"THERE IS NO DEATH! WHAT SEEMS SO IS TRANSITION":
DIFFICULTIES IN IDENTIFYING POLITICAL BOUNDARIES
BETWEEN LAMANAI AND KA’KABISH

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The identification of social, cultural, and/or political boundaries has been long considered key aspect of archaeological research. In furtherance of this goal many approaches have been attempted ranging from the application of Thiessen polygons and drop-off density models, to the use of distinct assemblages as ethnic or regional markers. However, these models may impose an artificial and somewhat static approach to landscape occupation, failing to take into consideration shifting political alliances, and the changing fortunes of centres. This paper discusses the current difficulties in identifying the possible political boundary between Lamanai and Ka’kabish in light of new evidence regarding this region during the Classic period.

Introduction

The identification of boundaries, social, cultural, or political, has been long considered a key aspect of archaeological research. Consequently, many approaches have been advanced as a means for identifying boundaries; however, care must be exerted when using these models so that they do not concentrate on a single, or narrowly focused, point of time and space, and as such promote the image of static landscape occupation. These single ‘snapshots’, while useful for viewing particular moments in time, provide a limited view of the socio-political landscape and fail to illustrate shifting political alliances, the changing fortunes of centres, and the fluidity of populations that we now realize characterised much of ancient Maya history. To highlight these points, we will discuss the current difficulties we have experienced in trying to identify the possible political boundary between Lamanai and Ka’kabish.

Models of Analysis

Before beginning a discussion of the data, and the problems encountered, will we comment on the nature of identifying boundaries. In the Maya world, there are few anthropogenic markers of physical boundaries known; these include such things as the stela markers placed around the Copan valley (Fash 1991: 101; Martin and Grube 2008: 201; Webster 2002), walls around Mayapan (Hare and Masson 2012), and within the larger Tikal urban landscape (Webster et al. 2004), as well as the famous ditch, or moat, around Becan (Evans and Webster 2001: 435; Webster 1976). However, it should be noted that many of these may serve other functions, such as internal divisions or aguadas (see Hansen 1998: 87 Note 9) rather than polity markers and only the monumental valley markers of Copan include non-urban territory.

In the absence of physical cultural markers, or clear epigraphic references, researchers must resort to other methods to try and determine the possible locations of polity boundaries. As a review of all the methods that have been employed in the archaeological literature to assess boundaries would exceed the scope and purpose of our discussion, we will restrict our comments to three methods used in the Maya world (see Iannone 2006 for a fuller discussion). We will note how their application and subsequent inability to adequately resolve the issue of identifying a political boundary between Ka’kabish and Lamanai has left us still struggling for answers.

The first and most common means for identifying ties between sites is through assessment of the cultural material assemblage, both artefactually and architecturally. Similar assemblages, particularly of rare or unusual materials or features is seen to suggest ties between sites. The closer the correspondence the tighter the linkage. However, this method implies that entire assemblages can be identified or that structure forms can be clearly known, which requires extensive excavation and analysis.

Another method initially used for ancient Mesopotamian and Greek city-states but also
employed in the Maya world (Marcus 1987, 1993; Mathews 1991), is the creation of Thiessen polygons. These are defined mathematically by the bisection of a series of points so as to create an area of influence in which “any location inside the polygon is closer to that point than any of the other sample points” (ESRI.com). The idea behind this model is to identify not only the primary centre (or polis) but also the rural area that was linked to it, and likely interwoven into a reciprocal support network, based on Christaller’s central place model (see King 1984).

In Central Place Theory city arrangement relies on the idea of tiers, and makes the assumption that all the higher order central places are of similar size (big) with sites decreasing in size and services as one moves away from the centre (King 1984). This model relies on the identification of the primary centres or polity capitals, a debatable issue in its own right, but one beyond the focus of this paper, suffice-to-say that in Christaller’s (and many other’s) interpretations, primary generally equates to largest.

Marcus (1976), argued that by using emblem glyphs to reconstruct the relationships between sites we could achieve a hierarchical ranking more closely reflecting the original system of the ancient Maya, believing that the presence of an emblem glyph was indicative of a site’s status as a political capital. This concept was elaborated upon by Peter Mathews, in which he used Thiessen polygons to divide the Classic period Maya world into polities by correlating sites possessing emblem glyphs with primary centres (Mathews 1991).

This desire to recreate the ancient Maya landscape as the people themselves envisioned is an ideal goal but it is not without inherent problems. Most notable are the assumptions that if a site possessed an emblem glyph we would be able to identify it, and that sites without emblem glyphs were, “politically less important” (Marcus 1993). These assumptions fail to take into consideration the rampant looting that has occurred at many sites. An example of this conundrum is Site Q; known from monuments in museums, but lacking the archaeological provenience that comes with in situ artefacts, Site Q was cast adrift on the Maya landscape. It was only the discovery of a monument buried in a collapsed building at La Corona that allowed us to finally identify this Maya site (Camuto and Barrientos Q 2013: 2). In truth, one must wonder, if the monument at La Corona had not been buried would it too have fallen victim to looting? Thereby, leaving La Corona nameless and mute, consigned to the depths of insignificance in reconstructions of Maya history.

In using emblem glyphs as markers of polities or polity capitals we must also acknowledge the various issues involved in understanding their meaning and locations. Although generally considered toponymic in nature, the use of the Mutul (or Tikal) main sign in the emblem glyph of Dos Pilas (at a time when it was ruled by a lineage with ties to the Tikal royal family) raises questions as to possible dynastical or lineage bases to these symbols (Houston and Mathews 1985: 2). The exact nature, or intended meaning of these glyphs, as political, dynastic, or geographic designators has yet to be conclusively determined. We also must be cautious of identifying the site at which an emblem glyph is found as the home city of the glyph. We know from places such as Hatzcap Ceel that rulers from dominate centres sometimes erected monuments commemorating their victories or, in this case, recording their accessions, at subordinate centres (Martin and Grube 1995). As Chase notes (2004: 324), “no one-to-one correspondence between emblem glyph and polity can be assumed”.

Moreover, there are many emblem glyphs or site names that are found in the epigraphic record for which we have not been able to associate a site. In several of these cases, these sites are linked to rulers who are subordinate lords, suggesting that the conflation of emblem glyphs with polities is in error – although this may also be a matter of scale and autonomy rather than political boundaries, and the existence of political entities of varying size and degrees of autonomy based on socio-political context must be acknowledged.

At this point we wish to turn the discussion to another method used for identifying possible divisions between polities; that of population drop-off models. This method
is based on the idea that settlement boundaries may be identified by the “incremental fall-off in habitation density” (Levi 1993:33), with the common practice being to demarcate boundaries between polities at the point with the lowest occupation (or no-occupation) density. This method had been used successfully in the Three Rivers Region, with a 1994 study finding that at both Dos Hombres and La Milpa settlement seems to drop off after 5km from the sites, with the 10 km diameter radius around the sites forming the sustaining areas (Robichaux 1995; Tourtellot et al. 2003; see also Healy et al. 2007:24). However, it has been noted that settlement patterns do not necessarily fall into evenly dispersed suburban residences, but rather often cluster into groupings of varying sizes, some with prominent architecture, leading Bullard to hypothesize on the existence of a ‘rural nobility’. The dispersed nature of settlement clusters, and presence of larger residences and sometimes small civic-ceremonial buildings in these outlying areas makes the identification of community and polity boundaries extremely difficult (Rice and Culbert 1990).

Geography

Turning our attention northward to Lamanai and Ka’kabish, these two sites are situated in North-central Belize to the north-west of the New River Lagoon. Lamanai occupies a point along the northwest banks of the New River Lagoon, near the headwaters of the New River, and is currently the largest known site in the area (Andres 2005).

Ka’kabish is located on a rise a further 10 km inland along a north-westerly track and although initially identified as a small site with only 21 known structures (Guderjan 1996), it is currently known to have had at least 104 structures arranged in 10 plazas and/or courtyards of varying sizes (Jamik 2012). Evidence suggests the site likely encompassed a much larger number of structures, all now fallen to agricultural clearing. This distance between the two sites corresponds with that identified for sites in the Belize River Valley to the southeast (9.9 km [Driver and Garber 2004]) and the north-eastern Petén to the west (10.4 km [Hammond 1974:325]) significantly less than the 26 km identified by Harrison for the Quintana Roo area to the north (Harrison 1981).

Both Ka’kabish and Lamanai share a similar chronological history. Radiocarbon dates from corn confirm that settlement at Lamanai existed as early as 1500 BC (White 1997: 173), however, the earliest ceramics date much later, in the late Middle Formative period (600-400 BC). This late Middle Formative Mesh Complex (600-400 BC) is represented by one burial and a sparse collection of ceramics and, according to Powis “does not constitute a functionally complete ceramic complex” (Powis 2002: 502). The first functional complex at Lamanai (Lag) dates to the succeeding Late Formative (400-100 BC) (Powis 2002). Ceramic material from Ka’kabish, however, predates both of these complexes, coming from the early Middle Formative period (ca. 800-600 BC). This Mormoops complex, which is also supported by radiocarbon data, forms a complete complex (Sagebiel and Haines 2015). Occupation at Lamanai continues from the Formative period through the Post-Classic and into the Colonial period (Graham 1987, 2004, 2011; Graham et al. 1989). At Ka’kabish occupation continues from the Formative period, with a hiatus in occupation in the early Late Classic period, but resumes in the Terminal Classic and continues into the Post-Classic period (Sagebiel and Haines 2015).

In his 1991 work Mathews, based on the presence of an emblem glyph at Lamanai on Stela 9, envisioned Lamanai at the centre of a polity. The proximity of the sites, similar chronology, along with other elements to be elaborated upon below, suggest that the two sites were likely in contact and probably linked for at least a portion of their history. The questions therefore become: when were they linked? And, how, or what form, did this connection take? Also, did a boundary, whether it be political, social, or psychological, even exist between the two sites? And if so, can it be identified archaeologically?

Key Points & Material Evidence

The first question – when were they linked – emphasizes the recent work on the Classic period (AD 250-900) that has indicated that power structures, rather than being statically
inscribed upon the landscape, were dynamic entities that fluctuated as communities competed to establish, maintain, and regain power and territorial control (Demarest 1993, 1997; Demarest et al. 1997; Driver and Garber 2004; Estrada-Belli 2011; Hansen and Guenter 2005; Houk and Valdez 2011; Iannone 2004, 2005; Reese-Taylor and Koontz 2001; Stuart and Stuart 2008). Over the past several decades, archaeological research has severely altered our concept of the Maya political landscape; initially perceived as being a few large polities (Adams 1981, 1986), we now know it contained many polities of varying size (Culbert 1991; Demarest 1990, 1997; Martin and Grube 1996, 2008; Mathews 1991). We also know that many sites, either willingly through heterarchical alliances or unwillingly through conquest, were dominated by other cities for periods of their history (Martin and Grube 2008). Consequently, the idea that Maya polities were flexible, with periods of coalescence and fragmentation (Marcus 1992, 1993), is well documented (Demarest 1993, 1997; Estrada-Belli 2011; Hansen and Guenter 2005; Iannone 2004, 2005; LeCount et al. 2002; Martin and Grube 2008; Palka 1997).

Ceramic Evidence

Ceramically, both sites are quite similar starting in the latter part of the Middle Formative (600-400 BC). Both the Mesh complex at Lamanai and the Noctilio complex at Ka’kabish (600-400 BC) contain Joventud Red, Chunhinta Black, and Guitarra Incised wares (Sagebiel and Haines 2015; Powis 2002:502); however, at Ka’kabish, Richardson Peak, Pital, Muxanal, and Chicago groups also are present (Sagebiel and Haines 2015). It should be noted that the absence of these groups at Lamanai may be a factor of the small sample recovered.

The succeeding Late Formative period at Lamanai has been divided into three complexes, the Lag (400-100 BC), the Zotz-early facet (100 BC-AD 150), and the Zotz-late facet (AD 150-250). At Ka’kabish we have yet to refine our ceramic chronology to this extent and our Late Formative complex is all designated as the Rhogessa complex (400 BC-AD 250/300). Like their preceding complexes, there are distinct similarities in types present in the ceramic assemblages from the two sites (i.e., Cabro Red, Flor Cream, Lechugál Incised, Polvero Black, Alta Mira Fluted, Laguna Verde, Puletan Red-and-unslipped, Largartos Punctated, Sierra Red varieties, and Society Hall Red). There also are marked differences, with Powis (2002:88-90) identifying Accordian Incised, Ciego Composite, Quacco Creek Red, Guacamallo Red-on-Cream, Liscanal Grooved-incised, Pahote Punctated, Monkey Falls Striated, and Chahmah Washed sherds in the assemblages from Lamanai. While at Ka’kabish Sagebiel has identified material belonging to the Rio Bravo Red, Repasto Black-on-Red, Repollo Impressed, and Chicago Orange types (Sagebiel and Haines 2015). Thus showing that, while the inhabitants at both sites are participating in the Chicanel ceramic sphere, both communities are exhibiting some differences in type preferences.

Ties to the Central Petén in the Early Classic, or perhaps to the wider regional influences, are also noted in the ceramic assemblage at Ka’kabish where cast-off mortuary goods were left behind by the looters, because they were either broken or monochrome; these included several black Central Mexican, or Teotihuacan-style, slab-footed vases (Balanza Black). Only one such vessel was recovered at Lamanai, this being from the woman’s tomb (N9-53/1) in the Mask Temple (N9-56) (Pendergast 1981a:97; Powis 2002: 518). While one can speculate that this implies Ka’kabish had stronger ties to the Central Petén, it does not rule out links between Ka’kabish and Lamanai, particularly when one examines the mortuary architecture of the Woman’s Tomb and a second similar tomb (N9-56/1) also found at the Mask Temple.

Mortuary Architecture

It is with the examination of the Classic period components, particularly in regards to mortuary architecture, that things become noticeably odd and the questions of autonomous or unified polities truly emerges. At Ka’kabish, rampant looting, starting in the 1980s, has exposed many tombs. While the mortuary goods are almost completely absent in the majority of the cases, non-valued items (i.e., broken vessels [polychromes and monochrome], obsidian blades), carelessly missed pieces (i.e., small jade
beads), and, of course the mortuary architecture itself remains.

It is with the mortuary architecture that we have our most striking evidence of high-status elites at both sites. Although both Lamanai and Ka’kabish have strong Early Classic components, and high-status graves exist at both centres during this period, only at Ka’kabish do we find tombs that are corbel vaulted. While the length of these tombs remains relatively consistent at just over 3 metres (actual measurements range from 3.18 to 3.3 metres), they vary more extensively in both width, from a mere 0.96 m to 1.4 metres wide, as well as height, ranging from 1.27 m to 2.25 metres. The largest and most elaborate of these vaulted burial chambers is Tomb FA-6/1, dated to the late 5th century, which had red painted walls decorated with darker red glyphs (Haines and Helmke n.d.; Helmke 2011), and a passageway leading 2.5 metres to the west. Passage tombs of this type have been documented in the Central Petén (Guitera 2012: pers. comm.) and also at Caracol (Chase and Chase 1987: 26, 1994, 1996) and Minanha (Iannone 2005: 32), and ties to the Central Petén were noted in the cast-off ceramic mortuary assemblages at Ka’Kabish and in the Woman’s tomb at Lamanai mentioned above.

The Woman’s Tomb (N9-53/1), along with that of the male burial in the Mask Temple (N9-56/1) appear to have been constructed using a wooden hooped framework (now decayed) that was placed over the body and covered in fabric and layers of plaster to create a domed space around the individual. Pendergast described this mortuary construction as forming a “cocoon-like chamber” (Pendergast 1981b: 39), and, based on the associated ceramics, dated them to the beginning of the 6th century AD (Pendergast 1981b: 38). To date only three tombs using this type of hooped-frame construction have been reported, the two previously mentioned at N9-56 at Lamanai and one from Structure D-5 at Ka’kabish (Tomb D-5/1) (Haines 2008).

Further linking these tombs, or their occupants together, are similar ceramic polychrome plates which were recovered from all three tombs. However, petrographic analysis conducted by Howie has revealed most conclusively that the example from the tomb at Ka’kabish was not made by Lamanai potters.

Not only is it compositionally different, having feldspar and igneous rock fragments indicative of the Mountain Pine Ridge Area, but it is also technologically different from those at Lamanai, specifically the how the slip pigment was produced. Scanning electron microscopy also has revealed differences in firing methods and decorative and surface treatment techniques. From a Type-Variety perspective, these dishes present an interesting challenge. Although at Lamanai vessel types change, they are all part of the same tradition of local manufacture. The Ka’kabish tomb dish is very interesting in that it indicates that there were other producers of these polychrome dishes, and that these different producers had distinctive approaches to making dishes that are strikingly visually similar. All we can say for sure at the moment, is the Ka’kabish dish, while visually similar to those from Lamanai, and coming from a tomb whose design and construction is unique to the Lamanai/Ka’kabish area, is most certainly not made by the same potters as the Lamanai examples. As the cultural material assemblages, both artefactually and architecturally, show strong signs of both similarities and differences using them as criteria by which to judge polity association is inconclusive at best, a headache at worst!

**Hiatuses and Hieroglyphs**

The history of interaction between the two sites becomes perhaps slightly less foggy in the Late Classic period, although this is largely because we have yet to find anything dating to the early Late Classic at Ka’kabish. It appears that Ka’kabish suffered an occupational hiatus between the start of the Late Classic period and the Terminal Classic period (ca. AD 600-800). Speculation as to the reason for this hiatus may provide our strongest evidence that these two sites were combined into a single polity during this time.

A possible reason for the hiatus at Ka’kabish can be found on Stela 9 at Lamanai. This monument, erected in AD 625 by K’ahk’ Yipi Chon Yopaat declares him to be an elk’in kaloomte’ and a k’uhul ajaw. The title, k’uhul ajaw, implies that the individual is the ‘divine lord’ of what always has been assumed to be Lamanai (Closs 1988; Simon Martin, pers.
However, according to Martin, lack of comparative epigraphic information makes this attribution open to question and it is also possible that K’ahk’ Yipiy Chan Yopaat is from another, yet undetermined, centre.

It should be noted that, unlike in the Late Classic period when the title became more widespread and one could argue debased, during the Early Classic period the title of kaloomte’ was denoted an especially high rank attributed to only a few rulers (Simon Martin, pers. comm. 2012). Loosely translated as ‘overlord’ or ‘high king’, the term kaloomte’ is interpreted as referring to a paramount position, one above that of “divine lord” (Freidel et al. 2007:200; Stuart 2000:486-487; Wren and Nygard 2005:173), and it is associated with either a military conqueror or political leader of a hegemony.

The use of the term elk’in, a geographical designation meaning east, suggests that the individual was claiming to be the “high ruler of the eastern quarter” (Graham 2016:206). Although whether this claim to dominance is based on military activity or political, economic, or marital alliances, including the nearby site of Ka’kabish, is a debate for another time. What is clear is that at the end of the Early Classic period (ca. AD 600) the distribution of power in the region appears to shift, with Ka’kabish waning and Lamanai if not exactly ascending, then at least holding steady, and possibly becoming the centre of a polity as envisioned by Mathews (1991). It should be noted that Lamanai, rather than flourishing as one might expect, also exhibits a lull in construction with efforts being focused on façade remodelling as opposed to completely rebuilding structures (Pendergast 1992:73).

If this larger ‘eastern’ polity, consisting of a merged Lamanai and Ka’kabish, existed, its duration was potentially short-lived, as in the early 9th century Stela 9 was destroyed and Ka’kabish and Lamanai are revitalised. The resumption of activity at Ka’kabish not only includes occupational evidence but also refurbishing of the front of the main temple, Structure D-4 (Bob). What is also of interest is that this flurry of activity continues into the Post-Classic period. Recent ceramic evidence uncovered this year from a chultun immediately south of Group D, suggests that occupation at Ka’kabish possibly continued into the Late Post-Classic period. This burial contained a miniature vulture vessel similar to the Late Post-Classic vessels from Santa Rita Corozal, along with two other copper objects – a plain ring and a small pair of ‘tweezers’, similar to, but much smaller than those found in The Loving Couple Burial at Lamanai which we believe also dates to the Late Post-Classic period (Pendergast 1989).

A nearby chultun excavated in previous years also yielded a wealth of copper objects, including 9 complete or fragments of rings and 32 bells of various forms (Gonzalez 2013). While numerous visually similar copper objects were found at Lamanai, XRF analysis of the materials from both sites conducted by Dr. Aaron Shugar has revealed that, like the cocoon-tomb plates, similar appearances does not mean similar compositions. Shugar has found that several of the Ka’kabish objects have unique elemental compositions suggesting that, at least, they were not the result of a ‘trickle-down’ redistribution model but separate production runs, and that at the most, Ka’kabish was tied into different trading or trader networks (Shugar 2015 pers. comm.).

Population Density and Drop-off Models

In regards to the issue of population density and drop-off models it appears that the 5 km drop-off point noted for Dos Hombres and La Milpa does not apply to Ka’kabish and Lamanai. Not only are the two sites only 10 km apart, the 5 km midway point between them is marked by a small centre identified as Coco Chan (Baker 1995) and considerable rural residential mounds, identified as Chomokeil (Patterson 2008), the latter made easily visible by the clearing and ploughing activities of the area Mennonites. Although work on a systematic transect between the two centres is still on-going the intervening areas between Coco Chan and both Ka’kabish and Lamanai appear to be unevenly taken up by either residential groupings of varying sizes and densities and empty areas (McLellan 2012). McLellan, in his survey of the settlement area, has noted that the areas where occupation is lacking seem to be the wettest or most easily flooded (McLellan pers. comm.), and that these empty areas are often adjacent to other, drier and...
more densely occupied areas. It is tempting to suggest that these ‘vacant areas’ may have been used for milpas or arboriculture but without intensive hydrological and soil studies the actual original use of these areas remains unknown, and while these vacant areas may help us identify small rural community boundaries they do nothing to aid us in understanding possible polity boundaries between Ka’kabish and Lamanai.

**Summary**

In summary, our work at Lamanai and Ka’kabish suggests that none of the models presented — similar assemblages, Christaller’s Central Place, the use of thiessen polygons based on emblem glyphs, or population drop-off models — have proven effective. There were obviously boundaries, in that people probably paid taxes and owed allegiance to one lord rather than another, however, understanding the existences of, or division between potential polities is much more complicated than alluded to by these models. The case of Central Place theory, which relies on the identification of the largest site in the region, and assumption that it is therefore the capital, presents the problem in that we don’t know how large Ka’kabish was.

As for relying on emblem glyphs to define polities, while attempting to recreate the ancient Maya landscape as the people themselves envisioned is an ideal goal, it too is not without its inherent problems. Ka’kabish has been the subject of rampant looting for almost three decades and anecdotal accounts among the villagers in the area report carved stele being hauled away. Moreover, two uncarved stela have been found on the site which may have once been painted. As such it is possible that an emblem glyph may have been present at Ka’kabish, but we have yet to find evidence of it. It is also possible that the undeciphered emblem glyph at Lamanai on Stela 9 is actually that for Ka’kabish, or possibly used by both like Tikal and Dos Pilas. It is also possible that the emblem glyph belonged to neither Lamanai nor Ka’kabish but is from a third centre whose ruler conquered both cities.

As noted population drop-off models are proving equally unhelpful in identifying a polity boundary. Not only are we encountering difficulties in identifying clear points of population decline, the settlement zone appears particularly long-lived and identifying possibly earlier components of some later residences is challenging due to the underlying sediments – which in some places is over a metre of dense black clay (McLellan 2015 pers. comm.). Consequently, identifying fluctuations and or changes in the occupation of the settlement zone is difficult and time consuming.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, we would like to confess that when it comes to explaining the relationships between Ka’kabish and Lamanai we are presenting more questions than we are answering. It is clear that the issue of defining relationships, let alone political boundaries cannot be based on a single, or limited set of variables, but rather, as Chase notes, a multitude of variables is required, including “ceramics, architectural plans, settlement layouts, burial practices, epigraphy, and the distribution of certain goods and features” (Chase 2004: 325). Moreover, as the increasing corpus of research over the past decades has shown, these polities, when identifiable, were flexible, dynamic entities, fluctuating in size, political power and influence, and even autonomy as the centuries rolled past.

It also needs to be recognised that a geopolitical boundary “does not necessarily identify the boundaries of social, political, or economic interaction” (Chase 2004:323). Rather we need to acknowledge that the lived experience of the people occupying these sites may have meant that they conceptualised their sense of belonging, and therefore their interactions, quite differently from what we might perceive, or even what was politically mandated. This is particularly true if one considers that identity can change depending on the situation ranging from broad to quite narrow definitions of affiliations (i.e., how a person might explain their identity to someone within their own neighborhood or small community versus how they might identify themselves to someone from another, or distant, city); each context carries with it a distinct level of integration and degree of participation, and which type of explanation a person chooses to use encodes different social
information. It should also be noted that in many cases personal identity and socio-political ties are not always congruent due to cross-boundary kinship ties. Something that also may have happened in the ancient Maya world, between the communities in the settlement areas at a greater distant from the city centre.

While we may never know the exact nuances of the relationship between Ka’kabish and Lamanai, we can draw several new conclusions about the political landscape of this area of north-central Belize. The archaeological evidence indicates that both sites flourished during the Late Formative period (400 BC-AD 250), and established themselves as autonomous political entities, each likely sporting their own elite rulers during the Early Classic period. At the end of the Early Classic period (ca. AD 600) the distribution of power in the region appears to shift, with Ka’kabish waning and all monumental construction, and perhaps even occupation, ceasing throughout the Late Classic period (AD 600-800). During this period, activity at Lamanai continues, albeit at a reduced pace, and it appears to become the dominant centre for the area, and possibly the polity capital. Monumental construction at Ka’kabish resumes during the Terminal Classic and Early Post-Classic periods (AD 800-900) before ceasing completely by the beginning of the 11th century. A flurry of construction activity also is noted at Lamanai in the Ottawa Group (N10-3) during the same period (Graham 2004: 224). Occupation at Ka’kabish and Lamanai continues throughout the Post-Classic period, as does their engagement in trade networks. While occupation at Lamanai continues into the Colonial period, occupation at Ka’kabish, as far as we know, does not, and current evidence suggests the site was abandoned by the end of the 15th century.

And so, when it comes to the fluctuating histories of ancient Maya sites what you see is that “There is no death! What seems so is transition” (Longfellow Resignation 17). North-central Belize was a dynamic area where cities were created, grew, merged, and separated – assuming new forms through time on an ever changing political landscape.

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