary analysis of subsequent layers suggests that the occupants at Ka'Kabish continued to use this specific locale for ritual

feasting events into the Early Classic period. While the exact nature of these feasting events is unclear, and may always remain so, it seems more than coincidental that these events and structures are located in close spatial, if not temporal, association with this particularly rich burial. We may be looking at evidence of community place-making and the reinforcement of social identity through the continued veneration of a respected ancestor, if not community founder, as reified through feasting events and the construction of ritual platforms.

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