IS AND ISN’T PRODUCE EACH OTHER: AN UNUSUAL ARCHITECTURAL AMALGAMATION AT KA’KABISH

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Monumental architecture forms a visible marker symbolising the state power and ideologies. Large pyramid temples encoded the concept of witz’, or sacred mountain, and were a focus of Southern Lowland Maya ritual and mortuary activities from the Late Formative through the Terminal Classic period. Round structures, although considerably rarer, share a similar time-span as their temple pyramid companions. These structures appear in the Middle Formative and continue into the Post-classic where they are associated with the ideology of Ehecatl – the Wind God. Round structures are often typified by a flat-topped platform to which a square flight of steps is appended, thereby assuming a distinctive ‘key hole’ shape. At Ka’kabish we have the startling combination of a tall pyramid temple with a round structure appended to the front, thus combining the two normally discrete forms into a single architectural programme. This odd amalgamation occurred during a remodelling of the front staircase of Structure FA-8, likely to accommodate the placement of the tombs that were discovered in the platform. This paper will provide a preliminary summary of Structure FA-8 discussing its unusual remodelling and associated architectural features and material culture.

Introduction

Maya sites are traditionally identified, and defined, by their built environment. Within these constructed landscapes monumental architecture forms a visible marker symbolising state power and ideologies. Architectural forms also can encode identity through regional stylistic variations and unique decorative elements. Over the life-time of a city structures were often refurbished, remodelled, or completely rebuilt with a newer building completely encasing the original structure. These remodelling attempts could radically alter the form and function of a structure, changes that are often attributed to concomitant changes in intra-polity power structures and political alliances.

In this paper we present evidence on an unusual remodelling of a structure at Ka’kabish. The structure, FA-8, reveals evidence of a conflation of what are typically two separate architectural forms; pyramid temples and round structures. We provide a brief overview of these two building types before discussing the construction history of Structure FA-8. In concluding our discussion of the structure we note potential reasons for the creation of this amalgamation that provides a more prosaic approach to architectural variability. This research is based on preliminary analysis of the structure which was excavated as part of the 2015 KARP field season.

Relevant Architectural Forms

Architecture in the Maya world can be classified into a variety of function-based forms (i.e., temples, palaces, ball courts [Andrews 1975]) as well as shape-based designs (i.e., range building, [Coe 1967:55]). The two relevant forms for this paper are the ubiquitous pyramid-temple and rarer round structure (Pollock 1936).

Pyramid temples vary widely in size and distribution, ranging from small single pyramids found as part of courtyards and assumed to be lineage shrines, to groupings of large pyramid temples forming acropolis clusters such as the North Group at Tikal. Regardless of size or quantity, pyramid temples are found at virtually all Maya centres whether they be major cities or minor centres. These structures formed the focus of Southern Lowland Maya ritual and mortuary activities from Late Formative through the Terminal Classic period and frequently were rebuilt or remodelled by later rulers. Remodelling could take the form of small changes or minor modifications, ranging from replastering episodes to extending the lower few steps of the staircases. More sweeping changes also could be made to these structures and examples exist of rebuilt staircases, the addition of stair-side outsets, extensions to the lower front steps to form a frontal platform, and alterations to the front of the structure to include a room partway up the substructure. While minor modifications many have been required for maintaining the integrity and appearance of
Table 1. Identified Round Structures by Temporal Periods (Aimers et al. 2000; Kangas 2015; Szymanski 2010).

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Although round structures are considerably rarer than pyramid temples, Pollock originally identified nine types of round building forms spanning all of Mesoamerica (Pollock 1936). These architectural oddities long have held the fascination of archaeologists, and Pollock’s inaugural work has been followed by several studies focusing on round buildings (Aimers et al. 2000; Kangas 2015; Syzmski 2010). Combining data from these studies, at total of 70 Maya round structures were identified (Table 1). Although round structures were constructed throughout Maya history, the greatest number of these structures (n=42; 56.0%) were identified as being Middle to Late Formative in origin. Only three structures (4.0%) were securely dated to the Early Classic period, and only 14 structures (18.6%) in total to the Classic Period.

These structures appear to have varied in form through time. Formative period round structures were low flat platforms with no superstructures and an outset staircase consisting of two or three steps in what Glass dubbed ‘keyhole’ shape (Glass 1965:51-59). The Classic period round structure at Nohmul consisted of a low platform with circular structure constructed with a low wall only a few courses high and, based on the paucity of stone in the collapse, likely sported a perishable superstructure (Chase and Chase 1982). This round structure form also has been documented in the Sibun area (Harrison-Buck 2012; Harrison-Buck and McAnany 2013). Post-Classic round structures vary widely in size. Structure N13-9 at Lamanai was a small two-tiered round structure with outset stair situated upon a small square platform (Pendergast 1986:11). Beyond the use of a square substructure platform, the Lamanai structure contrasts significantly with the more famous large Post-Classic Caracol structure at Chichen Itza which Thompson once described as a “2-decker wedding cake on the square carton in which it came” (Thompson 1994: 37; see also Ruppert 1935).

Although the size and form of the structure may have varied through time, it is believed that the general function these buildings served, that of ritual, remained relatively consistent. In the Formative Period, round structures in the Belize Valley at least, according to Aimers and colleagues (2000:83) “appear to have been used as stages for performance activities, related to their role as burial shrines”, and were likely used “for performances related to ancestor worship”. Lohse and Sagebiel (2006) note that in the Early Classic round structures at many sites “were important for fomenting group identity at both the household and public scale”. They speculate that the round structure at Gran Cacao “was used for public integrative events and ceremonies” and as such it was an “important architectural component in the Early Classic Gran Cacao community” (Lohse and Sagebiel 2006). A continuation of the ritual function for round structures into the Terminal Classic period is supported by Harrison-Buck’s and McAnany’s work in the Sibun area (2006) where they note that “material culture from the Sibun settlements lends support to the theory that circular shrines were ritual in function”. These Terminal Classic round structures as well as later Post-Classic structures are believed to be associated with the wind God, Ehecatl (Bruhns and Amaroli 2009;
While a ritual association for the round structure at Ka‘kabish is more than likely due to its location and composition, it is unclear if it can linked to Ehecatl.

**Brief Overview of Ka‘kabish**

Ka‘kabish is a moderate site located in northcentral Belize approximately 10 km northeast of Lamanai, between the New River Lagoon and the Rio Bravo Escarpment (Figure 1). The city was built on a limestone ridge, one of several that extend roughly from the Bay of Chetumal to the Belize River valley (Hammond 1973; Wright 1959). Its location on this rise makes it clearly visible from the escarpment and likely also provided a clear view of the immediately adjacent countryside.

Previous research indicates that the area was initially settled in the Middle Formative period (ca. 800-600 BC) and that the city was occupied well into the Post Classic period. Evidence of the earliest occupation comes from a Middle Formative ritual deposit discovered beneath the Group-D plaza that consisted of a cist containing a secondary burial, over 500 marine shell beads comprising at least three discrete necklaces, 17 pieces of jade; another 30 pieces of jade were distributed in 18 smaller pits adjacent to the burial. The position of the burial and wealth of mortuary goods suggests that this was an important individual, possibly one of the founders of the sites.

Ka‘kabish continued to flourish through the Early Classic period (AD 250-600), when the city was inhabited by a high-status population, as evinced by courtyard complexes, lineage temples, corbel-vaulted residences, and formal tombs visible in looters’ trenches (Haines 2005, 2008a, 2011a, 2011b; see Andres 2005; Becker 2003:258-262; Ball & Taschek 1991; Chase & Chase 1996; de Montmollion 1995; Pyburn 1997). Participation in long-distance trade networks, first evinced in the Middle Formative period, and evidence of the economic success of the centre is manifested in the Early Classic period through the consumption of large quantities of obsidian in the construction of tombs around the centre (Haines 2000; Haines and Glascock 2012). Early Classic ceramic vessels, discarded by looters’ due to their broken state, also reveal strong ties to the Central Petén, most notably with the site of Tikal.

At the end of the Early Classic period (ca. AD 600) monumental construction at Ka‘Kabish diminishes, possibly ceasing completely. Activity at the city resumed during the Terminal Classic period (AD 750-900), and the site continued to flourish into the Post-Classic period (ca. AD 900-1500). At Ka‘Kabish, Post-Classic occupation at the site is documented from a number of locations, including refurbishment of the main temple, the presence of low domestic platforms in the Group D plaza, and the use of chultuns to the south of the plaza for burials. One chultun yielded a wealth of copper artefacts associated with a multi-individual interment.

The site currently consists of eight plazas and courtyards, identified as Groups A through H (Figure 2). It is likely that the site was larger during the Classic period as two courtyard groups are known to have been lost due to agricultural development. A modern road bisects the site between Group D, the largest plaza and Group F, and anecdotal accounts combined with survey work suggest that at least one building was destroyed during the creation of the road. Group D forms the core area with the largest, and greatest number of, monumental buildings. However, Group F, which likely was originally connected to Group D, contains the greatest number of pyramid temples. There are
eight structures at Ka’kabish that conform to the pyramid shape and are likely temples; two are in Group D (Strs. D-4 and D-9), two are conjoined (Strs. F1 and F2), while the remaining four (FA-5, FA-6, FA-8, and FA-9) are arranged along the east side of a raised platform forming what we believe was the site acropolis, all facing westward. It is structure FA-8 that is central to this discussion and upon which we will focus the rest of this paper.

Structure FA-8

Structure FA-8 was one of the structures originally identified in the initial survey of the site in 1995 (Guderjan 1996). The early mapping project identified the structure as having a large frontal modification which was recorded as a rectangular platform (see Guderjan 1996: 118). The structure was later remapped in 2009 as part of the KARP survey, at which time the convention of mapping the frontal protuberance as a rectangular platform was
continued. The structure did not garner additional attention until 2015, when it was discovered that looting on the structure had occurred between the 2014 and 2015 field seasons.

Two trenches were discovered in the building; Trench 1 penetrated the building along the primary access starting at the front of FA-8-1st (the front platform) and extending through the platform. Trench 2 penetrated the building from the south-side at the juncture of the front platform and the larger pyramid structure. Examination of Trench 2 revealed that the looters had hit a north-south wall in the initial section of the trench, likely that of the pyramid structure, before changing course and heading north-east. No other features of note were present in this trench. Of particular interest in regards to Trench 1, was the fact that the looters had deliberately attempted to disguise their tunneling with the strategic placement of rocks at the bottom of the trench. Removal of the rocks revealed they had discovered three tombs, although it was uncertain if they had completely looted the third burial due to the damage to the ceiling which made the area extremely narrow and very dangerous.

We started investigations in 2015 to determine the extent of looting damage, document tombs, and to recover materials left behind in the backdirt and tombs. Clearing of the backdirt from in front of the structure, the trench, and initial two tombs (Tombs FA-8/1 and FA-8/2) yield a wealth of Early Classic material. A number of sherds from censers as well as pieces of Yaloche Cream Polychromes were recovered from the inter-tomb tunnel, likely originating in the platform fill. These materials, as well as others from additional excavations, help place the construction of the platform in the Early Classic. Additionally, 19 reconstructible, although incomplete, vessels dating to the Early Classic were also recovered. These vessels range in type and include Aguila Orange, San Blas Red-on-Orange, Dos Arroyos Orange Polychromes, and Balanza Black as well as Unnamed Early Classic Incised Red, and unnamed Early Classic Cream vessels. The forms included typical Early Classic ‘cream pitchers’ and flanged plates. Of particular interest were at least four (likely more given the number of foot fragments) Teotihuacan-style tripod cylinders with feet sporting a variety of cut-out designs. These vessels likely came from the tombs and were abandoned by the looters due to damage that would have rendered them unsellable.

It was during the course of these investigations – cleaning up around the entrance to tunnel that we discovered that the design of the platform was “distinctly odd” and warranted fuller investigation. In the course of these investigations we discovered that FA-8 had undergone at least four modifications and rebuilding episodes. To put the structure, and the final front platform, into meaningful context it is necessary to discuss these construction episodes in historical, rather than excavation, sequence.

**Structure FA-8-4th**

Due to the depth of the succeeding construction phases, little is known about FA-8-4th. In correlating information between the two looter’s trenches it appears that the wall pierced by the looters belonged to the front of this building. We also encountered the front step in our excavation unit on the top of the platform; however, no datable materials were recovered from either area. The basal step identified in the excavation unit suggests that the structure was similar in design to the succeeding FA-8-3rd in that it was a relatively standard pyramid-temple structure with a single front staircase. This excavation also revealed that the staircase had been cut into for the creation of Tomb FA-8/3, and it appears that this mortuary event was the impetus for the construction of FA-8-3rd (Figure 3).

**Structure FA-8-3rd**

As noted, the basal steps of FA-8-4th were removed to lay Tomb FA-8/3 (Figure 3). We had hoped that the looters had not fully cleared this tomb, hence the reason for our upper excavation unit, regrettably, our excavations revealed that the looters had in fact cleared this tomb. The chamber was scarcely larger than an individual measuring roughly 75 cm wide and 1.5 metres long. The mortuary construction for the feature better conforms to the definition of a crypt (Chase and Chase 1987:57; Welsh 1988).
An Unusual Architectural Amalgamation at Ka'kabish

Figure 3. Profile Map of Structure FA-8.

The sides and ceiling were comprised of flat slabs, of which several of the latter had cracked and were canted downwards at a disturbing angle likely due to the weight of later remodellings and one of the ceiling slabs collapsed while we were examining it.

The succeeding structure, FA-8-3rd, was constructed above Tomb FA-8/3 and conforms to the archetypal pyramid substructure. The face of the structure contained beautiful terrace facings consisting of six wide stepped panels coated with heavy stucco coating (Figure 4). The terrace had an overhanging superior moulding and an extended basal moulding, with no evidence of stucco modelling to suggest decoration leading to the conclusion that the stepped design was the intended decoration. A single frontal staircase with wide, rounded steps, typical of Early Classic structures at Lamanai, was placed along the central axis of the building. As with the staircase of FA-8-4th, the lower steps were destroyed when Tomb FA-8/2 was constructed as part of, and likely the reason for, the succeeding FA-8-2nd build phase.

Structure FA-8-2nd

The lower centre section of the FA-8-3rd steps were removed for inclusion of Tomb FA-8/2, which is similar in construction to Tomb FA-8/3, in that it more closely conforms to a crypt in design. While the building was remodelled to accommodate the addition of the burial, it was not rebuilt to the same scale as the earlier FA-8-3rd. The side terraces were built over with a simple flat face made from cut
stones that may have been plastered smooth. No stucco was discovered in the collapse in front of the terrace that would suggest it supported a frieze, although it is possible that it was painted. In place of a new staircase, the mortuary chamber was covered with a stairblock made from shaped stones (Figure 5). However, the stairblock was never properly finished, but appears to have been extended prior to its completion to encompass the addition of Tomb FA-8/1. The extension of the stairblock was made from roughly shaped stones. It not only incorporated the new tomb but it also extended to cover an altar stone, that sits on Floor 2 in front of the building. It is probable, based on its location that the altar was meant to be associated with the FA-8-2\textsuperscript{nd} stair block.

We hypothesize that the individual who was interned in Tomb FA-8/1 died unexpectedly, before construction of FA-8-2\textsuperscript{nd} was complete. Their interment in FA-8 was hastily contrived resulting in the need to attempt to stretch the stairblock to cover both tombs. However, the resulting proportions created a distended platform, not unlike a thrust stage. This platform was never finished but was remodelled to create FA-8-1\textsuperscript{st}.

**Structure FA-8-1\textsuperscript{st}**

In order to accommodate the disproportions arising from the inclusion of Tomb FA-8/1 in the stairblock, the builders changed the form of the extension from rectangular to round, thereby creating a quasi-round structure (Figure 6). The new frontal addition, which looks rather more like a vase than a circle, completely covered the central portion of the original staircase and included a rectangular outset at the front. New staircases, incorporating parts of the original steps, were constructed on the northeast and southeast quadrants of the platform. These steps were completely obscured from view from the front of the platform.

Tomb FA-8/1 is distinct from the previous two mortuary chambers. Rather than the large slabs that formed the walls and ceilings of the previous burial chambers, this tomb was constructed from small stones. While similar in dimensions to the previous two tombs, it was constructed with a corbel vaulted roof. A small piece of modelled stucco was found incorporated into the ceiling as one of the building blocks suggesting that at some point a frieze did exist, possibly on the structure itself, but that it had been destroyed.

The altar stone was round with a diameter of approximately 1.75 metres and a thickness of 0.5 metres. Only the northern third of the stone was exposed in the initial looters’ trench making a complete exploration of the stone untenable without removing a significant portion of the platform. The looters had broken the altar and the northwestern quarter of the stone was found outside of the structure in the backfill. Investigations below the stone revealed that it was flat on the bottom and no caches were located beneath it. The surface was smooth with no indications of having been carved.

Excavation of the surface of the structure revealed evidence in the northeast area (a section undisturbed by looters or trees) of a low circular wall. Like Nohmul Structure 9, excavated by Diane Chase and Alren Chase (1982), there is not enough debris to suggest that the wall extended to any great height, and it is likely that the structure had perishable upper walls and roof.

Two stone-lined pits were also found on the upper surface of the platform; one pit in the southeast quadrant and the second feature in the northeast quadrant. The southeast pit was circular and extend down to the surface of Floor 1. Interred within the pit was a lidded God Pot. Regrettably, as the vessel was incomplete it is hard to date although the paste of the vessel suggests an Early Classic period manufacture. The pit in the northeast is oval in shape and slightly larger than the first feature. It contained two highly eroded Aguila Orange flanged plates dated to the Early Classic period and a shell labret. The overall shape of the feature, combined with the labret suggests that at one point the pit contained a burial.

**Summary of Structure FA-8**

Excavation indicates that Structure FA-8 was initially designed as a traditional pyramid temple sub-structure, and that it retained this form throughout its two earliest known incarnations (FA-8-4\textsuperscript{th} and FA-8-3\textsuperscript{rd}). During its penultimate form it appears that the builders
Figure 5. Plan map of Structure FA-8-2nd.

Figure 6. Plan map of Structure FA-8-1st.
intended to retain the pyramid-temple form with the addition of a stairblock. These additions are well documented at neighboring sites such as Structure 9 at Blue Creek and Structure B-4 at Altun Ha, where they also were used to house burials and caches (Haines 1995; Pendergast 1982).

Structure FA-8 is also, in its final form, a round structure. The construction episode that created FA-8-1st is too large and too complex to be considered a ‘modification’. This construction involved the creation of a distinct platform almost one-third the height of the pyramid substructure behind it and nearly as wide. This platform shares the round structure characteristics found at Structure 9, at Nohmul (Chase and Chase 1982) and the three round structures identified in the Sibun area (Harrison-Buck and McAnany at BAAS 10 years ago).

It clearly isn’t either a pyramid-temple or a round structure, but rather an amalgamation of the two forms. The closest similar ‘amalgamation’ is Structure D in Sistema del Templo Mayor, Cempoala (Pollock 1936, Figure 36); however, in this case the round structure is appended to a rectangular, flat-topped platform of equal height with the staircase on the opposite side of the platform from the round building. By using the Daoist tenet “what is and isn’t produce each other” we are able to build a definitional dialect that allows us to state that Structure FA-8-1st currently seems to be unique in the lexicon of Maya architecture.

Conclusion

Our conclusions regarding this structure are based not only on the structure itself and its composition, but also its placement in the larger built landscape. We know that it was used for burials and contained at least three mortuary constructions. It is highly plausible that Structure FA-8-4th was also constructed to house a mortuary chamber. The consequential use of the structure for interments, coupled with its location adjacent to other temples with mortuary functions (Haines and Helmke 2016), supports the idea that Structure FA-8 was a lineage temple. The position of the structure on the acropolis also serves as a likely indicator that both the original pyramid structure, as well as the later building on top of the round platform, may have served as a locus for ancestor veneration rituals. The discrete building and distinctive nature of the addition may have been used as a means for the lineage who commissioned and used the building to differentiate themselves from other lineages or groups at Ka’kabish (see Hendon 2000). Regardless of its possibly use for crafting a familial identity, all of the other identified functions – mortuary, ritual, and ancestor veneration – fit with what we know about the purpose of both pyramid-temple and round structure architectural forms. However, we have found no evidence beyond the shape of the platform to securely connect the building to Ehecatl.

Our decision to present on this structure, despite the preliminary nature of our data was two-fold. First, we wanted to bring this odd form to the attention of the Maya archaeological community so that it could be added to the present lexicon on Maya architecture. This addition can thereby expand the conventions we use for conceptualising unexcavated structures. Second, we are hoping that by bringing this odd form forward for discussion that we might obtain help identifying other similar pyramid/round structure combinations or, conversely, securely ascertain the unusualness of this structure.

Through discussing this structure and the unusual process by which the ultimate form was achieved, we put forth the plausibility that Maya structures were not always built with considerable forethought. The grossly disproportionate nature of the original modification to the FA-8-2nd stairblock and the clear altering of the form from rectangular to round to salvage the visual design aesthetics of the buildings indicates a flexible and highly adaptive construction process, a behaviour not generally attributed to Maya architectural projects. As to why the ancient builders chose not to construct a complete pyramid temple, as had been the case for FA-3rd, to bring the building back into harmonious proportions remains unclear. As such a structure would have involved an extensive investment of labour and material, it is possible that the decision to not build another pyramid was related to larger issues of polity politics, lineage power, and/or
resource availability. What is clear is that Ka’kabish continues to yield as many perplexing questions as answers.

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