



Texas Notes on Precolumbian Art, Writing, and Culture

No. 53

May, 1993

Ballcourts : The Chasms of Creation

by

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I propose that the alignment of ballcourts to clefted mountains indicates a metaphorical relationship between the ballcourt and the cleft in the *Yax Hal Witz*, or "First True Mountain" of creation (Freidel, Schele, and Parker, in press, chapter 2). The ballcourt at Yaxchilan is identified as a *hom*, or "chasm" in the text on Step VI from Structure 33 (Schele and Freidel 1991:291). *Hom* in K'iche means "graveyard", a reflection of the deadly nature of the ballgame (Tedlock 1985:326). I supply epigraphic, iconographic, and architectural evidence that the Maya viewed their ballcourts as being the cleft in the *Yax Hal Witz*. The *Yax Hal Witz* is translated as the "First True Mountain" of creation (Freidel, Schele, and Parker, in press, chapter 2). This is the *pan paxil*, K'iche for "Broken Place", from which the first corn and first humans emerged, as told in the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1985:328).

The peoples of Mesoamerica saw the ballgame as a multi-layered metaphor for warfare (Miller and Houston, 1987; Gutierrez, 1990), the movements of planets (Cohodas, 1991), and creation (Schele and

Freidel, 1991; Freidel, Schele, and Parker, in press, chapter 8). I present additional evidence that the Maya, and perhaps all Mesoamericans, viewed the ballgame not only as the reenactment of cosmic creation but the ballcourt itself was the actual place of creation, the *hom*, or chasm, of the *Yax Hal Witz*.

A number of ballcourts in the Maya area, and throughout greater Mesoamerica, are aligned to mountains. In the cases of Yaxchilan in Chiapas, Mexico and Copan in Honduras, the ballcourts are actually aligned to mountains that either form clefts in a mountain range (Yaxchilan) or are characterized by clefted summits (Copan).

When clefted mountains were not nearby, the architects improvised and aligned ballcourts to non-clefted mountains, as is the case at Piedras Negras, Guatemala. In this case, the ballcourt is aligned to a mountain behind Structure K-5, the largest pyramid at the site. Similar orientations outside the Maya area occur at Dainzu in the Valley of Oaxaca and Teotihuacan. The ballcourt at Dainzu is oriented toward a non-clefted mountain (Heather Orr, personal communication, 1993). Beatriz de la Fuente and her

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students have identified the Avenue of the Dead as a series of connected ballcourts (de la Fuente, 1993). It is of great interest that the Avenue of the Dead is oriented toward Cerro Gordo, which is a clefted mountain.

I suggest that the ancient Mesoamericans viewed such clefted mountains as their local version of the *Yax Hal Witz* to which they oriented their ballcourts. Through such orientations an obvious comparison is made between the sunken playing field of the ballcourt and the cleft in the mountain. The ballcourt at Yaxchilan is referred to as a *hom*, or chasm (Fig. 1) in the text on Step VI of Structure 33 (Schele 1991:133), indicating that the

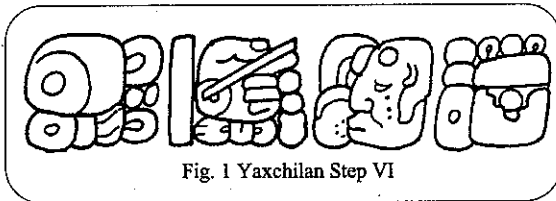


Fig. 1 Yaxchilan Step VI

Maya of Yaxchilan viewed their ballcourt as an architectural representation of the cleft in the *Yax Hal Witz*. When viewed in side plan view (Fig. 2),

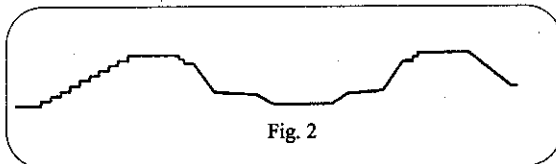


Fig. 2

the ballcourt's playing field forms a cleft that strongly resembles the cleft in the top of the witz monster's head (Fig. 3), identified as a logograph for mountain (Schele and Freidel 1990:418). Thus, the Maya saw their ballcourts as being architecturally parallel to the cleft in the *Yax Hal Witz*.

At Yaxchilan, Tate (1992:113) notes that there is a cleft in the mountains on the eastern horizon to which buildings seem to be oriented. This cleft may

also be the name of the site as represented by the emblem glyph (Tate 1992:4-5). I believe the ballcourt is oriented toward the general direction of this cleft. The cleft is formed by the two highest peaks on the horizon at 63 degrees east of north; and, Tate notes that the summer solstice sun rises within this cleft (1992:113). With the ballcourt oriented 2528 degrees east of north (Tate 1992:174), its orientation does not match that of the cleft, but pre-existing architecture in the vicinity of the ballcourt may have been a factor.

Architecturally, the Mesoamerican ballcourt resembles the *Yax Hal Witz*. The parallel mounds forming the sides of the ballcourt represent the sides of the mountain, with the sunken playing field being the cleft (Figs. 2 and 3). Therefore, play metaphorically took place within the cleft of the *Yax Hal Witz*. Furthermore, when viewed from the end, the architectural plan of the ballcourt strongly resembles half of a quatrifoil shape and the cleft in the witz monster's head. With the quatrifoil marking the portal to the Otherworld since Olmec times and the witz monster being a personified mountain, I do not believe the strong similarities these images have in common with the ballcourt are mere coincidence.

At Yaxchilan and Copan there was a strong association between the ballcourt and the Otherworld. Ballcourt markers set into the playing surface at Yaxchilan contain figures inside of sky bands; whereas, the figures represented on the ballcourt markers at Copan are inside quatrifoil-shaped cartouches. The quatrifoil is viewed as marking the entrance to the Otherworld and the sky band defines the celestial realm. Thus, the playing field of the ballcourt is iconographically identified as either being in the Otherworld or a partition where this and the Otherworld meet.

Additional architectural evidence supports the idea of the ballcourt being the point of physical connection with the Otherworld. The ballcourt at

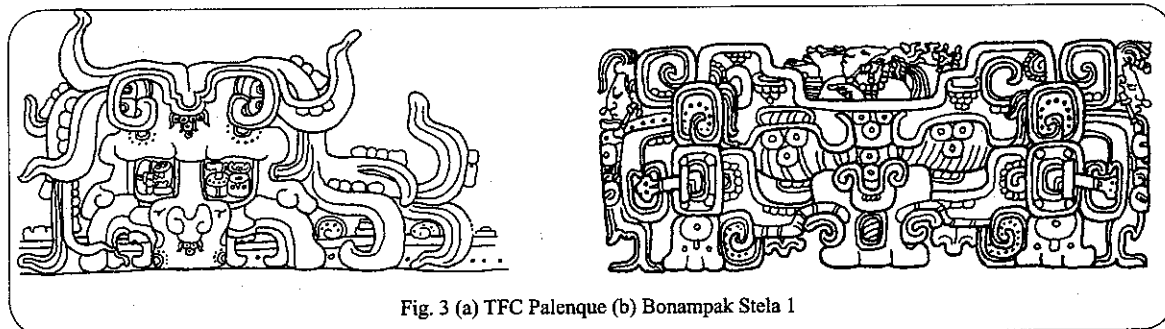


Fig. 3 (a) TFC Palenque (b) Bonampak Stela 1

Yaxchilan has nine steps leading up to it, and the number nine is associated with the Otherworld for it is seen as being divided into nine levels (Thompson 1970:280). The glyph at C'1b on Altar 21 from Caracol is interpreted as either a ballgame event (Houston, 1986) or a ballcourt (Gutierrez, in press) (Fig. 4). It consists of the number nine, or bolon, as a superfix over a ballcourt as it is seen from one of the ends. The ball is suspended between the two side mounds. T23



Fig. 4

appears as the postfix. The use of the number nine as the superfix may indicate that the Group A ballcourt was associated with nine stairs, as is Structure 14 at Yaxchilan. At least in the case of Yaxchilan, the ballcourt is architecturally associated with the nine levels of the Otherworld.

In addition to the Great Ballcourt, Bird Jaguar commissioned Structure 33, his accession monument, and had his most illustrious ancestors depicted as playing the ballgame, with himself included to bring the action up into the present time. The text on Step VI (Fig. 1) further reinforces the identification of the ballcourt as an Otherworld location. The text contains a reference to the ballgame being played in the hom, or "chasm" (Schele 1991:133), which I think refers not only to the abyss of the Otherworld as Schele suggests, but to the cleft in the *Yax Hal Witz* that the playing field represents. Based upon the iconographic program of Structure 33 and the text of Step VI, it is clear that the ballcourt at Yaxchilan is strongly associated not only with the portal to the Otherworld, but also to the royal ancestors who inhabit the Otherworld.

In conclusion, the *Yax Hal Witz*, or First True Mountain, is the place of origin for the first corn and the first humans. Metaphorically speaking, play in the Great Ballcourt at Yaxchilan took place in the chasm, otherwise known as the cleft of the *Yax Hal Witz*. In the case of Yaxchilan, I suggest the playing of the ballgame was viewed as an act of creation that called or manifested the venerated ancestors into the world of the living. Not only was the ballcourt the place from which ancestors could be recalled but it also represented the "Broken Place" from which all of creation originated.

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