

The Great Ball Court Stone of Chichén Itzá

LINNEA WREN

*Gustavus Adolphus College,
Saint Peter, Minnesota*

PETER SCHMIDT

*Museo Regional de Antropología,
Mérida, Yucatán, México*

RUTH KROCHOCK

University of Texas at Austin

IN THE SUMMER OF 1983, Peter Schmidt and Linnea Wren located a hemispherical stone (Fig. 1a) in the *bodega* of the *Museo Regional de Antropología* in Mérida, Yucatán. The stone in question matches a reference in a museum catalog of the 1940s showing that it was found in the Great Ball Court at Chichén Itzá. The authors have therefore designated the sculpture as “the Great Ball Court stone.” It forms the subject of this brief essay.

The Great Ball Court stone was discovered by Miguel Angel Fernández in 1923 in the south end of the court (Lizardi Ramos 1936; 1937). It is 52 centimeters in height, 99 centimeters in diameter, and 311 centimeters along its maximum circumference. Around its base is a rim 16 centimeters high and 11 centimeters wide. Although now broken, the piece was originally carved from a single piece of limestone.

The unusual shape of the Great Ball Court stone has led to considerable speculation on its original function. Edward H. Thompson (n.d.) described it as a “peculiarly shaped stone fragment [resembling a] stiff round hat,” and proposed that it had served as a “stelae [sic] or a cap-stone to a pillar. . . , or perhaps the stone cover to an urn.” César Lizardi Ramos (1937:12) described the stone as “a large ring for a ball to pass through.” The solution to the question of the function of the Great Ball Court stone, however, may lie at the site itself, for what appear to be stones of similar size and shape are illustrated in the heart-sacrifice scenes in the murals of the Temple of the Warriors (Morris et al. 1931: Pl. 145); the Upper Temple of the Jaguars (Coggins & Shane 1984: Fig. 19); and on Disk H from the Sacred Cenote (Lothrop 1952: Fig. 1). Comparison of these depictions and the Great Ball Court stone allow the identification of the latter as a ritual sacrificial stone upon which victims were placed and their hearts extracted.

Although the convex upper surface of the stone is badly eroded, three areas of low-relief carving can be seen. Areas 1 and 2 (Figs. 1b & 1c) depict the salient characteristics of ball game scenes of sacrifice as displayed on the benches of the Great Ball Court and elsewhere at Chichén Itzá. Of these, Area 1 is the best preserved. There, two teams of players face a ball inscribed with a skull (Fig. 1b). To the [observer’s] right stands a decapitated sacrificial victim from whose neck spurt streams of blood stylized as serpents. To the left is his opponent (?), who holds a severed head. Area 3—corresponding to the topmost part of the stone—shows three figures, each outlined against a serpent form, facing a fourth stationary figure who appears to hold a serpent staff (Fig. 1d). Below these, a fifth figure is shown in reclining position.

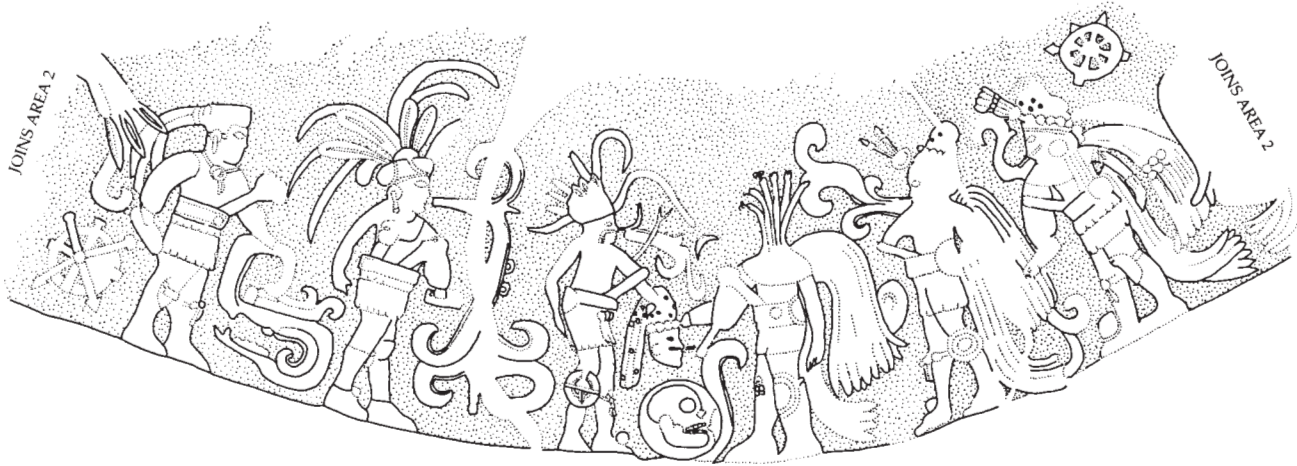
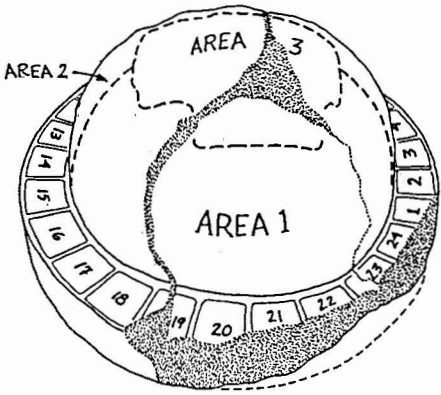
The horizontal upper surface of the circular rim of the Great Ball Court stone is inscribed with a band of 24 hieroglyphs (Fig. 2). According to J. Eric Thompson (1937:189), who received Fernández’s drawing of the text and an accompanying commentary by Enrique Juan Palacios,

SCALE: APPROXIMATELY 1:6

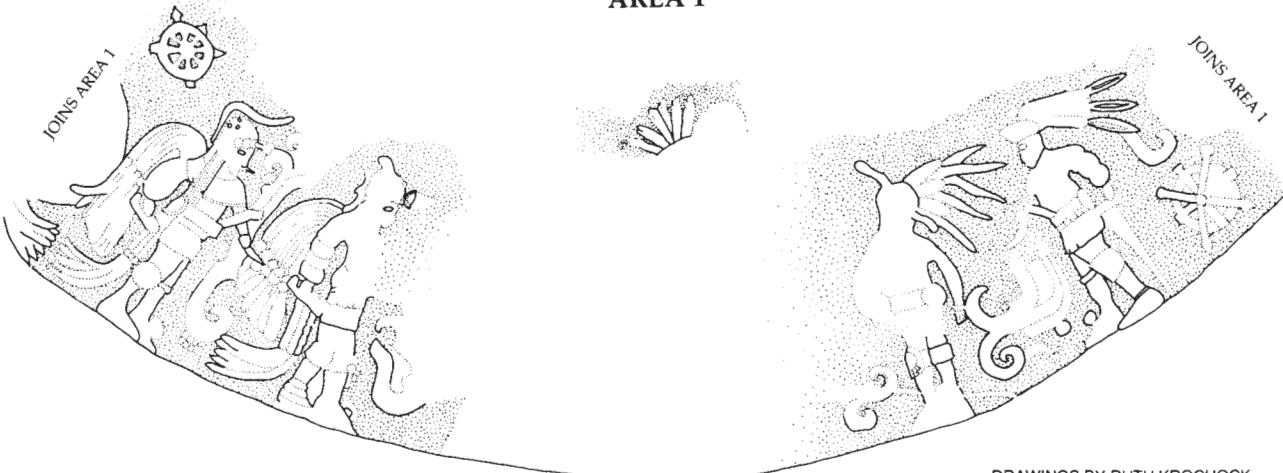


PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WREN

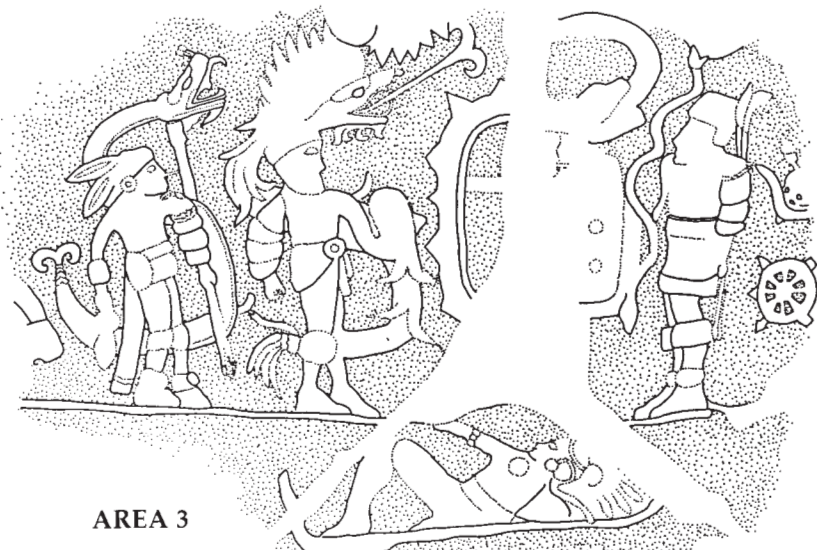
FIGURE 1. THE GREAT BALL COURT STONE



AREA 1



AREA 2



AREA 3

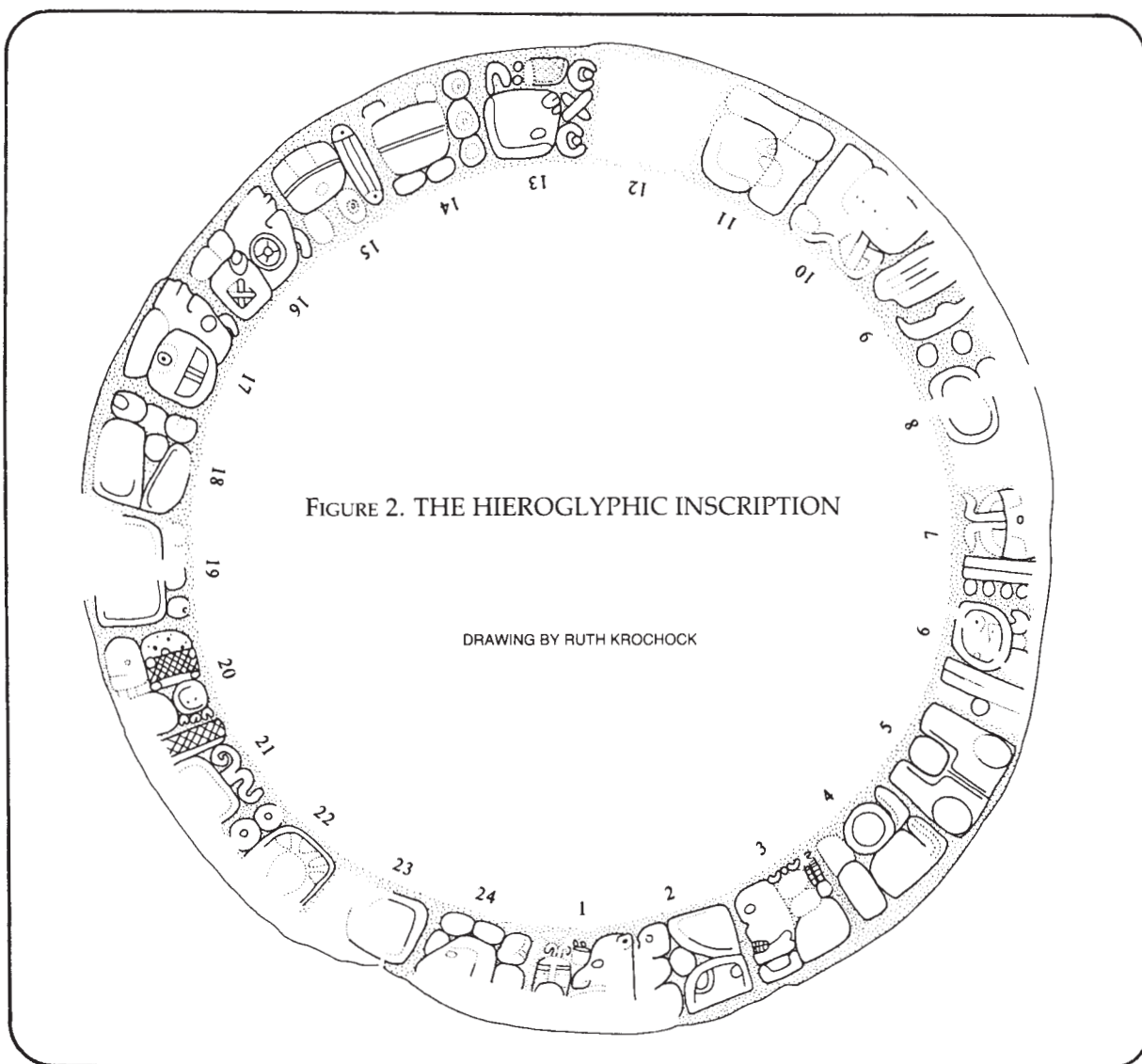
DRAWINGS BY RUTH KROCHOCK,
AFTER PEGGY DIGGS

the latter identified both an "Initial Series"—with suppressed *Baktun* and coefficient—and a Calendar Round date in the inscription. Palacios reconstructed the Initial Series date as (11).7.5.3.0 6 Ahau 13 Pax (July 18, A.D. 1367, Gregorian). The Calendar Round date Palacios gave as 2 Ahau 3 Uayeb. He considered it as corresponding to the Long Count position 11.9.16.0.0 (August 25, 1417). Thompson appears to have accepted both of Palacios's dates.

The recent study of the Great Ball Court stone by the present authors show that no Initial Series is included in the hieroglyphic text. Moreover, the single Calendar Round date, at positions 6 and 7, records the day 11 Cimi 14 Pax (Fig. 2). A Long Count equivalent of 10.1.15.3.6 (A.D. 864) has been posited for that date by Wren (1986).

Parallels can be drawn between the inscription on the Great Ball Court stone and texts from the Temple of the Four Lintels, Yulá, and Structure 6E3—the Temple of the Hieroglyphic Jambs. A ball game event appears at position 5 of the Great Ball Court stone; others occur on Lintel 1 of the Temple of the Four Lintels, at C8 (Kelley 1982:5), and on Yulá Lintel 1 at D3 (Love 1989: Fig 1). A glyph on Structure 6E3, identified by David Kelley (1982:10) as a variant of the name *Kakupacal*, also appears at positions 21 and 22 of the Great Ball Court stone.

The name of *Kakupacal* is preceded on the Great Ball Court stone by the well-known



"lu-bat" glyph recently discussed by David Stuart (1986) as an element preceding the names of sculptors on monuments. The compound, which appears frequently at Chichén Itzá, can be read in this instance as something like "it is transcribed" (Krochock 1988:86). It appears to refer to the sacrificial dedication of the Great Ball Court stone by its patron, *Kakupacal*.

Following the name of *Kakupacal* on the Great Ball Court stone are two additional glyphs (at positions 23 and 24), the second of which has been identified as the Emblem Glyph of Chichén Itzá, readable as "ruler of lords" (Fox 1984:13-18; Kelley 1976:218).

SUMMARY

The Great Ball Court stone is the only Maya inscription known from the North Terrace at Chichén Itzá. It demonstrates that Maya hieroglyphic writing similar to that found on Pure Florescent, or "Chichén-Maya," structures was used simultaneously with pictographic name glyphs such as those found on "Chichén-Toltec," structures. Furthermore, it suggests that the construction of buildings in two styles once considered chronologically discrete may have been contemporaneous. Finally, it promises to add epigraphic evidence on the identity and activities of the elite patrons who governed the site of Chichén Itzá and who created its distinctive architectural style.

SUBMITTED JUNE 1989

LIST OF REFERENCES

- COGGINS, CLEMENCY C. AND ORRIN C. SHANE III
1984 *Cenote of Sacrifice: Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- FOX, JAMES A.
1984 The Hieroglyphic Band in the Casa Colorada. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Denver, Colorado, November 17, 1984.
- KELLEY, DAVID H.
1976 *Deciphering the Maya Script*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
1982 Notes on Puuc Inscriptions and History. Supplement to *The Puuc: New Perspectives*, edited by Lawrence W. Mills. Scholarly Studies in the Liberal Arts, Publication no. 1. Pella, Iowa: Central College.
- KROCHOCK, RUTH
1988 The Hieroglyphic Inscriptions and Iconography of Temple of the Four Lintels and Related Monuments, Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, Mexico. Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts.
- LIZARDI RAMOS, CÉSAR
1936 Los secretos de Chichén Itzá. *Excelsior*, December 21. México, D.F.
1937 New Discoveries of Maya Culture at Chichén Itzá. *Illustrated London News*, July 3 [12-15]. London.
- LOTHROP, SAMUEL K.
1952 *Metals from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza, Yucatan*. Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Memoirs, vol. 10, no. 2. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- MORRIS, EARL H., JEAN CHARLOT, AND ANN AXTELL MORRIS
1931 *The Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza, Yucatan*. Two volumes. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publication no. 406. Washington.
- STUART, DAVID
1986 The "lu-bat" Glyph and its Bearing on the Primary Standard Sequence. Paper presented at the First World Symposium on Maya Epigraphy, Guatemala City.
- THOMPSON, EDWARD H.
n.d. Undated memorandum in the Edward H. Thompson papers, the Alfred M. Tozzer Library, Harvard University.
- THOMPSON, J. ERIC S.
1937 *A New Method of Deciphering Yucatecan Dates with Special Reference to Chichen Itza*. Contributions to American Archaeology, vol. 4. Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publication no. 483 [Contribution 22, issued June 1937]. Washington.
- WREN, LINNEA
1986 The Great Ball Court Stone of Chichén Itzá. Paper presented at the Sixth Palenque Round Table.