

# The Ballgame

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During the past twenty years, The Art Museum has acquired several objects that relate to the Mesoamerican ballgame. Examination of what is known of the ballgame ritual can give the modern observer a greater understanding of these objects. By the same token, study of these works can offer greater insight into the ballgame, the nature of its play, the ritual attire of its players, and the meaning it held for ancient Mesoamerican people.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the Spanish Conquest (1519–21) of the Aztecs, a native ballgame was played with a rubber ball throughout the Americas. The Spanish conquerors admired the skill of its players, and in 1528 Hernando Cortés took a troupe of Aztec ballplayers with him to Europe to present to the courts along with other wonders of the New World (fig. 1). Europeans were taken with the properties of rubber, a material unknown to them before the discovery of the New World, which soon transformed the ballgames of Europe. Many of our modern ballgames have a New World origin.

Throughout Mesoamerica, that is, in the region between fourteen and twenty-one degrees north latitude, roughly equivalent to the world familiar to the Aztec themselves, ballgames were played for at least three thousand years. Such games characteristically were played in a “ballcourt,” usually an alley formed by

two parallel structures, sometimes with clearly defined end zones that gave the entire area the shape of a capital letter I. Points were made by hurling a solid rubber ball through a ring or by striking markers set along the alley or in the end zones. The rules of play varied, but the game, which was played between two teams, often was limited to two team members, for a total of four men on the court at one time. The ballplayers controlled the ball by hitting it with the upper arm and thigh; touching it with the hands was forbidden.

The ballgame was undoubtedly played for a variety of reasons and had many levels of meaning, from simple sandlot play to court ritual. At the time of the Conquest, amateurs and professionals alike engaged in the game; although it could be played for fun, heavy gambling frequently accompanied professional competition. Spectators wagered their finely woven mantles, with losers fleeing the courts leaving a trail of garments behind them.

In the Classic (A.D. 100–900) and Postclassic periods (A.D. 900–1519), Mesoamerican lords frequently juxtaposed ballcourts with other ceremonial architecture at the centers of sacred precincts. At Copán, Honduras, the Classic ballcourt with sloping walls links the Main Acropolis, a royal residence, ancestral shrine, and locus of much private ritual, to the Great Plaza, an open space populated by the images of noble Copán forebears (fig. 2). At the heart of the Aztec ceremonial precinct within Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), a ballcourt (recognized by its I-shape in plan) was placed in front of the great twin pyramid (fig. 3).

As such ceremonial placements indicate, the ballgame in Mesoamerica was more than just sport. Mesoamerican peoples seem to have seen in the play of the ballgame a metaphor for the movements of the heavenly bodies, particularly the sun, moon, and Venus, and their oppositions, their conflicts. Shortly after the Spanish Conquest, a young Maya nobleman wrote the epic *Popol Vuh*, the Maya story of creation and history, in which two pairs of brothers enter the Underworld and play the ballgame against the Underworld gods. The first pair, the First Fathers, is defeated and sacrificed by the gods; but the second pair, the Hero

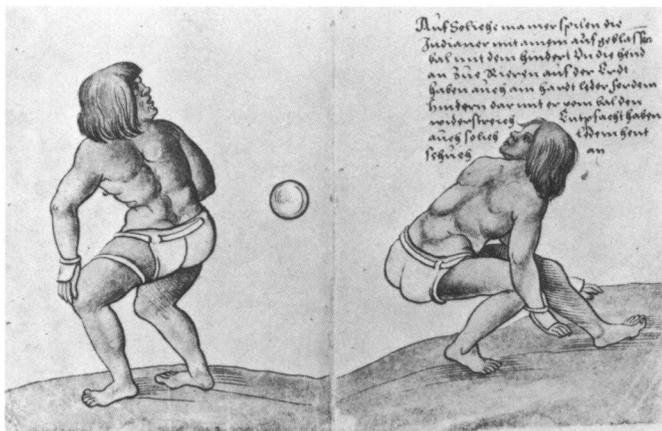


Figure 1. Native American Ballplayers. Drawing by Christoph Weiditz, 1529. From Ted J. J. Leyenaar, *Ullama: The Perpetuation in Mexico of the Pre-Spanish Ball Game Ullamaliztli* (Leiden, 1978), 32.

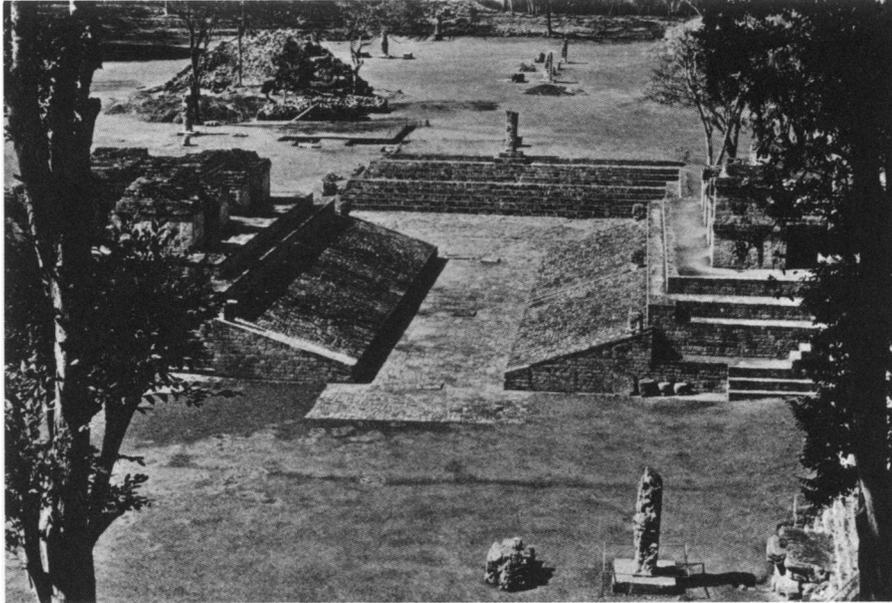


Figure 2. Ballcourt, Copán, Honduras. From Leyenaar, *Ulama*, 33.

Twins, the offspring of one of them, overcomes the Underworld gods and outwits them at every turn. Even when the Underworld gods believe they have bested the Twins at the ballgame, the Twins return to defeat and sacrifice them. The Twins resurrect their father, whose cycle of life, death, and regeneration can be equated with the life cycle of maize, and, thus, fertility, and then ascend into the heavens to reign as the sun and Venus.<sup>2</sup> Similar religious beliefs about the ballgame were held throughout Mesoamerica. Ballcourts were often thought to have been entryways to the Underworld, liminal places where man and god met.

The Maya and the Aztec, and perhaps other Mesoamerican peoples, as well, regarded the ballgame also as a public reenactment of warfare, in which defeated captives of war faced successful warriors under circumstances destined to reiterate the victory of the battlefield. Warriors took live captives on the battlefield, but warrior ballplayers sacrificed their defeated enemies in the aftermath of ballgame play. The ballcourts found at the heart of ceremonial precincts frequently adjoin skull racks (see fig. 3), where the decapitated heads of the defeated may have been displayed as evidence of the prowess of both the victorious ballplayers and the victorious state.

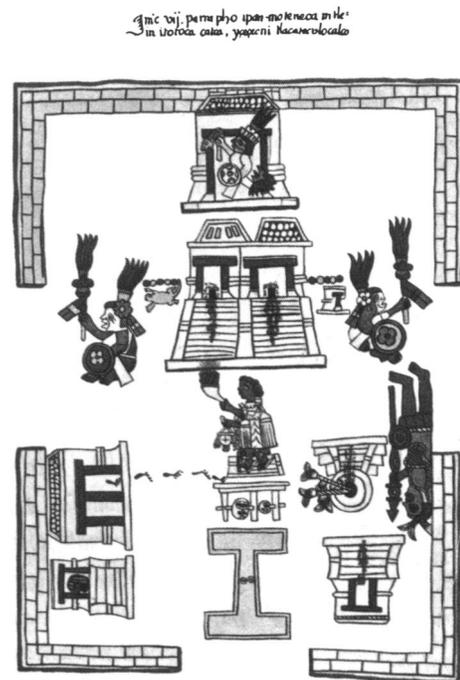


Figure 3. Plan of the Great Temple Precinct at Tenochtitlán, Mexico. From *El "Códice Florentino" y la "Historia general de Sahagún"* (Mexico, 1982), 37.

Needless to say, the Mesoamerican ballgame as a religious ritual accompanied by human sacrifice could not survive the Spanish Conquest. The Spanish systematically extirpated the game by destroying the masonry ballcourts. By 1580, the courts were gone, and the game seems to have vanished from the regions of New Spain that were under close supervision of the Crown. But in northwest Mexico, particularly in the modern state of Sonora, the ballgame survives today, played apparently by ancient rules and with homemade equipment, including a solid rubber ball that can weigh as much as ten pounds. The fast-paced game with such a heavy ball is dangerous; a blow to the head or stomach can wound or even kill a player.<sup>3</sup>

The ballgame may have developed along the Gulf Coast, where the resilient properties of latex were possibly first observed.<sup>4</sup> At San Lorenzo, in the modern state of Veracruz, the presence of parallel structures suggests that the Olmec, rulers of Mesoamerica's first civilization, laid out a ballcourt within the ceremonial precinct about 1200 B.C., so the game was probably known for some time before that. From 1500 B.C. until the end of the Late Formative, around A.D. 100, there are few other surviving ballcourts, but figurines from across Mesoamerica reveal that the game was recognized universally within the region. The Olmec traveled trade routes that carried them to Guerrero, in western Mexico, and through southern Mexico and on into Central America. It is possible that they also introduced a game with a rubber ball, although there is no reason to believe that the rules were uniform.

At Xochipala, in the modern state of Guerrero, before 1000 B.C., hundreds of figurines were made that celebrated play of the ballgame. Some adopt the ballplayers' characteristic kneeling posture; others wear the ballplayers' protection around the head, hands, or waist. The Princeton Xochipala ballplayer (fig. 4) perhaps once wore perishable padding, but despite his lack of protective gear, his role is clear: he holds a ball at chest height and prepares to set it into play.<sup>5</sup>

At about the same era or a little later, in the modern states of Colima, Nayarit, and Jalisco, the ballgame also took root and was reflected in funerary offerings in

shaft tombs from 300 B.C. onward.<sup>6</sup> Animated ballgame scenes were replicated in clay, particularly in Nayarit, forming permanent testimony to the significance of the game. In Colima, shaft tombs housed figures of individual ballplayers or groups of figures—along with many other offerings—just as the tombs themselves housed the remains of individuals or of many persons. The Princeton Colima ballplayer (fig. 5), like the Xochipala figure, is poised to throw a large ball into play. Padded at waist and ankle and leaning forward slightly, he is captured at the moment before the contest begins.

By the Classic era, the ballgame was played throughout Mesoamerica. At Teotihuacan, a game with movable markers more like lacrosse or field hockey was played, but everywhere else across Mesoamerica masonry courts were used. Along the Gulf Coast, the ballgame conceivably enjoyed special privilege: at El Tajín alone, some eleven courts have been discovered and more may well lie under heavy vegetation. Archaeologists and looters have recovered thousands of



Figure 4. Xochipala, Early to Middle Preclassic period, 1200–400 B.C. Standing ballplayer, clay, h. 16.2 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.



Figure 5. Colima, Mexico, Late Formative to Early Classic period, 300 B.C.–A.D. 300. Standing ballplayer, clay, h. 35.6 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

figurines and ballgame accoutrements from graves and tombs in the modern state of Veracruz in many styles and many materials, but all are known collectively as “Classic Veracruz.” If compelling in life, the ballgame dominated death. Like the Maya Hero Twins, Veracruz nobles who carried ballgame imagery to the Underworld may have been prepared to dispel and defeat death. Throughout Mesoamerica, offerings of ballgame paraphernalia in tombs provided imagery of resurrection.

The Art Museum has two Huastec figurines from northern Veracruz that exhibit characteristic protective padding (figs. 6, 7).<sup>7</sup> Both wear a yoke at waist, a wrap

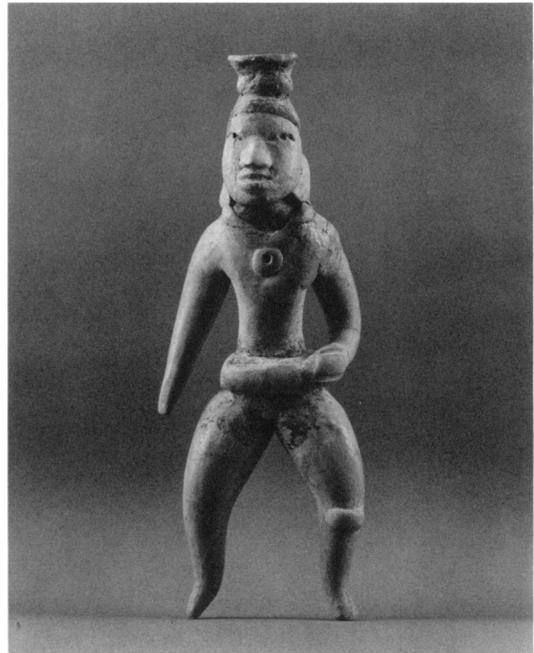


Figure 6. Pánuco area of the Huasteca, Veracruz. Late Formative to Early Classic period, 300 B.C.–A.D. 300. Standing ballplayer, clay, h. 20.0 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.



Figure 7. Huasteca region, Veracruz, Early Classic period, A.D. 250–550. Standing ballplayer, clay, preserved h. 11.5 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

on the left hand, and a pad on the left knee onto which they would fall when striking the ball. Examples of such gear, which were probably made of soft, perishable materials, including wood, reed, and cloth, survive today in stone. Stone ballgame paraphernalia may have been generally made as commemorative trophies for successful players, but since they are mostly of human scale, some may have been worn, if only on ceremonial occasions. Stone yokes, for example, often weigh about thirty pounds and rest snugly across a slender adult's hips (figs. 6–8).

As some figurines and reliefs reveal (fig. 8), the yoke supported other accoutrements, including the “hacha” and “palma” (both of which are known by their modern Spanish nicknames). The tall, thin palma or the squatter hacha were worn in the yoke, but their purpose is not clear; some renderings, if interpreted literally, show the palma completely obscuring the player's vision. Many hachas attributed to Classic Veracruz were collected in highland or Pacific coastal Guatemala, but few palmas, which seem for the most part to post-date and succeed the hacha, have been recovered outside Veracruz. Stone versions of knee protectors and handstones also abound.

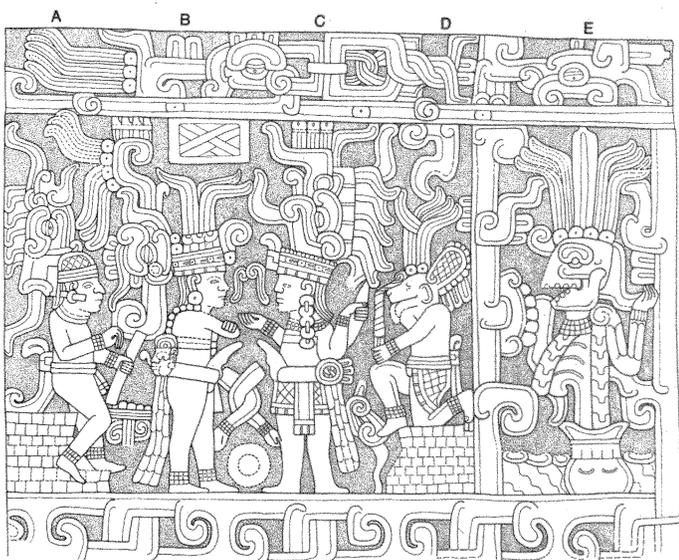


Figure 8. Late Classic period, A.D. 600–900. Ballplayer from El Tajín. Drawing by Michael Kampen. From *The Sculptures of El Tajín, Veracruz, Mexico* (Gainesville, 1972), fig. 22.



Figure 9. Olmec, Gulf Coast, Middle to Late Formative period, ca. 600 B.C. Plain ballgame yoke, stone, 11.5 x 33.0 x 39.5 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

Plain yokes are common and difficult to date. Some may have been made by the Olmec (fig. 9), but most are Classic. The wraparound interlace motif that characterizes the borders of reliefs at El Tajín was thought by Tatiana Proskouriakoff to date to the Early Classic (A.D. 250–550) (fig. 10 a and b).<sup>8</sup> The bodiless heads at the open ends of the yoke in figure 10 have their hair bound and possibly commemorate sacrificial victims of the game. Rich three-dimensional carving more commonly occurred toward the end of the Classic era (fig. 11 a, b, c).<sup>9</sup> The yoke in figure 11 features three human faces, each with lolling tongue, scarred face, and what appears to be a gouged eye—in other words, three faces of sacrificial victims. The victorious ballplayer who wore such a yoke at his waist thus displayed three victims, surely confirmation of his prowess and might. The Princeton stone knee protector (fig. 12) shows a similarly distorted human face and may belong to the same period.

Many hachas and palmas also show themes of death and sacrifice. Skulls, jaguars, and monkeys were worked from rich dark stones with strong textures in forms that lend themselves to the squat shape of the hacha (figs. 13, 14). Most hachas have a tenon at the back (see fig. 13) that allows them to be fastened into a

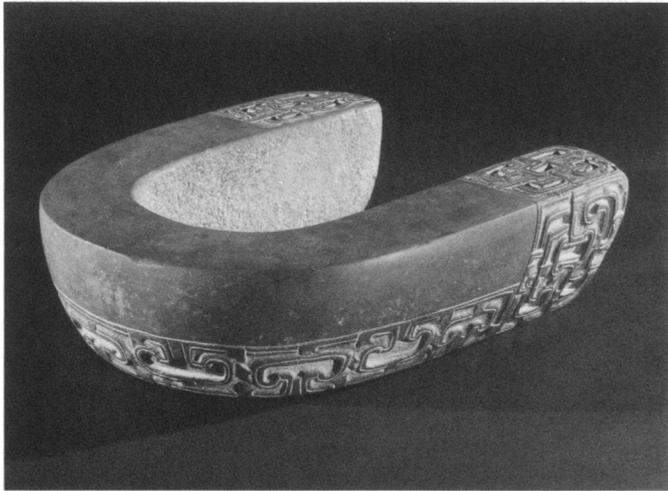


Figure 10 a,b. Veracruz, Classic Tajín style, Early Classic period, A.D. 250–550. Ballgame yoke, greenstone, 10.5 x 32.5 x 40.5 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Mrs. Christian H. Aall (68-235).

yoke, but no stone yokes have such openings into which either the hacha itself or a secondary armature can be inserted. Some hachas may, in fact, have been architectural pieces, ornaments of the stone ballcourt, or even the markers for play. At Copán, archaeologists have reattached the slightly larger tenoned pieces in the form of macaws to the ballcourt cornices, where they serve as architectural ornament.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the tall, slender palmas take the forms of human arms and hands, standing ballplayers, or fan-tailed birds. The Princeton palma (fig. 15 a and b) conforms to the palma shape in the feathered shield that flares at the back of the mustachioed human head. Warriors and nobles wore such a feathered shield at the back of the waist, frequently with an attached trophy head (see fig. 8), emblematic of victory and sacrifice. A trophy like the Princeton palma may have commemorated a victory and been worn to ensure another one in





Figure 11a,b,c. Veracruz, Late Classic period, A.D. 600–900. Ceremonial ballgame yoke, granite, 12.0 x 37.0 x 40.5 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University. Museum purchase, gift of the Friends of The Art Museum in honor of the sixtieth birthday of Gillett G. Griffin (88-12).

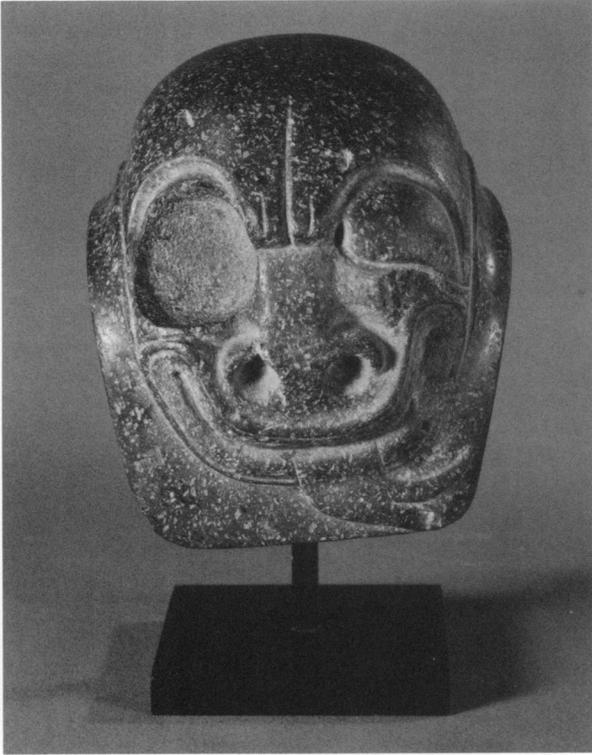


Figure 12, above left. Veracruz, Classic period, A.D. 100–900. Knee protector (*yuguito*), granite, h. 13.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University. Museum purchase, gift of the Wallace S. Whittaker Foundation in memory of Wallace S. Whittaker, Yale Class of 1914 (83-17).

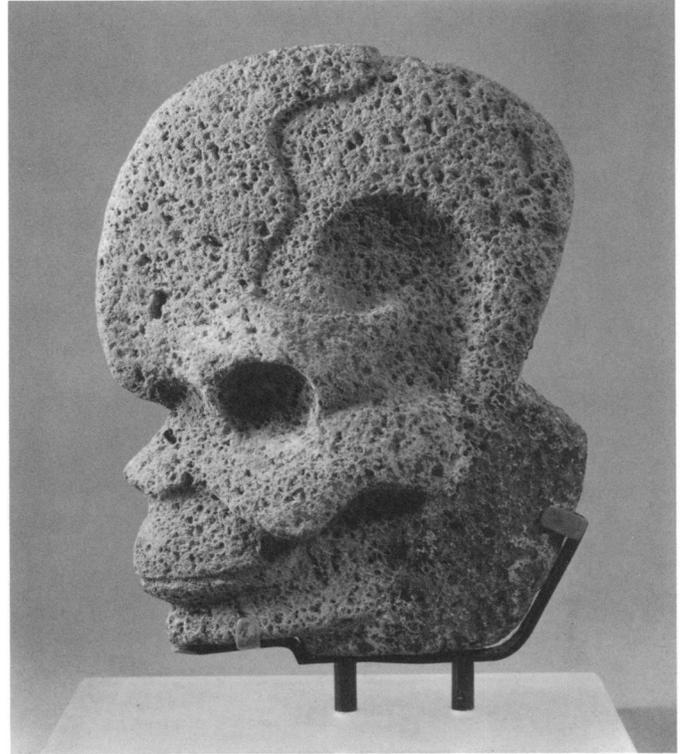


Figure 13, above right. Veracruz, Classic period, A.D. 200–900. Hacha in the form of a skull, volcanic stone, h. 25.0 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

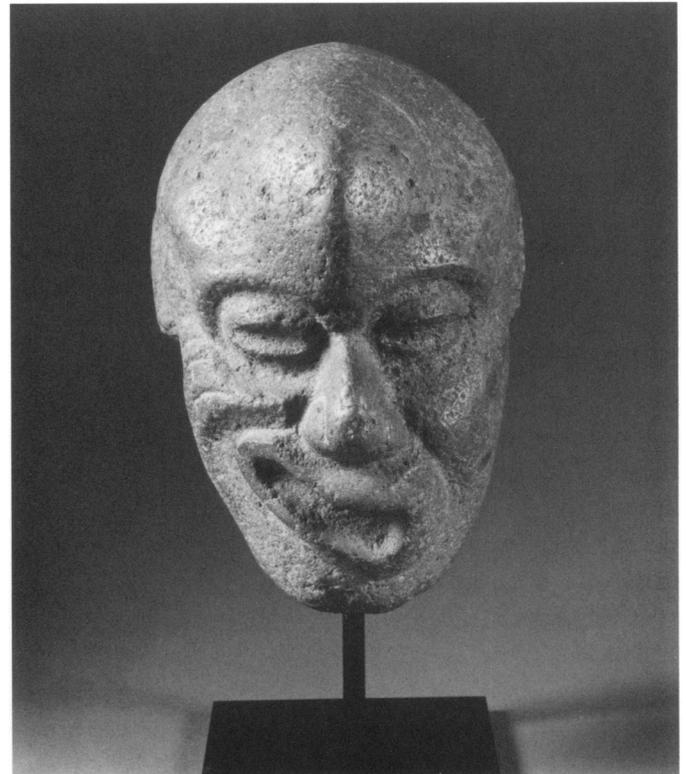


Figure 14, right. Veracruz, Classic period, A.D. 200–900. Hacha in the form of a head, volcanic stone, h. 19.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Miles Lourie (84-5).

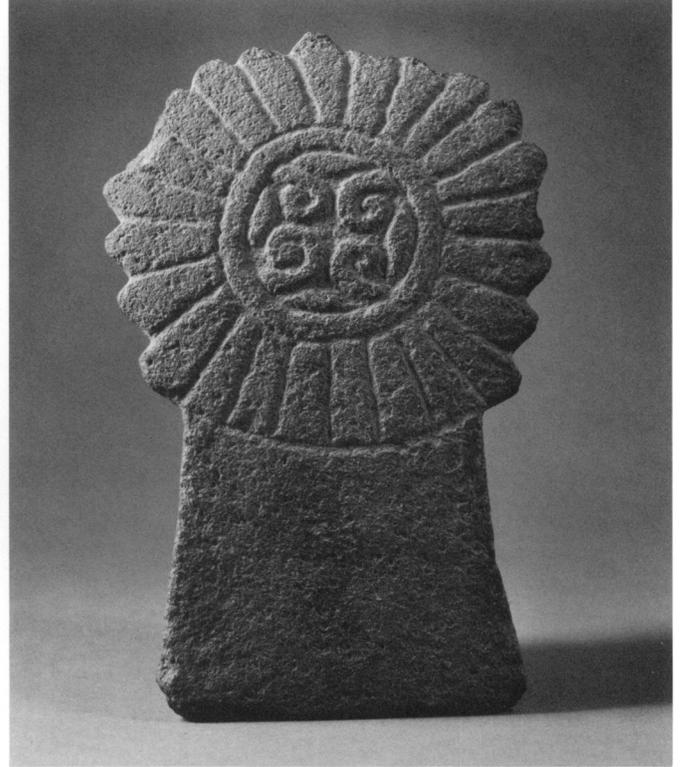
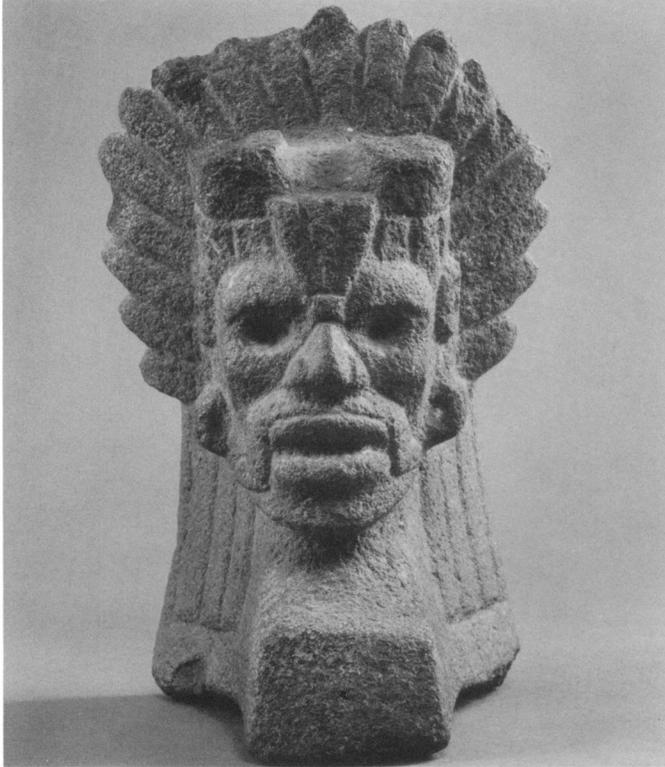


Figure 15 a,b. Veracruz, Late Classic period, A.D. 600–900. Palma in the form of a human head with feathered shield, h. 22.6 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

the future. Little evidence survives to demonstrate how hand protectors, whether made of stone or more resilient, perishable materials, functioned in the game, since direct hand contact was not allowed in most situations. Figurines that wear them indicate that perhaps they were used to protect the fragile bones on the back of the hand (see figs. 6, 7). Like other ballgame equipment, handstones may have been trophies issued to victors. Most allow just two or three fingers to grip the handle, and the inserted fingers often complete the design, as in the case of the Princeton handstone (fig. 16), where human fingers form the lower teeth and jaw of a skeletal deity head. The Princeton handstone is probably quite early (100 B.C.–A.D. 500) because of the simple triadic symbol on its forehead.<sup>11</sup>

The ballgame was not an isolated ritual of Mesoamerican life, which is probably why commemorative ballgame art occurs so widely. It was integral to other rituals and historical events—warfare, the coming of



Figure 16. Veracruz, Classic period, 100 B.C.–A.D. 500. Handstone, stone, d. 14.0 cm. Promised gift, The Art Museum, Princeton University.

age, fertility rituals, and, perhaps, most important, death. When the Maya Hero Twins entered the Underworld, they outsmarted the Underworld gods. They played them in the ballgame and allowed themselves to be defeated and sacrificed in order to return and wreak havoc on the order of death. The Underworld gods

wanted the Hero Twins to play with special equipment, but the Twins insisted on using what they had brought from the surface of the earth. The abundance of permanent ballgame paraphernalia informs us not only of its commemorative value in life but of its power for the dead, who used it to overcome death itself.

## NOTES

1. Many authors have considered the Mesoamerican ballgame, although recently more study has focused on the Maya game. The only comprehensive treatment of the game is in Theodore Stern, *The Rubber-Ball Games of the Americas*, American Ethnological Society, Monograph 17 (New York, 1948). Ted J. J. Leyenaar has written about modern survivals in *Ulama: The Perpetuation in Mexico of the Pre-Spanish Ball Game Ullamalitzli*, trans. Inez Seeger (Leiden, 1978). Eric Taladoire has made a thorough record of ballcourts in *Les terrains de jeu de balle (Mésomérique et Sud-ouest des Etats-Unis)* (Mexico City, 1981). Marvin Cohodas has treated the ballgame in northern Yucatan, "Diverse Architectural Styles and the Ball Game Cult: The Late Middle Classic Period in Yucatan," in *Middle Classic Mesoamerica: A.D. 400–700*, ed. Esther Pasztory (New York, 1978), pp. 86–107, and Jeff Karl Kowalski and William L. Fash the game at Copán, "Symbolism of the Maya Ballgame at Copán: Synthesis and New Aspects," ms. on file (New Haven, 1987). The meaning of the Maya game has been examined by Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, chap. 6 in *The Blood of Kings: Ritual and Dynasty in Maya Art* (New York, 1986); and Mary Ellen Miller and Stephen D. Houston, "The Classic Maya Ballgame and Its Architectural Setting: A Study of Relations Between Text and Image," *RES* 14 (Autumn 1987): 47–65. In 1988 the Mesoamerican ballgame was treated in two exhibitions: Ted J. J. Leyenaar and Lee A. Parsons, *Ulama: The Ballgame of the Mayas and Aztecs, 2000 B.C.–A.D. 2000*, exhib. cat., Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (Leiden, 1988); and Marilyn M. Goldstein, ed., *Ceremonial Sculpture of Ancient Veracruz*, exhib. cat., Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1988).
2. See Dennis Tedlock, ed. and trans., *Popol Vuh* (New York, 1985).
3. See Leyenaar, *Ulama*, 1978.
4. S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson has recently suggested that the game may predate Olmec presence along the Gulf Coast, "Cultural Time and Space in Ancient Veracruz," in Goldstein, *Ceremonial Sculpture*, 6–17.
5. Archaeologically, little is known of Xochipala. See Carlo Gay, *Xochipala: The Beginnings of Olmec Art* (Princeton, 1972).
6. Hasso von Winning, *The Shaft Tomb Figures of West Mexico* (Los Angeles, 1974); see also Leyenaar and Parsons, *Ulama*, 1988.
7. For a consideration of Huastec style, see Gordon S. Ekholm, "Excavations at Tampico and Pánuco in the Huasteca, Mexico," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 38 (1944), 319–512.
8. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *Varieties of Classic Veracruz Sculpture*, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Pub. 606 (Washington, D.C., 1954).
9. A similar yoke has recently been published (Leyenaar and Parsons, *Ulama*, 1988, no. 61).
10. Kowalski and Fash, "Symbolism of the Maya Ballgame at Copán."
11. Goldstein dates it to the Late Classic, A.D. 600–900 (entry 171).