

Ancient Ballgames of Mesoamerica

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When the Spanish first sailed to Latin America they found several large, well organized civilizations occupying the land. In the late 1500s several Spanish accounts describe a game played by the native peoples of Mesoamerica. Their interest in the game arose from a bouncing hard ball. Franciscan monk, Fray Toribio de Benavente, stated that “the balls of this land are very heavy, and the Indians run and jump so much that it is as if the balls have quicksilver within.”¹⁶² Pedro Martir de Angleria Spanish royal historian from 1520-1526, wrote that “I don’t understand how when the balls hit the ground they are sent into the air with such incredible bounce.”¹⁶³

The Mesoamericans played the game on a ballcourt designed to correlate with their religious and astronomic beliefs. Even the most insignificant items, such as the equipment worn by the players, had specific meaning. These games were more than just a sport. The ballgame could replace full-scale war, determining the winner of a conflict, based solely on the outcome of the game. The games signified important forms of both entertainment and ritual, in which lives and honor were gambled along with money and material goods. The losers of the game were expected to die with honor; and crying and begging for their lives was unthinkable. The idea of the losers’ honor, how they portrayed themselves as they died, remained of great import in the minds of the Mesoamerican people. The ballgames incorporated religious beliefs about immortals, creation, and various myths, to formulate the rules and traditions of the game. These games proved an important part of Mesoamerican culture.¹⁶⁴

Types of Ballcourts

Masonry courts were only built in the largest cities and the main trading centers. The upper class built ballcourts near ceremonial locations or markets. Various types of courts were found in large and smaller cities throughout Mesoamerica. Ballcourts were often “I” shaped, with two tall structures forming the top and bottom lines of a letter “I.” However, there were simple linear courts, which did not have the “I” shaped structures.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² “Explore the ballgame.” An online educational companion to the traveling exhibition of The Sport of Life and Death: The Mesoamerican Ballgames. <http://www.ballgame.org>.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Mary Ellen Miller, “The Ballgame.” Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University 48 (1989): 22.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

The Ballgame

Scoring depended on the game. There were several rings which, like basketball, could give the team points when participants threw the ball through them. In some places, corncobs were used to keep track of points; whoever had the most at the end won.¹⁶⁶ However, if participants threw the ball through a ring mounted on the wall of the court, immediate victory would result.

Both young and adult men played the game, and, on the ballcourt, class divisions disappeared.¹⁶⁷ When on the field the men were equal. The teams would consist of “teams of two, three, and occasionally as many as nine to eleven players.”¹⁶⁸ Usually, they played in two teams of two.¹⁶⁹ Various rules governed the ways in which the players could touch the ball. Players could use only the buttocks, hips and knees to hit the ball. The restricted means of striking the ball lent the game the name hip ball.

Many Mesoamerican myths talk about dividing the body into upper and lower parts. The ball could only be hit where these two parts connected. At this connection, players often wore a yoke, which separated these two parts, and was believed to put a player in and out of the Underworld at the same time. The courts themselves were usually divided into two or four parts, representing the two or four divisions of the body, constellations, or the four parts of earth. Furthermore, this separation was represented in the courts between the north nations, the sun, and the southern nations, the moon.

One group of people went a step further and incorporated this division to the initiation of boys. The Apinaye of South America held the games for boys undergoing their initiation into adulthood.¹⁷⁰

Equipment of Ancient Ballgames

According to tradition, when the Hero Twins fought the gods, in the Underworld, they only used what items they had from the living world. Depending on the variation of each region's myths, these items became the role for the equipment used in the Mesoamerican ballcourts. The sort of clothing and equipment used, even the ball, varied by region. Most of these items no longer exist and their exact use and significance is not clear. Yet, there are some clues in the form of figurines, found in excavations, and depicted in written documents. Some figurines have protective gear on, such as “a yoke at waist, a wrap on the left hand, and a pad on the left knee

¹⁶⁶ John Gerard Fox, “Playing with Power: Ballcourts and Political Ritual in Southern Mesoamerica.” *Current Anthropology* 37 (June 1996): 493.

¹⁶⁷ Vernon Scarborough and David Wilcox, *The Mesoamerican Ballgame* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991): 9.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁶⁹ Miller, 22.

¹⁷⁰ Scarborough and Wilcox, 328.

onto which they would fall when striking the ball.”¹⁷¹ In their original form, these pads were probably made of reed, wood, or cloth.¹⁷² Some types of pads may have been for certain ceremonies or as markers of victorious ballplayers. Although restricted to use their hands, they did have hand protectors. It is not certain why they needed hand protectors, except to protect the bones in the hand. Usually only three fingers would fit in the handle. In addition, there are some headstones, which could have been awarded to the winning side.¹⁷³

Roles of the Ballgames in Mesoamerican life

The Mesoamerican ballgames were used for many purposes, from simple games in the dirt to complex ceremonial rituals in large cities. Evidence shows that there was a great amount of food involved in the games. Moreover, archaeologists uncovered many utensils, such as empty plates and bowls, which probably contained food in them, now long since decomposed. Scholars believed that Mesoamericans used food dedication rituals of the ballcourts.¹⁷⁴ Numerous artifacts indicate that Mesoamericans also used ballcourts for sacrificial burials. In the supernatural courts, items like precious jewels would take on symbolic meanings. For example, a greenstone and a Spondylus shell could be the universe. In the Tikal’s Triple ballcourt, there is evidence that “two females were placed within the benches of the two central structures in the seated positions, facing each other across the ballcourt alley.”¹⁷⁵ Such sacrifices honored the dead, for it was believed that the life of the people killed gave life to the newly dedicated building, which in turn meant that it was also giving life to the whole community.

The ballgame created extensive connections for communication and trade. Villages competed against each other, which involving men and women. These competitions were not just in the ballcourts. There were contests of many kinds between the people within their village. Feasting, dancing, singing, and mock warfare ensued:

When the two groups came together, they began to dance. The dancing was continued for three hours. The songs this first night gave their reasons for being joyful. The second night, the songs told of the valor and agility of their ball players. The following day, the women occupied themselves in preparing a feast for the day of the contest. If the challenging village won, the visitors were given a great feast, but, if it lost, the visitors were given

¹⁷¹ Miller, 25-26.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷⁴ Fox, 486.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 487.

nothing, the losers consoling themselves by eating the feast alone.¹⁷⁶

The games were a social event. People mingled and enjoyed themselves, often casting bets in attempts to gain wealth.¹⁷⁷ For most Mesoamericans, the games served as a form of entertainment. For elites, the ballgames presented an opportunity to increase personal power and prestige, or to negotiate with other leaders. Depending on the amount of wealth, and the rank of a particular person in society, elites might wager vast amounts of wealth.¹⁷⁸ "Spectators wagered their finely woven mantles, with losers fleeing the courts leaving a trail of garments behind them."¹⁷⁹

Ballcourts also served as a fertility ritual. Because of such extensive feasting, historians believe these events were set around harvest time, when food supplies would have been most abundant. With these harvest feasts, negotiations about village relationships could take place.

Ballgames were a way for two rivaling villages to compete and fight without having to engage in traditional warfare. The outcome on the field represented the outcome of the battle; some would lose wagers and honor, while the losing team would lose their lives. In addition, the ballcourts were used as a "public reenactment of warfare."¹⁸⁰ In this case, prisoners from a defeated enemy were forced to play ballplayers from the city of the victors. Thus, the ballgame signified ways to portray the victory of a battle.

The ballgames were seen as a replication of the movements of the planet Venus, the moon, and the sun. Ballcourts were pathways to the underworld. One story, *Popol Vuh*, written by a Mayan noble in Central America, narrates the tale of two sets of twin brothers and underworld gods. The brothers go to the underworld and the first set of them are killed and given to the gods, but the second set of brothers defeat the underworld gods several times. The brothers travel to heaven and now represent the planet Venus and the Sun.¹⁸¹ Walter Krickeberg developed one idea centered on the story of *Popol Vuh*. He states that the games represented "a symbolic reenactment of the struggle between day and night, between light and darkness. It therefore symbolized the daily and seasonal journey of the sun and other celestial bodies, and their cyclical descent through the Underworld, and ascent into the sky."¹⁸²

Origin of the Ballgames

¹⁷⁶ Fox, 493.

¹⁷⁷ Miller, 22.

¹⁷⁸ Scarborough and Wilcox, 14-17.

¹⁷⁹ Miller, 22.

¹⁸⁰ Miller, 23.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁸² Scarborough and Wilcox, 319.

Each village contained its own legend about the foundation of the ballcourts; therefore, each ballcourt represented the village's identity. Two examples follow:

After the Mexica had reached Coatepec and established their villages and the temple of their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, they were instructed by that god to build a ballcourt. In these migration legends, the transformation of the wild, uninhabitable spaces into controlled, social places was partly accomplished through the imposition on the landscape of public, ritual architecture.¹⁸³

Another legend stated the following:

In another Central Mexican account, the native chronicler, Ixtlilxochitl, cited in Leyenaar, tells us that Topiltzin, the ruler of Tula, proposed to his three rivals that the four of them rule his realm together and presented them with a model of a ballcourt made of four kinds of precious stone. In this case, the ballcourt symbolically represented Topiltzin's domain and all of its wealth and resources.¹⁸⁴

Winners and Losers

While in society the players were separated by rank, blood, and class; in the ballcourts they were divided into winners and losers. The winners would finish the day in victory, living on to play another game, while becoming champions for their village. The winners were also given the honor of being able to drink Chicha, a fermented drink typically made of maize.¹⁸⁵ On the other hand, Mesoamericans often sacrificed the losers to their gods, generally by decapitating them. In the Great Ballcourts of Chichen Itza, serpents or squashed plants depicted the neck of a person, once the decapitation finished.¹⁸⁶

Sacrifice and the "Rolling Heads" Myths

¹⁸³ Fox, 485.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 485.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 493.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 493.

Researchers believe the rubber ball was created in the tropical lowlands, where rubber sources grew naturally and existed in high supply.¹⁸⁷ In places where no rubber balls existed, documents show that human heads were used instead. One Seneca myth describes this:

A cannibal killed a woman and ate all but her head, breasts, and the boy twins she was pregnant with, which he placed in a hollow tree. The boys survived on the milk in the breasts and were later discovered by their father, who made them ball clubs and a ball to play with. The mother's skull was still alive, and in fear of it the boys and their father fled. The father, helped by his invisible brother, was chased by his wife's flying skull until it was finally killed. After the skull was dead, it was used as a ball in a game.¹⁸⁸

Sacrifice played an important role for the ballgames. There are many accounts from art pieces, artifacts, and bones to confirm this practice. However, Mesoamericans used various means of execution, the primacy of decapitation in the act of ritual sacrifice remains uncertain. In *Popol Vuh*, many references to decapitation exist, though not for sacrificial reasons. For example, one person did not die when losing his head and the other was already dead.¹⁸⁹ The actual deaths were by other means. One set of twins were killed before the ballgame, but the method was unknown. In another story, from the same sacred source of the Mayas, another twin's head was cut off, but his twin brother gave him a pumpkin as a replacement. This second set of twins won the game, but allowed themselves to be put into a stone oven and burned to death, by their enemies. They were revived and killed again; this time with their limbs were scattered and their hearts and head removed. Removing the heart represented the most important act of sacrifice in several Mesoamerican regions. Many mythical stories portrayed the head living without the rest of the body.¹⁹⁰

There is evidence to suggest that some nations used human heads instead of a rubber ball. Many paintings and stories offer examples of heads used for balls and games in which the balls have faces. Since the purpose of the game was to keep the ball moving, the bouncing behavior of rubber made it a perfect material for ball construction. Several myths depict heads that could move on their own. In this respect, decapitation would "bring about not a lifeless head, but a head that, once freed from the body, could

¹⁸⁷ Vernon Scarborough, Beverly Mitchum, Sorraya Carr, and David Freidel, "Two Late Preclassic Ballcourts at the Lowland Maya Center of Cerros, Northern Belize," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 9 (Spring 1982): 21.

¹⁸⁸ Scarborough and Wilcox, 327-328.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 321-328.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 321-328.

jump, roll, and fly.”¹⁹¹ Thus the term, *rolling heads*, or *rolling skulls*, are found in many stories throughout the New World. The Apinaye, in South America, only played ballgames for a boy’s initiation. To coincide with the *rolling heads* legend, they used rubber balls based on a myth:

A man who attacked people at night with his sharpened leg-bone was beaten to death by villagers, who cut off his head. His head jumped away, and returned in the daytime to attack the people, but they tricked it into falling into a hole and covered it with dirt. Later, youths going through their initiation came across the spot and noticed a rubber tree growing out of the head’s grave. Using the sap from the tree they made the first rubber balls for the rubber-ball game.¹⁹²

There are also stories where rubber balls represented the moon, constellations, or the Sun. In addition, some believe that the loss of a game was a symbolic severing from society. Therefore, decapitation and dismembering of body parts portrayed this disconnection. Not only does the person lose life but also the connection to the body, which in turn represents the larger disjunction of culture, and a link to the constellations. These ideas can be used to describe aspects of the harvest and fertility. Both social interaction and agricultural fertility remained two of the central roles of the games. The myths associated with decapitation and these two themes correlate together.¹⁹³

End of the Ballgames

People played ballgames all over Mesoamerica. Although each area had slight variations to the game, the overall definition of what a ballgame was and how it was to be played remained fairly similar. Ballgames had such an impact on the lives of the Mesoamerican world, and were so popular, that the gulf coast nations sent a tribute of 16,000 rubber balls a year to an inland king.¹⁹⁴ The ballgames were tightly interwoven into the everyday life of society. The ballgames incorporated the culture of Mesoamerican societies, which now aids archaeologists with learning about forms of Mesoamerican entertainment. The ballgames displayed the power, prestige, honor, and beliefs of these people. The games proved how complex these societies, later called savage and uncivilized by foreign invaders, really were at the height of their rule. These games are no longer played. Ultimately, the Mesoamerican civilization would fall to disease and Spanish conquerors.

¹⁹¹ Scarborough and Wilcox, 326.

¹⁹² Ibid., 328.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 325-330.

¹⁹⁴ Scarborough and Wilcox, 9.

When the Spanish came, with their Christian beliefs, any practice that worshiped any creator but the Christian god was prohibited, which, of course, meant that the act of sacrifice was not tolerated. The game which had been played for 3,000 years ended not long after the Spanish invasions.¹⁹⁵ By 1589, all the ballgames had ended, although a few Spaniards wrote accounts of a few games, and some artifacts have been preserved. These are mere glimpses at the earliest form of organized sport in Mesoamerica.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Miller, 22.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.