

SPORT, COMMUNITY, AND THE BALLGAME AT YALBAC, BELIZE

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Abstract

The Maya ballgame, widely attested through archaeological and historical sources, was a popular activity among the southern lowland polities of the Late Preclassic and Classic periods (ca. 300 B.C.-A.D. 900). Traditional interpretations of this game have seen it as a highly ritualized event, carried out to re-enact certain mythological cycles dealing with life, death, warfare, and agricultural fertility. These interpretations, however, often exclude the possibility that the game also functioned as a sport or was similar to athletic events from other societies, both past and present. Such events are universally metaphorical for conflict, and are widely popular when played between opposing communities. Archaeological evidence from ballcourts in northern Belize, including the site of Yalbac, indicates that communities in this area were actively engaged in inter-community ballgame competition. This suggests that the Maya ballgame, like sporting events in other parts of the world, functioned as a means of reinforcing community identity.

Introduction

Throughout the world, athletic competitions serve many purposes, such as to provide entertainment, encourage gambling and promote social interaction. Their most important role, however, is to reinforce the identity of a particular community through metaphorical conflict with another group. It is this reinforcing quality that makes athletic events both emotional and often politically charged. The Mesoamerican ballgame is an example of one such athletic event. Although previous interpretations of this game have focused on its religious associations and seen it as a highly ritualistic activity, it is likely that the game also functioned in much the same way as sporting events from other parts of the world.

The Maya are one of many ethnic groups of Mesoamerica, and, like their neighbors, played a rubber ballgame that can be documented both archaeologically and historically. The excavation of ballcourts in the Maya area has enabled scholars to analyze their formal characteristics, as well as determine which activities took place in their general vicinity. My work at the ballcourt at Yalbac, Belize, has enabled a comparison to ballcourts at other Maya sites in the geographic regions of northern Belize. Through this comparison, ballgame affiliations between polities can be documented and conclusions drawn about the nature of ballgame competition itself.

Not only did the Maya construct courts as venues for the game, they also depicted it on monuments and ceramics, and wrote about it in inscriptions. Spanish authors at the time of the conquest were able to document the ballgame among the Maya and their Mexican neighbors. Forms of the Mesoamerican ballgame are even played today. Through an examination of these many lines of evidence, a model of the ballgame's

significance can be obtained that relates it to the universal properties of athletic competition.

Yalbac, Belize

The small Maya site of Yalbac is located in the Orange Walk district of northern Belize between Yalbac Creek and the low Yalbac Hills (Figure 1). The site has been under investigation by the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project since 2001. It was mapped in that year and surface ceramics were collected (Lucero 2002). Work continued in 2002 with the documentation and clearing of looter's trenches, excavation of two residential complexes, continued mapping of the site core, and initial settlement survey (Lucero 2003). The site core contains the small-scale Petén-style architecture typical of sites in the region, and consists of three plazas, five major pyramidal structures, and an acropolis (Lucero 2002).

Like the majority of sites in the area, Yalbac contains a ballcourt. A Maya ballcourt consists of two long parallel structures, the alley between them, and the open areas at either end, called end zones. At Yalbac, the ballcourt (Structures 2B and 2C) is attached to the front of Structure 2A, the largest pyramidal structure at the site (Figure 2). The presence of this ballcourt is in no way remarkable. Numerous ballcourts have been found at sites throughout the Maya area. The fact that ballcourts are so ubiquitous does not make the Yalbac ballcourt unworthy of study, however, but rather is an indication of the widespread importance of these structures for the Maya.

The Mesoamerican Ballgame

History of the Ballgame

Maya ballcourts were the formal setting for a game was played with a large solid rubber ball. The distribution of this ballgame extended far beyond the Maya area. Ballcourts have been identified throughout Mesoamerica, the Southwestern United States, the Caribbean Islands (Stern 1950), and even as far away as Peru (Pozorski and Pozorski 1995). The oldest ballcourt known in the Americas dates to 1400 B.C. and was found at the site of Paso de la Amada, Chiapas (Hill and Clark 2001). A ballcourt that dates to this early period indicates that the ballgame has long been an important event in Mesoamerica, and that its establishment coincided with some of the first evidence for social stratification (Hill and Clark 2001). Iconographic representations of the ballgame also date to early periods, with ceramic ballplayer figurines from San Lorenzo dating to as early as 1500 B.C. (Bradley 2001:34). Rubber balls themselves have been found archaeologically, the oldest of which, from El Manatí in Veracruz, date to 1600 B.C. (Nadal 2001:27).

While the exact rules of the game remain unknown, a combination of ethnographic, historic, and iconographic sources reveal that there were probably a variety of games played throughout the ballgame's history, each of which may have required different rules. The ballgames survive today in the form of several varieties played in the Mexican state of Sinaloa. These games, played by striking a rubber ball with the arm, hip, and a wooden bat respectively, do not use a masonry court but a flat field which is marked off with the shoe. The game is scored much like tennis or volleyball, with a serving team scoring points off the opposing team's faults (Leyenaar 2001). Several Spanish writers documented the ballgame as it was played at the time of the conquest

(Stern 1950). These sources indicate that the ball could be struck with the hip, buttock, or knee, that the game required great physical endurance and skill, and that players wore equipment to protect themselves from the dangerously heavy ball (Stern 1950:57-61). As for the Maya ballgame, iconographic representations generally show small teams or individuals facing one another, protected by large torso and hip protectors, and knee pads (Cohodas 1991).

The Ballgame among the Maya

Traditional interpretations of the ballgame's significance for the Classic Maya have been based largely upon iconographic and epigraphic data. Additionally, scholars have been able to draw many parallels between Classic period ballplaying themes and the Postclassic (A.D. 900-1492) Maya book, the Popol Vuh. This Quiché creation myth was recorded by the monk Francisco Ximenez in the early 18th century. Ximenez' Popol Vuh is copied from an earlier manuscript, which in turn was probably copied from an even older hieroglyphic version (Christenson 2003:33). Ballgames and ballplayers are prominently featured in this story, allowing for the religious interpretations of the Classic ballgame.

One of the most common interpretations of the Classic Maya ballgame was developed by Linda Schele, (Schele and Miller 1986, Schele 1987, Schele and Friedel 1991, Friedel et al. 1993) who hypothesized that it was an arena for the re-enactment of the creation myth later recorded in the Popol Vuh. In this story, the Maize God, his brother, and his twin sons play against the gods of the underworld in a series of ballgames. The outcomes of these games dictate the sacrifice of the Maize god, the eventual defeat of the lords of the underworld, and the Maize God's rebirth. According to

this interpretation, ballgame events during the Classic period directly referenced these original ballgames, and likely culminated with human sacrifices designed to perpetuate the growth cycle of maize. Support for this interpretation can be found in various examples of ballgame iconography, most notably Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2. A series of ballgame scenes is represented on this stairway, and the central panel (Figure 3) tells a story of three mythic “choppings” (or sacrifices) that take place in an underworld location. In honor of these events, the stairway is named the “Three Conquest/Victory Stair,” a name which is also found at Copan, Tonina, and Naranjo in connection with stairways and ballcourts¹ (Schele and Grube 1990, Schele and Friedel 1991, Friedel et al. 1993). Additional support for the Popol Vuh interpretation of ballgame events is found in the ballcourt markers from Copan and La Esperanza. These markers show lords from their respective kingdoms impersonating gods from the Popol Vuh story, and re-enacting specific ballgame episodes from the myth (Schele 1987, Friedel et al. 1993).

Expanding on the theme of ballgame sacrifice, scholars have also interpreted ballgame events as directly relating to war (Miller and Houston 1987, Gillespie 1991). According to these interpretations, captives taken in battle may have been forced to take part in ceremonial re-enactments of the creation myth, in which they served the role of pre-determined losers, to be eventually sacrificed through beheading or by being bound up like the ball itself and thrown to “suffer and die in mock play” (Freidel et al. 1993:361). The Yaxchilan stairway depicts this bizarre form of execution, and it may also be referenced in a wall panel from La Amelia (Figure 4), on which the name of the king’s ball may refer to his captive (Schele and Grube 1990:3-5). Furthermore, an inscription from the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stairway indicates that a ballgame event at Calakmul took

place on the same day as a victory of Caracol, Calakmul's ally, over a site called Tzam, perhaps connecting ballplaying to victory in war (Martin and Grube 2000:92).

While these religious/ceremonial interpretations of the Classic Maya ballgame seem to be strongly supported by these iconographic examples, scholars have sometimes tended to emphasize religious and ceremonial significance at the expense of other possible meanings of the ballgame. However, it is quite likely that these events had multiple meanings depending on when they were played, and who was doing the playing. While the strong opinion that the Maya ballgame was more than “just a game,” or a “mere sport” is held by many scholars, (e.g. Miller and Houston 1987:60, Ferguson 1999:3, Schele and Freidel 1991:289) this judgment may be true only in certain contexts. Such diminutive language denies both the many aspects of the game that are strikingly similar to competitive athletic events from around the world, and the overwhelming importance of these events in many societies, both past and present. It is not my intention to either refute those religious interpretations that have been presented by various scholars, or to suggest that there was a fundamental distinction between religious and secular interests as there is in modern Western societies. However, it is likely that there are other possible interpretations of the Maya ballgame that both move beyond the highly formalized ceremonial models that have been hypothesized, and offer a comparison to athletic events as they are manifested in other parts of the world.

That scholars have, in recent years, begun to see the Classic Maya ballgame in new ways is hardly surprising considering the ethnographic and historic examples available in other parts of Mesoamerica. Spanish sources indicate that the Mexican ballgame at the time of the conquest was a widely popular source of amusement among

both the elite and commoner classes (Stern 1950). Duran (translated by Horcasitas and Heyden 1971) describes it as, “a highly entertaining game and amusement for the people, especially for those who held it to be a pastime or entertainment” (p.313). Great numbers of people could be involved in the game all at the same time: “in the square corners a great number of players stood on guard to see that the ball did not penetrate. The main players stood in the center facing the ball” (pp. 314-315) Jones (1985:48) observes that, “in such a situation, the distinction between participant and spectator would not be strong.”

The ballgame was also a scene of high-stakes gambling. “These wretches played for stakes of little value or worth, and since the pauper loses quickly what he has, they were forced to gamble their homes, their fields, their corn granaries, their maguey plants” (Horcasitas and Heyden 1971:318). Ballplayers themselves were not all ritual specialists. Some were “lords, captains, braves, and important men,” while some “played it for profit...lacking instruction in anything else but ballplaying” (Horcasitas and Heyden 1971:315-317).

Spanish sources are less forthcoming about the Maya version of the ballgame. Landa, the only source that definitively describes the Maya game, notes that it was just one of many pastimes enjoyed by young men. “[There] they gathered for their pastimes. They played ball, a certain game with beans like dice, and many others” (Gates 1978:52). While the Popol Vuh has often been used to point to the religious connotations of the ballgame, some passages may be best interpreted as referring to the recreational aspects of the game. Before their fateful journeys to the underworld, the Maize god (One Hunahpu) and his brother (Seven Hunahpu) play the ballgame apparently for the fun of it.

“As for One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, they would merely play dice and ball everyday” (Christenson 2003:113).

There are numerous scene of ballplaying on Maya polochrome ceramic vessels, many of which do not overtly reference religious ritual. Some of these scenes, for example, may depict ballgame disputes, argued before a referee. An individual, holding a conch shell trumpet and elevated above the players, appears to officiate the game, calling plays in favor of one team or another (Tokovinine n.d.) (Figure 5 a-c). Such disputes, if that is indeed what is depicted, would seem to be unusual if the ballgame always had a predetermined loser destined for sacrifice. Rather, they would be consistent with a game in which money and pride were staked on the outcome.

Archaeological data from the Maya area indicates that ballgames were public events, likely held for the general enjoyment of the populace. Fox’s (1996) important study of ballcourts in Honduras demonstrates that, much like Western sporting events, food consumption was an important feature of ballgame entertainment. In addition to the ballcourts in the study, Fox points to archaeological evidence at ballcourts throughout the Maya area in his analysis. Recovered artifacts included ceramic fragments from bowls and jars, obsidian blades, animal bones, and *jute* shells, all of which point to a prevalence of food in these areas. Scenes on polychrome ceramic vessels also depict musical entertainment in the form of maracas and trumpets that accompanied the ballgame (Zender 2004:10) (See Figures 5b and 5c). With these sources of evidence in mind, it is not difficult to imagine a ballgame as a scene of high stakes, riotous enthusiasm, satisfied stomachs, and a general good time.

How are we to reconcile these competing models of the Maya ballgame? There were surely some cases in which ballgame events were staged to re-enact important mythological themes through ritual play and sacrifice. However, there were surely also times at which sport and entertainment, rather than ceremony, played a key role in the event. Ballcourt dedication ceremonies are well documented archaeologically (Fox 1996), and it is possible that, since many monumental inscriptions are primarily dedicatory in nature, the ballgames depicted in monumental sculpture represent dedication events in which the king performed a series of rituals (Tokovinine 2002:6). These would include the god impersonations and sacrifices depicted on such monuments, and would formally dedicate the ballcourt or stairway in question, while not necessarily serving as a template for ballgame play itself.

Maya ballgames and Maya politics

Another feature of the Maya ballgame is the extent to which it was used by elites in political contexts, made clear by monumental inscriptions. While ballgame competitions may have been used to celebrate war, they were also played between polities that were on friendly terms. The famous “Site Q” ballplayer panels offer a good example. Ballplayer Panel 1 (Figure 6) depicts a ballgame between a high-ranking lord of the powerful site of Calakmul, and an individual named Chak Ak’ach Yuk, known to be the king of the subordinate site of La Corona. The text also specifies that the location of the ballgame was at Calakmul itself (Martin and Grube 2000:110). The diplomatic relations between the two sites are well documented (Graham 1997), and it was undoubtedly these relations that the La Corona king wished to stress when commissioning the monument. It is likely that all of the Site Q ballplayer panels were

carved primarily to celebrate peaceful ballgames, played between political allies, rather than a more warlike equivalent.

The carved ballcourt markers from Cancuen also depict ballgames between apparent political allies. Ballcourt Marker 1 (Figure 7) depicts Cancuen's king, Tajal Chan Ahk, playing ball with a certain K'an Maax, who would later become king (Zender and Skidmore 2004). Ballcourt Marker 2, commemorating a dedication event, gives great prominence to the captor of the kings of Sak Te' and Machaquila, and it is he who is depicted playing ball. These two sites were enemies of Cancuen, and only after this capture, apparently, did the Cancuen king usurp the Machaquila emblem glyph and claim rulership of both sites (Zender and Skidmore 2004). Clearly then, while the ballcourt markers may have been intended to celebrate military victory, the ballgames they depict did not involve captives from the sites in question, but rather local, victorious lords.

Depictions of such friendly or diplomatic ballgames do not confine themselves to monumental carving but can be found on ceramic vessels as well. One clear example comes from a polychrome vessel depicting a ballgame between two finely dressed individuals (Figure 8a). Although the rim text of the vessel indicates that it once belonged to the king of Hix Witz (Figure 8b), one of the ballplaying figures is labeled as the king of Motul de San Jose (Figure 8c). In all likelihood, the vessel was painted to commemorate an important ballgame between the two polities (Miller and Martin 2004:91).

All these images are examples of individual ballgames that were part of a political or diplomatic process. However, Maya kings were also interested in expressing general ballgame connections as well. The Mayan root *pitz*, meaning "to play ball" is often found

in association with ballgame scenes in which it serves as a caption to the event being depicted (Stuart 1987:25). However, the *pitz* root is found in other contexts as well, and forms the basis for an elite title, used repeatedly at several sites by specific kings. For instance, Yaxchilan's Shield Jaguar II is referred to as a 5- "*k'atun*" *pitzil* "ballplayer over 80 years old" in Yaxchilan inscriptions and on Stela 1 from Dos Caobas (Cougnaud et al. 2003:5) (Figure 9a-c). The ballplayer title is just one in a string of several 5-K'atun titles used to refer to this king.

Variations on the *pitz* epithet are found at other sites as well. The Dos Pilas king Bajlaj Chan K'awiil is referred to as a *bate' pitz* on multiple occasions, a title meaning "wrestler ballplayer" (Zender 2001) (Figure 10a,b). At Palenque, variations on the ballplayer title describe numerous kings (Figure 11a-c), including Kan Balam II, whose childhood name was apparently *aj pitzal ohl*, "he of the ballplayer heart," (Figure 11d) and who is also described as a "*k'atun*" (young) *pitzal* at the time of his accession (Figure 11e). Baak-nal Chaak, Kan Balam's contemporary and king of the rival polity of Tonina, took the title *yajawte' pitzal* (*yajawte'* is an elite title meaning "lord of the tree") (Figure 12). This king was also responsible for the construction of a large ballcourt at Tonina, decorated with statues of various captives. Labels below each captive, where legible, tell us that these were vassals of the hostile king Kan Balam of Palenque (Martin and Grube 2000:181) (Figure 13). In a remarkable display of irony, these ballcourt texts refer to Kan Balam not by his royal name, but simply by his epithet *aj pitz*, the ballplayer. Although Kan Balam is not himself displayed as a captive, the monument seems to mock his claim of ballgame prowess through the revelry in his military defeat.

The *pitz* title, in addition to its explicit use by royalty, is found on ceramic vessels as well, whose owners also seek to associate themselves with ballplaying activities. One vessel, for example, possibly painted by an artist from Naranjo (Kerr n.d.), refers to its owner as an *itz'aat pitz* (*itz'aat* being another common title taken by nobility) (Figure 14). An unusual unprovenienced alabaster vessel also employs the title with variations (Figure 15). Its *luumil pitzal*, *bate' pitzal*, and *kabal pitzal* can be translated as “dirty ballplayer,” “wrestler ballplayer” and “earthy ballplayer” respectively (Zender 2001).

Clearly, Maya elites were interested in casting themselves as ballplayers. This was done through the dedication of ballcourts themselves, as well as prominently displaying scenes in which they conducted ballgame ceremonies, played ball against other high-ranking members of society, and even through the explicit description of certain individuals as ballplayers. But, as we have seen, the ballgame was not exclusively played in reference to religious themes. Rather, it was also an important source of entertainment in the lives of elite and commoner alike. Why, then, do Maya lords place such a high emphasis on this event and seek to so readily associate themselves with it?

Fox (1996) offers one possible explanation for this phenomenon. Pointing to a strong link between ballgame events and food consumption, he suggest that ballgame rituals may have been a form of competitive generosity. The lords who sponsored such events hoped to gain prestige and respect in the eyes of their subjects and their peers through the ability to provide a good time. He points out that “The effectiveness of such public display efforts is partly contingent on the sponsors’ ability to impress others through pomp and pageantry” (Fox 1996:494). Hill and Clark (2001), on the other hand, argue that, “the accumulation of symbolic capital and social prestige appears to have been

an important ingredient [of political power], but insufficient by itself. All paths to potential heritable power have the possibility of differential control of material goods, but these required investment and manipulation in particular ways to defeat the egalitarian system” (p. 341). Citing the close spatial and chronological connection between the first known ballcourt in Mesoamerica and the beginning of social stratification at Paso de la Amada, Hill and Clark suggest that the ballcourt served as a material means of seizing power. They suggest that the ownership of the ballcourt, along with the control of gambling debts, may have led to a differentiation of material wealth that brought about a differentiation in social status.

Furthermore, Hill and Clark (2001) suggest that the beginning of ballcourts in Mesoamerica led to the first inter-village competition, which in turn built a sense of community based on support for the village team and in opposition to other communities. From this sense of community, a concept they call *Communitas*, the individual who controlled the ballcourt would have emerged as a representative of the community for both visitors and locals alike. This may have contributed to the transition from achieved status to ascribed status in these communities. This argument, however, is based upon the assumption that other villages near Paso de la Amada built their own ballcourts as well. The authors point out, “the presence of just one ballcourt in the region is as illogical as wearing only one shoe” (p. 342).

By the Late Preclassic period (ca. 400 BC-AD 250), both the ballgame and divine kingship were imbedded traditions within Maya society and the emergence of social stratification and heritable power were no longer at stake by this time. The fact remains, however, that even several thousand years after the construction of the first known

ballcourt in Mesoamerica, Maya elites were still just as interested in associating themselves with the ballgame as were their distant elite predecessors. It seems simplistic to argue that at this late stage the ballgame alone was responsible for the continuation of the institution of kingship. However, the role of *Communitas* and its manifestation through inter-polity ballgame competition could indeed have played a role in the fortunes of individual rulers.

How did this process play itself out at Yalbac? No monumental texts have ever been found there, so we have no way of knowing the personal ambitions of its rulers. However, like the excavators of Paso de la Amada, we have the ballcourt itself. Excavations at the ballcourt provide information about the beginnings of the ballgame at Yalbac, its popularity through time, its locus in relation to other features at the site, and activities which may have gone on in its general vicinity. And unlike the excavators of Paso de la Amada, we have numerous other ballcourts to which the Yalbac ballcourt can be compared. Through this comparison, we can look for evidence of inter-site competition, which is, according to Hill and Clark, the key to *Communitas*.

Ballcourts of Belize

Ballcourt Description and Classification

There are numerous sites in Belize that contain ballcourts; in fact, sites without them are rare. Ballcourts in general display a surprising diversity which has caused various scholars to classify them according to broad typologies. Such categorization was undoubtedly easier when fewer ballcourts were known, and the great number and variety that have since been described complicates the situation. Blom (1932) made one such

attempt by developing a typology for 32 ballcourts from the Maya area. The important features in Blom's classificatory system were the angle of the ballcourt's side walls, as well as the material of which the ballcourt's rings were made. (Based on the example of the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza, Blom assumed that all ballcourts originally had rings, and the lack thereof at many Maya sites indicated to him that they originally must have been perishable.) Blom also noted that all the ballcourts in the sample had a "low terrace" as well as a "stone-clad slope, from terrace to floor of the court" (Blom 1932:513). Finally, he stated that "there is no rule as to how the ball-courts are placed in relation to cardinal points" (Blom 1932:513).

Acosta and Koer (1946) refined this classification with the definition of three important ballcourt features: the *banqueta*, *gran talud*, and *paramento*. The *banqueta* is described as a small platform above the floor of the ballcourt alley. The *gran talud* is the sloping surface that rises above the *banqueta* and, they believe, was the most important feature in ballgame play. Finally, the *paramento* was the high wall, usually vertical, above the *gran talud*. According to this classification, Type A ballcourts had all three features, whereas Types B and C lacked a *banqueta* and a *gran talud* respectively.

Smith (1961) considered even more features and expanded his typology to include five ballcourt types. The characteristics of the ballcourt's inner profile remained important, and Smith defined two features thereof: the bench (equivalent to Acosta and Koer's *banqueta*) and the playing wall (equivalent to the *gran talud* or *paramento*, depending on whether the wall was sloping or vertical). Additionally, he noted the presence in some cases of vertical molding above such sloping surfaces. Finally, Smith accounted for the demarcation of end zones, defining two types of open-ended courts,

two types of enclosed courts, and one type with no end zones at all. Additionally, Smith was wise enough to include a sixth category, miscellaneous, for all those ballcourts which were still indefinable.

The most recent attempt at classifying Mesoamerican ballcourts was made by Taladoire (1981). He further changed terminology by defining the ballcourt bench, apron (Acosta and Koer's *gran talud*) and Cornice (a vertical face equivalent to the *paramento*, playing wall, or vertical molding). Taladoire's typology covered a large geographical and chronological range, spanning Mesoamerica from the American Southwest to the Caribbean Islands, and the Middle Preclassic to Postclassic periods.

Problems with these classifications abound. First, strict definitions of ballcourt features do not take into account the broad range of forms present. For instance, how does one define a bench/*banqueta*/low terrace? According to Blom, Acosta and Koer, and Taladoire, it must always be a flat surface, but Smith describes one of this types as possessing a sloping bench top. Furthermore, how does one draw a line between a *gran talud* and a playing wall/cornice? According to Smith, playing walls can be vertical or sloping. Secondly, such studies attempt to bring literally thousands of ballcourts under a single classification scheme. Since Taladoire's (1981) study, the number of ballcourts identified archaeologically throughout Mesoamerica has increased drastically (Taladoire 2001). As more ballcourts are discovered every year, the overwhelming diversity of ballcourt forms becomes increasingly apparent, as does the sample size with which to test certain classifications.

A better understanding of ballcourt forms is produced by studies that focus on smaller regions. Such studies (e.g. Scarborough 1991, Fox 1991) facilitate the recognition

of localized chronological and architectural patterns and attempt to define those features which are important in a particular region. Where regional standardization does exist, it is likely indicative of the peculiarities of ballgame play in that particular area. For instance, large ballcourts in one region may indicate a style of play that necessitated more movement or a larger number of players, whereas smaller ballcourts in a neighboring region may indicate more restricted movement or a smaller number of players. By focusing on those features which are emphasized locally, not only can an understanding be achieved of the particulars of ballgame play in that area, but those areas can be defined that were regularly engaged in inter-site ballgame competition. The more localized these studies become, the greater our understanding will be of the ballgame's role within the social and political landscape of each region.

If one is to focus on local patterns in ballcourt construction, how does Yalbac's ballcourt fit into building trends in northern Belize? The Yalbac site core is located about four kilometers south of the Yalbac Hills, which form a natural boundary between the Belize River Valley to the south, and the Three Rivers Region to the north (Figure 1). The Belize River Valley is defined by the settlement in the foothills along the Mopan and Macal Rivers, and on the alluvial plain to the east, where the confluence of these two rivers forms the Belize River (Chase and Garber 2004). The Three Rivers Region to the north is more loosely defined as the area between the floodplains of the Rio Azul to the north and west, and by Booth's River to the east. While the site of Chan Chich has previously arbitrarily set the southern margin of this region (Sullivan and Sagebiel 2003), I consider San Jose to be part of this area as well. Yalbac's particular location at the very juncture between these two regions makes it geographically unique, and it is unknown

which area played a more dominant role in Yalbac's political orientation. Since ballgame competition was an important arena for social and political interaction, ballcourt variation may indicate which of these adjacent regions was more important to Yalbac's development.

If this is a viable line of inquiry, however, it must be demonstrated that the two neighboring regions display significant regional differences in ballcourt construction. To define ballcourt variability, I have focused on several attributes. These include quantitative measurements such as 1) the length of the ballcourt alley as defined by the length of the ballcourt's structures, 2) the width of the alley 3) the height of the structures and 4) the cardinal orientation of the ballcourt alley².

Other attributes I examined were more qualitative, such as 5) chronology of ballcourt construction and use and 6) the profile of the internally-facing walls of the parallel structures. While the ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region vary considerably in this regard, the ballcourts of the Belize Valley are far more regular. For this reason, I have adopted the following terminology to describe Belize Valley ballcourts: a bench face refers to the first surface encountered above the alley floor. It is either vertical or sloping. A bench top is a flat or slightly sloping surface above the bench face that extends away from the center of the alley. A playing wall is a vertical or steeply sloping surface that rises above the bench top. Such easy definitions are not viable for the description of ballcourts in the Three Rivers Region, and therefore I have described each surface individually, sometimes making comparisons to the Belize Valley terminology.

The features I have chosen to examine were selected based on the assumption that they would affect actual ballgame play. For instance, the length and width of the alley

would determine the amount of movement possible during a game. The height of the structures as well as the profiles of the various playing surfaces would determine the ways in which the ball would bounce if it were struck against them. The orientation of the ballcourt alley might have influenced the times of day at which a ballgame would be possible (nobody wants to play with the sun in their eyes). Finally, the chronology of the ballcourt is important to determine the ballgame's popularity through time.

Belize River Valley Ballcourts

The present study is not the first to thoroughly examine the ballcourts of the Belize River Valley. In her examinations of the ballcourts of Baking Pot, Ferguson (1999) provides a catalogue, brief description, and analysis of the ballcourts in the Belize Valley. While using additional sources where possible, I used this catalogue as my primary source for ballcourts in the region. I added one additional ballcourt to the list, located at the site of Saturday Creek and excavated by the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project in 2001 (Jeakle et al. 2002). In total I examined 19 ballcourts at 13 sites in the Belize River Valley (See Appendix A for a description of these ballcourts).

The quantitative attributes of the ballcourts of the Belize River Valley are easily described and analyzed. The lengths and widths of the ballcourt alleys of all 19 ballcourts were collected, either through examination of site maps, or by the description of excavators. The ballcourt alleys were nearly all 10 m in length or longer, with the exception of the ballcourt from North Caracol Farm. This ballcourt alley measured only 5 m in length, which seems extremely anomalous. For this reason, alley lengths were analyzed twice, once including North Caracol Farm, and once excluding it from analysis.

Heights of the structures were harder to come by, as site plans do not commonly

indicate the heights of various structures. Only 10 heights were collected. The orientation of ballcourt structures was also collected for all 19 ballcourts. Of all the ballcourts in the Belize River Valley, only one at Baking Pot was oriented generally east-west, while the rest were aligned generally north-south. For this reason, two analyses of orientation were conducted. The first was based upon all 19 ballcourts, with the east-west ballcourt at Baking Pot adding considerable variation to the sample. The second analysis excluded this ballcourt altogether, and only examined those ballcourts aligned generally north-south.

The raw data collected from ballcourts in the Belize River Valley are as follows:

| Site Name | Alley Length | Alley Width | Structure Height | Orientation |
|--------------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| Actuncan | 16 | 3.75 | | 80 |
| Baking Pot 1 | 19 | 3.15 | 2.6 | 166 |
| Baking Pot 2 | 19 | 4.5 | | 82 |
| Baking Pot 3 | 20 | 5.5 | 1.6 | 98 |
| Blackman Eddy | 17 | 6 | | 85 |
| Buenavista 1 | 24 | 6 | | 66 |
| Buenavista 2 | 21 | 3 | | 76 |
| Cahal Pech 1 | 16 | 4 | 4.5 | 76 |
| Cahal Pech 2 | 15 | 3 | 2 | 90 |
| El Pilar 1 | 15 | 5.5 | | 95 |
| El Pilar 2 | 10 | 8 | | 90 |
| Las Ruinas | 13 | 5 | | 93 |
| North Caracol Farm | 5 | 2 | 2 | 90 |
| Ontario Village | 15 | 5 | 2 | 92 |
| Pacbitun | 17.5 | 4.8 | 3.5 | 76 |
| Saturday Creek | 26 | 5 | 2.4 | 80 |
| X-ual-canil | 14 | 5 | 1 | 73 |
| Xunantunich 1 | 10 | 4 | | 78 |
| Xunantunich 2 | 15 | 5.5 | 1.13 | 78 |

The sample size (n), mean (\bar{x}), standard deviation (s), and coefficient of variation¹ (cv) for each attribute are listed below.

Alley Length (all ballcourts)

$n=19$
 $\bar{x}=16.2$
 $s=4.92$
 $cv=30.4\%$

Alley Length (excluding North Caracol Farm)

$n=18$
 $\bar{x}=16.8$
 $s=4.23$
 $cv=25.1\%$

Alley Width

$n=19$
 $\bar{x}=4.7$
 $s=1.37$
 $cv=29.4\%$

Structure Height

$n=10$
 $\bar{x}=2.40$
 $s=1.10$
 $cv=45.7\%$

Orientation (all ballcourts)

$n=19$
 $\bar{x}=87.6$
 $s=20.81$
 $cv=23.8\%$

Orientation (north-south ballcourts only)

$n=18$
 $\bar{x}=83.2$
 $s=8.76$
 $cv=10.5\%$

As can be seen by these data, most attributes are highly variable. Although the exclusion of North Caracol Farm in the length analysis did lower the coefficient of variation for that attribute, it did not greatly change the mean or standard deviation. The exclusion of the east-west Baking Pot ballcourt, however, created more dramatic results. Both the standard deviation and coefficient of variation were significantly reduced, and the mean shifted nearly five degrees westward.

The qualitative attributes of the ballcourts of the Belize River Valley are more complicated. Most of the ballcourts in the region were constructed during the Late Classic period. There are others, however, that were built during the Late Preclassic and were refurbished during subsequent centuries. The five Preclassic ballcourts in the Belize River Valley include those at Actuncan, Pacbitun, Saturday Creek, the South Ballcourt at Buenavista, and the Eastern Ballcourt at El Pilar. Of these five ballcourts, only two survived into the Early Classic period. Both the South Ballcourt at Buenavista and the ballcourt at Pacbitun were replastered during this period, though no major architectural construction took place. The only ballcourt that can be definitively said to have been initiated during the Early Classic period was that at Las Ruinas de Arenal. Thus it is clear that during the Early Classic, ballcourt construction in the Belize River Valley was not as high a priority as in previous centuries.

During the Late and Terminal Classic periods, however, ballcourts in the Belize River Valley enjoyed a resurgence of popularity. Ballcourts previously built at Actuncan, Pacbitun and Saturday Creek were rebuilt at this time, and new ballcourts sprang up everywhere. These included the three ballcourts at Baking Pot, both ballcourts at Cahal Pech, and those at North Caracol Farm, Ontario Village, X-ual-canil, and Ballcourt 2 at Xunantunich. Additionally, the South Ballcourt at Buenavista was terminated and the brand new North ballcourt was built in its stead.

Ballcourt profiles in the Belize River Valley show remarkable standardization and stability through time. In general, the profile of a ballcourt in the Belize River Valley consists of a bench face, bench top, and playing wall. Bench faces vary, both in slope and in height (reported heights all fell between .5 and 1 m high). Bench tops in the Belize

River Valley, although not all completely horizontal, are not steeply sloped. The highest reported slope of a bench top in this region is the 17 degree slope at Ontario Village. Most others were reported as horizontal or slightly sloping. Above the bench tops rose playing walls, which were generally vertical or nearly so. The Eastern Ballcourt at Cahal Pech and Ballcourt 2 at Xunantunich had 80 degree and 65 degree playing walls respectively. The ballcourt at Pacbitun, however, was originally built with a 45 degree playing wall. While this is still a relatively steep angle, it was nevertheless increased during the Late Classic period with the construction of a new vertical wall at the juncture between the bench top and playing wall. While this new wall did not extend to the structure's summit, it had the effect of creating a steeper playing surface, common at other ballcourts in the area. Only one ballcourt, at Saturday Creek, did not have a playing wall.

The effect created by the juncture of a (nearly) horizontal bench top with a (nearly) vertical playing wall emphasizes the height of the latter, as well as the restricting angle between them. Steeper benches would reduce this effect and make the angle between the surfaces less abrupt. To compare this effect to the ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region, I have attempted to quantify these characteristics by comparing the heights of the playing walls. However, it is difficult to make this comparison with ballcourts that are themselves different heights. Therefore, where possible, I have calculated playing wall height as a percentage of the total structure height. Saturday Creek was excluded from this analysis because it has no playing wall. At Baking Pot's II-D ballcourt, this ratio was about 60 percent. Although the other two ballcourts at Baking Pot were not as precisely described, they were both compared to the II-D ballcourt, so I

assume that this ratio is similar. At Actuncan, (as indicated by McGovern 1993 fig. 5) Cahal Pech's Eastern Ballcourt, and Pacbitun, this ratio was even higher at 80 percent. (The Pacbitun ratio was reduced in the Late Classic but only due to the fact that the new vertical wall did not reach the top of the structure. If one takes into account the older playing wall remaining above this surface, the ratio remains about the same.) The playing wall to structure height ratio was the highest at Xunantunich's Ballcourt 2, at 90 percent.

All these numbers well exceed fifty percent, and it is likely that other ballcourts, whose statistics could not be precisely determined, would show similarly high ratios. The only exception to this general principle was the ballcourt at Ontario Village, whose relatively steeply sloped bench top (17 degrees) met its playing wall at a higher point. This ratio was a mere 25 percent. While this type of analysis is a peculiar way of describing ballcourts in one particular region, it will become useful when the profiles of ballcourts in the Three Rivers Region are examined. As can be seen from the descriptions in Appendix B below, the Three Rivers Region ballcourts are not as highly standardized, but can also be described and compared using the same type of analysis.

Three Rivers Region Ballcourts

Although more ballcourts seem to be discovered every year in the Three Rivers Region, I included 20 ballcourts at 16 sites in my analysis (See Appendix B for ballcourt descriptions). Like those of the Belize River Valley, the Ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region were analyzed both statistically and qualitatively. Whereas only a single ballcourt in the Belize Valley was oriented east-west, three were constructed with this orientation in the Three Rivers Region. Once again two analyses were conducted on the orientation

data, one including the east-west ballcourts, the other excluding them. The raw data are as follows:

| Site Name | Alley Length | Alley Width | Structure Height | Orientation |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| Blue Creek | 19 | 6 | | 85.5 |
| Chan Chich | 28 | 10 | 4.3 | 84 |
| Chawak But'o'ob | 16 | 8 | | |
| Chochkitam | 16 | 4 | | 90 |
| Dos Hombres 1 | 18 | 4 | 3 | 90 |
| Dos Hombres 2 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 90 |
| E'kenha | 16.5 | 8.7 | | 100 |
| Gran Cacao | 16.5 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 107 |
| Ixno' Ha | | | 1.4 | 16 |
| Kakabish | 12.5 | 7 | | 86 |
| Kinal | 20 | 7 | | 115 |
| La Honradez | 20 | 4 | | 100 |
| La Honradez | 20 | 4 | | 100 |
| La Milpa North | 26 | 7 | 2.5 | 10.5 |
| La Milpa South | 19 | 5 | 5.5 | 95 |
| Maax Na | 17.5 | 5 | 2 | 94 |
| Punta de Cacao | 19 | 11 | | 163 |
| Quam Hill | 16 | 10 | | 87 |
| Rio Azul | 17 | 6.5 | | 102 |
| San Jose | 17 | 5 | 4 | 93 |

The same four statistical variables will be used in the analysis of the Three Rivers Region ballcourts.

Alley Length

$n=19$

$\bar{x} = 18.2$

$s=3.92$

$cv=21.6\%$

Alley Width

$n=19$

$\bar{x} = 6.2$

$s=3.92$

$cv=38.6\%$

Structure Height

$n=9$

$\bar{x} = 3.1$

$s=1.32$

$cv=42.0\%$

Orientation (all ballcourts)

$n=19$

$\bar{x}=90.0$

$s=32.16$

$cv=35.8$

Orientation (north-south ballcourts only)

$n=16$

$\bar{x}=94.9$

$s=8.5$

$cv=9.0\%$

The quantitative attributes described in the Three Rivers Region are highly variable. But, as in the Belize River Valley, the reanalysis of ballcourt orientation proved useful, considerably reducing the variation in each sample and moving the mean orientation five degrees eastward. Unlike the ballcourts of the Belize River Valley, none of the 20 ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region was dated to the Late Preclassic period. The two earliest ballcourts that have been dated thus far are located at Blue Creek and Ixno Ha', and both date to the Early Classic period. During the Late and Terminal Classic periods, like its neighboring region to the South, the Three Rivers Region seems to have become host to more ballcourt construction, with nine new ballcourts dating to these periods.

The structural profiles of the ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region were highly variable. Although some resembled those of the Belize River Valley in the presence of flat benches or steep playing walls, there was far less consistency in the Three Rivers Region structural profiles. The degree of slope of the various playing surfaces varied considerably throughout the region. However, the ballcourts in the Three Rivers Region lacked the general emphasis on the dichotomy between flat benches and high vertical

playing walls. To demonstrate the lack of this feature, I calculated the ratio between the overall height of the ballcourt structures to the height of the vertical or near vertical walls exposed for play for comparison to the Belize River Valley. For the purposes of this analysis, any angles greater than 50 degrees were considered near vertical. While the analysis of the Belize Valley ballcourts considered the 45 degree slope at Pacbitun to be generally vertical, this was allowed because a) it was the extreme outlier and b) it was modified in subsequent phases to express a greater vertical emphasis. For those ballcourts with multiple tiers such as Chan Chich phase 1, Gran Cacao and Dos Hombres Ballcourt 1, I have excluded the upper tier, since it is likely that upper walls supported structures and were not used in ballgame play. Where bench faces are present I have also excluded these, as I did for the Belize Valley.

The percentages in the Three Rivers Region were generally far lower than in the Belize River Valley. Some ballcourts such as Ballcourt 2 at La Milpa and the Maax Na ballcourt had no vertical surfaces at all. The La Milpa ballcourt strongly resembled the outlier at Ontario Village in the Belize Valley with a 17 degree sloping surface, a short vertical wall, and a ratio of 30 percent. The Chan Chich ballcourt had a 25 percent ratio in its first phase which was reduced to 9 percent in its second phase. The ratio at Dos Hombres Ballcourt 1 was 28 percent, and at Gran Cacao and San Jose it was 43 percent and 40 percent respectively. The only ballcourt in the region to exceed 50 percent was the Dos Hombres 2 ballcourt. The total height of the vertical wall on that ballcourt was not determined, but if one assumes that it reached the top of the structure, the ratio would be 68 percent. It is clear from these numbers that high steep surfaces were not as important

in ballcourt construction in the Three Rivers Region as they were in the Belize River Valley.

Analysis

To determine whether there were statistically significant differences between the quantitative attributes of the two regions, *t*-tests were conducted for each attribute. It was hypothesized that the two samples would represent different populations, and α (the probability of rejecting a true null hypothesis) was set at .05.

Alley Length (all ballcourts)

$t=1.61$; $df=36$; $p>.05$

H_0 was not rejected (the difference was not significant).

Alley Length (excluding North Caracol Farm)

$t=1.13$; $df=35$; $p>.05$

H_0 was not rejected (the difference was not significant).

Alley Width

$t=2.36$; $df=36$; $p<.05$

H_0 was rejected (the difference was *significant*).

Structure Height

$t=1.26$; $df=17$; $p>.05$

H_0 was not rejected (the difference was not significant).

Orientation (all ballcourts)

$t=.273$; $df=36$; $p>.05$

H_0 was not rejected (the difference was not significant).

Orientation (north-south ballcourts only)

$t=3.92$; $df=32$; $p<.05$

H_0 was rejected (the difference was *significant*).

As indicated above, two of these analyses yielded significant results. Ballcourts in the Belize River Valley had significantly narrower playing alleys than those in the Three Rivers Region. While it is tempting to conclude that this significance is a reflection of true differences in playing or building style, caution must be taken. In both regions, alley

widths had high coefficients of variation (29.4% and 38.6% variation respectively). Like the Belize River Valley, the Three Rivers Region contained ballcourts with restrictively narrow playing alleys. However, wide alleys also existed in this region, producing a greater range, higher variation, and skewing the mean width. I believe that it is unlikely that the difference in alley widths is truly noteworthy.

The differences in orientation, however, cannot be so easily discounted. When taking all ballcourts into consideration, those few east-west ballcourts in each region introduce substantial variation into the sample. However, a reminder is in order that in both regions, east-west running ballcourts are the exception, and north-south ballcourts the overwhelming rule. If we are only to evaluate those ballcourts which are oriented north-south, variation within each sample is substantially reduced. The mean orientation for north-south Belize Valley is 83.2 degrees, while those of the Three Rivers region have a mean orientation of 94.9. This represents a mean difference of over 12 degrees. However, these particular 12 degrees lie on either side of true north, which may carry extra importance. The fact that ballcourts in one region are generally oriented just east of north and oriented just west of north in the other region is suggestive of intentional planning.

But why these specific orientations? There are several possible explanations. One is that ballcourt orientation reflects the overall orientation of buildings within a particular site or group, and that cardinal directions has nothing to do with ballplaying whatsoever. While this may be true in some cases, there are examples within the data set where ballcourts are isolated or where their orientations do not match those of nearby architecture.

Taking practical purposes into consideration, if one wanted to avoid the situation in which a ballplayer or team faced into the sun, north-south ballcourts would certainly be more useful than east-west ballcourts. Beyond these generalities, offsetting a ballcourt a few degrees from north would have additional advantages at certain times of the year. For instance, at a Belize River Valley ballcourt, oriented several degrees west of north, the south-facing ballplayer could avoid being blinded on those evenings when the sun was relatively low in the sky (December). Similarly, ballplayers of the Three Rivers Region could avoid such difficulties on December mornings by skewing ballcourts several degrees east of north. The reverse is of course true on mornings and evenings in June as well. These observations point to a possibility that the differences in ballcourt orientation are a reflection of specific times of day or year in which the ballgame was regularly played in each region⁴.

Chronologically speaking, ballcourts appear in the Belize River Valley earlier than they do in the Three Rivers Region. Six Preclassic ballcourts have been found in the former, and none in the latter. The relative paucity of courts during the Early Classic period is similar in both regions. Ballcourts existed during this time, but they were far from common and little effort was invested in their construction or upkeep. During the Late Classic, however, both regions experienced a surge in ballcourt building, and the game presumably became a popular event throughout both areas.

But while popularity of ballcourts through time was similar in both regions, the formal characteristics of these ballcourts varied considerably. The highly standardized ballcourts of the Belize River Valley, with their relatively flat, wide benches and steep playing walls differed from the more variable ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region with

their gentler slopes and shorter walls. As previous classification systems have acknowledged, the profile of the ballcourt structures was possibly the most important feature defining the nature of the ballcourt. As the heavy rubber ball was bounced between opposing teams, the surfaces that it struck would have been the primary determinant in the speed and direction of the bounce. High playing walls would have favored a particular type of ricochet, whereas shorter playing walls would have restricted the incidence of this phenomenon. Similarly, wide, flat benches would have affected play differently than the steeper slopes found at many sites in the Three Rivers Region. It is impossible to understand all the nuances of this variation without being a ballplayer, and without knowing exactly how the game was played, but it must nevertheless be acknowledged as significant.

Yalbac Ballcourt Excavations

Since variation exists between the two regions immediately north and south of Yalbac, examination of the ballcourt features at Yalbac should offer an indication of the area with which it more closely interacted, at least in the sphere of ballgame competition. Excavation at the Yalbac ballcourt began in 2002, but poor weather conditions in that year prevented substantial progress (Lucero 2003). Excavations continued in 2003 with a 3-x-1-m test unit that was opened between the parallel ballcourt structures 2B and 2C. The purpose of this excavation was to find the alley floor and, it was hoped, a ballcourt marker. For this reason the excavation unit was placed in the center of the alley, perpendicular to Structures 2B and 2C. Excavation revealed collapse debris (strata 102 and 103) as well as a series of plaster floors (104 through 107). Finally, clay fill (108)

and a cut plaster floor (109) were exposed before excavations ended for the season (Lucero 2004).

I joined the Valley of Peace Archaeology project in the summer of 2004 as a student through New Mexico State University's archaeology field school. During that season I completed the ballcourt alley excavation with the help of Zedekiah Scott of Valley of Peace Village, Belize. The ballcourt excavations in 2005, completed by myself with the help of Mr. Scott and several field school students, focused on the ballcourt's profile, its relationship to an abutting structure, and evidence of ritual activity. The results of the 2004 and 2005 seasons at the ballcourt have already been prepared for publication in the respective field reports of those two seasons (Baron 2005, 2006a). Additionally, data from both seasons was presented in an article for the forthcoming volume of the Research Reports in Belizean Archaeology (Baron 2006b). The following sections will draw heavily from these three publications.

2004 Excavations. The 2004 excavations continued where 2003 had left off with a 1-x-2.75-m unit. After removing the backdirt and plastic from the 2003 season, we found that much of plaster floor 109 had deteriorated due to the rain in 2003, and we were left with only a small patch of plaster and the ballast stones for the floor on the western end of the unit. Excavation beneath the ballast stones of floor 109, revealed a thin layer of clay which yielded a piece of cut stone, a piece of bone, and several pieces of porous limestone which we are tentatively identifying as speleothem fragments.

Stratum 108, the clay fill identified in 2003, which overlaid floor 109, was heavily burned east of the remaining ballast stones. The stratum yielded a series of burnt materials, all of which were patchy and uneven. Although we separated the burning into

three layers for analysis, it is likely that these layers represent a single heavy burning event. The uppermost of these layers showed large burned patches, the second layer yielded smaller areas, while in the lowest layer they were smaller still, with the exception of a heavily burned strip four centimeters wide running lengthwise through the middle of the ballcourt alley. Such heavy burning events at Maya sites usually represent termination rituals that were carried out when a structure was going out of use, or was being renovated.

Under strata 108 and 109, we identified another layer of clay fill, stratum 110. This fill would have originally separated floor 109 from the earlier floor 113 below it. This plaster of this floor is thick, especially on the east end of the unit. The floor appears to have been cut or broken because it has a distinct edge protruding for most of its length about a centimeter from the south wall of the unit. While following floor 113 we discovered a plastered step (stratum 112) rising 20 cm above the floor. The plaster of this step was well preserved, and covered several foundation boulders. The largest of these was a smooth, hard river stone, unlike most of the soft, porous limestone usually found. It was encased by plaster and large pieces of hard limestone.

To get a better idea of stratum 112, we expanded the unit half a meter eastward, and found that the step sloped gradually upward. Removing the plaster exposed more boulder sized stones, most of them limestone, but river stones as well (stratum 115). Because the large stones of 115 were covered by the thick plaster of 112, we concluded that we had uncovered the bench of an earlier ballcourt. This was an important discovery, because it indicated that even the earliest construction in this area had been used as a ballcourt.

Under stratum 115 and floor 113 was stratum 114 which consisted of pebble ballast stones and a clay fill. The plaster floor 113 and the ballcourt bench were built continuously on top of this fill. Under stratum 114 we encountered natural soil (stratum 116), a light gray clay mixed with chunks of limestone. This layer was not at all level and it appears as if stratum 114 was the first cultural layer (representing the initial construction event), used to level out the natural ground surface before any construction began.

Stratigraphy and ceramic evidence indicate that there were three overarching phases in the construction of the ballcourt at Yalbac (see Table 1, Figure 16). The first, represented by floor 113 and ballcourt architecture 115/112, took place between 300 and 100 B.C. during the Late Preclassic period. That the initial floor and ballcourt bench are related is clear because there is no break between the plaster of the floor and the plaster of the bench face. The floor and the bench were built on top of clay fill 114, used to level out the uneven natural ground surface. Later, during the same time period, clay fill 110 was added on top of floor 113. This leveled the ballcourt alley for a new construction: floor 109.

As late as A.D. 250, floor 109 was covered with clay fill 108 and one, or a series of burning events took place during this process. Burned layers were found throughout fill 108, but floor 109 was only present in a small part of the unit, having either been cut through, or having dissolved. At the same time, the first floors were constructed in the rest of the plaza, so it is possible that the ballcourt was ritually terminated in association with new construction developments at the site. Following the burning of 108, the ballcourt remained unaltered for the duration of the Early Classic period. A third and

final major phase of construction took place in the Late Classic period, when a series of floors was built on top of 108. Floors 106 and 105 were added first but poor construction caused them to slant toward the center of the playing alley. Both floors were covered by floor 104 without an intervening layer of fill (Lucero 2004). These three floors represent the final major phase of construction at the ballcourt and correspond to the final phase of structures 2B and 2C, investigated in 2005.

2005 Excavations. Excavations in 2005 were designed to expose the terminal architecture of ballcourt structures 2B and 2C. This was accomplished with a series of axial trenches across both structures and through the center of the alley (Figure 17). The greatest effort was focused on a 2-x-9-m trench running from the estimated area of juncture between Structures 2A and 2B to the estimated eastern edge of Structure 2B. This trench was divided into four 2-x-2-m units and one 1-x-2-m unit, numbered 1-5. This placement partially overlapped the original trench from the 2002 season. To the south of this trench was placed another, unit 6, measuring 3-x-1 m, to expose more of the sloping playing wall. This trench was confined to the eastward, basal portion of Structure 2B and did not continue above the sloping surface. A 1-x-6.5-m trench (unit 7) was opened in Structure 2C to fully establish the parallel, mirror-image nature of the structures and support the final conclusion that these structures together comprise a ballcourt. Finally, for clarification of the base of each structure, units 7 and 5 were connected with one final unit, (number 8) which was an eastward extension of units 5 and 6, and a narrow (.5 m wide) trench along the alley floor.

In order to understand the nature of the ballcourt's terminal phase construction, excavation was designed to simply expose the architecture of structures 2B and 2C.

However, the excavators of the ballcourt trench in 2002 had mistaken architectural layers for collapse and removed them. The area of this removal corresponded to the center of our units 4, 5 and 8. The internal layers of Structure 2B were therefore also included in analysis. Fortunately, the original trench was only 1 m wide, so intact strata were left on either side of the removed section and could be documented by the 2005 trench. The end result was an exposed profile of the fill behind the sloping playing wall and the foundation underneath it (Figure 18). Based upon the 2002 excavations and the trenches on Structure 2B, conclusions could be drawn about the construction of the ballcourt's terminal phase.

Excavation revealed a line of small boulders on top of the plastered playing alley, which formed a low step only about 20 cm tall. Most of these stones were no longer present in unit 8, possibly having been removed in 2002. Above these stones was a layer of cobbles set in mortar (Stratum 110) about 20 or 30 cm thick. This stratum was best exposed on a narrow line between units 5 and 6, since elsewhere it was covered in cobble facing stones or collapse. Above the layer of cobbles was a layer of large, flat boulders set in mortar (Stratum 108). The eastern edge of these flat stones was set back by 20-30 cm from the first line of small boulders to account for the sloping of the playing wall. These three layers apparently made up the foundation of Structure 2B and may have continued westward all the way under the structure.

Above the flat stones set in mortar was piled dry fill of stones of all sizes, from large boulders to small pebbles (Stratum 106). It was this fill that was removed in 2002 in the center of the trench. The fill was piled to form the sloping wall of the playing alley, which was then covered with a layer of facing stones (Stratum 103b), continuing all the

way down to the level of the first foundation layer, the line of small boulders. The resulting slope rose above the alley at an angle of about 30° and ended about 2 m above and 3 m west of the edge of the alley. Unfortunately, the placement of the cut facing stones of Stratum 103b was not entirely clear after excavation. They had been removed entirely within the area of the 2002 trench, and on either side of this area, the facing stones seem to have slid away, piling up at the bottom of the sloping wall. In unit 6, some of the Stratum 103b facing stones seem to have remained in place (Figure 19). Judging from this unit, the facing stones of the sloping wall were probably set in a stepped-back formation and then covered in plaster. However, the cut stones recovered from unit 6 were not well lodged in place, and the possibility remains that they were originally set in some other position, and have since slumped to their current configuration.

West of this sloping wall was a platform, about 60 cm wide, composed of more large, flat boulders set in plaster (Stratum 103a). This platform was placed on top of the dry fill exposed in unit 4. Above the narrow platform rose a nearly vertical wall face, about 1.5 m high (Stratum 102). Excavators of this wall recovered several flint cores, as well as other types of stone, including polished river stones and possibly basalt. Apparently these were used as part of the masonry fill. Wall 102 formed a retaining wall for the rest of Structure 2B behind it, which was topped with an eroded platform (Stratum 107). This platform continued westward to the juncture with Structure 2A.

Our attempt to expose the architecture of Structure 2C was less successful. The 1.5-m vertical wall that topped the playing wall was fully exposed, along with the narrow platform at its base. These two features were given the same stratum numbers (102 and 103 respectively) as those on Structure 2B. The existence of the features at the correct

height satisfactorily demonstrated that the structures do represent a ballcourt. However, exposure of the sloping wall of Structure 2B was not completed by the end of the season. Therefore the sloping playing wall of 2C is reconstructed by analogy to the much more fully excavated 2B.

Between the two structures was exposed the much eroded plaster floor of the final playing alley (Stratum 112). While this floor was not reported in 2002 when the original trench was excavated, its cobble ballast can be seen in the north profile of the ballcourt alley unit completed in 2004 (Figure 16). Just east of the first line of stones forming the ballcourt masonry, several large stones rise out of the plaster floor. We named this area stratum 111, but there was some disagreement as to its significance. Around this pile of stones, plaster had melted away, making it difficult to determine where the masonry ballcourt began and the plaster floor ended. It is likely that the plaster floor in this area was reinforced by large ballast stones that originally ran underneath it, and that these stones were subsequently disturbed by root activity (Figure 20).

All of the features just discussed yielded Late Classic (A.D. 600-800) ceramics. (Table 1) While it was originally hypothesized that the foundation layers of Structure 2B might have been built during an earlier phase of construction, the ceramics recovered showed that this was probably not the case. Therefore the entirety of the architecture exposed in 2005 represents the terminal construction of the ballcourt, and the architecture of its Late Preclassic predecessor still lies buried underneath or was demolished during the its Late Preclassic termination.

Summary. While no investigation was undertaken to locate the corners of the ballcourt structures, survey indicates that they are each about 17 m in length. Excavation

indicated that the ballcourt alley, at least during its terminal phase, was 5 m wide. From the alley floor to the summits, the ballcourt structures would have stood at 3 m in height in their final phase. Excavations in 2005 clarified that the ballcourt structures are aligned at 18 degrees east of north, or 108 degrees. The ballcourt was originally built in the Late Preclassic period, and was modified later on during this time period. Between 250 B.C. and A.D. 250 it was ritually terminated and went unused for several hundred years, before it was rebuilt in the Classic Period.

The ballcourt's Preclassic phase was not fully exposed, but must have consisted of a bench face 20 cm high, and a nearly horizontal bench top of undetermined width (but at least .8 m wide). In the Late Classic, the ballcourt's profile had a 20 cm vertical surface or bench face, a 30 degree sloping surface rising to a height of 2 m, a 60 cm horizontal surface, and a final vertical wall rising to the height of 1 m.

Analysis

The data collected from the ballcourt at Yalbac were compared to the data collected from both regions. Once again, *t*-tests were performed to test the hypothesis that Yalbac differed significantly from ballcourts in each region. Like in previous analyses, α set at .05. The results are shown below.

Alley Length

Belize River Valley
 $t=.16; df=18; p>.05$

Three Rivers Region
 $t=.29; df=18; p>.05$

Excluding North Caracol Farm
 $t=.04; df=17; p>.05$

Yalbac was not significantly different from the sample of either region.

Alley Width

Belize River Valley
 $t=.24; df=18; p>.05$

Three Rivers Region
 $t=.50; df=18; p>.05$

Yalbac was not significantly different from the sample of either region.

Structure Height

Belize River Valley

$t=.65; df=9; p>.05$

Yalbac was not significantly different from the sample of either region.

Three Rivers Region

$t=.10; df=8; p>.05$

Orientation (all ballcourts)

Belize River Valley

$t=.96; df=18; p>.05$

Yalbac was not significantly different from the sample of either region.

Three Rivers Region

$t=.55; df=18; p>.05$

Orientation (north-south ballcourts only)

Belize River Valley

$t=2.75; df=17; p<.05$

Yalbac was significantly different from the Belize River Valley, but was consistent with the Three Rivers Region.

Three Rivers Region

$t=1.48; df=15; p>.05$

As the data for these attributes indicate, the ballcourt at Yalbac would be unremarkable in either population were it not for its orientation. At 108 degrees, the Yalbac ballcourt is consistent with ballcourts from the Three Rivers Region, but is significantly different from those in the Belize River Valley.

The ballcourt's profile is also puts it squarely within the Three Rivers sample. In its terminal phase, the ballcourt's 30 degree slope is completely uncharacteristic of the Belize Valley, but is similar to ballcourts at San Jose and Chan Chich in the Three Rivers Region. Like San Jose, the Yalbac ballcourt also has a vertical wall .6 m in height at the top of this slope. The percentage of the height of the structures accounted for by this wall was 20 percent, far more consistent with ballcourts from the Three Rivers Region.

However, one cannot ignore the ballcourt's Preclassic architecture. The fact that architecture from this date even exists links the ballcourt to the Belize Valley, since no ballcourt construction is known in the Three Rivers Region from this time. Furthermore, while the Preclassic ballcourt at Yalbac was not fully excavated, the area that was

exposed revealed a slightly sloping bench top at least .8 m wide. This feature is consistent with ballcourts from the Belize River Valley. Therefore, while the Yalbac ballcourt was undoubtedly tied to the Three Rivers Region during its later use, the strong possibility exists that it was originally part of the Preclassic ballcourt tradition of the Belize River Valley. Yalbac's ballplaying affiliations therefore probably changed through time, shifting from south to north during the Late Classic period.

Conclusion

The data presented reveal that it is possible to evaluate Yalbac's broader geographical affiliations by analyzing and comparing the form and chronology of ballcourts in its two neighboring regions. The study also demonstrates that the typological classification of ballcourt architecture must be conducted on a local level, and incorporate those features which are important in that area, rather than those which form important distinctions elsewhere, such as end zone demarcation or the presence of ballcourt markers.

While we can only speculate as to the original function of each ballcourt feature, an assumption that can be made is that these features influenced how the ballgame was played at each site, and that regional standardization existed where there was a high degree of ballgame interaction between communities. Ballplayers of one community would have been unlikely to play at the ballcourt of another community if it was substantially different from their own and gave the home team the advantage. Standardization would have countered this advantage and made it possible for individuals to play at numerous ballcourts of other communities. Excavation at the Yalbac ballcourt suggests that during the Late Preclassic period Yalbac competed with sites in the Belize

River Valley, but that by the Late Classic period this interaction shifted to the Three Rivers Region. Thus, by defining those areas of standardization, large and small, one can gauge the amount of ballgame competition between sites, and, by extension, the amount of social and political interaction as well.

Sport, Community, and Politicization

As the data presented here have shown, Yalbac participated in ballgame competitions with other communities in northern Belize. During the Late Preclassic, it is likely that this competition was primarily with communities of the Belize River Valley, but by the Late Classic period, it had shifted to communities in the Three Rivers Region. Although no monumental inscriptions have ever been recovered from Yalbac (or indeed, most of the sites in this study), evidence from other sites also suggests that the Maya ballgame was important to the elite ruling class, who attempted to establish symbolic links between themselves and the act of ballplaying. The association of political power with athletic activities is common in many societies, as is the process by which sport becomes politicized. Through the examination of this process, a model for the perception of sport among the Maya can be developed.

Hill and Clark (2001), as we have already seen, suggest that a natural association exists between the ruling elite of Mesoamerica and the ballgame. They propose that this association is fundamental to the ballgame itself. Individuals who control access to the ballcourt, as well as the financial benefits of gambling activities, are able to acquire (or in this case maintain) greater wealth and status than their peers. Their status is also

reinforced symbolically through their role as sponsor of the village team, and the creator of community identity through competition with other villages.

While this model is insightful, it casts the elite class as the primary force behind the continuation of the ballgame tradition, relegating the lower classes, presumably many of whom were ballgame aficionados themselves, to the role of passive receivers. An examination of athletic activities in other contexts, however, will show that it is generally the amorphous group of observers—the very community reinforced by athletics themselves—that control the popularity and create the power of sports. That sport and community are closely linked is an obvious reality. But a further exploration of the nature of this symbolic association will clarify the role of the ballgame for the Maya, and specifically for the people of Yalbac.

Sport and Warfare

In order to compare the Maya ballgame to athletic events from other societies, it is necessary to define sport itself. Blanchard and Cheska (1985) define sport as, “a game-like activity having rules, a competitive element, and requiring some form of physical exertion” (p. 14). Sands (1999) offers a more refined definition:

A cultural universal having the following features: a human activity that is a formal and rule-directed contest ranging from a gamelike activity to a highly institutionalized structure; competition between individuals or teams or can result in internal competition within an individual; a basis in physical skills, and strategy, chance or a combination of all three; and potential tangible rewards for the participants, monetary, material or status [p. 3].

Both these definitions emphasize the competitive nature of sport, and could even be applied to other human activities generally categorized as warfare. Indeed, it has often

been observed that athletic events are similar to warfare in numerous ways. Sports are fundamentally a form of conflict and display certain features thereof. For instance, two opposing teams or participants struggle for a limited resource—only one side can win and by so doing, achieves a hierarchical status over the other (faster, stronger, smarter, etc.) (Blanchard and Cheska 1985:217). Furthermore, as in warfare, athletes are uncertain of the outcome of competition (Blanchard and Cheska 1985:218).

Many aspects of warfare are also similar to what one might think of as sport-like behavior. In some societies, warfare is a highly ritualized performance, sometimes devoid of any real violence. Specific agreed-upon rules dictate who will be the clear winner, and battles are often planned and announced ahead of time (Blanchard and Cheska 1985:219). Even in modern warfare, rules of conduct are often observed, and combatants themselves are surrounded by sport-like symbols—rites, flags, and uniforms that differentiate them from their enemies (Kertzer 1988).

Even though sport is sometimes thought of as “war without weapons,” (Blanchard and Cheska 1985: 218) it is also often associated with peace and a cessation of warfare. The modern Olympic Games embody this ideal. Through peaceful, organized sport, nations of the world are supposed to set aside their differences and reach a common understanding. This, in turn, was designed to be a reflection of the ancient Olympics, at which an Olympic Truce was declared, designed to protect athletes and spectators from becoming involved in local conflicts. Cities that engaged in hostile military action during this time were fined heavily or were not allowed to compete (Romano 1985).

Thus, although the two activities are similar, sport and warfare are often mutually exclusive. It must be possible, therefore, to find a factor that differentiates the two

activities, and to further refine the definition of sport. While the physical acts of warfare and sport are sometimes indistinguishable, the difference between them lies in the way they are perceived by members of their representative communities. The factor that separates sport from warfare is perhaps best articulated by Geertz (1973) in his classic study of the Balinese cockfight. Like sporting events, cockfights pit two fighting animals against one another, cheered on by crowds of supporters. Although the roosters fight to the death, their owners and the spectators are rarely harmed. Here, each match is plainly a metaphor for social hierarchies and distinctions, and spectators are polarized by their support of social allies.

The cockfight is - or more exactly, deliberately is made to be - a simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of crosscutting, overlapping, highly corporate groups --villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, "castes" - in which its devotees live [p. 436].

However, when the match is over, and metaphors for social conflict have been played out, nothing has fundamentally changed.

Fighting cocks... is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kingroup rivalries and hostilities, but in "play" form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggression..., but not quite, because, after all, it is "only a cockfight" [p. 440].

The cockfight... makes nothing happen. Men go on allegorically humiliating one another and being allegorically humiliated by one another, day after day, glorying quietly in the experience if they have triumphed, crushed only slightly more openly by it if they have not. But no one's status really changes. You cannot ascend the status ladder by winning cockfights; you cannot, as an individual, really ascend it at all. Nor can you descend it that way [p. 443].

This, then, is what differentiates sports and "play" from warfare: the eventual outcome.

No matter how ritualized the warfare, it is always carried out in an attempt to change something, whether that be power relationships, the distribution of resources, or prestige.

Athletics are simply a metaphor for this type of conflict since in the end, nothing has changed. Even when victorious athletes, representing their communities, regions, or nations, achieve exalted status among the people they represent, the fundamental status of those people, communities, and nations relative to their competitors is never changed.

Under these circumstances, war and sport cannot coexist. Once sport becomes a vehicle for change, it is no longer sport at all, but open hostility. The closer sport comes to crossing this line, the more exciting and emotionally charged a sporting event will be. For instance, the United States led an international campaign to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics due to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Casting the invasion as a "morally indecent act" unbecoming of a host nation, President Carter asked the nations of the world to skip the Olympiad that year (Hulme 1990:45). While the Carter administration clearly felt that relations between the nations were too strained for athletic competition, the Soviet Union nevertheless sent athletes to the Winter Games, held in Lake Placid, New York. The subsequent contest between the men's hockey teams was a politically and emotionally charged event, symbolic of the very governmental systems of the two nations. The resulting victory of the underdog U.S. team caused a national euphoria that "far superseded any reaction based purely on sporting considerations" (Hulme 1990:10).

When tensions do reach a breaking point, however, nations often refuse to compete in sporting events against other nations with whom they are engaged in political conflict. For example, during the years of apartheid in South Africa, the international sporting community began to boycott South African sports teams. In the 1970's, the United Nations called on the world to cease athletic competition against South Africa.

The New Zealand rugby team, which ignored this request, faced the ire not only of the international community, but of New Zealanders themselves, who rioted during the tours of 1981 and 1985 (Crawford 1999).

The mutual exclusivity of sport and warfare, and the inability of sport to change status relationships may superficially seem to contradict the themes of warfare and sacrifice often present in the Mesoamerican ballgame. Spanish sources indicate that among the Aztec, high-stakes games could result in the control of cities or kingdoms. A ballgame is documented between emperor Axayacatl and his rival Xihuitlemoc, in which each put up huge stakes of whole cities (Stern 1950:62). Santley et al. (1991), citing other stories of famous ballgames in Mexican lore, propose that the ballgame was a “vehicle to increase the power, prestige, and wealth of the elite” (p. 14). While the loss of cities would certainly impact the wealth of the respective rulers, the point of the exercise was surely the boastful wagering and display of confidence in the outcome of the game itself, rather than the material gains or losses. (Besides, when Xihuitlemoc easily won the game, Axayacatl had him promptly assassinated to avoid paying [Stern 1950:62].) Legendary ballgames, such as that to determine the ruler of the Toltec Empire (Santley et al. 1991:15) cannot be firmly relied upon as a model for historical ballgame competition, as they are surely just that: legend.

Even the Popol Vuh, in which, as it is often claimed, the outcome of key ballgames determines the sacrifice of the Maize god and his sons, is not so cut and dried. While the ballgame certainly acts as a frame in which a myth about conflict can be recounted (Tokovinine 2002:6), the ballgames played may not necessarily determine the fate of the gods. One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, although sacrificed at the ballcourt,

never explicitly play against the gods of the underworld, and they are presumably sacrificed on account of a plethora of failures they endure before even reaching the ballcourt. One Hunahpu's twin sons, on the other hand, play twice in the underworld. At first they are defeated, and forced to pay the price of four bowls of flowers, a wager agreed upon before the start of the game. In the second game, the twins win, but they are sacrificed anyway through the deceit of the lords of the underworld. If we examine strictly the outcome of the ballgames played between the gods in the underworld, wins and losses do not seem to directly influence the sacrifices in the story.

For the reasons outlined above, it seems unlikely that Maya polities would have participated in ballgame competitions against their political enemies. While the game may have been played as part of a celebration of military victory, it is unreasonable to assume that an athletic event served as a venue for hostile competition, or even that prisoners of war would have engaged in such an event with their captors. Images of ballgame sacrifice that are historical, rather than metaphorical or mythological, involve a captive *as a ball*, rather than as any kind of worthy opponent.

Sport and Community Identity

Cross-culturally, people spend a great deal of time, energy, and emotion on sporting events. But, as we have seen, athletic competition thrives even when real hostility is absent. If sports cannot change social hierarchies or settle disputes, what is the purpose of participating in these activities at all? Because, as Hill and Clark (2001) have observed, sport creates a sense of community—*Communitas*. The deliberate creation of conflict where none really existed creates a unity within a group through the opposition to the Other. Through conflict, community identity is reaffirmed. Thus, sporting events will

become more popular and emotionally charged not only in the face of increased military tensions, but in the face of a loss of community identity as well.

There are numerous factors which might cause a community to feel that its identity is threatened. For instance, a general proximity or cultural similarity may bring about the desire for the reaffirmation of community differences. It is an easily observable phenomenon in modern American athletics that cross-town rivalries are often the strongest, as communities which may seem overwhelmingly similar to outside observers compete viciously every year to prove their superiority. The need for the reaffirmation of regional identity surely contributes to the intense soccer rivalries within European nations and among them (Bale 1997). In Italy for example, soccer fanaticism is mostly expressed locally in the form of violent support of municipal teams. When the World Cup was held in Milan in 1990, Italian fans, rather than uniting around their national team, were divided by local rivalries. Southern Italians supported the Argentinean team due to the presence of Naples captain Maradona on the roster, while Northern Italians booed Argentina to the echo for the same reason. Support for the national team was not lacking from other World Cup years, but the arrival of the competition in Italy itself ignited local rivalries (Dal Lago and De Biasi 1994).

The United States is not immune to such rivalries. When Canadian track star Donovan Bailey won the 100-meter final at the 1996 Olympics, the American media refused to accept his claim of world's fastest man in favor of 200- and 400-meter champion Michael Johnson. With wounded pride and feeling challenged in its national identity, Canada suggested a compromise: the two athletes would run a 150-meter race to determine the superior of the two athletes. The rhetoric surrounding the race created a

metaphorical duel between Canada and the United States (Jackson and Meier 1999). Unfortunately, Johnson was injured during the race and crossed the finish line with a limp, behind his opponent.

The dense settlement along the banks of the Belize River and within the Three Rivers Region would have been a likely locus for an athletic rivalry created by general proximity and cultural similarity. The fact that most of the communities in these regions had a local ballcourt, and that there was a high degree of standardization among them, strongly supports this assertion. As I have already argued, standardization is only likely to exist in areas where inter-village games are a regular occurrence.

A second form of threat a community may feel towards its local identity is perceived social inferiority or political subordination⁵. While wrapped up in the complicated and painful issues of colonialism, cricket in the Caribbean offers an illustration of sport as reassertion of cultural pride and desire for political independence. Already a symbol of class and racial differences, Stoddard (1995) asserts that, “it was inevitable that the politicization of West Indian cricket should spill over into the realms of nationalism, ideology, party politics, and international relations” (p. 242). From the very introduction of cricket in the British West Indies, the goal of defeating England itself, as a demonstration of cultural worth, was felt by many. When this finally took place in 1950, the victory was celebrated with jubilation throughout the British Caribbean (Stoddard 1995).

Such athletic defiance would be difficult to detect archaeologically, at least among the Maya. However, these sentiments may very well have been felt by communities subordinate to major polities. Perhaps this is even what we see in the

famous “Site Q” ballplayer panels. It is known that La Corona was subordinate to the powerful kingdom of Calakmul, and that the panels record ballgames that took place there. While the panels superficially celebrate the friendly relations between the two cities, and the peaceful games played between them, it is surely possible that such games were perceived by the La Corona populace as a dignified assertion of equality with the powerful city, if not politically, at least on the ballcourt.

A final way in which a community’s local identity may be threatened is far more problematic for elites or political leaders. If the class structure within society is such that members of one socioeconomic stratum identify more closely with their peers than with other members of their community, the stage has been set for rebellion and social upheaval. These circumstances are likely to occur where a common elite culture spans multiple communities or regions. If the interactions, material resources, and aesthetics shared by members of this elite set them apart substantially from non-elite citizens, these lower classes may begin to wonder about the benefits of a shared community identity and fail to support the elite materially.

To counteract this very problem in Medieval Italy, members of the elite classes in Siena employed a traditional competition between the city’s wards. Every year, these *contrade* compete in a series of events, culminating with the *Palio*, a horserace through the center of the city. The festival was the highlight of the year for the city’s population, and was enthusiastically followed by rich and poor alike (and still is). Since the *contrada* is a socially heterogeneous unit, the *Palio* encourages local identity at the expense of class-based identity. The ruling Medici family, aware of this phenomenon, encouraged

the *Palio* as a “strong counterforce against class-based horizontal alliances” (Silverman 1981:179).

While phenomena such as the *Palio* may also be impossible to detect archaeologically, this may be a fruitful way of looking at the Maya ballgame. A very uniform elite culture certainly existed among the Maya that cross-cut community divisions. Political alliances were formed between far-flung cities, and it is certainly possible that there was a degree of danger to allowing class divisions outweigh community loyalties. Rulers and elites certainly spent a great deal of effort in celebrating victories over rival polities, referencing local gods, and establishing royal legitimacy through local precedent and founder cults. Perhaps the ballgame was another source of local legitimacy, as rulers built ballcourts to reinforce local ties and community identity. This may be the case at Tonina, where the ballcourt even explicitly references that city’s hostility with Palenque and domination over its neighbors.

Athletic competitions serve a vital purpose of uniting a community in the absence of any real outside conflict. In essence, they create conflict where there is none. Such conflict is necessary in order to create a sense of community and reinforce local identity. Therefore, sport is necessary when this identity is threatened in some way. This threat could be in the form of a general proximity or similarity to other communities, political dominance, or class divisions. There are good indications that all three of these general circumstances were at work among the Maya, and contributed to the popularity of the ballgame.

Under these circumstances, sports are often the only means a community has of asserting its identity, and they are easily politicized. In order to achieve or maintain

political power, rulers will readily seek to associate themselves with the unifying force in the community. This principle can be observed in modern contexts. In Brazil, soccer, it can be argued, “more than any other single factor helped to unite the huge, sprawling country” (Snyder 1976: 272). Under these circumstances, soccer was easily seized as a symbol for the military regime in the 1970’s. The government co-opted soccer songs and slogans to reinforce its image as a representative of all the people, and enflame Brazilian nationalism (Snyder 1976). A similar phenomenon can be observed in Italian politics, where the party *Forza Italia* (“go Italy”) takes its name from a popular soccer chant (BBC News 2006). Members of the party refer to themselves as *Azzurri* (blues) in a clear reference to the national team.

It has already been observed that the Maya ballgame was a politicized event, with Maya rulers claiming ballplayer titles and generally associating themselves with the game. Rather than growing out of any natural association between the elite and the game, the process by which this took place was probably similar to the many examples I have described here. As communities faced threats to their local identities, the ballgame became a vital means of reasserting that identity, and was thus seized upon by rulers in an attempt to reference group solidarity. The *Communitas* created by the ballgame gave rise to its association with political rulership.

If the model I have just outlined is truly applicable to the Mesoamerican ballgame, then ballcourt was more than a ceremonial location, used for rigid ritual activity. The competitions that took place at the ballcourt were dynamic, exciting, and emotional for participants and spectators alike. This model is supported by archaeological and historical evidence: ballcourts were arenas for inter-community competition, and the

ballgame was a highly politicized event. Ballgames were popular with all members of society, and have been present since the very beginning of settled village life (Hill and Clark 2001). By comparing the Maya ballgame to athletic events as they are manifested world-wide, a better understanding of its function and significance can be achieved.

Conclusion: Sport, Community, and the Ballgame at Yalbac

No monumental inscriptions record the dedication of Yalbac's ballcourt, nor do carved images depict games played there. But the ballcourt itself, and its similarity to the ballcourts of its neighbors, indicate that it was used as a venue for competition with other communities. During the Late Preclassic period, Yalbac, along with several communities in the Belize River Valley possessed ballcourts that were similar to one another, facilitating inter-village competition. During the Early Classic Period, several ballcourts throughout the valley were temporarily neglected or permanently abandoned. The first ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region were constructed during this time period, but the ballcourt at Yalbac was ritually terminated and went unused for several centuries. Finally, in the Late Classic period, ballcourts began to spring up throughout both regions. Yalbac's ballcourt was rebuilt, its new architecture fitting its new connections: the ballgame at Yalbac was now played against its northern neighbors of the Three Rivers Region.

Why did the ballgame lose popularity during the Early Classic Period? Why did Yalbac's competitiveness shift from south to north? Perhaps the answers to these questions lie in the nature of these communities themselves, and what the ballgame meant to them. Athletic events reinforce community cohesion through the invention of conflict

with other communities where none actually exists. This is most necessary when some force acts to threaten community cohesion or identity. This could include such factors as political dominance by another community, identity based on class solidarity, or simply rising populations and encroaching communities.

During the Late Preclassic, populations throughout the Maya lowlands rose and communities multiplied, developing hierarchies of size and power. But at the end of the Preclassic (ca. A.D. 100-300) many sites in the Maya lowlands suffered population loss and abandonment. Populations rose once again throughout the Classic period, reaching their height during the Late Classic (Sharer 2006). It is simplistic to argue that population numbers directly affected the popularity of the ballgame, but a general correlation between the number of ballcourts in northern Belize, as well as the pattern of their maintenance, and the rise and decline of populous states of the Maya lowlands, is easily observable. As communities increased in size and number, it is only natural to assume that traditional local identities were challenged and new ones formed. The ballgame, as a medium of expressing group solidarity, could certainly be expected to increase in popularity during these times.

Any number of factors could have caused the northward shift in Yalbac's ballgame efforts. Perhaps the distribution of settlement in the area connected Yalbac more closely with these communities than with those in the Belize Valley. Perhaps trading networks north of the Belize River drew Yalbac's attention. Perhaps political domination from the north or cultural similarities brought about the need for community cohesion through outside competition. The question warrants further investigation, and future excavations at Yalbac and other sites may offer a test of the implications of this

study. What is clear, however, is that Yalbac's community identity, as reinforced by the ballgame and evident at the ballcourt at which it was played, was defined in relation to, and through opposition to its neighbors, the many sites of northern Belize.

Notes

1. See Miller and Houston (1987) for a complete discussion of the ballcourt/stairway conflation.
2. While cardinal orientation is normally measured with zero representing true north, 90 representing east, etc., most ballcourts under examination are generally aligned north/south. I will therefore report orientations in degrees from west in a clockwise direction. Therefore, one degree west and one degree east of north are reported as 89 degrees and 91 degrees respectively, rather than 359 degrees and 1 degree, as in the traditional system.
3. The coefficient of variation is a measure of dispersion that takes the size of the mean into account. Whereas two standard deviations cannot be directly compared, two coefficients of variation can be, since they indicate the percentage of variation contained in each sample. Although there is no standardized way of evaluating the strength of the coefficient of variation, those much larger than 10 percent indicate that the data are highly variable or do not fall in a normal distribution (Thomas 1986:84). The small sample sizes here may exaggerate this problem.
4. Indeed, the American Sports Builders Association (2003) lays out specific guidelines for the orientation of Tennis Courts according to the times of year and times of day at which they are most likely to be used.

5. One might even argue that Penn's fierce basketball rivalry with Princeton is an assertion of identity in the face of a perceived inferiority to that top-ranked institution.

6. After the completion of this thesis, I received additional information about the Chawak But'o'ob ballcourt from a field report sent to me by Dr. Stanley Walling (Walling et al. 2006). This report indicates that this ballcourt had an alley 16.5 meters long and 7 meters wide (rather than the 16 X 8 used in my analysis). Additionally, the report indicates that the structures were roughly 2 meters in height and were oriented 1 degree east of north, or 91 degrees. The structures were built in a single construction phase during the Late Classic period. A bench fronted each structure, whose face rose approximately 17 cm above the ally floor, and whose top was 1.5 m wide. This bench sloped at approximately 15 degrees (a calculation derived by myself from its total rise along its bedrock foundation). Above the bench rose a playing wall approximately 1.58 m in height.

While the ballcourt's alley size, structure height, orientation, and chronology are unremarkable in the Three Rivers Region, its specific attributes are peculiar. A gently sloping bench paired with a steep playing wall are more common in the Belize River Valley, and the ballcourt's playing wall to structure height ration is 71 percent, a particularly high number for this region. The Chawak But'o'ob ballcourt therefore, unlike many other ballcourts in this region, emphasized a high vertical wall available for ballgame play. In this respect it is similar, though smaller, than Dos Hombres Ballcourt 2, located not far down the Rio Bravo (See figure 1).

Table

Table 1. Ceramics Collected from the Yalbac Ballcourt

| | Unit | Stratum | Description | Ceramic dates |
|------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2004 | | | | |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 102 | Topsoil/cobbles | Late Preclassic through Terminal Classic; Sierra Red (Barton Creek), Minanha Red (Hermitage), Mt. Maloney (late facet Spanish Lookout), Roaring Creek Red (late facet Spanish Lookout), Tutucan? Striated (Spanish Lookout) |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 103 | Collapse | Late Classic; ash tempering; Belize Red (Spanish Lookout), and perhaps Mt. Pine Red (Tiger Run) |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 104 | Floor/ballast | Tiger Run or later |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 105 | Floor | ~Tiger Run |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 108 | Clay fill | Middle Preclassic-Late Preclassic; Jocote Orange-brown (early facet Jenny Creek); jar w/ filleting (likely late facet Jenny Creek); Polvero Black (Barton Creek); Trijinto ? Cream |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 108 lower | Cultural clay fill with burning | ~Paso Caballo; what also seems Preclassic is thickness of plate/bowl forms |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 109 | Cobbles/deteriorating plaster | Savanna Orange; Jenny Creek; 900-600/300 B.C.; calcite/ash |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 110 | Cultural clay fill | Sierra Red- BC, 300-100 B.C.; ~Quacco Creek-Mount Hope, 100 B.C.-A.D. 100 |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 111 | Possible plaster floor (remnant/ballast) | Sapote Striated, BC, 300-100 B.C. |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 112 | Plaster floor | Ashy body sherd ~w/ medial flange; ~Floral Park |
| | Ballcourt Alley | 113 | Plaster floor | Ashy orange w/ thick grayish core; open form (bowl or plate) |

| | | | | |
|------|-----------------|-----|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Ballcourt Alley | 114 | Dark cultural clay fill | Ashy orange; ~very shallow plate w/ remnant red slip |
| 2005 | | | | |
| | Unit 1 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic large turnip jar rim; Early Classic z-angle; Preclassic bulge bowl |
| | Unit 1 | 109 | 2A façade | Late Classic; annular ring base, shallow plate, volcanic ash paste |
| | Unit 2 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic bowl slipped on both sides; Late Classic volcanic ash annular base; Early Classic z-angle; ~Preclassic bulge bowl |
| | Unit 2 | 107 | 2B façade | Late Classic; jar rims—flared |
| | Unit 2 | 109 | 2A façade | Late Classic; incurving bowl w/ slight ridge on outside; volcanic ash paste |
| | Unit 3 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic volcanic ash flared bowls (2) slipped both sides, volcanic ash annular base, everted jar rim; Preclassic bulge bowl |
| | Unit 4 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic volcanic ash straight-sided bowl, slipped both sides, everted jar rim |
| | Unit 4 | 106 | Dry core fill | 2 Late Classic volcanic ash body sherds |
| | Unit 5 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic volcanic ash incurving bowl with interior slip (~exterior), volcanic ash flared bowl, 2 large everted jar rims, narrow orifice everted jar rim (or a Preclassic bowl) |
| | Unit 6 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic volcanic ash red slipped (interior) bowl, volcanic ash body sherd |
| | Unit 7 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic volcanic ash foot, bowl (volcanic ash, limestone temper), annular base, volcanic ash plate; Early Classic flange |
| | Unit 7 | 104 | Backfill | - |
| | Unit 8 | 101 | Topsoil | Late Classic foot; Early Classic/Late Classic flange; Early Classic flange; orange volcanic ash paste narrow orifice jar w/ red slip on both sides—straight-sided |

Figures

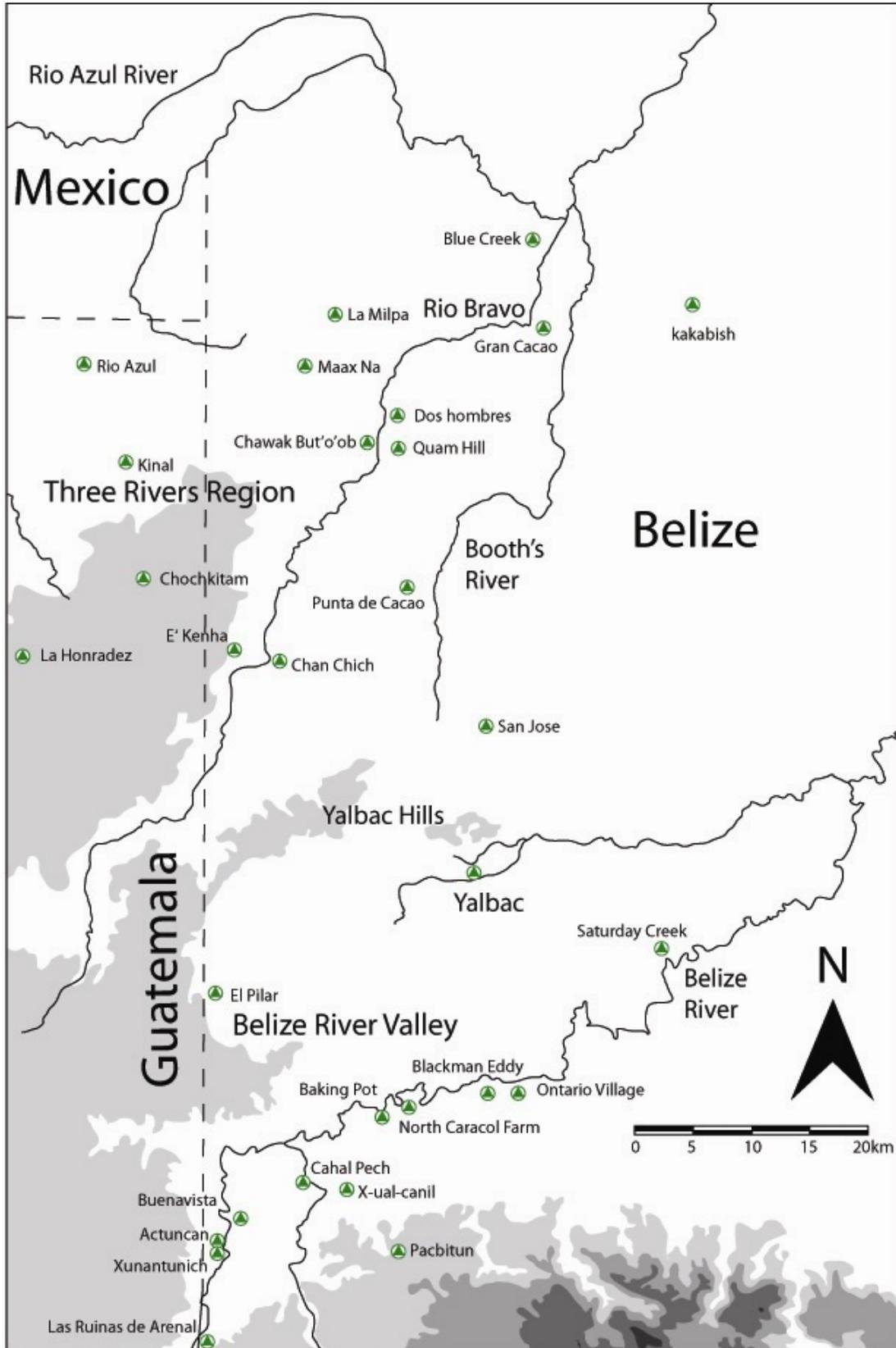


Figure 1 (Previous page). Map of the Belize River Valley and Three Rivers Region.
 Based on International Travel Maps 2001. (Do not use for navigational purposes!)

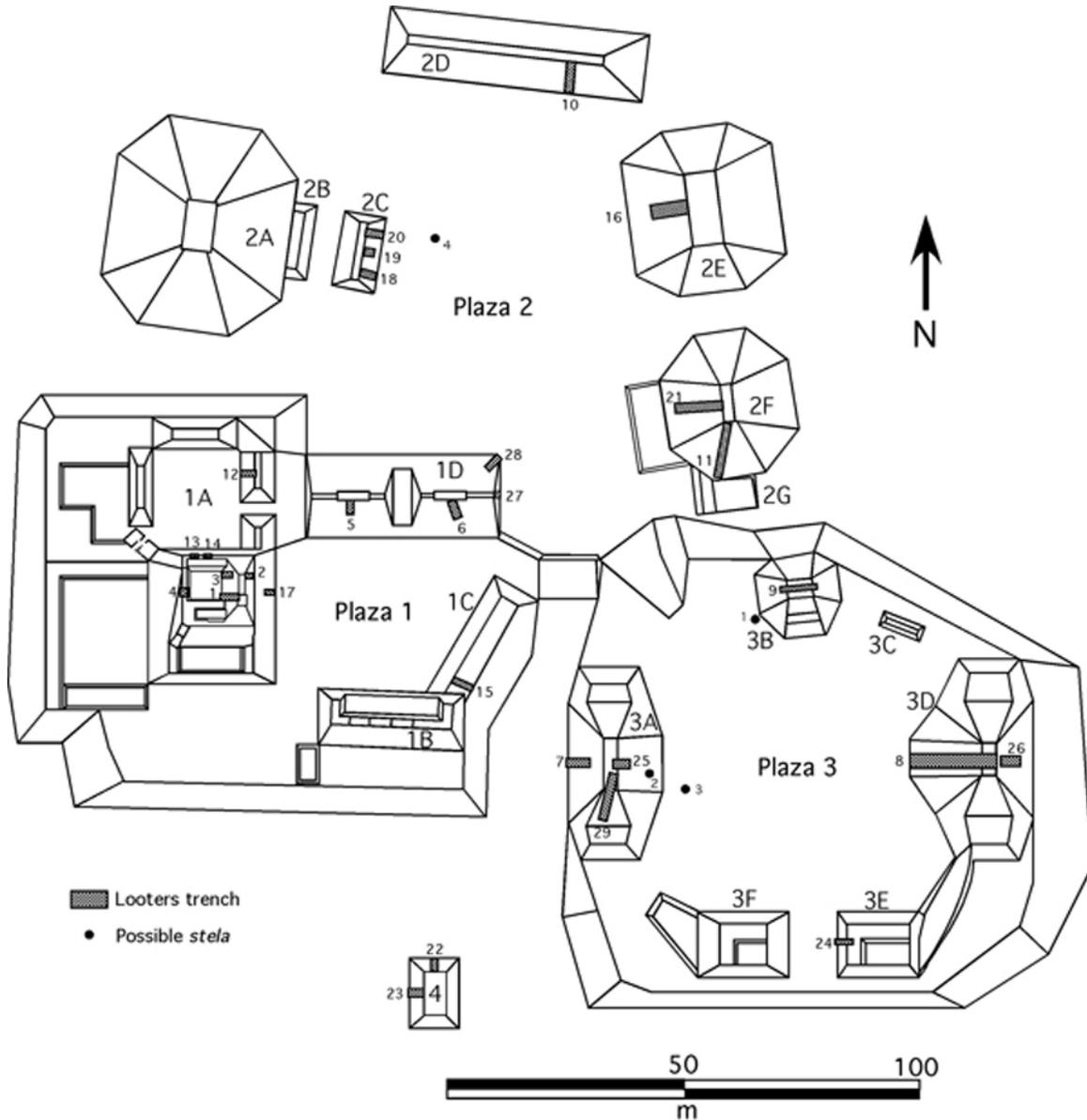
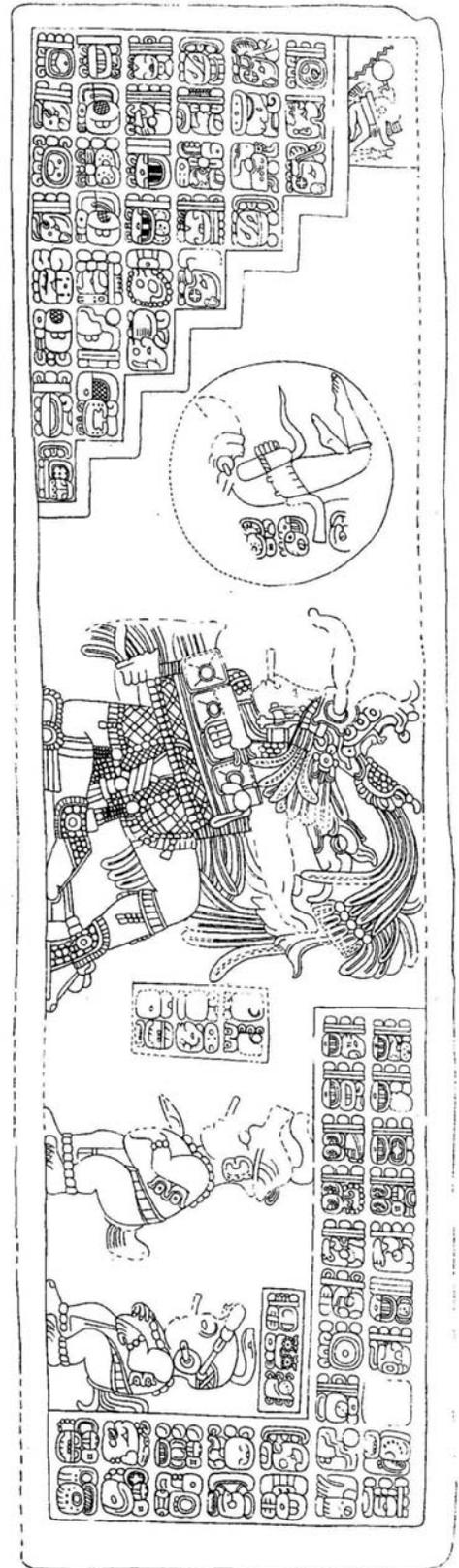


Figure 2. Yalbac Site Core. Mapped by the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project

Figure 3. Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 Step

VII. Drawn by John Montgomery.

VII



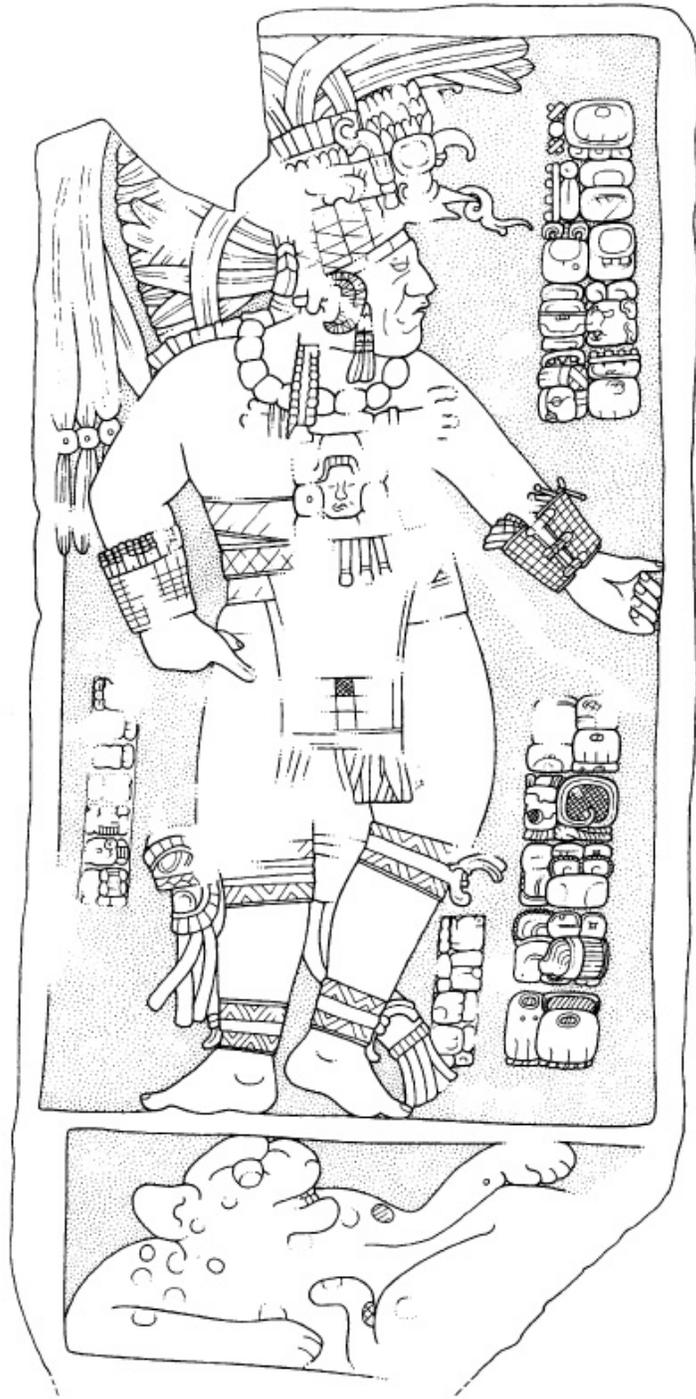


Figure 4. La Amelia Stela 2. Drawn by Stephen Houston

Figure 5. Ballgame scenes on
polychrome ceramic vessels.
“Referee” figure elevated in center.

5a. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

(K2731)



5b. Photograph by Justin Kerr. (K5435)



5c. Photograph by Justin

Kerr. (K3814)



K3814

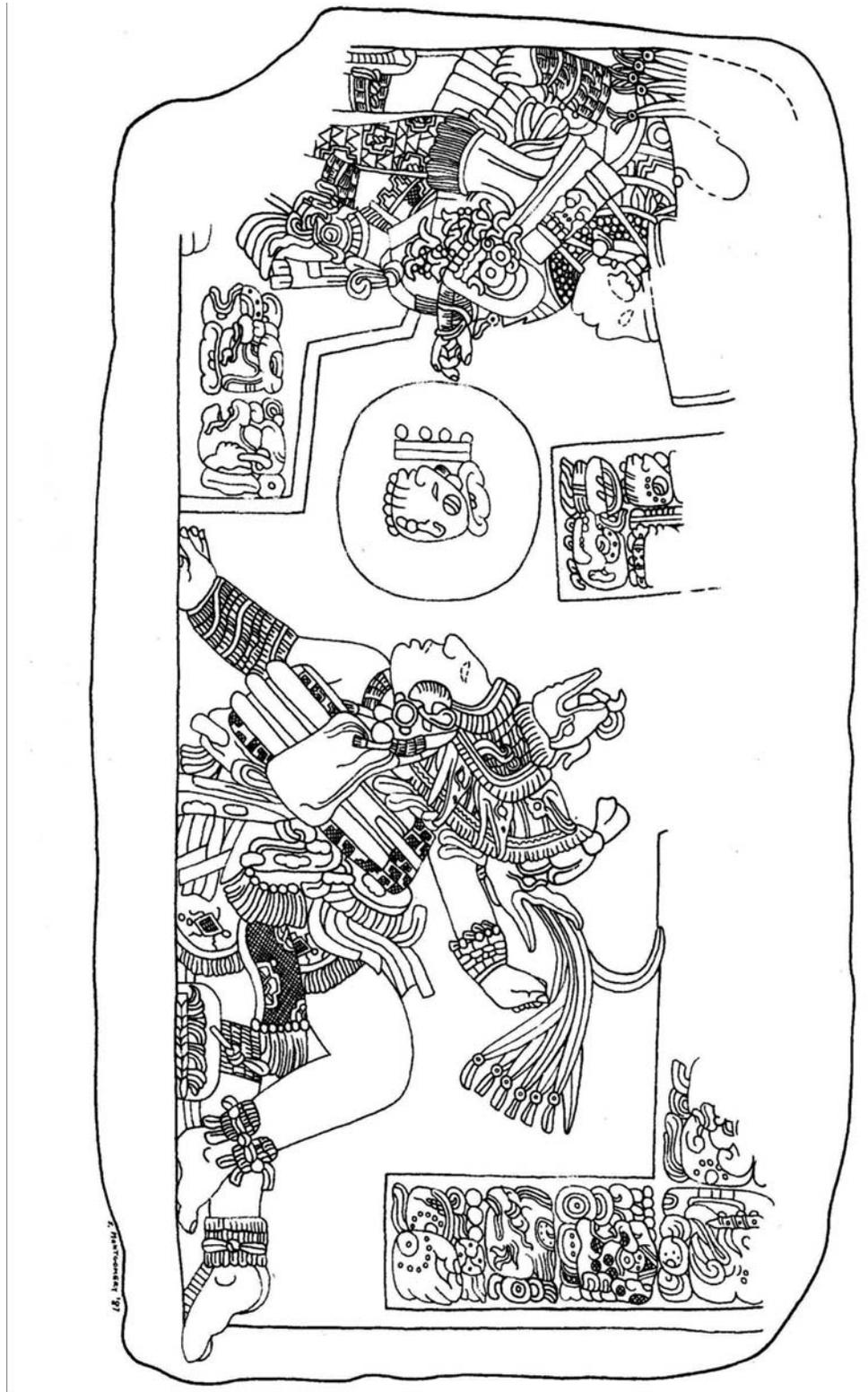
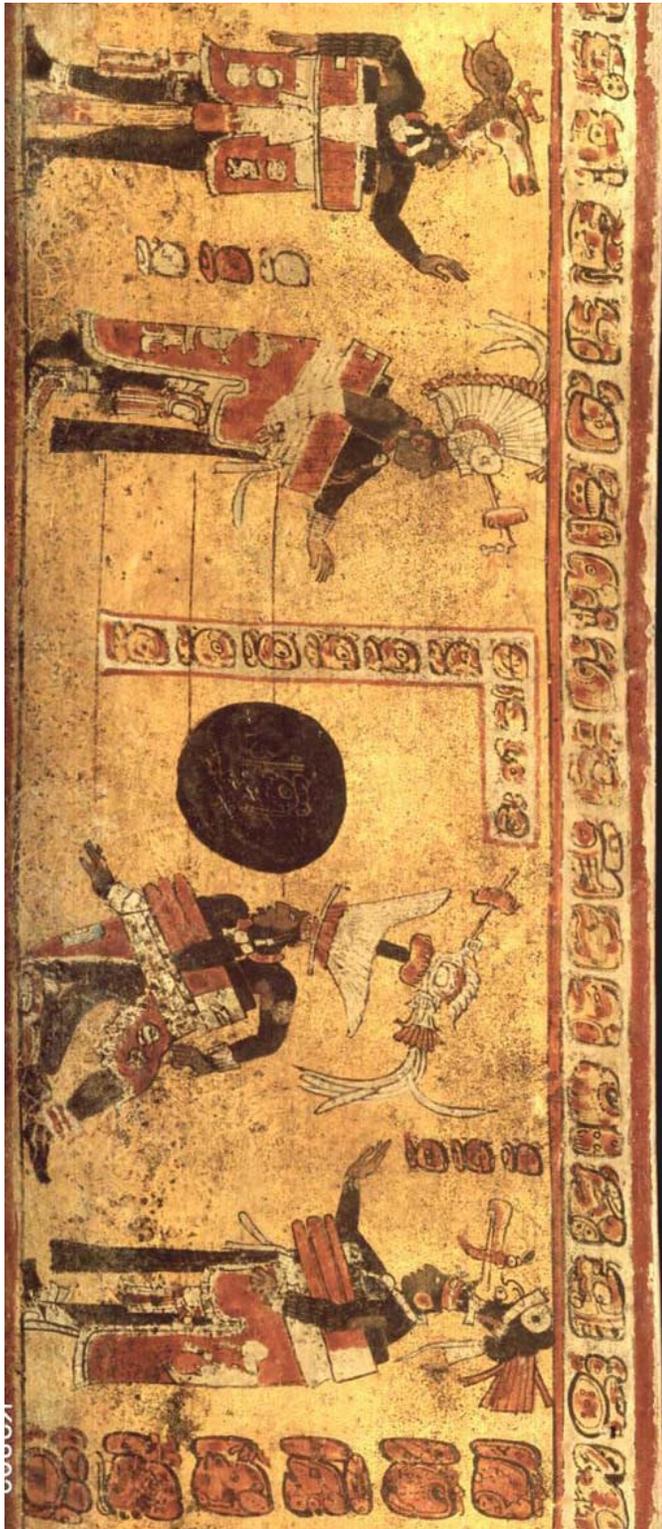


Figure 6. "Site Q" Ballplayer Panel from La Corona. Drawing by John Montgomery.



Figure 7. Cancuen Ballcourt Marker 1. Photograph by Harri Kettunen.

Figure 8. Polychrome ceramic vessel. Photograph by Justin Kerr.
(K2803)
8a. Ballgame scene



8b. Owner of the vessel: *Hix Witz ajaw bate'*

“Jaguar Hill lord wrestler”



8c. Caption of ballplayer: *ubaah ta pitz chak ch'ok kelem Sak*

Muwaan k'uhul Ik Ajaw

“It is his image in ballplaying, great prince, youth, Resplendent Hawk, holy lord of *Ik* [Motul de San Jose].”

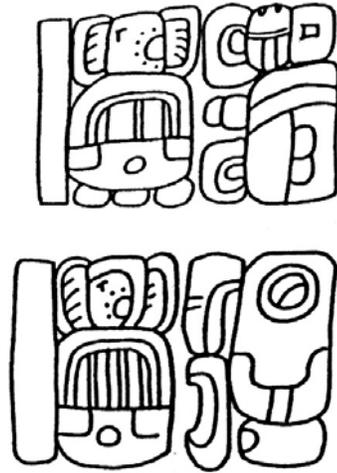


Figure 9. Titles of Shield Jaguar II of Yaxchilan

9a. Yaxchilan Stela 12. Drawing by Linda Schele

ho winikhaab yajawte' ho winikhaab pitzil

“5 ‘k’atun’ [80+ year-old] lord of the tree, 5 ‘k’atun’ ballplayer”



9b. Dos Caobas Stela 1. Drawing by Hal Green

ho winikhaab ajaw ho winikhaab bate' ho winikhaab pitz

ho winikhaab ch'ahoom

“5 k’atun lord, 5 k’atun wrestler, 5 k’atun ballplayer, 5 k’atun ‘chahoom’”



9c. Yaxchilan

Hieroglyphic Stairway 3.

Drawing by Ian Graham

ho winikhaab bate' ho

winikhaab pitzil ho

winikhaab yajawte' ho

winikhaab ch'ahoom

“5 k’atun wrestler, 5 k’atun ballplayer, 5 k’atun lord of the tree, 5 k’atun ‘ch’hoom’”

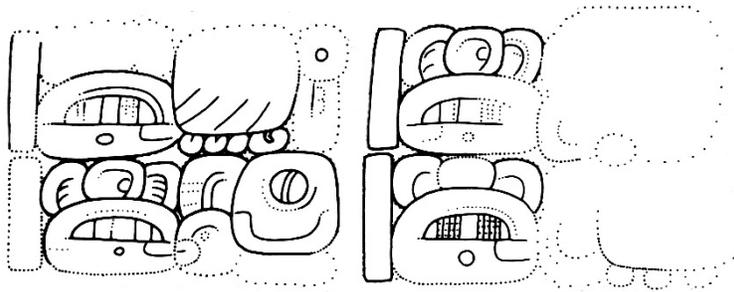


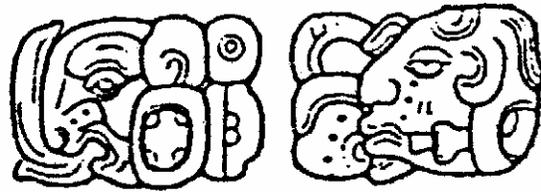
Figure 10. Titles of Bajlaj Chan K'awiil of Dos Pilas

10a. Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 4.

Drawing Stephen Houston.

bate' pitz

“wrestler ballplayer”



10b. Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic

Stairway 2. Luis Fernando

Luin.

bate' pitz bajlaj chan k'awiil

k'uhul mut ajaw

wrestler ballplayer, K'awiil

Hammers in the Sky, holy

lord of Dos Pilas.

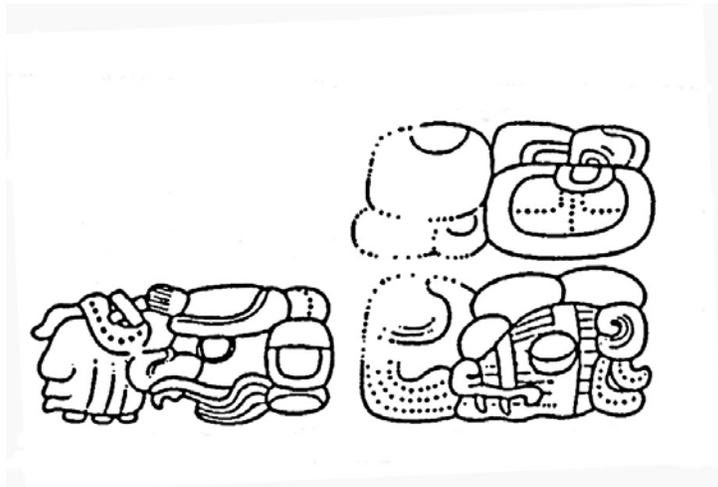


Figure 11. Ballplayer titles at Palenque

11a. Palace Tablet. Drawing by Merle Green
Robertson.

chan winikhaab ajaw k'inich janaab pacal pitzal
k'uhul matwiil ajaw k'uhul baak ajaw

“4 k'atun lord, Radiant ? Shield, ballplayer, holy
lord of Matwiil, holy lord of Palenque”



11b. Palace Tablet. Drawing by Merle Green
Robertson.

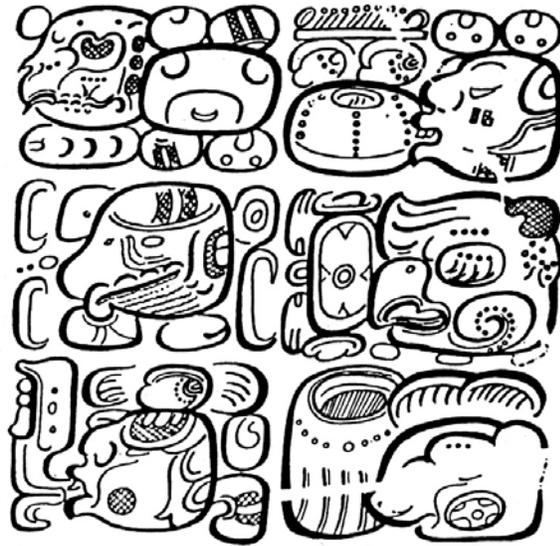
k'inich k'an joy chitaam u k'al k'aba' pitzal ohl k'uhul
matwiil ajaw, k'uhul baak ajaw

“Radiant Precious Tied Peccary is the royal name of the
ballplayer-hearted holy lord of Matwiil, holy lord of
Palenque.”



11c. Tablet of 96 Glyphs. Drawing by Merle Green Robertson.

baakel way aj pitzal ohl yajawte' k'inich k'uk' balam hun winikhaab ajaw bakab
 “bony-way [companion spirit], he of the ballplayer heart, lord of the tree, Radiant Quetzal Jaguar, k'atun [less than 20 year-old] lord, ‘bakab’”



11d. Childhood name of Kan Balam II. Temple XVIII Stucco Fragments. From Schele and Mathews 1979.

aj pitzal ohl ch'ok

“He of the Ballplayer Heart, prince”



11e. Palace Tablet. Drawing by Merle Green Robertson.

chumwaan suk winik ch'ok aj pitzal ohl k'inich kan balam uk'al k'aba' k'uhul baak ajaw winikhaab pitzal
 “He seated [acceded], the older brother prince, He of the Ballplayer Heart. Radiant Snake Jaguar is the royal name of the holy lord of Palenque, the k'atun ballplayer.”



Figure 12. Titles of K'inich Baaknal

Chaak of Tonina.

12a. Monument 134. Drawing from

Graham and Mathews 1999.

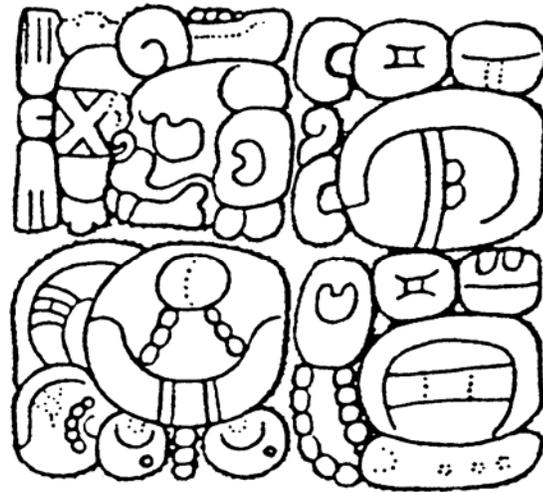
k'inich baaknal chaak yajawte' pitzal

k'uhul popo' ajaw

“Radiant Bone-place Chaak [rain god],

lord of the tree, ballplayer, holy lord of

Tonina”



12b. Ballcourt inscription.

Monument 141. Drawing from

Graham and Mathews 1999.

ox ahal [ballcourt] u[ballcourt]

yajawte' pitzal k'inich baaknal

chaak k'uhul popo' ajaw

“3 victory ballcourt, it is the

ballcourt of the lord of the tree, ballplayer, Radiant Bone-place Chaak, holy lord of

Tonina.”

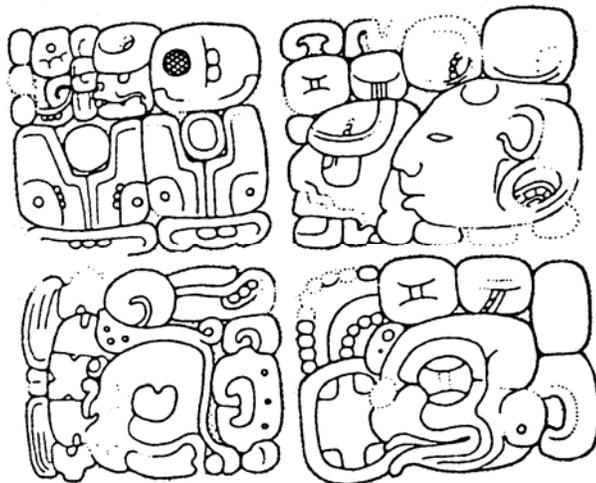
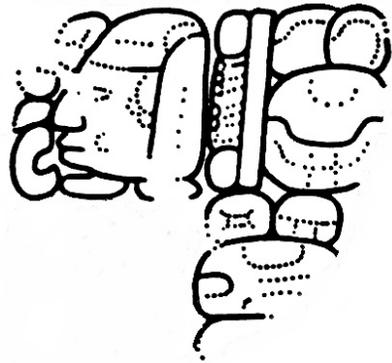


Figure 13. Panels from the Tonina ballcourt. Drawings from Graham and Mathews 1996.

13a. Monument 65.

yajaw aj pitz baak ajaw

“He is the vassal of the ballplayer, the Palenque lord.”



13b. Monument 31. (Though eroded, the phrase is legible and identical to Monument 65.)

yajaw aj pitz baak ajaw

“He is the vassal of the ballplayer, the Palenque lord.”

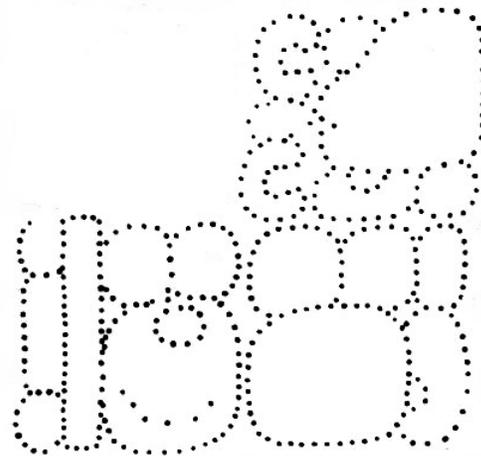


Figure 14. A polychrome ceramic vessel, probably from Naranjo. Photograph by Justin Kerr. (K8622)



14a. Mythological scene.



14b. Rim text identifying owner of the vessel.

yuk'ib ti yutal kakaw itz'aat pitz

“It is the drinking cup for fruity chocolate of the ‘itz’aat’ ballplayer.”

(“Fruity” translation from Stuart 2004:6).

Figure 15. Incised alabaster vessel. Photograph by Justin Kerr. (K7749)



15a. A strange, bloody wrestling scene.



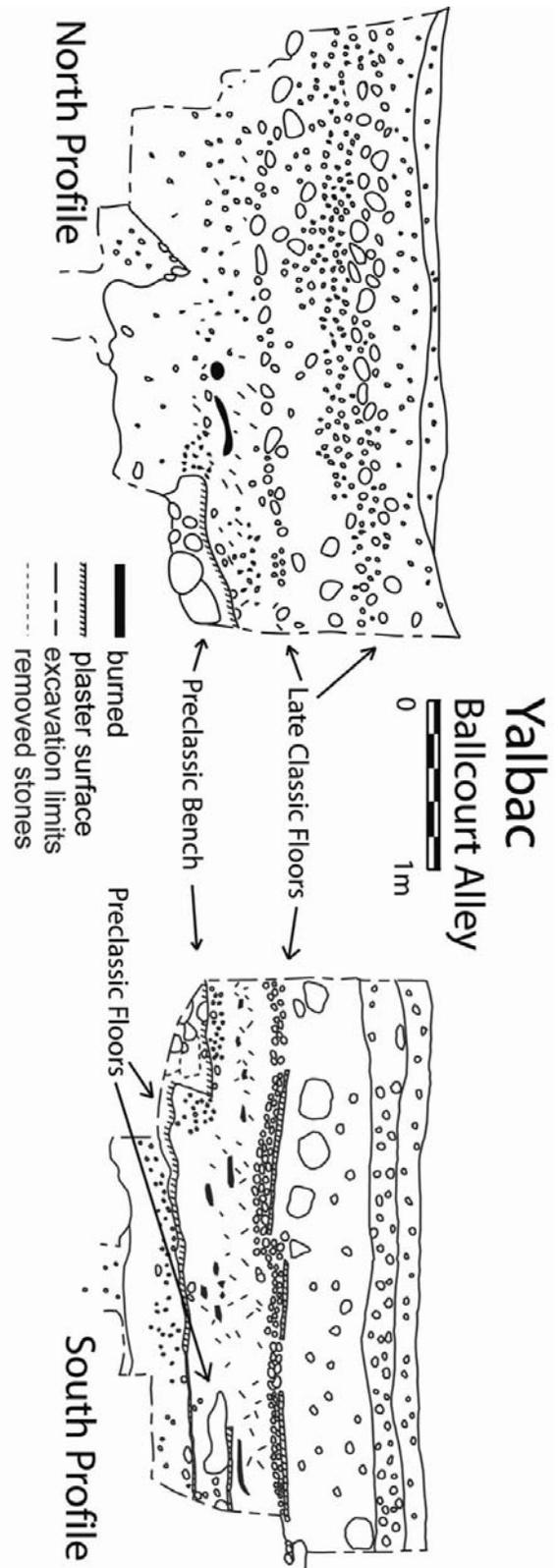
15b. Rim text identifying owner of the vessel.

yuk'ib lumil pitzal uwi' winikil bate' pitzal u-?-il kabal pitzal

“It is the drinking cup of the dirty ballplayer, the last man of the wrestler ballplayer, the son of the earthy ballplayer.”

Figure 16. Ballcourt Alley Profiles.

Drawn in 2004.



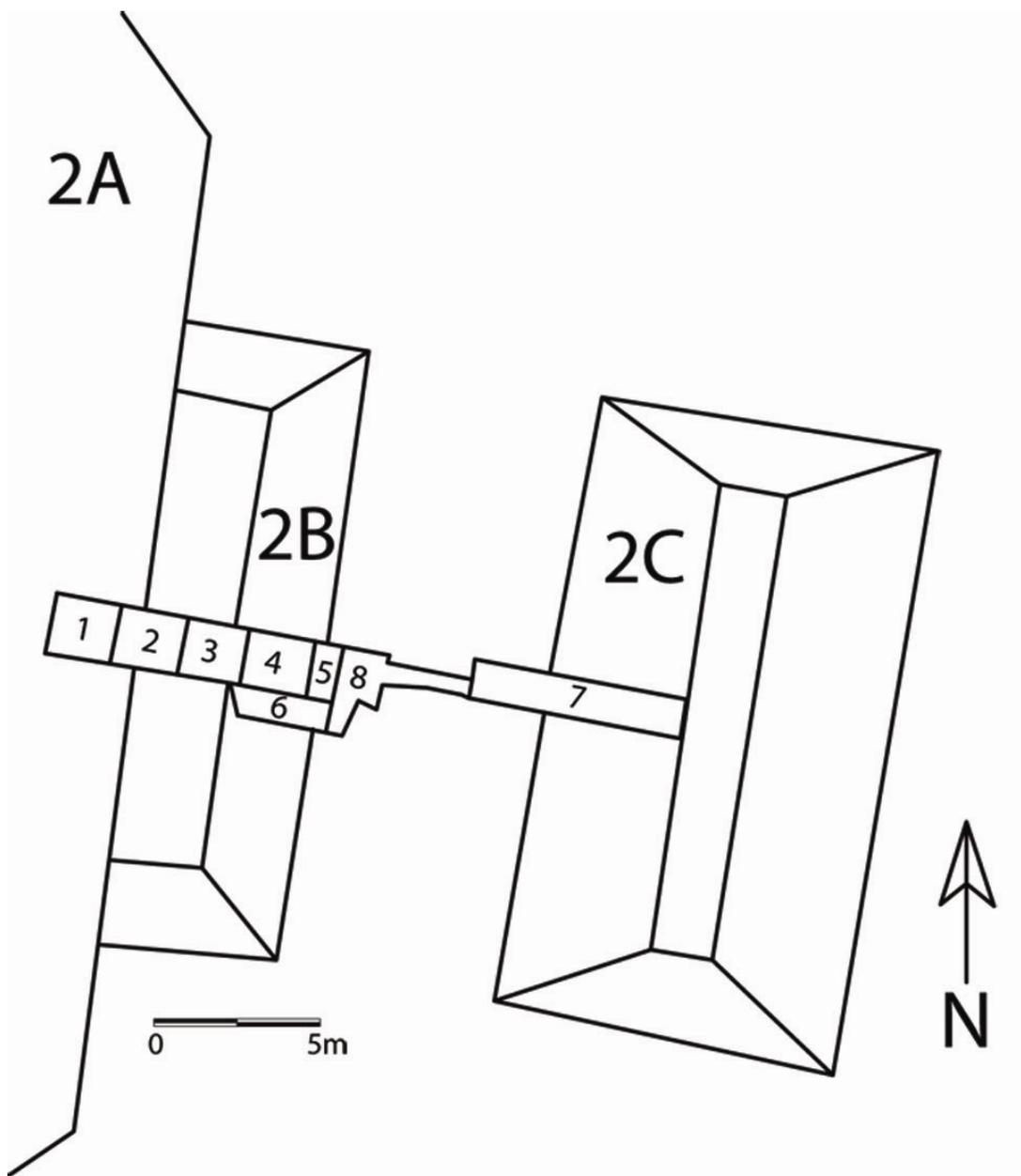


Figure 17. Excavation units from 2005.

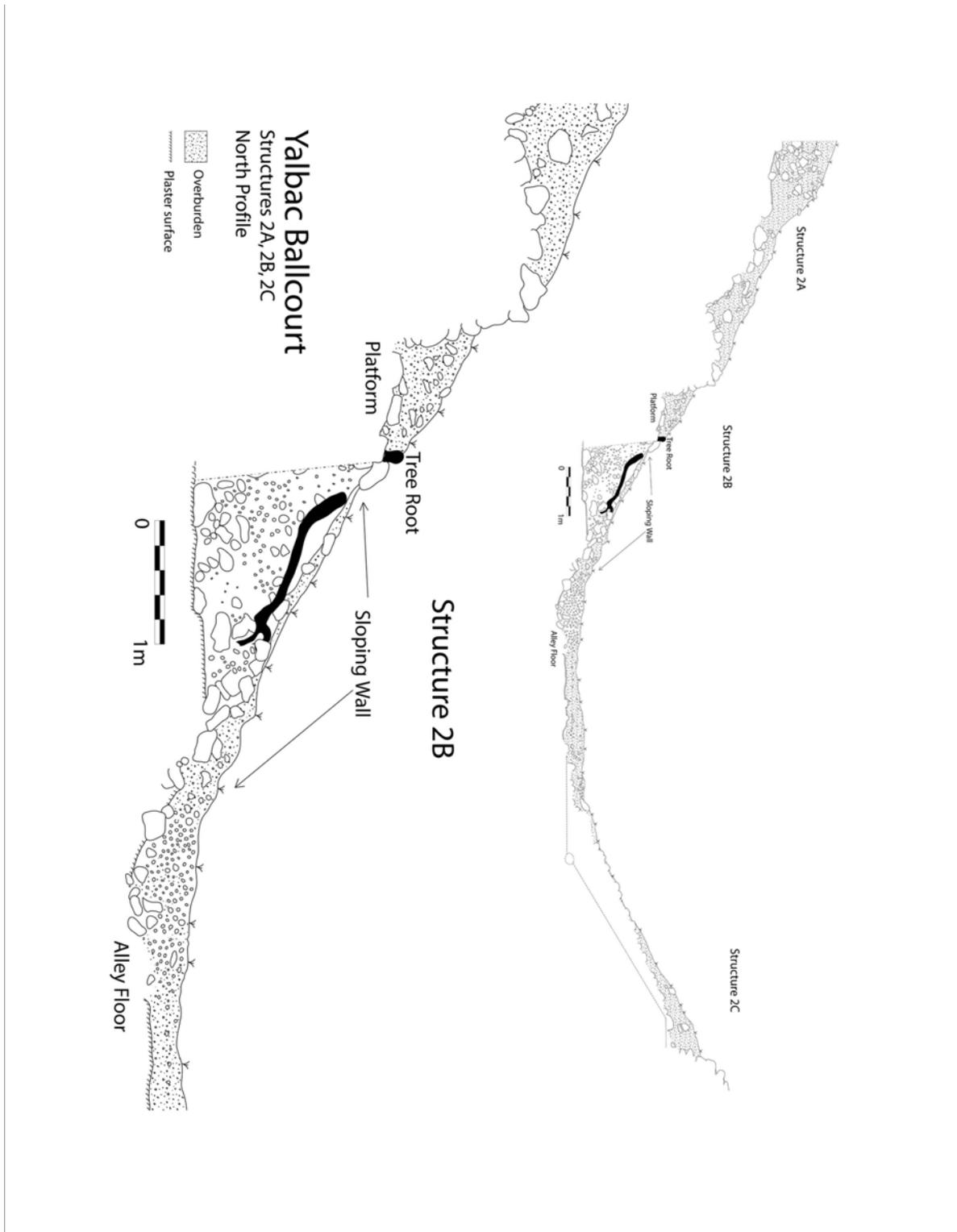


Figure 18. North Profile of Yalbac Ballcourt. Final construction phase.

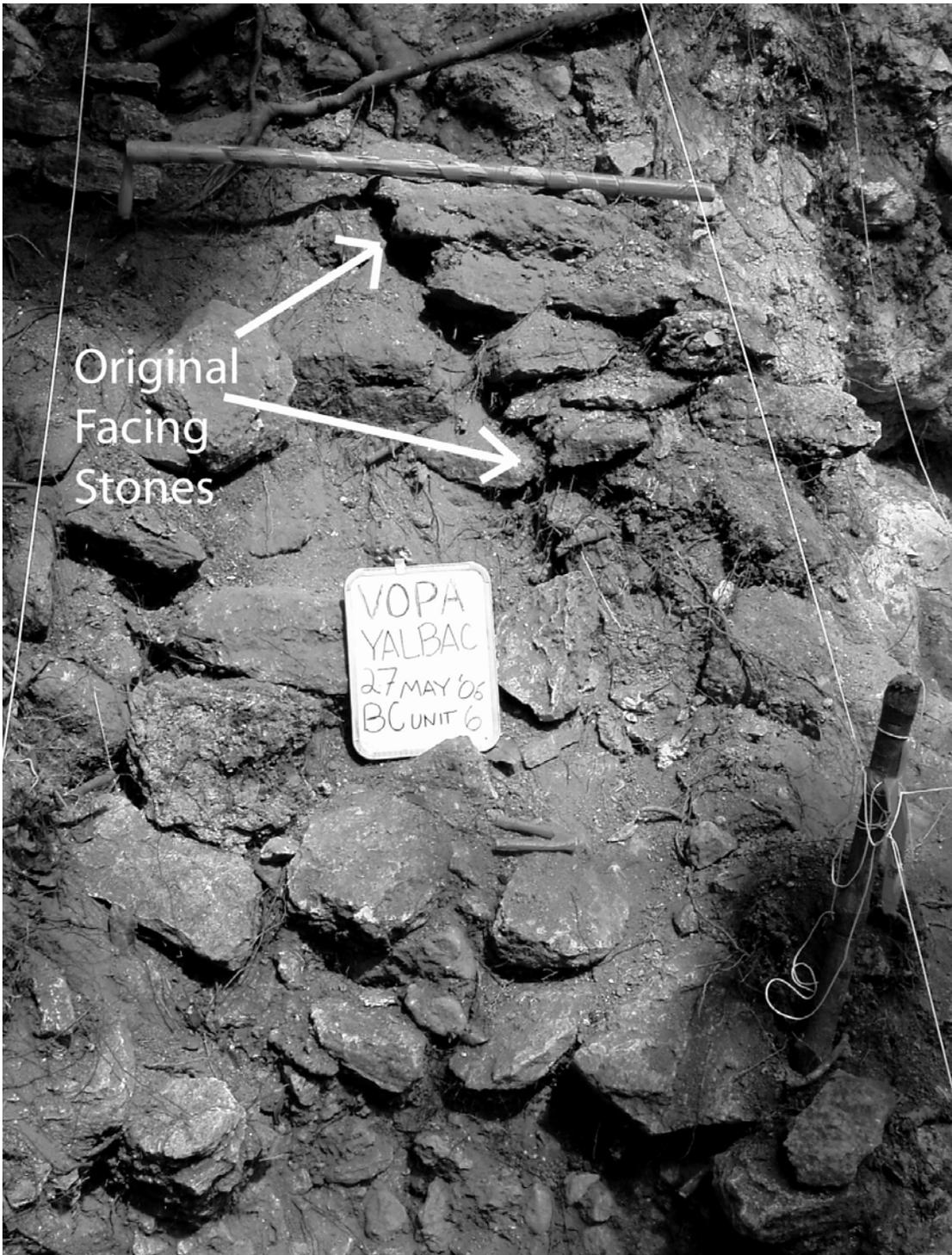


Figure 19. Intact facing stones in unit 6.



Figure 20. Stratum 111. Disturbed alley floor in unit 8.

Appendix A: Ballcourts of the Belize River Valley

Actuncan. Only one ballcourt has been identified at Actuncan, excavated in 1993 and 1994 by the Xunantunich Archaeological Project. The playing alley measures roughly 16-x-3.75 m (McGovern 1994:Figure 5) but the height of the parallel structures was not reported. The ballcourt, like the majority in both regions, is aligned generally north-south, with an orientation of 80 degrees (10 degrees west of true north) (McGovern 1993:Figure 2). The ballcourt's chronological sequence, determined from six flooring episodes excavated in the ballcourt alley, began in the Late Preclassic Period (300 B.C.-A.D. 1). This was followed by floors dated to the Protoclassic (A.D. 1-250), and Late Classic (A.D. 600-850) periods (McGovern 1993). Excavations of the western ballcourt structure revealed that the alley was originally wider than its terminal phase, and was constricted through time by various construction phases (McGovern 1994). McGovern (1994:Figure 5) indicates that the ballcourt has a sloping bench face and a bench top nearly three meters wide. Ferguson (1999) also indicates that the playing wall of the ballcourt was probably vertical, while the bench was gradually modified through time from a horizontal surface to a sloping one.

Baking Pot. Three ballcourts have been identified at Baking Pot, and are treated in detail by Ferguson (1999). The Structure II-D Ballcourt Complex was excavated by William Bullard and Mary Ricketson Bullard of the Royal Ontario Museum in 1961 (Ferguson 1999). The ballcourt alley measures 19-x-3.15 m, but the structures are of unequal heights (3.4 m and 2.6 m). Since ballcourt structures generally form mirror images of one another, the shorter height is a more appropriate measure, with the extra height of the other structure possibly being due to a later addition unrelated to ballgame

play. The only east-west ballcourt in the Belize River Valley, the II-D Ballcourt Complex is oriented at 166 degrees (14 degrees north of true east-west). Based on ceramic analysis, the ballcourt was given a Late Classic period date. Only two flooring episodes were identified in the ballcourt alley, although the earlier of these may have been built prior to the ballcourt's original construction (Ferguson 1999). Excavations in the northern ballcourt structure revealed that the ballcourt has a 1 m high bench face and 3 m wide bench top (Ferguson 1999). Above the bench top rises a sloping playing wall at about 65 degrees (Bullard and Bullard 1965:Figure 7 in Ferguson 1999).

Baking Pot's Plaza 2 Ballcourt was excavated by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project in 1995 and 1996. Survey revealed that the ballcourt alley measures 19-x-4.5 m (Ferguson 1999), though the height of the structures was not reported. The Plaza 2 Ballcourt is oriented at 82 degrees, or 8 degrees west of north. The chronology of the ballcourt is not entirely clear. While ceramic evidence dates other features in the area to the Early Classic period, the ballcourt was added to previously existing buildings at an unknown date (Ferguson 1999). Furthermore, Ferguson argues that there are three distinct construction phases of the ballcourt itself, and that the terminal phase dates to the Late or Terminal Classic period. Although Aimers (in Ferguson 1999) claimed that the ballcourt's profile resembles that of the II-D Ballcourt, Ferguson (1999) believes otherwise. While the first phase of the ballcourt had a "vertical bench face, slightly sloping bench top, and vertical playing wall" (Ferguson 1999:87) subsequent phases increased the slope of the bench top and decreased the slope of the playing wall from vertical to sloping. Despite this lack of agreement, it seems clear that the Plaza 2 ballcourt was nevertheless similar to the II-D ballcourt in the presence of

these three features, which, although characterized by gradual changes in slope angle, probably were of similar sizes.

The North Ballcourt at Baking Pot was excavated in 1997 by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project. The ballcourt alley measures 20-x-5.5 m, and the heights of the structures are 1.64 m and 1.57 m (Ferguson 1999). The ballcourt alley is oriented at 98 degrees (Ferguson 1999:Figure 3.10). Excavations revealed five replasterings of the bench surface, and six plaza floors. Few ceramics were recovered, but they indicated that the ballcourt was built in a single phase of construction during the Late Classic period (Ferguson 1999). The North Ballcourt also resembles the II-D ballcourt in “size type and architectural construction” (Ferguson 1999:99) and has a sloped bench face, slightly sloping bench top, and steeper playing wall.

Blackman Eddy. Only one ballcourt has been identified at the site of Blackman Eddy, which was excavated in 1991 by the Belize Valley Archaeology Project (Ferguson 1999). The playing alley measures roughly 17-x-6 m (Hartman 1995), though structure heights were not reported. The ballcourt is oriented at 85 degrees. No chronological data is available for the ballcourt. Excavations were limited to the playing alley and revealed three soil strata, but no plaster floors (Garber et al. 2004). No information is available about the ballcourt’s playing walls.

Buenavista del Cayo. Two ballcourts have been identified at Buenavista del Cayo, and were excavated by the Mopan-Macal Triangle Archaeological Project of San Diego State University in the 1980s (Ball and Taschek 2001). The South Ballcourt at the site has an alley measuring approximately 24-x-6 m (Ball and Taschek 1991:Figure 2). Although the height of the structures has not been published, the orientation of the ballcourt alley

runs at 66 degrees (Ball and Taschek 1991:Figure 2). The South Ballcourt was constructed in the Late Preclassic period, during the first century B.C. (Ball and Taschek 2001). The ballcourt was replastered several times during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods. The ballcourt was terminated between A.D. 640 and 660, and its central cache was removed for later deposition in the new North Ballcourt. The ballcourt's profile consists of a vertical playing wall and sloping bench top (Ferguson 1999). A wide bench top (approximately 4.5 m) is illustrated by Ball and Taschek (2001:Figure 6.8).

The North Ballcourt at Buenavista del Cayo has a playing alley measuring approximately 21-x-3 m and lies at an orientation of 76 degrees (Ball and Taschek 1991:Figure 2). Constructed shortly after the termination of the South Ballcourt, the North Ballcourt was built between A.D. 700 and 750, and contained the cache removed from the South Ballcourt (Ball and Taschek 2001). Like its counterpart, the North Ballcourt has vertical playing walls and sloping bench tops (Ferguson 1999), but a more narrow bench top (approximately 3 m) is illustrated by Ball and Taschek (2001 Figure 6.8).

Cahal Pech. Two ballcourts have been identified at Cahal Pech. The Eastern Ballcourt was excavated in 1995 by the Belize Valley Preclassic Maya Project of Trent University (Ferguson et al. 1996). The playing alley measures about 16-x-4 m, and the ballcourt structures were 4.5 m in height (Ferguson 1999). Although Ferguson et al. (1996:36) report the orientation of the Eastern Ballcourt as "11 degrees east of magnetic north," the map of the site core indicates that the ballcourt structures, along with many other structures at the site, are in fact oriented at about 14 degrees west of north, or 76 degrees (Ferguson et al. 1996:Figure 1). Ceramics from the Eastern Ballcourt indicated

that it was built in a single phase of construction during the Late Classic period (A.D. 700-900) (Ferguson et al. 1996). The ballcourt's profile is composed of sloping bench faces which rise to a height of approximately .75 m (Ferguson et al. 1996:Figure 2), nearly horizontal bench tops about 2.6 m wide, and playing walls that extend to the top of each structure at an 80 degree angle (Ferguson 1999).

The Western Ballcourt at Cahal Pech is smaller than its counterpart, with an alley measuring 15-x-3 m, and the structures measuring 2 m in height (Ferguson 1999). The orientation of the ballcourt is just about true north/south, or 90 degrees (Ferguson et al. 1996:Figure 1). The Western Ballcourt, like the eastern, was built in a single construction phase between A.D. 800 and 850 during the Late Classic period. Its profile contains a roughly vertical bench face, horizontal bench top, and vertical playing wall (Ferguson 1999). Ball and Taschek (2001:Figure 6.8) indicates that the bench tops are little over a meter wide.

El Pilar. Excavated by the Belize River Archaeology Settlement Survey Project, El Pilar contains two ballcourts. The Eastern Ballcourt was excavated in 1995 (Ford et al. 1995). A map of the site (Wernecke 1993:Figure 3) indicates that the playing alley measures about 15-x-5.5 m, and was oriented at 95 degrees. Four plaster floors were uncovered in the ballcourt alley, and evidence suggests that the ballcourt was initiated in the Late Preclassic period (Ford et al. 1995). The ballcourt's playing wall is vertical, and no subsequent changes to its architecture were identified (Ferguson 1999).

El Pilar's western ballcourt remains unexcavated, though it has been observed that the ballcourt alley measures approximately 10-x-8 m and that the ballcourt is oriented at approximately 90 degrees (Ferguson 1999).

Las Ruinas de Arenal. One ballcourt has been identified at Las Ruinas de Arenal, although it has not been excavated. The site was investigated in 1991 and 1992 by Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek of San Diego State University (Taschek and Ball 1999). The ballcourt alley measures approximately 13-x-5 m (Taschek and Ball 1999:Figure 2), although the height of the structures was unreported. The ballcourt is oriented at approximately 93 degrees (Taschek and Ball 1999:Figure 2). Although the ballcourt has not been excavated, ceramic evidence from looters trenches indicates that it was initiated between A.D. 420 and 540 during the Early Classic period (Ferguson 1999).

North Caracol Farm. North Caracol farm was investigated in 1995 by the Belize Valley Archaeological Reconnaissance Project and one ballcourt was identified (Ferguson 1999). Its alley measures only 5-x-2 m but the structures are 2 m in height. The ballcourt's orientation was reported at approximately north-south, or 90 degrees (Ferguson 1999). While no excavation has taken place, surface collection yielded ceramics from the Late and Terminal Classic periods, and investigators hypothesize that the ballcourt was built in a single construction phase (Ferguson 1999).

Ontario Village. One ballcourt has been identified at Ontario Village, and was excavated in 1993 and 1994 by the Belize Valley Archaeology Project. The ballcourt's alley measures 15-x-5 m, and its structures rise to a height of 2 m and 2.8 m (Garber et al. 1994). The orientation of the ballcourt is 92 degrees (Driver and McWilliams 1995:Figure 44). Ceramics collected during excavations indicate that the ballcourt was constructed in a single phase during the Late Classic Period. Excavations indicate that the ballcourt has a bench top that slopes at 17 degrees, and vertical playing wall about half a meter in height. On Structure A3, the higher of the two, another terrace rose above the

top of this playing wall (Garber et al. 1994:Figure 11, Driver and McWilliams 1995:Figure 3.7).

Pacbitun. The ballcourt at Pacbitun was excavated between 1984 and 1987 by Paul Healy. The ballcourt's playing alley measures 17.5-x-4.8 m, while the structures measure 3.5 m in height (Healy 1992). The structures are oriented at approximately 76 degrees (Healy 1992:Figure 2). Four major architectural phases of the ballcourt were recognized. The first phase, dating to the Late Preclassic period (300-100 B.C.), consisted of a bench face angled at 40 degrees, which rose to a height of 54 cm, a horizontal bench top 2.2 m wide, and a playing wall which sloped at 45 degrees to the structure's summit, 2.8 m above the alley floor (Healy 1992). A series of replasterings dating to the Early Classic period (A.D. 300-550) make up the second phase, and the ballcourt did not undergo major modification until phase 3, dating to the Late Classic period (A.D 550-700). At this time, vertical wall one meter in height was added at the juncture between the ballcourt's bench top and its sloping playing wall. Although this short wall did not reach the summit of the structures, it effectively gave the ballcourt a vertical, rather than sloping, playing wall. The final phase, dating to the Terminal Classic period (A.D 700-900), added a 40 cm high platform on top of the ballcourt structures, bringing them to their present height.

Saturday Creek. The ballcourt at Saturday Creek was excavated in 2001 by the Valley of Peace Archaeology Project. The ballcourt alley measures approximately 26-x-5 meters (Jeakle 2002:Figure 3), and the structures measure 3.04 m and 2.4 m in height (Jeakle 2002). The ballcourt is oriented at 80 degrees (Jeakle 2002). Excavations in the ballcourt alley exposed six plaster flooring episodes. The first of these dated to the Late

Preclassic period (300-100 B.C.) as did the third and fourth (A.D. 1-250) (Jeakle 2002). The fifth and sixth floors dated to the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 700-900) (Jeakle 2002). While these floors suggest a long occupation in this area, (with a noticeable lack in construction during the Early Classic) the ballcourt's eastern structure was only excavated to the depth of its Late Classic component (A.D. 600-700). The profile of this structure is curious in that, while it has a vertical bench face approximately half a meter high, and a slightly sloping bench top (about 11 degrees), no playing wall is apparent, vertical or otherwise (Jeakle 2002:Figure 5). This makes the Saturday Creek ballcourt somewhat unique among the ballcourts examined from the Belize Valley.

X-ual-canil. The X-ual-canil ballcourt was excavated in 1996 and 1997 by the Social Archaeology Research Program of Trent University. While the dimensions of the ballcourt alley were not precisely determined, it measures approximately 14-x-5 m (Ferguson 1996:Figure 4). The heights of the structures are .99 and 1.05 m, which for simplicity's sake will be rounded to 1 m (Ferguson 1996). The structures are oriented at 73 degrees (Ferguson 1996:Figure 4). Excavations revealed that the ballcourt was built in a single phase of construction during the Late Classic period (Ferguson 1996).

Xunantunich. Two ballcourts have been identified at Xunantunich. The westernmost of these, Ballcourt 1, was initially excavated in 1978 (Ferguson 1999). The ballcourt alley measures 10-x-4 m, and the structures are oriented at 78 degrees (Jamison and Wolff 1994:Figure 1). The chronology and profile of the ballcourt is undetermined (Ferguson 1999).

Ballcourt 2 was excavated in 1994 by the Xunantunich Archaeological Project. The ballcourt alley measures 15-x-5.5 m, and the structures stand at a height of

approximately 2.1 and 1.13 m (Jamison and Wolff 1994). Like Ballcourt 1, Ballcourt 2 was oriented at 78 degrees. Two floors were identified in the ballcourt alley. Although ceramics recovered from this excavation were primarily from the Middle Preclassic period, sherds from the Early and Late Classic were identified at all stratigraphic levels, indicating that the ballcourt was originally built during Late Classic times (Jamison and Wolff 1994). The ballcourt's profile consists of a sloping bench face .95 m high, a bench top roughly three m wide, and a playing wall over a meter in height (Jamison and Wolff 1994).

Appendix B: Ballcourts of the Three Rivers Region

(Unless otherwise stated, the sites are located in northern Belize.)

Blue Creek. The ballcourt at Blue Creek was investigated by the Maya Research Program under the direction of Thomas Guderjan during the 1990's (Guderjan 2004). The ballcourt alley measures approximately 19-x-6 m and is oriented at 85.5 degrees (Guderjan 2004:Figure 4). A test pitting program at the ballcourt and its associated platform revealed that it was built during the Early Classic period, though the profile of its walls was not determined (Guderjan 2004).

Chan Chich. The ballcourt at Chan Chich was excavated in 1997 by the Chan Chich Archaeological Project. The ballcourt alley measures 28-x-10 m and the structures stand at a height of 4.3 m (Ford 1998). The structures are aligned at 84 degrees (Ford 1998:Figure). There were two major construction phases at the Chan Chich ballcourt. The first construction phase, described as "tiered" was fairly complex (Ford 1998). It consisted of a basal tier, similar to the benches of the Belize River Valley, that was 70 cm in height and 2.1 m wide. Above this, a second tier rose to a height of 44 cm, and its sloped surface was also 2.1 m wide. The slope of this surface was about 13 degrees. Finally, another vertical step rose above this sloping surface an additional 45 cm, to the top of the structure. A paucity of ceramics made it difficult to date this earlier construction phase (Ford 1998). In its second phase, the ballcourt was simplified. The original 70 cm step above the alley floor was reduced to 30 cm, and above this a 26 degree sloping surface rose an additional 3 m above the alley floor. Above this surface a final 30 cm high wall reached the summit of the structure. Based on ceramic evidence, this phase of construction was dated to the Late Classic period (Ford 1998).

*Chawak But'o'ob*⁶. A ballcourt was recently identified at Chawak But'o'b by the Rio Bravo Archaeological Survey project (Stanley Walling, Personal Communication 2005). The only available data for this ballcourt are its alley dimensions: 16-x-8 meters (Walling n.d.).

Chochkitam. The site of Chochkitam is located in northeastern Guatemala. Although its ballcourt has never been excavated, the site was mapped by Blom (in Morley 1937). This map indicates that the ballcourt's alley measures approximately 16-x-4 meters, and the structures are oriented at approximately 90 degrees (Morley 1937:Plate 193b).

Dos Hombres. Two ballcourts have been identified at Dos Hombres. Ballcourt 1 was excavated in 1994 by Brett Houk of the Programme for Belize Archaeological Project (Houk 1996). The ballcourt alley measures 18-x-4 m (Houk 1996), while the structures stand at a height of 3 m (Houk 1996:Figure 5.23). The structures are oriented at approximately 90 degrees (Houk 1996). The ballcourt was built in a single phase of construction, which dates to A.D. 700-800 in the Late Classic period, as indicated by ceramics from the alley floor (Houk 1996). The profile of the ballcourt's playing walls consists of a 20 cm vertical rise above the alley floor, topped by a 17 degree sloping surface five m wide. Above this sloping wall rises a .85 m vertical wall, topped by a second sloping surface, this one two m wide with an incline of 7 degrees. Above this inclined surface is a final .3 m vertical face, which brings the ballcourt to its summit platform (Houk 1996:Figure 5.23).

The second ballcourt at Dos Hombres was excavated in 1996 by Steven R. McDougal of the Programme for Belize Archaeological Project. The ballcourt alley

measures 11-x-3 m (McDougal 1997) and the structures are approximately 2 m in height (McDougal 1997 fig. 3.3). Like Dos Hombres Ballcourt 1, the ballcourt is oriented at approximately 90 degrees. While some ceramics recovered during excavations date to the Early Classic period, the majority indicated that the ballcourt was constructed and occupied during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (A.D. 550-900) (McDougal 1997). McDougal (1997:Figure 3.3) indicates that the profile of the ballcourt structures consists of a sloping surface rising above the playing alley at about 45 degrees to a height of approximately .7 m. Above this wall is a horizontal terrace approximately 2.5 m wide. Beyond this is a vertical wall several courses high.

E'Kenha. The site of E'Kenha was mapped in 1988 by the Rio Bravo Archaeological Project (Guderjan et al. 1991). The map includes structures which may represent a ballcourt, although one structure is longer and higher than the other. The alley between the structures measures 16.5-x-8.7 meters, (as determined by the smaller structure) and the structures are oriented at 100 degrees (Guderjan et al. 1991:Figure 33). A looter's trench in the larger structure indicates that there were two major construction episodes, but they have not been dated (Guderjan et al. 1991).

Gran Cacao. The Gran Cacao ballcourt was excavated in 2004 by the Blue Creek Regional Political Ecology Project. The ballcourt alley measures 3.5-x-16.5 m, (Lohse et al. 2004) while the structures rise to a height of approximately 3.5 m (Lohse et al. 2004:Figure 4). The structures are oriented at 107 degrees (Lohse et al. 2004:Figure 1). The ballcourt was built in a single phase of construction during the Late Classic period. Above the alley, the ballcourt's profile consists of a sloping bench face like those found in the Belize River Valley approximately .4 m high, a 3 m wide bench top that slopes at

approximately 11 degrees, a 1.5 m high wall that slopes at an angle of 61 degrees, a horizontal surface 1.5 m wide, and a second meter high wall that slopes at 66 degrees (Lohse et al. 2004:Figure 4).

Ixno' Ha. The ballcourt at Ixno' Ha was excavated in 2002 by the Blue Creek Regional Political Ecology Project. The ballcourt structures measure 1.4 m in height, and are oriented east-west, at 16 degrees. Ceramics indicated that the ballcourt was constructed during the Early Classic period, and the profile of the structures consists of a sloping plastered surface, and several walled terraces (Lalonde 2002).

Kakabish. One ballcourt has been identified at Kakabish, which was surveyed by the Maya Research Program in 1996. The ballcourt alley measures approximately 12.5-x-7 m, and the structures are oriented at 86 degrees (Guderjan 1996:Figure 35). Since the ballcourt has not been excavated, no data are available pertaining to the ballcourt's profile or chronology.

Kinal. Kinal is located in northeastern Guatemala and was mapped in the early 1960's by Ian Graham (Graham 1967). The site was excavated in 1991 by the Ixcario Regional Project (Houk 1996), but I was unable to obtain the results of these excavations. Graham's map (1967:Figure 21) indicates that the ballcourt's playing alley measures approximately 20-x-7 m, and that the structures are oriented at 115 degrees.

La Honradez. La Honradez is also located in northeastern Guatemala, and was mapped in 1967 by Eric Von Euw (Von Euw and Graham 1984:Figure 21). Interestingly, La Honradez contains a double ballcourt complex, in which two ballcourts were constructed next to each other, a single central structure forming the west playing wall for

one, and the east playing wall for the other. Both alleys measure 20-x-4 m, and the structures are all oriented at 100 degrees.

La Milpa. Two ballcourts have been identified at La Milpa. They were excavated in 1992 by the La Milpa Archaeological Project (Schultz et al. 1994). The North Ballcourt's alley measures 26-x-7 m, and its structures are 2.5 m high. The structures are oriented east-west at 10.5 degrees. Ceramic data indicate that the ballcourt was constructed after A.D. 750 in the Terminal Classic period. The profile of the ballcourt consists of a 37 degree sloping surface .7 m in height, a 17 degree surface 4.75 m wide, and a vertical wall at least .75 m high. Overall, this profile resembles those found in the Belize River Valley (Schultz et al. 1994).

The alley of the South Ballcourt at La Milpa measures 19-x-5 m, and the structures are 5.5 m in height. The ballcourt is oriented at 95 degrees. Like its northern counterpart, the South Ballcourt also dates to the Terminal Classic period. The South Ballcourt's profile consists of a 38 degree sloping surface 1.4 m in height, a horizontal surface 2 m wide, and a 32 degree sloping surface rising an additional 3 m (Schultz et al. 1994:Figure 7).

Maax Na. The ballcourt at Maax Na was excavated in 1996 and 2003 by the Maax Na Archaeology Project. The ballcourt's alley measures 17.5-x-5 meters (Leslie Shaw, sketch map in possession of the author) and the structures are approximately 2 m in height (Shaw and King 2003:Figure 4). The ballcourt is oriented at 94 degrees (Shaw and King 2003:Figure 3). Two major construction phases have been identified, both of which date to the Late Classic period and were built over earlier residential structures (Leslie Shaw, personal communication 2005). The first phase of construction consisted of a short

vertical rise about 13 cm high, a horizontal surface approximately .4 m wide, a 20 degree sloping surface 2 m wide (and about .75 m in height) and a final horizontal surface at least .45 m wide (Shaw and King 2003:Figure 4). The second construction phase consisted of a 47 degree sloping surface rising .5 m above the alley floor, a 10 degree sloping surface approximately 2.9 m wide, and a 45 degree sloping wall rising an additional 1.5 m (Shaw and King 2003:Figure 4).

Punta de Cacao. The ballcourt at Punta de Cacao was mapped in 1990 by the Maya Research Program (Guderjan et al. 1991) and excavated in 2001 by the Punta de Cacao Archaeological Project (Robichaux et al. 2001). The ballcourt alley measures approximately 19-x-11 m and the structures are oriented at 163 degrees (Guderjan et al. 1991:Figure 35). The ballcourt was built in a single construction phase during the Late Classic period (Robichaux et al. 2001).

Quam Hill. Quam Hill was also mapped in 1990 by the Maya Research Program (Guderjan et al. 1991). The ballcourt alley measures approximately 16-x-10 m, and the structures are oriented at 87 degrees (Guderjan et al 1991:Figure 50). No information is available about the chronology or profile of the ballcourt structures.

Rio Azul. The site of Rio Azul is located in northeastern Guatemala. Although extensive excavation and mapping have taken place there under the Rio Azul Archaeological Project (Houk 1996), its single ballcourt has not been excavated to my knowledge. The ballcourt alley measures 17-x-6.5 m and the structures are oriented at 102 degrees. No information is available pertaining to the ballcourt's chronology or profile.

San Jose. San Jose was excavated in the 1930's by J. Eric Thompson. A single ballcourt was documented at the site, whose alley measures 17-x-5 m, and whose structures measure 4 m in height and are oriented at 93 degrees. Ceramic analysis indicates that the ballcourt was constructed during the Late Classic period. The ballcourt's profile consists of a 26 degree sloping wall which is approximately 4 m wide, and a vertical wall 1.6 m in height (Thompson 1939). Thompson (1939) hypothesizes that at the base of the sloping surfaces there may be low terraces or benches, but admits that they may not exist, as any indication thereof would reduced the alley width to a very narrow 1.8 m. Since these terraces were not definitively located, I conclude that they are, in fact, nonexistent, and that the alley is indeed 5 m wide.

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