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Haines, Helen R.; Helmke, Christophe

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Painted Hieroglyphs from Tomb FA-6/1 at Ka'kabish, Belize

Helen R. Haines and Christophe Helmke

In 1995, during a preliminary survey and mapping expedition, remnants of hieroglyphs were found in a painted tomb at the ancient Maya site of Ka'kabish in north-central Belize. Initially deemed too fragmentary to be decipherable, with the advent of better photographic technology, a second attempt was made in 2010 to document the hieroglyphs. This paper presents the results of these documentation efforts and provisional interpretations of these glyphs along with a brief discussion regarding the unusual tomb in which they were found.

Site Description

Ka'kabish is an ancient centre located in north-central Belize approximately 10 km northwest of the more well-known major site of Lamanai on the west bank of the New River Lagoon (Fig. 1). The site was first visited by David Pendergast in the late 1980s during reconnaissance efforts, while excavating at Lamanai (Pendergast 1984, 1985, 1986). At this time, access to the region was almost exclusively by boat down the New River and overland travel, when possible, was along temporary logging roads. By the 1990s a poorly graded road had been cut to connect the town of San Felipe and the community of Indian Church, which at this time was located along the edge of the lagoon, between what is now the Lamanai site museum and the ruins of the nearby 16th century churches (see Graham 2008, 2011). This road bisected the site of Ka'kabish and evidence suggests that it damaged at least one, if not several buildings along the western edge of the site.

In 1995, archaeologists from the Maya Research Program based in the Blue Creek community to the west (including the first author), conducted a preliminary survey and mapped the site. At this time dense forests and heavy rains restricted the scope of the survey to the core area. A total of 27 structures were initially mapped, virtually all of which had sustained heavy damage from looting (Guderjan 1996; see also Pendergast 1991). Ceramics collected from the looters trenches suggested an occupation ranging from the Late Formative period Rhogeesa Phase (ca. 400 B.C.-A.D. 250) to the Late Classic period Trachops Phase (ca. A.D. 600-900) (Sagebiel and Haines 2015). Due to its relatively small size coupled with its proximity to Lamanai, Ka'kabish was presumed to have functioned as a secondary site within the larger Lamanai political sphere (see Mathews 1991 as well as Helmke and Awe 2012 for projected polity areas).

Intensive archaeological investigations at Ka'kabish were initiated in 2007 under the auspices of the Ka'kabish Archaeological Research Project (KARP) under the direction of the first author. This work has substantially revised our understanding of Ka'kabish and has shed new light on the political structure of north-central Belize. At present more than 100 structures, distributed among nine plazas and courtyard complexes, have been mapped (Fig. 2).

Ceramic remains and radiocarbon samples recovered from excavations have revealed that the centre was initially settled in the Middle Formative period Mormoops Phase (ca. 800-600 B.C.) (Lockett-Harris 2013; Sagebiel and Haines 2015). Occupation at Ka'kabish continued in and around the core zone into the Middle Post-Classic period Centurio Phase (ca. A.D. 1300-1400) (Gonzalez 2014), with the period of greatest development dating to the end of the Late Formative Rhogeesa Phase and Early Classic period Desmodus Phase (ca. 400 B.C. through A.D. 600) (Sagebiel and Haines 2015; Tremain 2011).

It is during this period that we see evidence of a powerful elite population emerging, as signalled by extensive courtyard complexes, lineage temples, corbel-vaulted palatial structures, and formal tombs (Haines 2008, 2011; see discussion in Becker 2003: 258-262). The presence of tombs buried within monumental temples in the site core is taken as indicative of elite power, and possibly rulership (Fitzsimmons 2009: 11; Houk and Valdez 2011). Of particular relevance to this paper is a corbel-vaulted tomb located in Structure FA-6. This building is one of several pyramidal structures located along the eastern edge of the acropolis in the site core.

Tomb FA-6/1

The construction of Tomb FA-6/1 is atypical for this area of north-central Belize. The tomb measures roughly 3.6 m along its north-south axis by 1.3 m wide east-west and has an overall height of 2.4 m (Fig. 3). The tomb is aligned to the primary axis of the structure, but perpendicularly and therefore lies athwart the main east-west axis of Structure FA-6. The west side of the vault revealed at least eight identifiable perforations that, upon inspection, appear to have originally accommodated triangular-shaped wooden beams. It is assumed that a matching number of beam holes would have been present in the east vault; however, collapse caused by damage from looting made it impossible to positively ascertain.

The tomb was constructed with a low passageway, 1.17 m high and 0.75 m wide, that ran for a length of approximately 2.5 m. Although passageways in tombs are known from other sites in Belize, including Caracol (Chase and Chase 1987: 26, 1994, 1996) and Minanha (Iannone 2010: 32), and whereas separate entrances, or vestibules, are also documented at Río Azul (Adams 1999; Hall 1986, 1987, 1989), and possibly at Chan Chich (Houk et al. 2010), they differ from the one at Ka'kabish in that they are at times constructed of irregular core faces (as in the case of Caracol and Minanha) or small passages carved through bedrock (as at Río Azul and Chan

Chich). At Ka'kabish, in contrast, the passageway was constructed of carefully cut stones that ran along a straight corridor before ending in the architectural core of the structure.

Regrettably, looters had pillaged the tomb, entering in through the east wall and tearing through sections of adjoining walls as well as removing several of the capstones. In the area exposed above the capstones, alternating lenses of carbon were visible, between layers of shell and obsidian. Over 50 pieces of obsidian were collected from the tomb when it was originally inspected during the 1995 visit by MRP staff (Haines and Glascock 2012). Carbon collected from the ceiling of the tomb yielded a calibrated radiocarbon date of cal. A.D. 416-533 (AA87098 1602 ± 36 yrs.). This date corresponds with carbon samples collected from the surface and interior of the tomb's floor, which have been dated to cal. A.D. 435-528 (AA92049 1543 ± 36 yrs) and cal. A.D. 386-547 (AA92050 1603 ± 36 yrs). These dates that suggest that the tomb was constructed during the latter part of the 5th or early 6th century A.D.

Vestiges of paint still remain in places revealing that the walls were originally painted a dark reddish orange (Munsell: 10R 4/8) with a deeper, reddish-brown pigment being used for the glyphs (Munsell: 10R 1/10). The background paint was applied using broad brushstrokes while the glyphs exhibit a finer, more precise application technique (Fig. 4). It is possible that the glyphs were painted shortly after the background coat was applied and was still wet as the foreground and background elements have bled into each other in some areas. Both the fresco application and extensive weathering and damage caused by the looters greatly hampers the reading of the glyphic collocations. The colour palette and the use of broad brushstrokes to apply an orange background, followed by the application of painted decorations using a red pigment is highly reminiscent of the murals of the tomb discovered within Temple XX at Palenque, in Chiapas, Mexico (Robertson and Lagan 2004). Unlike Ka'kabish, the Temple XX tomb was not decorated with glyphs, but with large figures of regal ancestors, thereby anticipating the composition of the stucco murals within the tomb of the famed Palenque ruler, Pakal the Great (completed between A.D. 688 and 689), laid to rest within the Temple of the Inscriptions (see Robertson 1983; Stuart and Stuart 2008: 170-171). Based on the associated ceramics and the style of the iconography the Temple XX tomb has been provisionally dated to the 6th century, which matches the date of the Ka'kabish tomb remarkably well. Closer at hand are the painted tombs of Río Azul, located 47 km to the west, in the Peten of Guatemala. The site is renowned for its Early Classic painted tombs, which based on associated ceramics and glyphic texts date to between A.D. 417 and 450 (Acuña 2009; Adams 1999; Hall 1986, 1987). Thus, although the Río Azul tombs are several centuries earlier than the Ka'kabish tomb, it is likely that these all form part of a regional tradition, not the least since some of the Río Azul tombs, such as Tomb 19, also exhibit orange backgrounds and red designs, and many were also embellished with glyphic texts rendered in red paint (e.g. Tombs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 17, 23, and 25). Nevertheless, considering the rarity of preserved mural paintings in tombs of the Maya area, it remains a possibility that this was a more widespread practice in antiquity than present evidence allows.

Epigraphic Analysis and Interpretation

Despite weathering and erosion, the mural is preserved in several contiguous fragments that still adhere to the west wall of the tomb. Based on what remains it is clear that the mural was once much more extensive and we suspect that the entirety of the tomb was once plastered over and embellished with a more extensive painted mural. One portion still exhibits the remains of two and part of a third glyph block (Fig. 5). The glyph blocks are set side by side in a row and their spacing is regular suggesting that a glyphic clause was rendered horizontally along the length of the tomb, instead of the more standard double-column format. In this sense the original text can be compared to that which once adorned the east wall of Tomb 12 at Río Azul (see Stuart 1987; Grazioso Sierra and Juárez Cossío 2009: Fig. 4). Based on what is preserved it can be estimated that the average glyph block measures between 25 and 26 cm wide. The glyphs are provisionally designated from left to right as Xp1, Yp1 and Zp1, in keeping with the conventions of the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* (Graham 1975).

Since the remaining glyphs appear to face to the viewer's left the text was probably intended to be read in the standard left-to-right reading order. The initial portion of the first collocation (Xp1) has blurred into the background which makes reading difficult, but it may represent a large and stylized celt sign, which is an undeciphered logogram, although David Stuart (2007) has suggested the reading **LEM**. Besides the celt sign, the right half of the collocation is composed of what appears to be three stacked elements, with the larger central sign exhibiting two thin parallel lines forming a circular device, the whole topped by two scrolls. Only the broad outline of the subfix is still visible. Although too little remains for a conclusive reading, on the whole this combination of signs may render the logogram **K'AWIL**, topped by flames and with a final phonetic complement **la** as the subfix. This spelling of the theonym as **K'AWIL-la**, yielding *k'awiil* (a.k.a. God K; see Taube 1992: 69-79) is consistent with the time period attributed to the tomb on the basis of the ^{14}C dating noted above. In contrast, had the text been executed sometime between A.D. 747-849 then we could expect to find the spelling **K'AWIL-li** indicating the vowel-shortened form *k'awil*, especially in this part of the Maya lowlands (Stuart et al. 1999: II-16; Houston et al. 2004: 91-92, 96-97; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004: 116-119). The possible pairing of the celt sign as a qualifier to the theonym *k'awiil* has, as far as we can ascertain, not been documented for the Classic period. Nevertheless, the pairing of celt signs with theonyms is commonplace for a range of deities named in the codices of the 15th and 16th centuries, such as the Codex Madrid (1967) and Codex Dresden (1975) (see also Taube 1992). If the reading of this part of the Ka'kabish text can be verified, then this particular theonym would constitute a remarkably early and millennial forerunner of the codical examples. Interestingly, other examples from the ethnographic literature provide added insight, since accounts of the beliefs of Yukatek Maya in northern Yucatan record, among the names of various divinities, the theonym of one particular group of lightning deities as *Lelem Kaan Chaakob*, or 'Flash/Lightning Sky *Chaak*s', wherein the *Chaak* are deities that personify thunder and related atmospheric phenomena (Redfield and Villa Rojas *121*
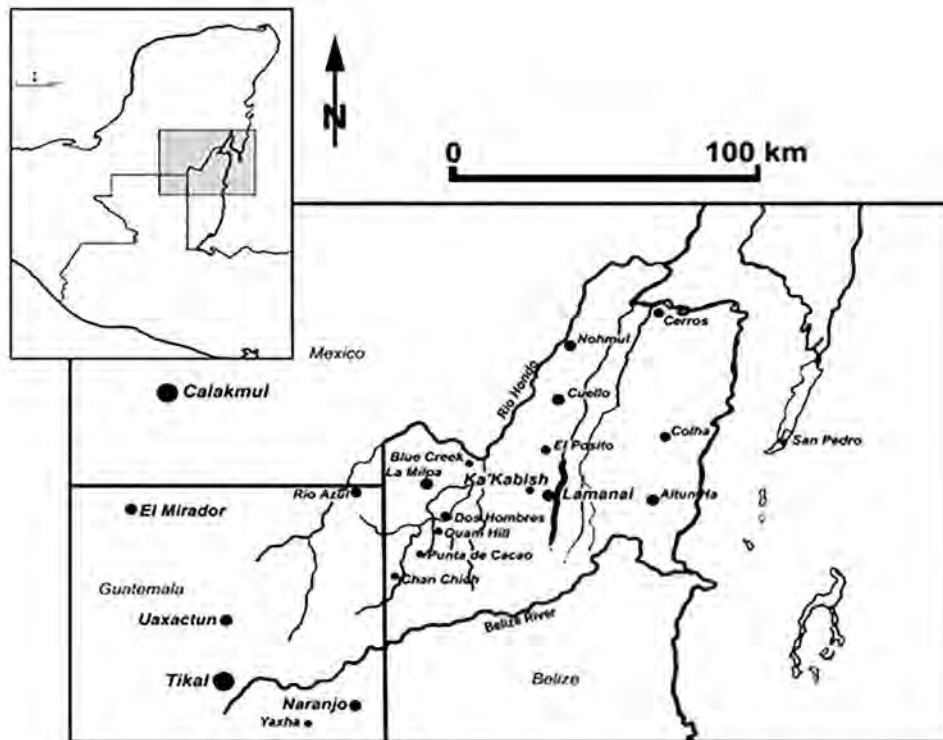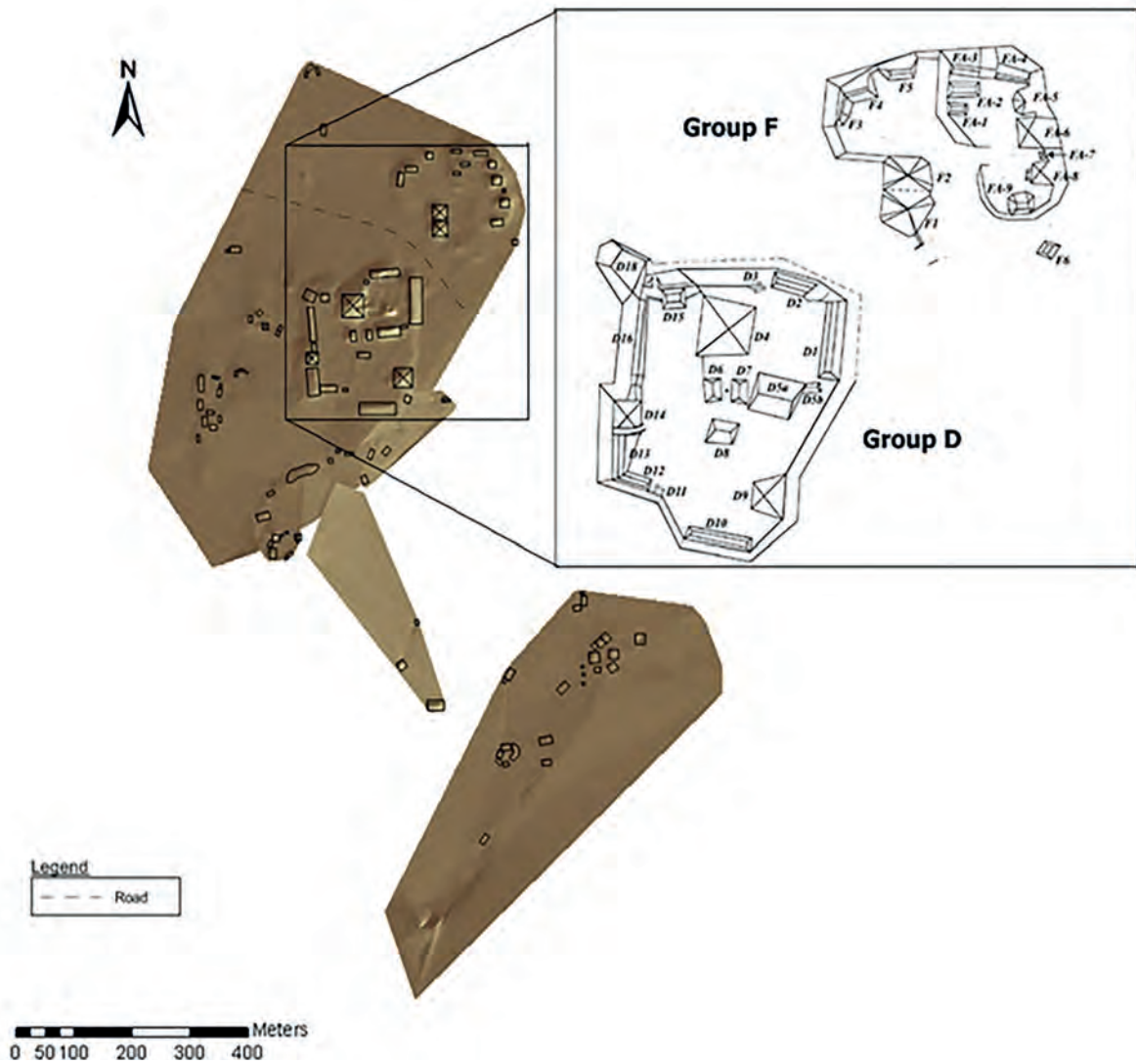
Fig. 1 Map of Northern Belize (drawing by H. Haines)

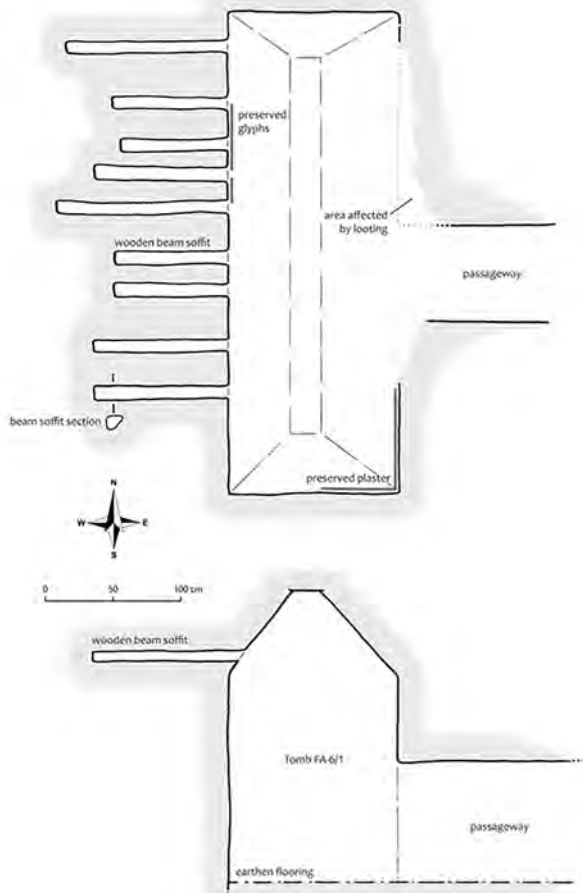Fig. 2 Map of Ka'kabish (map by H. Haines and E. Jamik)

Fig. 3 Plan and section of Tomb FA-6/1 at Ka'kabish (plan by H. Haines, O. Ruano and C. Helmke)
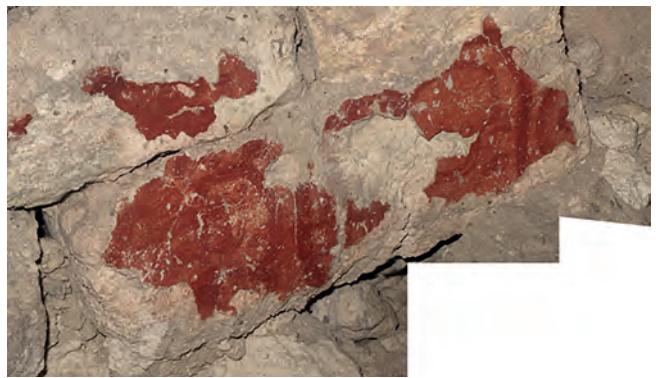

Fig. 4 Oblique photograph of the remains of painted plaster adhering to the west wall of the tomb (composite photograph by H. Haines and C. Helmke)

1934: 115, 349, 355; Villa Rojas 1995: 223). Here we have the pairing of *Lelem* (possibly analysed as *le-lem*, with the initial syllable reduplicated for emphasis as an augmentative) with the name of a thunder deity, an onomastic pattern that would duplicate that seen at Ka'kabish, wherein *Lem* would also serve to qualify the deity *K'awiil*, itself an embodiment of lightning, which in combination may prompt the translation of 'Flash/Lightning *K'awiil*'.

The second collocation (Yp1) is composed of two glyphs, the second of which may render a sign **JOL**, read *jo'l* 'skull' (see Kaufman 2003: 274; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004: 115, 117, 144), with the eyebrow providing the diagnostic markings of the sign. Alternatively, this element may record the logogram **CHAM** 'death, die', here functioning as a verbal root and plausibly recording the funerary rites that transpired within the tomb. Of the preceding glyph to this logogram little remains, and while it bears some resemblance to other known logograms may well record a vocalic sign **i**, which here could function as a conjunctive *i-chamiiy-Ø* 'and (then) he/she died'. This would indicate that the original clause recorded several verbal expressions in which the death event transpired later in the narrative. Of the final preserved collocation (Zp1) too little remains to identify what it originally rendered beyond the scroll of its lower left corner. Even so, based on regular syntax and other funerary texts we can ex-
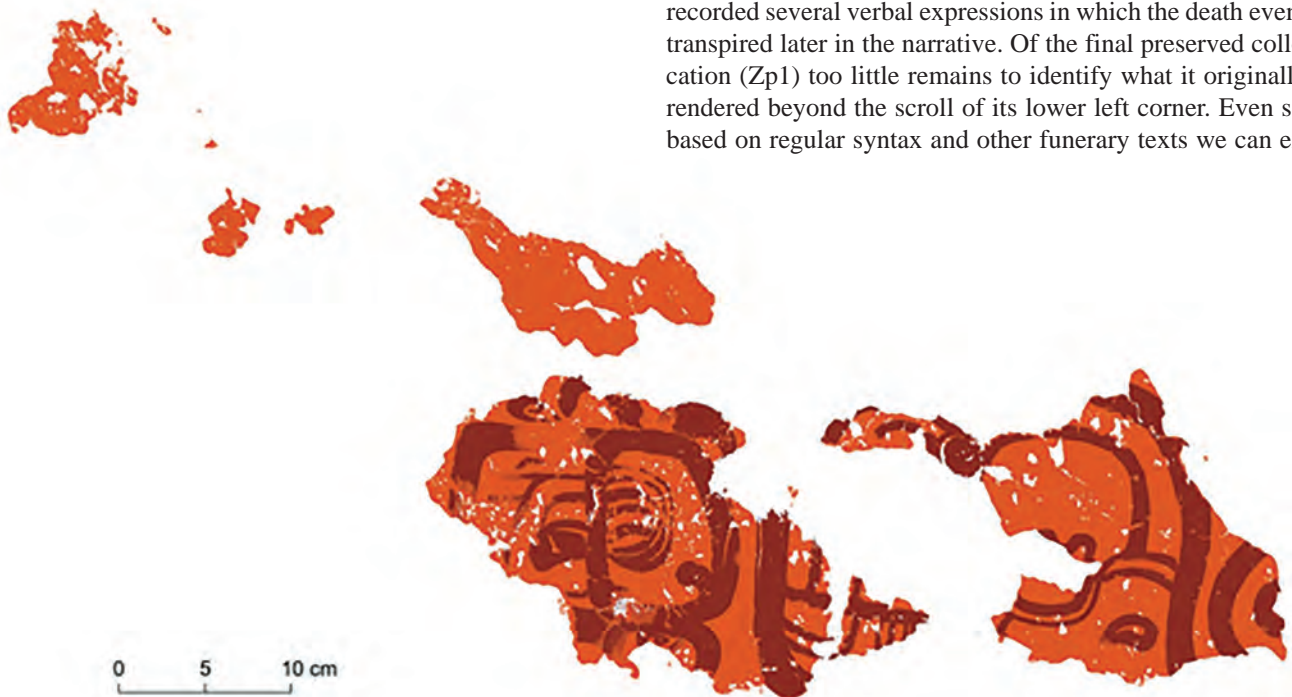

Fig. 5 The remains of plaster and painted glyphs as preserved on the east wall of Tomb FA-6/1 (drawing by C. Helmke based on rectified composite photographs)

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pect the remaining glyph at Zp1 to have recorded the initial portion of the deceased's name, followed by his/her titles. Based on the extant glyphs painted on the walls of Tomb FA-6/1 at Ka'kabish, the ancient Maya text may have recorded the theonym *lem k'awiil*, quite possibly followed by a verbal construction *i-chamiy*. Although these readings are highly tentative on account of extensive weathering and damage the constituent elements provisionally identified are consistent with those found as part of proper names, or anthroponyms, assumed by royalty upon their accession (see Colas 2014; Eberl and Graña-Behrens 2004; Grube 2002), and what may be a verbal construction. One may also conclude that the anthroponym closed one clause and that the possible verbal expression initiated another, since Mayan languages are verb-initial (England 1992). Due to its partiality, no positive match could be established for the nominal sequence with other previously reported anthroponyms, and based on present evidence it stands to reason that the name rendered that of the individual interred within the tomb, following the precedence of comparable texts from the Maya area. Overall, the text painted within the Ka'kabish tomb seems to record a typical funerary text as well as parts of the name of the interred.

Conclusion

Although hieroglyphic texts are known from this area of north-central Belize, they are most commonly found on public structures or monuments (Closs 1988; Grube 1994; Pendergast 1983: 3) as well as on portable objects including ceramics and personal objects of adornment (Grube 1994: Fig. 9; Helmke 1999; Mathews 1979:79-80; Mathews and Pendergast 1979; Pendergast 1979: 61, 127-128, 1982: 63, 84-86; Robichaux and Houk 2005). Tomb FA-6/1 represents the only known example of painted tomb hieroglyphs from this part of Belize. The uniqueness of the tomb's decoration coupled with its atypical architecture raise questions as to the status and alliances of the rulers of Ka'kabish during the important transitional "Middle Classic", but particularly during the Early Classic period, an important time when many dynastic lineages were founded (Martin 2001; Martin and Grube 2008; Schele 1992; Sharer 2001; Stuart 2004).

Evidence from Tomb FA-6/1 suggests that the elites at Ka'kabish, at least during the Early Classic period, had ties with sites to the west and quite possibly with the site of Río Azul in the Central Peten. This is particularly supported by the very presence of a painted tomb, especially one that has glyphs painted in dark red pigmentation on an even orange background, since similar tombs are known from Río Azul. This contrasts with evidence from Ka'kabish and neighbouring sites that suggests, for at least part of its later history, the fortunes of Ka'kabish were more closely tied to sites to the east, specifically Lamanai (Haines and Sagebiel n.d.) and perhaps Altun Ha (Haines and Sagebiel 2014). Thus, whereas it may be tempting to see the glyphs and the tomb within which they were found as telltale markers for the intervention of great and distant powers, the juxtaposition of Early Classic and Late Classic architectural and material culture at Ka'kabish highlights the dynamic and changing nature of ancient Maya polities at a more local level (Demarest 1993, 1997; Demarest et al. 1997; Estrada-Belli 2011; Hansen and Guenter 2005; Helmke and Awe 2012; Iannone 2005; Marcus

1992, 1993). It is hoped that further investigations at Ka'kabish will shed additional light on the political organisation of this clearly little known corner of the ancient Maya world.

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