



Sport, Spectacle and Political Theater: New Views of the Classic Maya Ballgame

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Although it is not always apparent from the stately scenes of kings and princes squaring off to either side of a single, oversized ball, Classic ballcourts were often crowded and noisy places, full of boisterous activity and the thunderous bounce of the ballgame ball, a dangerously heavy and occasionally unpredictable missile. New views of this old game owe much to the injection of data from recent archaeological investigations (Fox 1996), though reanalyses of well-known texts and imagery have also played a vital role in ongoing investigations of the ballgame tradition (Coe 2003; Chinchilla 1992; Tokovinine 2002; Zender 2001a).

The divergent roles of players, spectators, musicians and referees are highlighted on these remarkable vessels (Figures 1 and 2), both of which feature a backdrop of stair-like bleachers, perhaps one of the “reviewing stands” typical of the palace precincts of any number

of Classic cities (Coe 2003; Chinchilla 1992) or even of steps leading up from the end zone of a sunken ballcourt (Zender 2001a). As archaeological investigations by John Fox (1996:485-93) have demonstrated, these were the locales of sumptuous feasts, revealed in the form of smashed service vessels, discarded *jute* snail shells (an ancient snack food *par excellence*) and occasionally more ample fare, such as deer bones and turtle carapaces.

Ballplayers hug the groundline of both images, sporting characteristic kneepads, ballgame yokes and whimsical animal headdresses. Up in the bleachers, spectators wear the cylindrical bark paper headdresses common to priests, and the referee holds a large conch shell no doubt blown to initiate and halt play. The noise in a masonry court would have been deafening, not least when the blaring trumpets of the pre-game show (Figure 2) gave way to the staccato beat of maracas and bone rasps held by onlookers (Figure 1), punctuated by the rhythmic thud of a ten pound ball (Coe 2003). In some scenes, the furious sound of play is reflected in the dozens of disembodied speech scrolls which fill all of the available space (Figure 1), recalling the legendary

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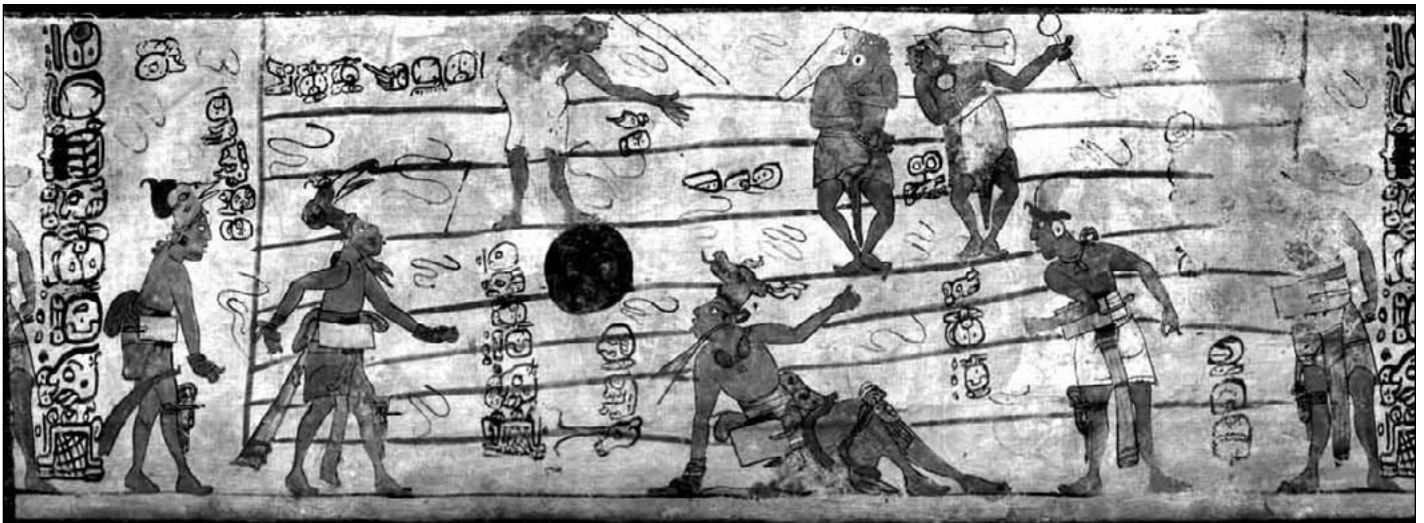


Figure 1. Frozen in action, players rush to field a ball dropped into play. Late Classic Polychrome vase, St. Louis Art Museum (K5435). Photograph © Justin Kerr.

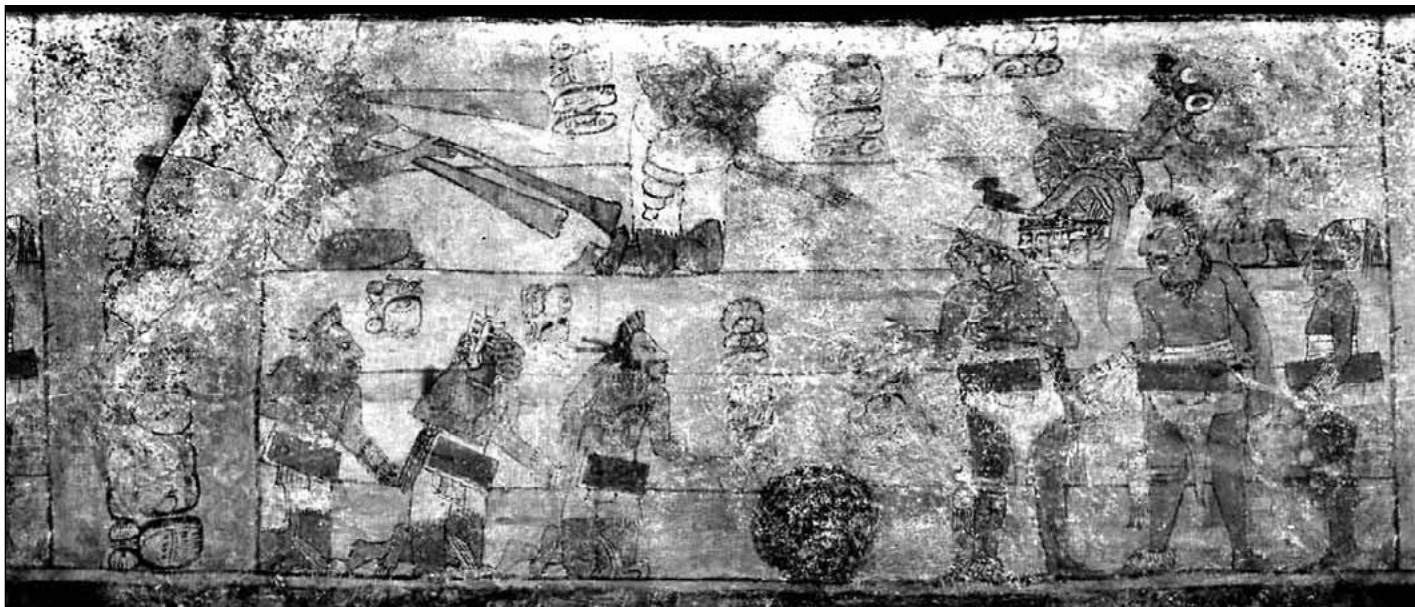


Figure 2. Pre- or post-game parlay with musical interlude. Late Classic polychrome vase, Peabody Museum, Yale University (K3814). Photograph © Justin Kerr.

ire of the underworld gods in having this noisy game played right above their heads (Tedlock 1996:91, 112-13).

Probably commissioned in commemoration of a joint ballgame of El Pajal and Motul de San Jose (Stuart 2004:8-9), this vessel (Figure 3) depicts the kings of these two cities squaring off before an enormous ball marked with the glyphic label *12-na-ba*, or *lajchan nahb* "twelve handspans" (Zender 2004). In addition to their ballgame paraphernalia, the two lords sport

elegant depictions of hummingbirds in their plumed helmets, while their lieutenants wear somewhat more comical headdresses representing a deer and a vulture. To judge from associated hieroglyphs, the lord closest to the ball was the king of Motul de San Jose, while the lord in front of him was the contemporary king of El Pajal, who most likely commissioned the vessel. While a lack of provenience makes the life history of this looted object frustratingly uncertain, it is quite possible that the El Pajal lord bequeathed this vase



Figure 3. A Gift for Lord Sak Ch'een of Motul de San Jose. Late Classic polychrome vase, Dallas Museum of Art (K2803). Photograph © Justin Kerr.

as either a gift or tribute to the Motul de San Jose king (Tokovinine 2002:5).

Originally from the little-known site of La Corona (Stuart, in Graham 1997), this unprovenanced panel (Figure 4) was commissioned in the late 7th-century A.D. by local lord Chak Ak'aach Yuhk and records a ballgame he played against a sacrificial stairway at Calakmul in April of 687. Chak Ak'aach Yuhk is depicted to the right, apparently in mid-dive as he strives to field the remarkably large ball bouncing toward him. His close association with the main text,

coupled with the turkey (AK'AACH) in his headdress, unequivocally identifies him as the sole member of the 'visiting' team. Intriguingly, he does not play against the king of Calakmul, but rather competes against the high-ranking priest Aj ?-K'inich, the *ti'sakhuun* of the reigning king (Zender 2001b). As Martin and Grube (2000:110) have noted, "[s]uch records give some insight into the great gatherings of lords that took place on these occasions, as client nobility travelled to the capital to participate in solemn rituals, sumptuous feasts and great public spectacles".



Figure 4. Chak Ak'aach Yuhk of La Corona strikes a "fourteen handspan" ball. Site Q Ballplayer Panel 1, Art Institute of Chicago (K2882). Photograph © Justin Kerr.

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