

## Ball-Game Scenes and Ball-Courts in West Mexican Archaeology \*

### A Problem in Chronology

El juego de pelota siempre ha sido considerado como prueba de la existencia de relaciones entre Mesoamérica y el Suroeste de los Estados Unidos. Pero, hasta la fecha, teníamos escasos datos acerca de la existencia del juego en el área intermedia, correspondiente al Occidente de México, salvo algunas evidencias respecto al juego actual en Nayarit. Se conocen ahora un petrograbado, seis maquetas y más de 21 canchas de juego de pelota en el Occidente. Resulta entonces posible y necesario hacer un análisis preliminar de esos datos, lo que nos permite demostrar cómo, a partir del área mesoamericana, dos influencias diferentes llegaron a modificar la cultura del Occidente.

Ball-courts and ball-game are usually considered to be one of the most important traits proving the existence of contacts between Mesoamerica, and the Hohokam and Anasazi cultures of the Southwest, along with other elements such as copper bells, mosaic pyrites mirrors (Willey 1966 : 237 ; Kelley 1971). Unfortunately, until 1963, very few ball-courts had been reported from the area through which these contacts should have taken place, that is, West Mexico (States of Michoacan, Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit), and Northwest Mexico (States of Zacatecas, Durango, Sonora and Chihuahua). We knew, at the time, of six ball-courts, at Casas Grandes, Schroeder Site, Teul de González Ortega, La Quemada, Santa Cruz and Sotolitos, plus one model from the Diego Rivera Collection, in the Anahuacalli (cf. Index no. 1 and 2).

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Since that time, many more courts have been brought to our knowledge: one was excavated at Amapa, two found at Teuchitlan (Loma Alta and Guachimonton Group), along with a petroglyph representing a ball-court; and Glyn Williams (1974) told of one (or several ?) ball-court in Los Altos de Jalisco. At the same time, four more models from Nayarit were exhibited in Los Angeles in 1972 (von Winning and Hammer 1972) (1). And, according to Beatriz Braniff (personal communication), several other ball-courts have been identified in Northwestern Mexico. Besides, eleven more courts have been located in Michoacan and Guerrero (2), or in Colima. One more model is supposed to be a ball-game scene from Colima. As we are now confronted with six models, and more than twenty ball-courts, it seems necessary to try to reexamine the problem (3).

This seems all the more important because several questions arise as to these ball-courts, and their chronological placement. There is, in fact, a discrepancy between the models and the actual ball-courts, so that it becomes necessary to begin with an analysis of the data available, before trying to present an answer to the problem of the origin of the Hohokam ball-courts. We know, as for now, of six ball-game models (see note no. 1), plus one petroglyph from Teuchitlan.

The petroglyph was identified at Loma Alta (near an actual ball-court) by J. Mountjoy (1976): it pictures a ball-court, in the usual shape of a capital I, with rounded outlines, and what may be the representation of a drain. According to Mountjoy, it must have been made some time during the Late Classic occupation of the site. There is no visible profile.

One model, quite distinct from the others, is said to come from Colima. It seems very questionable, in spite of its identification by H. von Winning and O. Hammer (1972): on a square stone platform, are pictured twelve men, two of them standing in front of small vertical walls. A circular object marks the center of the platform. The men stand erect and stiff, and no action is depicted. It is difficult to prove that this model stands for a ball-game.

On the contrary, the five models from Nayarit are quite vivid representations of the game, with players running after the ball, or striking it. These come, in all probability, from the region near Ixtlán del Río (cf. Index no. 1). Their shape is rectangular, rather large, and the model from the Anahuacalli excepted, they seem open-ended: but small rims, and onlookers indicate clearly each end of every court. At the same time, the main structures, composed of a small bench topped by a vertical wall (about 1,60 to 2 m. when compared to the players), are slightly shorter than the court, so that the playing floor has the usual shape of a capital I. This is all the more obvious in the model from the Anahuacalli, where two structures are built at each end of the court. Two, or maybe three, courts bear circular markers along their axis. Stairs, at each end or on the back of the structures, allow the onlookers access to the top. These onlookers may number from 13 to 27, which gives us an idea of the size of the court, and the players number from 3 to 7 (4). They are pictured

in dynamic attitudes, waiting for the ball, or striking it with their hip, which proves that we are really confronted with the usual Mesoamerican ball-game (5). They wear a sort of turban on the head, and, around the waist, the usual apron covering the thighs. This kind of dress is quite distinct from what is currently described as that worn by "ball-players" in West Mexican Archaeology. It might be that different kinds of games are depicted (Taladoire 1976), or even that many such figurines are, in fact, representations of warriors or shamans (Furst 1974).

The first question these models raise is that of their authenticity; every one of them has been looted, so that there is no certainty as to their origin. Besides, West Mexico is busy with the making of fake antiquities. There is consequently a doubt as to these models. It is still unlikely that every one of them should be a fake, because several other examples are known from various parts of Mesoamerica: two ball-court models were found while digging in the subway, in Mexico, one in Xochicalco, one comes from Oaxaca, and one from the Highlands of Guatemala (6). At the same time, the great amount of ball-court representations, in plan (in Codices, on petroglyphs, bones, or pottery vessels), as well as in profile (on stelae, panels, Codices, pottery vessels, or even graffiti), makes it logical that at least one such model should have been found in West Mexico. As all the models from Nayarit share the same traits, it does not matter, for the analysis, if only one were true. What is more important, then, is the question of their chronological placement. The current hypothesis (Gifford 1950) says that most house models come from the looting of shaft-tombs, near Ixtlán del Río. It is proven, on the other side, that those shaft-tombs were in use during the Early Classic period, that is till 500 A. D., with a possible, but still unproven occupation during the Late Classic. The Early Classic period is a time when very few ball-courts were known, for the whole of Mesoamerica. It is accordingly necessary to study the ball-courts from West and Northwest Mexico, to check on this hypothesis.

We know, as for now, of at least 21 ball-courts from the North of the State of Guerrero to Northern Chihuahua (7), five of them excavated (8). Most of them were merely reported after surveys, and, at the best, we have only concise and often imprecise descriptions. It is consequently very difficult, not to say impossible, to make out a true classification, so that the present description will only be provisional. A short survey in the North of Mexico, in August 1974, made it possible for us to add a few data to our knowledge (9).

A look at the map shows that those ball-courts are located in two different geographical areas: ten courts were identified in the Balsas region, mostly in Guerrero, or along the border with Michoacan, one of them being close to the State of Colima border. The ball-court at El Otero is still questionable. Nine ball-courts belong to a more northern group (in the States of Nayarit, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Durango and Sonora), whereas the ball-court at Casas Grandes stands apart from the others. Such a geographical repartition in two zones had already been suggested once by Brand (1944), and time and again by Isabel Kelly.

Type I: is present only on one site, at Amapa: it is enclosed, with end-zones; its cross-section includes a bench topped by a vertical wall, two meters high at the most. Center markers were reported from the court at Amapa. This court was built during the Late Classic (Cerritos Phase), or more probably, at the beginning of the Early Postclassic (Ixcuintla Phase), so that it is related to the Aztatlan complex.

Type II: amounts to only one ball-court, at Schroeder Site (Dgo); it is I-shaped, with very rough end-zones. Its cross-section is different, with benches and "taluded basal zones". It was probably built during the Las Joyas Phase (700-950 A.D.), but there exists a possibility of its being built during the Ayala Phase (550-700 A.D.).

Type III: includes the ball-court at Casas Grandes, I-shaped, with enclosed end-zones, and a cross-section which shows at least a bench and a vertical wall. It dates from the Paquime Phase, of the Tardío period, that is, from the Early Postclassic.

Type IV: quite distinct from the others, it includes two ball-courts at Santa Cruz (Sra), and Sotolitos (Dgo): according to the short descriptions available, they should be very similar to the courts found in Arizona, with an oval shape and battered walls.

All other ball-courts from the Northern region are impossible to classify: all of them are enclosed with rough and ill-defined end-zones, but their cross-sections remain unknown. At La Quemada (Zac), the ball-court was built some time between 900 and 1000 A.D. The ball-court at Teul de González Ortega, according to Margain (1943), is "de tipo conocido en Mesoamérica", and bears no date. The court (or the courts ?) discovered by Glyn Williams (1974) near Teocaltiche (Jal) is similar to the one at La Quemada, and was built during the Late Classic, or slightly later. The ball-courts at Loma Alta and Guachimonton (Teuchitlan) were built during the Late Classic.

In the Southern region, the situation is still more complex:

What might be Type V includes two enclosed ball-courts, at Citahua and Placeres del Oro, in the Lower Balsas region.

As for the others, we know only that two are open-ended (at Pandacuareo and on an unnamed site, located near Iguala), that three courts have rings, (which would date them from the Early Postclassic), at La Ciudad, La Soledad de Maciel, and Cerro de los Monos. The last four ones at Purechicho, Puente de Cerritos, El Otero, and on an unnamed site near the Presa La Villita, are impossible to classify, or even of doubtful existence.

It is not necessary to insist upon the provisional aspect of such a classification: what is essential is to note that, apart from the paucity of valuable data, there exists a similarity between the five ceramic models from Nayarit, and

Type I ball-court at Amapa. Besides, in the models, as in the actual ball-courts, end-zones exist, as at La Quemada, or at Schroeder Site, but they are very rough and ill-defined. As far as we know, then, every ball-court in the Northern group has end-zones, which is different with the Southern group. But the main problem is due to the relative chronological placement of these courts. It is certain that most of them (six out of ten), were built at the end of the Late Classic, or at the beginning of the Early Postclassic. There is a possibility of ball-courts at Schroeder Site or Teuchitlan being built at a slightly earlier date, that is during the Late Classic, but there exists no example of an Early Classic ball-court, either in the area, or in the Altiplano. It is consequently impossible to receive an Early Classic date for the models. They must have been made at the time when the game was introduced from Mesoamerica to West Mexico, that is during the Late Classic. This implies that such models were still in use after the abandonment of shaft-tombs, or that shaft-tombs, or some of them, were still in use during the Late Classic period.

It is furthermore possible to draw some more inferences from what was said above. First of all, if, as it seems probable, the ball-game models were made later than is currently supposed, it becomes impossible to use them as an original element in the analysis of religion in West Mexican archaeology (10). It is likely that they belong to a group of Mesoamerican traits, introduced late in West Mexico. On the other hand, these traits were beginning to appear during the Late Classic, at a time consistent with the development of the game in Arizona: the first ball-courts in Arizona (Snaketown Type) were built during the "Colonial Period", between 500 and 900 A. D., more probably towards the end of the period. It should be interesting to try to establish the time when were built the courts at Santa Cruz and Sotolitos. But it seems evident that there is a strong resemblance between the Type II ball-courts at Schroeder Site, and ball-courts from Arizona, in that both have battered walls, and are dated from the Late Classic, whereas ball-courts from the Coastal area (Amapa) were built at a slightly later date, and have a quite different cross-section, the origin of which must be different.

#### NOTES

- (1) Two more models have recently been brought to our knowledge: one belongs to a private collection in Mexico; it is probably a fake, and it looks like the model from the Anahuacalli; it is said to come from Jalisco. The other, quite similar to the models from Nayarit, is part of the Rufino Tamayo Collection, now in a Museum at Oaxaca.
- (2) According to Paul Schmidt (oral information during the International Congress of Americanists meeting in Paris, 1976), now excavating in the Xochipalla Valley, in Guerrero, there are a few other ball-courts in the area, all of them unpublished. Data about five more courts, three open-ended, and two enclosed, have been found for the Southern area (i. e. Guerrero).

As for Northwestern Mexico, four more courts have been identified: three of them, at El Carabino (Gto), Copala (Sin) and Teocaltitlan (Jal) are

- impossible to classify; the fourth one, was excavated at Gualterio Abajo, by Ellen A. Kelley, who thinks it to belong to the Early Classic period, as the whole site is dated from the Canutillo Phase (100-400 A.D.). Unfortunately, she has no more precise data for the ball-court itself.
- (3) According to the former note, there are now at least eight models, and more than thirty ball-courts known for the area.
  - (4) The possibility of teams being uneven (one versus three, or two versus three, "tres al mohino") is attested in Motolinfa (1903). It is interesting to remark that uneven teams of two and three are represented on the ceramic models from Nayarit.
  - (5) A short analysis of contemporary ball-game in Sinaloa and Nayarit shows very strong similarities in the manner of striking the ball, and in the attitudes of the players.
  - (6) Gussinyer 1974; Litvak King 1965; Dockstader 1968; Borhegyi 1969.
  - (7) cf. note 2.
  - (8) The following ball-courts have been excavated, or at least closely surveyed: Amapa, Teuchitlan (Loma Alta and Guachimonton Group), Schroeder Site, and Casas Grandes. Besides, a sixth court has recently been excavated, at Gualterio Abajo (cf. note 2).
  - (9) This survey was made possible through a grant from the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, obtained through the help of Dr. Guy Stresser-Péan, Director of the Mission Archéologique et Ethnologique Française in Mexico. We are grateful for their help, during this study. The map was drawn by Yves Baudouin, of the Mission Archéologique et Ethnologique Française.
  - (10) The same analysis should be presented, in our opinion, about the models representing "palos de voladores", as it might be possible to prove this to be a trait introduced late in West Mexico, by Mesoamerican groups.

Index no. 1: Ball-game Scenes

State of Colima:

- Model no. 1: Private Collection.  
Von Winning and Hammer 1972 (Cat. no. 76).  
Square, open court, with small vertical walls.  
Unclassified.

State of Nayarit:

- Model no. 2: Worcester Art Museum.  
Von Winning and Hammer 1972 (Cat. no. 75).  
I-shaped, without end-walls.  
Vertical walls and benches.  
Type no. 1.
- Model no. 3: Proctor Stafford Collection no. 34;  
Los Angeles Museum of Art.  
Von Winning and Hammer 1972 (Cat. no. 73).  
I-shaped without end-walls. Three alley markers.  
Vertical walls with benches.  
Type no. 1.
- Model no. 4: Anahuacalli, Collection Diego Rivera.  
"Artes de México", no. 75-76 (Pl. III).  
I-shaped, with end-structures.  
Vertical walls with benches.  
Type no. 1.
- Model no. 5: Yale University Art Gallery, no. 85-19-1958.  
Borhegyi 1969 (Fig. 5).  
I-shaped, without end-walls. Markers.  
Vertical walls, with benches.  
Type no. 1.
- Model no. 6: Private Collection.  
Von Winning and Hammer 1972 (Cat. no. 74).  
I-shaped, without end-walls. Three alley markers.  
Vertical walls, with benches.  
Type no. 1.

State of Jalisco:

- Petroglyph: Loma Alta (Teuchitlan).  
Mountjoy 1976.  
I-shaped, with end-zones.  
Unclassified.

Index no. 2: Ball-courts of West and Northwest Mexico

		1	2	3	4
<u>State of Guerrero</u>					
Cerro de los Monos	Armillas 1948	Postcl. ?		Rings	Uncl. V.
Citahua	Armillas 1948		End-zones		
La Ciudad	Armillas 1948	Postcl. ?		Rings	Uncl.
La Soledad de Maciel	Armillas 1948	Postcl. ?		Rings	Uncl.
Pandacuareo	Armillas 1948		Open		Uncl.
Placeres del Oro	Armillas 1948		End-zones		V.
	Lister 1955				
Unnamed no. 1	Am. Ant. 1968	Postcl. ?			Uncl.
Unnamed no. 2*	Greengo 1967	Postcl. ?	Open		Uncl.
<u>State of Michoacan</u>					
El Otero	Noguera 1944		Half-closed		Uncl.
Puente de Cerritos	Kelly 1943		End-zones		Uncl.
Purechucho	Osborne 1943		Open		Uncl.
<u>State of Jalisco</u>					
Teuchitlan					
Loma Alta	Mountjoy 1976	Late Cl.	Half-closed		Uncl.
Guachimonton Group	Mountjoy 1976	Late Cl.	Half-closed		Uncl.
Unnamed no. 3	Williams 1974	Late Cl.			Uncl.
<u>State of Nayarit</u>					
Amapa	Clune 1963	Late Cl.	End-zones	Center	I.
<u>State of Zacatecas</u>					
La Quemada	Kelley 1971	Early Postcl.	End-zones		Uncl.
Teul de González Ortega	Margain 1943				Uncl.
<u>State of Durango</u>					
Schroeder Site	Ferdon 1955	Late Cl.	End-zones		II.
Sotolitos	Kelly 1943		End-zones		IV.
<u>State of Sonora</u>					
Santa Cruz	Kelly 1943		End-zones		IV.
<u>State of Chihuahua</u>					
Casas Grandes	Contreras 1970	Postcl.	End-zones		III.

1: period of shape or of construction    2: shape    3: markers    4: type  
 \* located near Iguala, State of Guerrero (not shown on the map)

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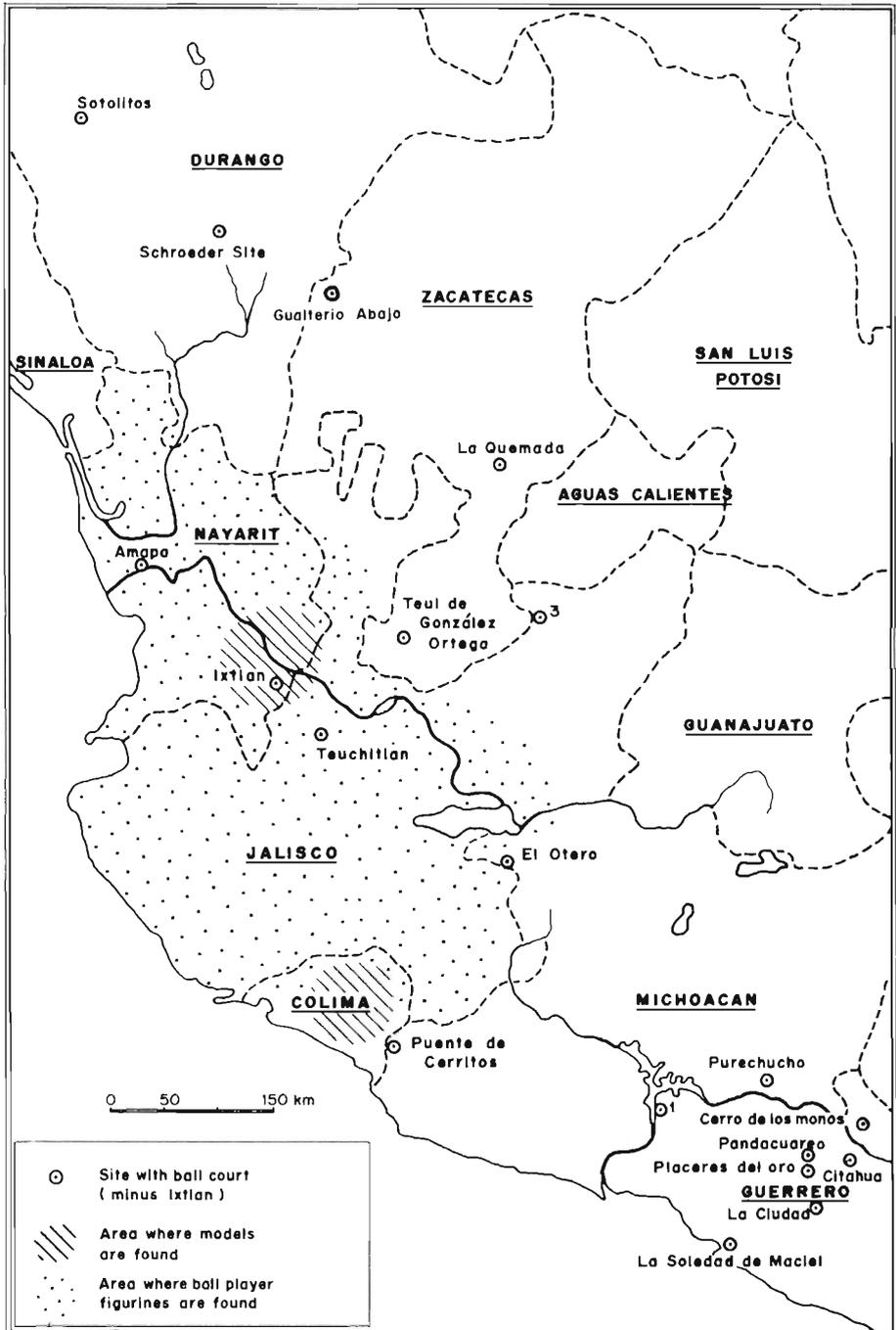
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Sotollitos

**DURANGO**

Schroeder Site

Gualterio Abajo

**ZACATECAS**

**SAN LUIS POTOSI**

**SINALOA**

La Quemada

**AGUAS CALIENTES**

**NAYARIT**

Ampa

Teul de González Ortega

Ixtlan

Teuchitlan

**GUANAJUATO**

**JALISCO**

El Otero

**COLIMA**

Puente de Cerritos

**MICHOACAN**

Purechicho

Cerro de los monos

Pandacuargo

Placeres del oro

Citahua

**GUERRERO**

La Ciudad

La Soledad de Maciel