

34 NEVER ENDING, STILL BEGINNING: A NEW EXAMINATION OF THE CERAMICS OF KA’KABISH, BELIZE

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A thorough analysis of the ceramics from all seasons of work (2005–2013) at Ka’Kabish has led to a reconfiguration and renaming of the ceramic complexes. The formulation of this new ceramic framework for Ka’Kabish involved a reconsideration of Ka’Kabish’s place in the landscape of North-central Belize as well as a reconsideration of its occupation history. Ka’Kabish was probably occupied by the middle Middle Formative (ca. 800–600 b.c.) and was likely an independent polity by the late Middle Formative (ca. 600–400 b.c.) continuing through the Early Classic. The possible abandonment of the Ka’Kabish regality center by the end of the Early Classic puts it at odds with much of Northern Belize, where most sites grew during the Late Classic (a.d. 600–900). There is evidence that Ka’Kabish was then reoccupied, or at least used for specialized activities like rituals and burials, in the Terminal Classic and Postclassic. This paper will shine light on Ka’Kabish’s ceramic history from its precocious start to its as-yet-to be explained ending(s).

Introduction

The site of Ka’Kabish has been under investigation by the Ka’Kabish Archaeological Research Project (KARP) since 2005, with intensive excavations beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2014. As of summer 2014, the ceramics from all seasons of work have been analyzed by the lead author. This includes a thorough reanalysis of sherds previously analyzed (Aimers 2007, 2011, 2012). This new analysis has led to a reconfiguration and renaming of the ceramic complexes of Ka’Kabish. The previous ceramic complex names have been discarded because a number of them replicate complex names used elsewhere (Haines 2012:17–18). In order to both avoid replication of names and to highlight the environmental importance of Ka’Kabish—as it faces continuing threats from development—we have chosen to use the genus names of the bats found at Ka’Kabish for the ceramic complexes.

Dr. Brock Fenton of the University of Western Ontario has been studying the bats at Ka’Kabish since 2012 and has so far recognized 12 species, including one species of bat—the Big-eared Woolly Bat or Woolly False Vampire Bat—that took three years to identify because individuals hang out in other species’ colonies. The Ka’Kabish looters’ trenches have become prime habitat for a wide variety of environmentally and economically important bat species, which we hope to preserve along with the archaeological remains and other wildlife of Ka’Kabish.

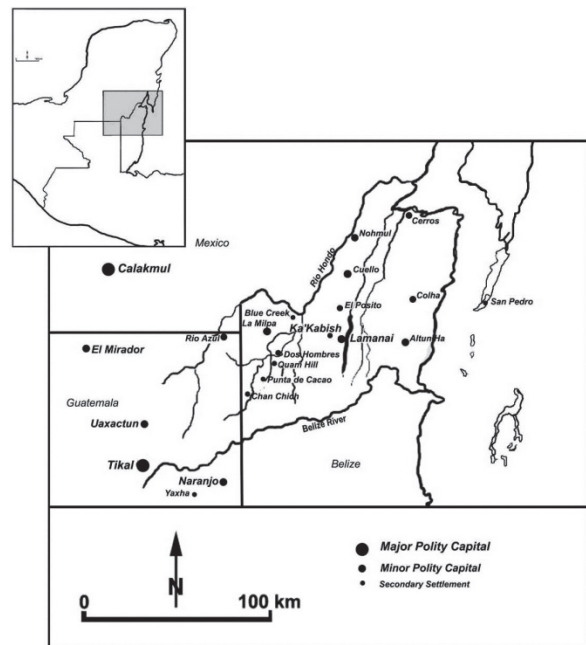


Figure 1. Map of Northern Belize and Northeastern Guatemala showing location of Ka’Kabish.

Ka’Kabish is located on one of the roughly northeast/southwest-trending limestone ridges of North-central Belize (Hammond 1973; Romney et al. 1959) (Figure 1). To the west are the drainages of the Rio Bravo and Booth’s River, which run along the Rio Bravo escarpment—where the Peten region truly begins. Up on the escarpment are the sites of Blue Creek, La Milpa, and Chan Chich, along with several other substantial sites. Only 10 km southeast of Ka’Kabish is the larger and longer-lived site of Lamanai, which is situated along the

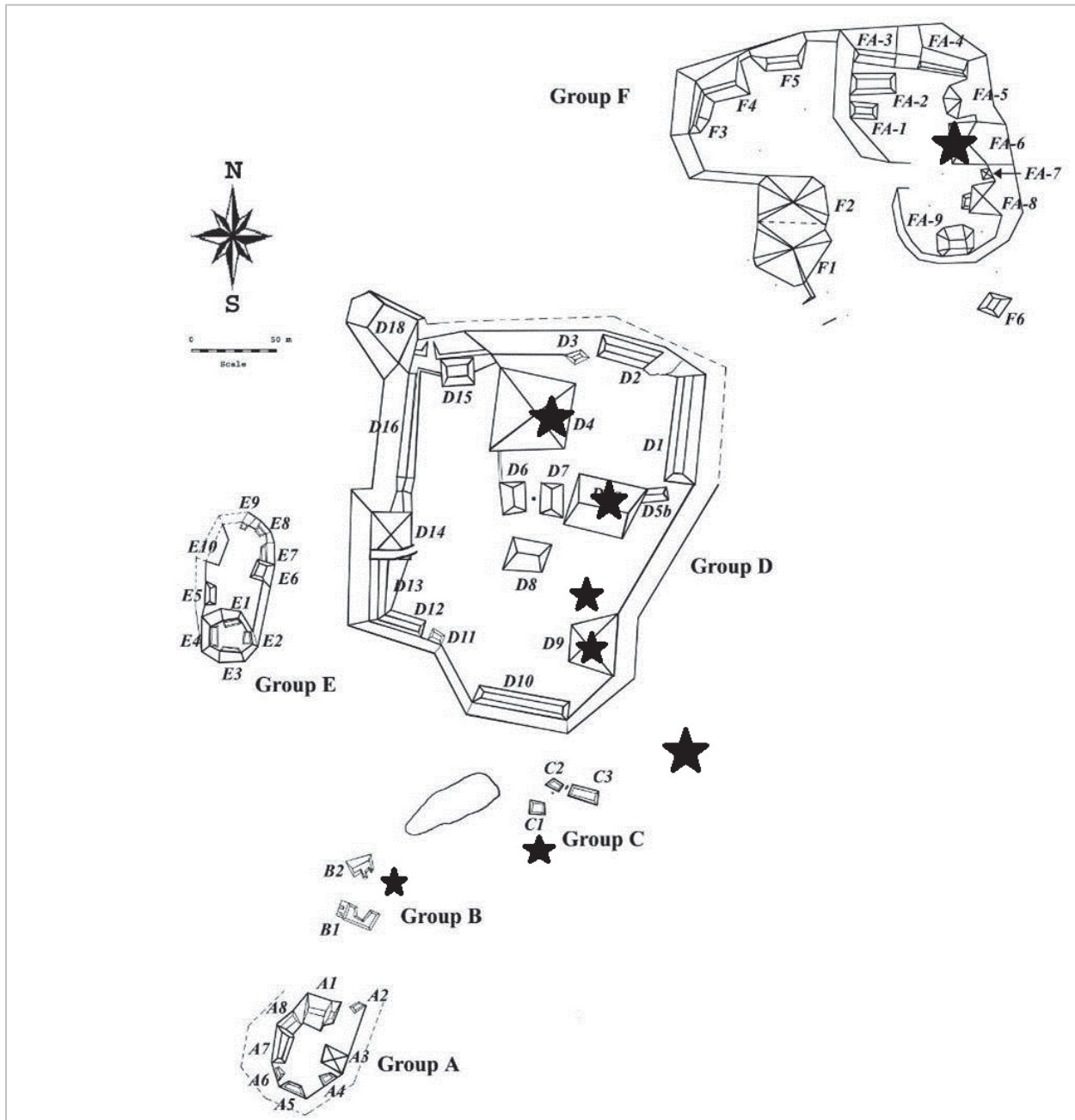


Figure 2. Map of Ka'Kabish site core with areas investigated marked.

New River Lagoon. Still farther east is Altun Ha and the Caribbean coast.

Work at Ka'Kabish has included the clearing and recording of looters' trenches in two main temples (D-4 and D-9) (Figure 2) and the excavation of a large area of the northeast plaza in order to get a preliminary idea of the construction sequences of these buildings (Tremain 2011). Additional work has included

the examination of two looted tombs: a Peten-style painted tomb found within Structure FA-6 and radiocarbon dated to the fifth century and the Structure D-5 cocoon tomb, which also dates to the Early Classic (Haines 2008, 2010). Other clearing operations have been conducted along the fronts of the D-4 and FA-6 pyramids. Operation 8 in the Group D South Plaza has so far provided the longest ceramic sequence at the



Figure 3. Ramgoat Red and Consejo Red bowls.

site, along with other interesting finds (Lockett-Harris 2013, 2014). Three chultuns (Chultuns B-2, C-1, and C-2) in site center have also been excavated and all three have contained Terminal Classic and Postclassic burials and other remains (Gonzalez 2013, 2014). Finally, an ongoing survey transect between Ka’Kabish and Lamanai has been mapped, along with testing and surface collections (McClellan 2011, 2012, 2013).

The Mormoops Complex

The Mormoops Complex is the earliest complex, dating to the middle Middle Formative ca. 800–600 BC. The ceramics tentatively belong to the Swasey/Bladen Sphere of Northern Belize (Kosakowsky 1987; Kosakowsky and Pring 1998). Primary contexts include a secondary burial, three pits (ca. 40 x 40 cm), and 23 smaller declivities excavated into bedrock in the Group D South Plaza. From these contexts a total of 47 pieces of greenstone and jade and over 2,500 marine shell beads have been recovered.

In 2013, the secondary burial was discovered within a depression excavated into bedrock (Haines et al. 2014). Three nearby pits contained 17 greenstone and jade artifacts—including a jade spoon pendant—and over 500 marine shell beads. Inverted above the burial was a Consejo Red bowl with an unusual striated

exterior. Charcoal from within this vessel was dated in the 2-sigma range to 799–511 BC cal.

In 2014, 23 smaller declivities were discovered near the burial, also excavated into bedrock. Eighteen of the declivities contained artifacts, including 30 pieces of jade and greenstone, 1,800 marine shell beads, and Consejo Group sherds. One of the declivities discovered in 2014 was capped with a small, inverted Consejo Red bowl with squash-like grooves/modeling on the exterior. Several of the declivities contained later Joventud Red sherds in an area that appeared to have been re-opened, re-entered, and re-capped.

The most common group in the Mormoops Complex is the Consejo Group. The Consejo Group has a bright red slip on a white surface preparation or underslip. Paste colors are buff, tan, or gray with thick gray cores. Calcite inclusions predominate, but sherd inclusions (grog) occasionally occur. Bowls are the most prevalent form; most have flared to slightly outcurved walls and flat bases. Some bowls with round to incurved sides also occur. Rims are direct or slightly everted with round or, occasionally, square lips. The forms—flared to outcurved walls, everted rims, and round lips—all suggest an affiliation with the Bladen Complex of Cuello (Kosakowsky 1987). Several Consejo Red vessels that appeared to

have a much finer paste were sampled for petrographic analysis by Alice Gomer and were found to have volcanic ash inclusions (Gomer 2013a).

The Consejo Group also includes Barquedier Grooved-incised, Fireburn Red-and-cream, Cudjoe Composite (including incised, modeled, punctate, and chamfered varieties), and Ramgoat Red. At Ka’Kabish, Consejo Red with its white underslip is generally on tan to gray paste, whereas, Ramgoat Red, without the white surface treatment, is usually on a pink to orange paste, perhaps making the white underslip unnecessary in order to achieve the desired bright red slip color (Figure 3). Other Mormoops Groups include: Copetilla, Machaca (including Chalcalte Incised), Quamina (including Tower Hill Red-on-cream), and Chicago.

The Noctilio Complex

The Noctilio Complex encompasses the late Middle Formative ca. 600–400 BC. It is similar to the Mamom Sphere Lopez Complex at Cuello (Gomer 2013a, 2013b; Kosakowsky 1987). So far, the best contexts come from the Group D South Plaza, especially a small “smash and trash” deposit located just above the bedrock deposits previously discussed. This “smash and trash” may represent a feasting event as it includes many serving vessels. Four radiocarbon dates from the deposit have a 2-sigma range between 762–388 BC cal.

The most common group in the Noctilio Complex is the Joventud Group. The Joventud Group has a thick, waxy, dark red to dark purple slip over a cream underslip that is often left visible on vessel exteriors. Pastes are somewhat darker than the Consejo Group with sherd inclusions quite common. A few sherds have volcanic ash inclusions as well (Gomer 2013a). Rims are folded or thickened with round lips. Bowls and dishes are common forms with flared to outcurved walls and flat bases. New forms include bottles and chocolate pots with ovate spouts. Incised designs on bowls and dishes include the double-line break motif.

The Noctilio Complex groups include: Richardson Peak, Joventud (including Guitara Incised and Desvario Chamfered), Chunchinta (including Deprecio Incised), Pital, Muxanal,



Figure 4. Muxanal Red-on-cream bowl.

and Chicago. Muxanal Red-on-cream typically has a red interior and cream exterior, but many have what may be intentionally painted or resisted designs in red (Figure 4).

Rhogeesa Complex

The Late Formative ceramics of the Rhogeesa Complex at Ka’Kabish are similar to the Cocos Complex of Cuello (Kosakowsky 1987) and belong to the Chicanel Sphere dating roughly 400 BC–AD 300. Good stratigraphic evidence again comes from the Group D South Plaza from a very large possible feasting event. This deposit consisted of over 3,000 sherds, over 30 reconstructible vessels, many small bowls and large jars, chocolate pots, an incensario, figurine fragments, one or two drums, a large sherd lid, and a large strap handle from a basket- or bucket- style vessel. Many vessels were decorated with modeling (Figure 5), impressed fillets, and possible resist decoration. There was also a lot of *Pomacea* shell, faunal bone, and ash.

The Rhogeesa Complex includes the following groups: Richardson Peak, Sapote, Sierra (including Laguna Verde Incised, Puletan Red-and-unslipped, Society Hall Red, and Rio Bravo Red), Polvero (including Lechugal Incised), Flor, and Chicago. It is also possible that the Matamore Group is represented, but this has yet to be confirmed.

Several types may increase over time, possibly representing a Terminal Formative facet. This includes Society Hall Red, which is



Figure 5. Sierra Red modeled sherds.



Figure 6. Early to Middle Postclassic red-orange tripod vessel.

a streaky orange-red on a white underslip or surface preparation. Similarly, Puletan Red-and-unslipped jars also have a white wash or surface treatment over fine striations on the lower body that is then covered by a red to pink wash. This is not noted at Cuello and appears to be a local variation. Puletan Red-and-unslipped likely continues into the Early Classic. Similarly, Rio Bravo Red is defined by the use of Sierra Red slips on Early Classic forms and pastes and likely continues into the Early Classic (Kosakowsky and Lohse 2003:7; Sagebiel 2005:247–253, 2014; Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003; Sullivan and Valdez 2006; Valdez and Houk 2000:130–135).

Desmodus Complex

The Early Classic Desmodus Complex dates about AD 300–600 and most of the penultimate, if not ultimate, construction phases of the buildings so far investigated in Ka'Kabish's site center date to this time period. This includes the latest major plaza filling events in the Group D South Plaza. The Early Classic ceramics fit well within the Tzakol Sphere of the Peten (Smith 1955; Smith and Gifford 1966), including the groups Quintal, Triunfo, Aguila (including Pita Incised), Sierra, Dos Arroyos (including Yaloche Cream Polychrome and Caldero Buff Polychrome), Balanza (including Lucha Incised), and Pucte, along with unidentified red and cream types. There is also an unslipped expedient ware (poorly formed and fired with highly variable rim forms) made up almost exclusively of small bowls. There are many in the fill of the Group D South Plaza, but whether they are the remains of yet another feast (as disposable bowls or ration bowls?) or have some other use (salt or other production?) remains to be investigated.

Trachops Working Complex

The Trachops Complex, ca. AD 600–750/900, is more a place holder than a complex at the moment. Identifiable Late Classic types have been exceedingly rare at Ka'Kabish so far and all have been mixed into deposits with later sherds. Few, if any, contexts have been encountered that contain only Late Classic (Tepeu 1 and 2) sherds.

Vampyressa Complex

The Vampyressa Complex is Terminal Classic ca. AD 750/900–1000/1100 and is possibly part of the Tepeu Sphere. The best evidence comes from surface collections in the settlement zone and Chultun B-2 in site center, which contained a burial and a number of Terminal Classic reconstructible vessels (Tinaja and Achote Groups) along with Dumbcane Striated and Lamanai Polychrome (Graham 2004). However, the radiocarbon dates from Chultun B-2 are Middle to Late Postclassic (2-sigma 1263–1394 and 1296–1418 AD cal.). A likely explanation for the Postclassic radiocarbon dates is that they are associated with unidentified Postclassic sherds in fill that was deposited sometime after the burial.

Tentative Terminal Classic groups and types include: Cambio Group, Dumbcane Striated, Tinaja Red (including Chinja Impressed), Roaring Creek Red, Garbutt Creek Group, Achote Black (including Cubeta Incised), Lemon Cream (Sagebiel 2005:541–553; Sagebiel 2014), Lamanai Polychrome, and unidentified fine-paste orange.

Artibeus and Centurio Working Complexes

The Artibeus and Centurio working complexes are tentative Early and Middle Postclassic complexes with very tentative dates of AD 1000/1100–1350. Sherds and several whole vessels from this complex were found in the settlement zone, in two chultuns in site center—C-1 and C-2—and in domestic surface occupation in the Group D South Plaza. Chultun C-1 contained copper bells and rings (post-a.d. 950), and returned a 2-sigma radiocarbon date of 1221–1386 AD cal. This radiocarbon date overlaps with radiocarbon dates likely associated with Postclassic sherds from Chultun B-2.

Tentative groups and types include unidentified unslipped and striated jars, comals, and basins; unidentified red-orange chalices on pedestal bases and grater bowls; unidentified red slipped vessels; unslipped jars with red slipped rims and necks; and unidentified black, brown, cream, and red-on-orange trickle.

Three whole and reconstructible vessels were found in Chultun C-2, including an unusual Protoclassic-looking red-on-orange trickle

collared jar, a red-orange slipped tripod vessel (Figure 6), and an unslipped collared jar.

Molossus Working Complex

This is the very tentative Late Postclassic to early Colonial working complex likely dating to post-a.d. 1350. A few possible early Colonial jars have been found in the settlement zone along with a number of Cehac-Hunacti Composite censer fragments from the surface of Structure D-4 in the Ka’Kabish site center.

Conclusions

The ceramics of Ka’Kabish require further analysis in order to definitively provide a dated ceramic sequence. However, the ceramics indicate occupation in or near Ka’Kabish beginning in the middle Middle Formative (ca. 800–600 b.c.). By the late Middle Formative, occupation of the site center is likely and continued at least through the Early Classic. The scarcity of Late Classic ceramics suggests some kind of occupation hiatus at Ka’Kabish. The burial in Chultun B-2 suggests at least use of the Ka’Kabish site center in the Terminal Classic. Surface and near-surface finds both in the site center and the settlement zone, as well as the ceramics in Chultuns C-1 and C-2, suggest that occupation in and around Ka’Kabish may have rebounded somewhat by the Early to Middle Postclassic, possibly continuing through the early Colonial period.

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