

KA'KABISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT BELIZE SUMMER 2022

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In one of the many conversations I had with my professor Dr. Kerry Sagebiel (who is also the co-director of this project), I expressed to her my anxiousness of traveling out of the country by myself for the first time. Primarily was the concern that I would get lost in the airport once I arrived in Belize, which she casually brushed off. Upon my arrival though, I could see why she responded that way. When the plane landed on the tarmac and a metal staircase was rolled to the main door, all I had to do was follow the crowd, all headed in the same direction. There was only one way to go, since the airport was so small that planes could only stay a couple of hours before they took off again.

After following the crowd, going past immigration and customs, and grabbing my luggage, I stepped out into the sweltering afternoon. I quickly found the director, Dr. Helen Haines, holding a sign with Ka'Kabish written on it. She directed me towards a small group of four students and I made my way over. It was a bit nerve-wracking because the rest of the students on this project already knew each other, being from the same university and same department, and I would be the newcomer. However, this also presented an opportunity to meet other archaeologists. And towards the end, we did end up becoming close (living in close quarters for a month tends to do that). It was a small group, a total of about seven students, and two professors (Dr. Haines and Dr. Newton, a bioarcheologist). There were about 18 undergraduate students expected to come, but because of some complications at the university, they did not join for this field season. We were also expected to have more professors join, but they were not able to make it. Although it was a small group, I think it was precisely this that allowed us all to get to know each other better and make for a more easily manageable group.



In Belize, we stayed at Indian Church Village, which as the name implies, is a small village with a population of about 250. The ride from Philip Goldson Airport where we arrived at to the village was a little over 2 hours. Our driver was actually a resident of the village and a longtime friend of Dr. Haines. His name is Jaime, and he also worked on the project with us along with a

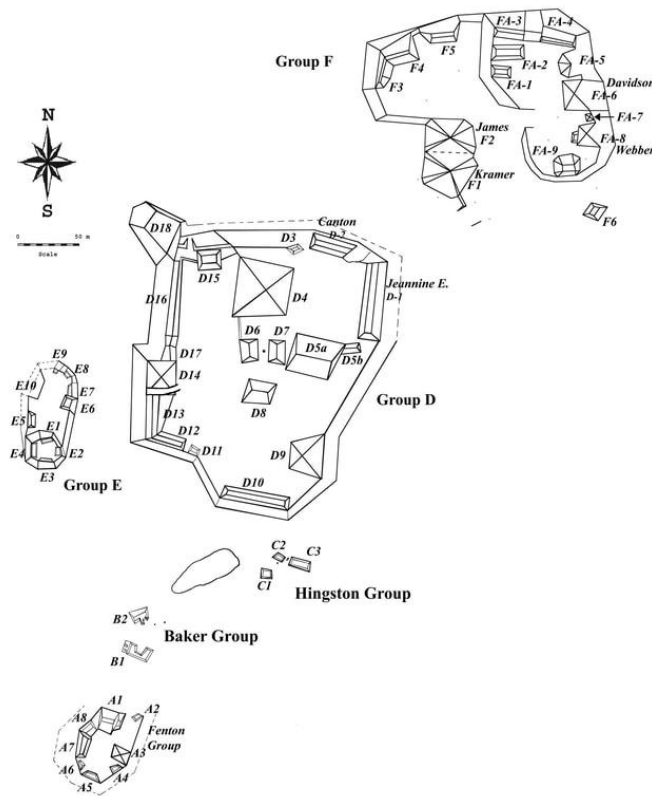
couple of other men from the village. Because nobody had been out to the site for two years since COVID, the paths were cleared by Jaime and the men. Dr. Haines also flew out from Canada a couple of weeks before we arrived to make sure everything was in order. Upon arrival at Indian Church, some of us were dropped off at the



Gonzalez Guest House, owned by the Gonzalez family. The Gonzalez family is the largest family in the village and they own the guest house where we stayed at. The room where I stayed in had 3 beds, one larger bed and one bunk bed. We had our own bathroom with running cold water and a fan, definitely a luxury with the hot temperatures! On the same property was a *palapa*, with three hammocks in it. The *palapa* had a thatch roof made of large palm leaves. Although traditionally it is open on the sides, the owners had placed mesh along the sides, therefore still allowing a breeze to pass through but protecting against insects.

Our schedule consisted of getting up around 6, eating breakfast at 7 and heading out in order to be at the site by 8. This was our routine Monday thru Friday for 4 weeks. We ate breakfast at one of the local places in the village, owned by a group of women and got to eat some authentic Belizean food. The site was a short drive away, about 20 minutes from the village and one of the few spaces of green left in the area. The rest has been converted to farmland.

A bit of background on the work done at the site – it was identified by Dr. David Pendergast in the late 1980’s while he was working at Lamanai, a larger site about six miles away. A couple of years later around the mid 1990’s, archaeologists from the Maya Research Program, a nonprofit organization that sponsors archaeological and ethnographic research, visited the Ka’Kabish site and created a map which documented about 27 structures (Ka’Kabish Archaeological Research Project, *Site Summary*). In 2007, the Ka’Kabish Archaeological



Research Project (KARP) was founded with the goal of remapping the site, and in the past years, over 100 structures have been documented, with excavations beginning in 2010. The site is bisected by a road that runs between Group F and Group D (pictured on the map to the left), and although this has greatly facilitated travel and connected the small village of Indian Church to the larger city of San Felipe, it has also opened the site to looting.

Ka’Kabish was founded around the Middle Pre-Classic period and flourished around the Early Classic period, becoming a pivotal center for regional trade networks (Ka’Kabish

Archaeological Research Project, *Site Summary*). This was evidenced by many pieces of marine shell beads that we found at the site (pictured to the left), as well as caches of jade and pieces of obsidian found in previous years. There have also been ceramic vessels recovered similar in style to ones found in Central Peten.



Many of the structures at Ka'Kabish were built during the Early Classic period, with construction ceasing for the most part towards the end of this period. There is strong evidence suggesting this was due to a military conquest. In the nearby site of Lamanai, Stela 9 (right) shows an individual wearing a headdress, declaring himself *Kaloomte'* (Overlord) of the region, and the destruction of this Stela coincided with the resumption of activity at Ka'Kabish



(Ka'Kabish Archaeological Research Project, *Site Summary*).

When the transition from Classic to Post-Classic happened (AD 900-1500), it “has often been misidentified as the ‘collapse of the classic Maya civilization,’ but researchers have found that different regions varied in their responses to changes happening towards the late Classic period (environmental degradation and changing ecological systems, competition, warfare, etc.) (Ka'Kabish Archaeological Research Project, *Site Summary*). There were sites in Belize that failed suddenly (Altun Ha) or were purposefully abandoned (Dos Hombres), and even some that were reoccupied, although they were all at a much smaller scale than Lamani or Ka'Kabish. Which is why the site of Ka'Kabish is important in shaping our understanding of the politics during the Classic and Post-Classic period in the region of north-central Belize. Other than most of the research on the Post-Classic period centering on the Central Peten Area, before the discovery of Ka'Kabish, it was believed Lamanai was the only site to have survived the transition between the Classic and Post-Classic period without an abandonment period; Ka'Kabish not only survived, but continued to flourish and grow into the Post-Classic period (evidenced by discovery of copper objects and importation of ceramics and obsidian) (Ka'Kabish Archaeological Research Project, *Site Summary*).

For this field season, originally, I was going to be helping out PhD student Tamara Moore on her excavation of a potential E-Group. E-groups are typically long platforms that face a pyramid across a plaza. They are believed to serve as calendars or observatories. Her research centers on questioning “the prevalence of a certain kind of arrangement that archaeologists have named, defined, and reported at multiple sites that have not then been verified through thorough excavation” (UCL Institute of Archaeology Research Students, *Tamara Moore*). When we



arrived and after a short walk (lower right is an image of us hiking through the jungle), we set up camp under a tarp (left) and split into two three groups. One group would work on structure D1, a potential E-group (my group); the second group at the Ballcourt; and the third group hiked the farthest in order to work on one of the Chultunes, underground storage chambers. We started by placing 2 stakes, one at each end, in order to measure the length of the structure. The length was about 60.8 meters. We also took a look at 4 looters trenches and cleared some backfill. Any ceramic sherds we found were bagged and tagged.

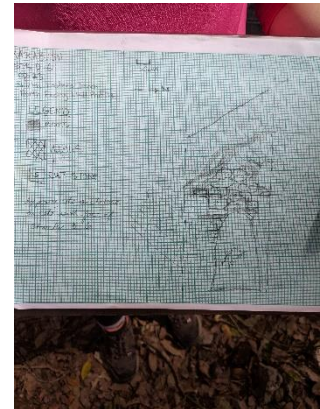


The next day, we resumed work on D1, but when lunchtime came around, major changes were made. Our field season was supposed to last about 6 weeks, but due to unforeseen personal circumstances, our project director had to leave early. This meant cutting our season short, hence the 4 week duration. Dr. Haines still wanted to give us some experience as well as make sure that all the MA students were able to get the data they needed to complete their theses. Because we were a smaller group, the remainder of the field season was supervised by Tamara and Dr. Newton. Due to the shortened timeline, Tamara decided to postpone her research on E-Groups, which meant our group would join the Ballcourt group. This was where I spent a large part of my time.

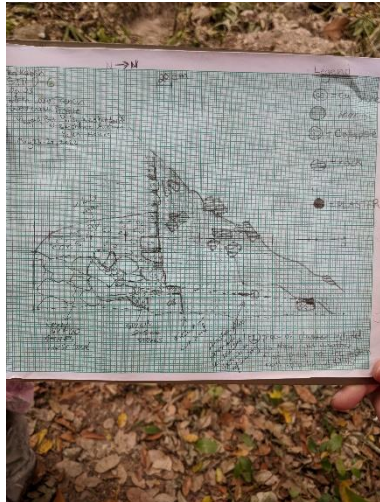


The ballcourt area had a couple of looter's trenches. Stephanie (another student) and I were assigned the north looters trench. Our goal was to map the slope of the trench. We set up our base line and mapped most of it, as well as some of the more pronounced cut stones. It took us the better part of the day. It was my first time mapping and I really appreciate the patience everyone had while teaching me. It was frustrating at first, and the

sun beating down on us as well as the humidity and heat did not help. But, the more I did it, the more I understood how to map. Therefore, it was pretty upsetting when we returned to the site and found that our toolbox was stolen. In it were some ceramic sherds that had been found, pick axes, measuring



Map of Front of Looters Trench



tapes, and as luck would have it, our map. We had to start mapping all over again, but on the bright side I was able to get more practice in. We also did a profile map of the west wall and part of the inside of the trench (pictured on the left). Once the north looters trench was mapped, I went with Tamara to map the western looter's trench. This was done fairly quickly.



We found some in situ ceramics and the remnants of a plaster floor (right).

After mapping, Stephanie and I were assigned to the Chultun group. It was here that I spent the remainder of the field school season. This particular Chultun had two chambers, B-1 and B-2 (Chultun entrance pictured to the left). B-1 had already been excavated in a previous field season. We worked on B-2 for this season. We hauled buckets up to clear all the soil and looked for any changes in color. We also mapped the inside of the chamber (right-side image of me in the Chultun, squinting because of the sunlight hitting my face). Masks were required when we went inside of the chamber because of the bat guano. For the most part, I was in charge of screening the buckets of soil that came up, which gave me practice in identifying lithics and looking for sherds. We collected any ceramics, lithics, bone, obsidian, and carbon. We bagged and tagged them depending on the level and cluster they were found in. We also found a mostly intact vessel! When we found ceramics or large clusters, we mapped them and this took up a considerable amount of time because there were lots of them.



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Inside of Chultun

There were days when it was really hot, which meant we would only spend a maximum of 15 minutes in the Chultun since it was hotter inside. There was one occasion where a storm took us by surprise. It was raining so hard that the Chultun started flooding with two of the students inside who were mapping the large vessel! We got them out as fast as we could and covered most of the ceramics still inside the





Our screening station at the Chultun

Chultun with plastic, but it was flooded for a couple of days, which delayed us. For those days when it rained and part of the afternoons, we did lab work, which entailed mostly cleaning the ceramics, identifying the bones found and sorting them, as well as organizing the bags of ceramics and lithics found from previous years. Although our field director was not here for most of the time we were in Belize, she still called in to check on our progress and to check in with us individually. This field school helped solidify my decision to go into the field of archaeology, and I certainly left with more knowledge than I came in with.

This entire experience made me realize the importance of adaptability. In archaeology, we can go in with a set plan and timeline, however, there is no guarantee that everything will come out just as planned. There were several days where we were delayed due to constant downpour, one where our kit box was stolen, having unexpected visitors show up at the site, and of course, our own personal lives can change our plans. Which is why we have to be flexible and make the most of the situations we find ourselves in.



Rim of a large vessel found in Chultun



Another factor that I would like to highlight is the importance of collaborating with the community and establishing connections. Dr. Haines has spent a considerable amount of time in Belize, specifically in the community of Indian Church, owns a home here, and is practically one of the villagers. She has a solid relationship with them. Although there were village members who helped out on the site, we also interacted with the residents outside of the field. We helped out in building a basketball court, ate at their restaurants, and were even invited to the local church for a communion! Other than the benefits we obtained of learning more about Belizean culture, including the locals and informing them of what we do at Ka'Kabish can help foster a connection between them and sense of pride. This is important because if residents can “be encouraged to empathize with the experiences of the ancient inhabitants...then they may gain an appreciation for the heritage resources below their feet and strive to protect them” (Wright 2015). In this case, residents can become stewards, protecting the site from becoming farmland and from looting, which has seen and increase. An example is the Actun Tunichil Muknal (ATM) cave located close to San Ignacio, Belize. The cave is mostly intact, with the majority of artifacts found still inside the cave, along with human remains. Despite being discovered by archaeologists around the late 1980's, looting rarely happens. There are no security guards at the entrance, but the residents nearby protect the cave themselves because it is part of their heritage and a source of pride.

This has truly been an unforgettable experience. I also realize that this is not an opportunity that everyone gets. Although field schools are a crucial step for any aspiring archaeologist, the costs are high. Which is why I want to thank the AIA for making this possible for me. It is through scholarships such as this that students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color, have entered the field and continued to grow and contribute to our knowledge of archaeology. Thank you again.



Dr. Sagebiel sorting sherds

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