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Background

Mesoamerican Ball Game is a game that derives from the ancient Maya culture. The courts would have had rings that hung from the sides of the sloping walls. These rings were significant because in order to win the game an individual had to get the heavy rubber ball through the rings without using your hands or feet. The game is closely tied to religious beliefs with the Maya because it is viewed as one of the entrances to the underworld. Ball Game offered a place where reality and the supernatural could meet. Many aspects of the game remain a mystery to historians and archeologists.

However, the information that does exist comes from the Popol Vuh. The Popol Vuh is a written document that helps understand the history of the Maya before the Spanish conquest.

Research Questions

- Ball courts differ structurally across Mesoamerica, does this affect how the game is played?
- Do the players use any type of equipment?
- Was there a sacrifice associated with the win or loss of the game?

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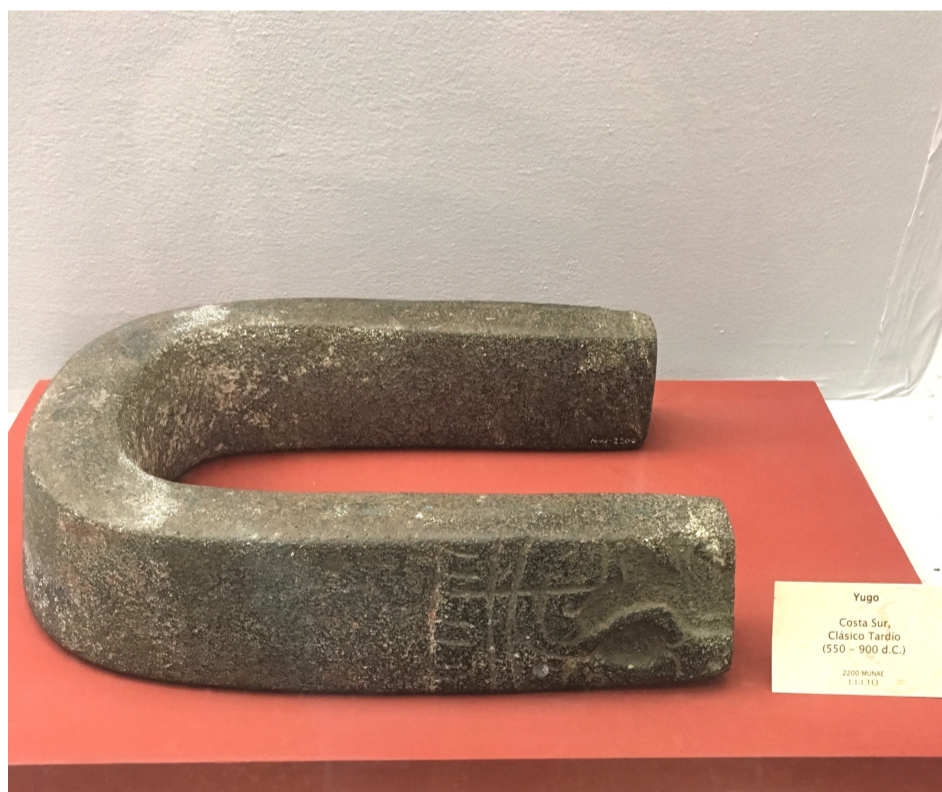
Tikal Ball Court

Compared to all of the elaborate structures that occupy the site of Tikal the court is fairly small.



Iximche Ball Court

The characteristic of a sunken ball court is symbolic of the underworld. The capital "I" shape is from the post-classic.



Stone Yoke

Due to the heavy rubber balls that were used in the game players wore protective equipment such as a yoke.



Lamanai Ball Court

Placed directly in the middle of the court is the world's largest ball court marker.

Results

The majority of the work published about ball courts is based primarily on theories and speculations. However, it is widely understood that the game must have been of great importance due to the significant amount of land that was dedicated to the court itself. Maya ballgame was often used as a political move in order to establish a hierarchy between individuals of a similar region. There is no solid evidence indicating that a sacrifice was associated with the outcome of the game. Depending on the location as well as the time period the specific rules of the game are varied. It is relevant that some sites placed a larger significance on the game than others.

Discussion

- It is a common misconception that the game includes a sacrifice.
- The primary purpose of the game is to express a public display of power.
- The game was essential in maintaining relationships between other Mesoamerican cultures.
- The Hero Twins are a set of rambunctious brothers who often anger the Lords of the Underworld. The Lord's put the Hero Twins through a series of challenges but the Hero Twins are able to pass each of their tests and end up defying the Lords of the Underworld.
- A common misconception is that a yoke was used to hold down sacrificial victims when in fact it was actually used to provide more weight to the player so that the individual could hit with a greater force.

Further Reading

Boone, Elizabeth Hill. *Painted architecture and polychrome monumental sculpture in Mesoamerica: a symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 10th to 11th October 1981.*

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