Ballcourts are ubiquitous across the Classic Maya lowlands, but associated paraphernalia such as *hachas*, *palmas*, and *yugos* are much less common. Given environmental conditions of the humid Maya lowlands, the actual protective gear of ballplayers and the rubber ball used in the game have scarcely survived in the archaeological record. Yet stone simulacra or skeuomorphs exist, which greatly contribute to our understanding of the ballgame. Despite this, the distribution of these objects is rather variable, with some culture areas of Mesoamerica exhibiting many, whereas others have remarkably few. The Maya lowlands are one such area that when painted with a broad brush can be described as generally vacant as relates to these objects, making the find of a well-made figurative *hacha* at Buenavista del Cayo, in western Belize, all the more remarkable (Figure 1). In this paper, we present this Late Classic stone *hacha*, and discuss its symbolism and significance, drawing comparisons to similar material culture from a Mesoamerican vantage.

Buenavista del Cayo

Buenavista is a large archaeological site in the Mopan valley in west-central Belize, the capital of an ancient polity that held sway in the Classic period (see Ball and Taschek 1991, 2004; Helmke and Awe 2012:61, 73, Fig. 12; LeCount and Yaeger 2010) (Figure 2). The first archaeological investigations at the site occurred under the auspices of the Mopan–Macal Triangle Project (MMT), directed by Joseph Ball and Jennifer Taschek between 1984 and 1991 (Ball 1993). MMT investigations at Buenavista included excavations of many of the larger architectural complexes in the site’s monumental core, settlement survey of the surrounding countryside, and excavation of selected rural settlements (Ball 1993; Ball and Taschek 2004; Taschek and Ball 2004).

After a hiatus in fieldwork at the site, the Mopan Valley Archaeological Project, directed by Jason Yaeger, began investigations at Buenavista in 2005 (Yaeger 2005). This research has entailed excavations within the site’s monumental epicenter—focused particularly on the West Plaza and adjacent royal palace complex (Yaeger et al. 2013), the site’s marketplace in the East Plaza (Cap 2015), and the Central Plaza (Yaeger et al. 2015)—complemented by survey of the surrounding countryside (Yaeger et al. 2011) and a more detailed study of one of the settlement clusters located immediately south of Buenavista (Peuramaki-Brown 2012). The area surrounding the site core was leased for mechanized agriculture in 2010 and has been subjected to annual plowing since then. This prompted MVAP to conduct additional survey and surface collections of the plowed fields, leading to the discovery in 2013 of the piece that we present and analyze here.

The research conducted by MVAP and MMT allows us to sketch Buenavista’s history. Occupation begins in the Middle Preclassic Kanluk phase (800–650 BC), but the first known monumental architecture dates to the Late Preclassic Umbral phase (550–200 BC) (Ball and Taschek 2004). By about 25 BC, the site contained a monumental palace complex and a large plaza defined by three ten-meter high platforms and an associated ballcourt (Ball and Taschek 2004). Clearly Buenavista was a significant ceremonial and political center by this time. The site’s ceremonial and residential loci saw continued expansion during the Early Classic Ahcabnal (AD 240/420–540) and the Late Classic Gadsen (AD 540–670) phases (Ball and Taschek 2004).

During the Ahcabnal phase, two burials were
A Figurative Hacha from Buenavista del Cayo, Belize

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placed in Buenavista’s Central Plaza. In the first of these interments, an adult male was laid to rest in a crypt with five ceramic vessels, several pieces of jade, and a rich assemblage of marine shell ornaments (Yaeger et al. 2015). The most elaborate of these ornaments is a large marine shell gorget, roughly shaped like an elliptical cogwheel or sprocket, which bears an ancestral figure that appears to peer down from the heavens. The iconography is accompanied by a short glyphic text, naming the object as u-k’an, “his gorget,” belonging to an individual named Naah Uti’ K’ab, king of Komkom (Yaeger et al. 2015:185-186). The remarkable find suggests that the location referred to in the Late Classic texts as Komkom was in the vicinity of Buenavista, if not the site itself (see Ball 1993:Fig. 7; Helmke et al. 2017; Houston et al. 1992:118; Stuart and Houston 1994:56; Yaeger et al. 2015:186-187).

This text also serves as evidence that Komkom was ruled by a royal dynasty by at least the fifth century AD, the date suggested by the style of iconography and paleographic traits of the glyphic text (Yaeger et al. 2015).

It was during the late seventh century AD that Buenavista seems to have reached its florescence (Ball and Taschek 2004:158). This was marked by a massive remodeling and rededication of the central plaza sometime in the mid-to-late seventh century. With the subsequent expansion of the palace complex, decomposition of the early ballcourt, and construction of another ballcourt to the north, Buenavista reached its maximum extent (see Ball and Taschek 2004:155). The East Plaza was remodeled at this time, to become the site’s marketplace (Cap 2007; also Ball 1993).

During this period, the rulers of Buenavista engaged with the newly resurgent and expansionist dynasty of the nearby kingdom of Naranjo. An elaborate vase, painted in the royal workshop attached to the court of Naranjo, was buried with a young Buenavista nobleman, likely a gift from Naranjo’s ruler, tendered to forge political links between the two polities (Houston et al. 1992; Taschek and Ball 1992). The vase was originally produced for the 38th ruler of the Naranjo dynasty, K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk (r. AD 693-728+) and may have been gifted to the Buenavista prince during the reign of his predecessor. As the vase was a personal possession of the Naranjo king, its presence at Buenavista indicates a close relation between the two courts. This contrasts with the texts of Naranjo’s Stelae 22 and 18, which record that K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Chaahk attacked and set Komkom ablaze in March 696 (Grube and Martin 2004:44; Helmke and Kettunen 2011:42; Martin and Grube 2000:76; Schele and Freidel 1990:188-189) and later may have subjugated the site in a “Star War” event in April 726 (Grube and Martin 2004:58; Helmke and Kettunen 2011:63). The marked
decline in monumental construction at Buenavista during the eighth century is likely due in part to these historical events.

The settlement zone immediately around Buenavista reached its greatest population density during the early part of the Late Classic period (AD 600-670), and it showed very little decline in population in the later acer of Late Classic period (AD 670-780) and El Salvador Brown (2012), suggesting a socio-political context that was buffered to some extent from the larger political machinations of the rulers of Buenavista and Naranjo.

The Naranjo wars of the seventh and eighth centuries did not significantly impact the populace of the Buenavista polity. The countryside was, as households within individual settlements showed marked disparities in wealth and status (Peuramaki Brown 2012; Yaeger et al. 2011). Some settlements, such as Guerra and Calixte Creek, were busy to more powerful hinterland families who were able to command significant labor to build their residences and associated acer shrines, and whose material possessions included imported ceramics and objects of great value, such as turquoise necklace ceramics that had been committed to the memory of sand.

The Hacha and its Discovery

The hacha is made of dark gray and fine-grained dolomitic limestone, and measures 16.4 cm wide, 13.6 cm high, and 5.4 cm thick (all measurements are maxima). In comparison to other hachas found in eastern Mesoamerica, the Buenavista find is a little narrower (since other specimens average around 22 cm) and yet a little thicker (since most specimens average 3.5 cm) (Shook and Marquis 1996:65). The back exhibits surface collection. The hacha was found on the surface of the plowed field, on the top of the tallest mound in group BVW-006.

Located roughly 300 meters west of the royal palace (Figure 2), BVW-006 and several nearby groups occupy the terrain that slopes down to the Mopan River. Its placement provides a commanding view of the river and its floodplain. BVW-006 itself was associated with relatively little surface material, which makes it difficult to offer a functional interpretation of the group. It bears noting that two fine obsidian lanceolate bolas were found on the top of the mound as well. The configuration of the adjacent groups and surface material associated with them indicate that they were residences, and the associated surface finds suggest an occupation from the Late Preclassic through the Terminal Classic periods.

The associated materials, however, do not suggest that they had any particular occupational specialization.

Ballgame Gear

The elements that together comprise the gear of Mesoamerican ballplayers do not readily form part of the archaeological record since these were all made of perishable materials.Fortunately, a few exceptions exist where water-logged sites with anaerobic conditions provide exceptional contexts for the preservation of organic materials. These include the remarkable spring site of El Manati in the Olmec heartland of Tabasco, Mexico, where the effectiveness of the ballgame is attested (Brown 2012), suggesting a socio-political context that was buffered to some extent from the larger political machinations of the rulers of Buenavista and Naranjo.

Brown (2012), suggesting a socio-political context that was buffered to some extent from the larger political machinations of the rulers of Buenavista and Naranjo.

Figure 2. Two views of the hacha discovered at the BVW-006 Group in the western periphery of Buenavista del Cayo (photographs by Jason Yaeger; section by Christopher Helnke).
at Bolomkin, Chiapas, and was decorated with a set of beautiful shell inlays (Sheseña and Lee Whiting 2004). The extant inlays relate that the yoke—described in the text simply as *u-tun-a*, “his stone . . .”—belonged to an *ajk’uhu’n* (lit. “worshipper”; see Zender 2004b) or priest of K’inich Baknal Chaahk (*ad* 688–704+) (Figure 5), a king of Tonina who was a passionate supporter of the ballgame if we consider the refurbishments he made to Ballcourt 1 and the number of monuments he erected on the occasion of its consecration (Martin and Grube 2000:181-182).

Interestingly, in many depictions of ballplayers they are shown wearing only one knee pad, presumably attached to their dominant leg. Considering the weight of the rubber balls encountered archaeologically, it is not surprising that a whole set of protective gear was specifically designed to protect the hand and forearm of the player. These are known as *manoplas* (“gloves”) or handstones and include a wide array of objects including those that have a handle affixed to a rounded mass (these are comparable to and about the size of small “kettlebell weights” that are so popular today) as well as simple stone spheres with shallow grooves for grip or a deeper furrow into which to slide the fingers. Although the exact functions of *manoplas* remain debated, they may have been used to strike the ball into play as well as to beat opponents as part of a gladiatorial variant of the ballgame wherein challengers fought to shed each other’s blood (Pérez de Lara 2012; Taube and Zender 2009; Zorich 2008). *Manoplas* with archaeological provenance are known from widely distributed sites, including Early Classic Teotihuacan (Ortiz Díaz 1993: Figs. 389-391) (Figure 7a-b), where a *manopla* in the shape of a human skull was found, which is highly reminiscent of the one found at Caracol (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985: Fig. 146) (Figure 7c-d). At Altun Ha grooved handstones have been found and interestingly these have been discovered in residential areas rather than in the monumental epicenter (Pendergast 1990:21, 140, 200), much as at Copan and Buenavista. An added point of interest is that Altun Ha is known as a site without a ballcourt, or at least one where a ballcourt remains to be identified. We suspect that it may in fact be formed by the paired Structures C1 and C2 that are aligned to

**Figure 4.** Examples of ballgame yugos: (a) drawing of a fragmentary yugo carved with a shell-diving figure in Teotihuacan style (after Bernal and Souffert 1970: Fig. 26); (b) detail of one of the ends of the cast of the yugo of *Animal Skull*, found in his tomb at Tikal (after Guillemin 1968:28); (c) fragmentary yugo found in the palace at Palenque (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (d) yugo found in the House of the Bacabs at Copan (after Roetti and Reina 1997: Cat. 192).
The objects known as Lacadena, personal communication 2003) handle that is preserved on its lower surface (Alfonso the top of the hand, as evidenced by the fragmentary The example from Ek Balam was also meant to cover in proximity to the ballcourt (Lacadena 2003:67-69). has been found, although it was found in a midden way to substantiate this is via excavations. At Ek Balam, (see Pendergast 1982:148, Fig. 86), although the only Since hachas and palmas replace each other, they must have served similar functions, a deduction that is corroborated by iconographic depictions were we can see that hachas were also mounted atop the yugo and served to protect the sternum of the player. In addition, hachas served to deflect the ball and possibly to bounce a rolling ball back into play. In most cases hachas are decorated to represent the head of an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic entity, such as an example from Veracruz that depicts the head of a macaw (Whittington 2001:Fig. 64), a hacha from Teotihuacan that depicts a puma or cougar (Figure 9a), another from Copan that represents a human cranium (Riotti and Reina 1997:209) (Figure 9b), examples from Palenque in the form of a bat (Schele and Mathews 1979:No. 861) and a spider monkey (Figure 9c), whereas an unprovenanced example depicts, aptly enough, the head of the Maize God (Schele and Miller 1986: Fig. VI.6; Whittington 2001:263) (Figure 9d). Both palmas and hachas usually have squared notches at their rear base that are presumed to be the sections that matched up with corresponding yokes (Shook and Marquis 1996:66-67); alternatively these were fastened through a large perforation in the middle of the hacha or along the rear or top edge. Nevertheless, in certain instances these squared notches would be better described as tenons, thereby causing hachas to resemble small architectural sculptures more than ballgame gear. Furthermore, some objects that resemble hachas are of such size as to suggest that they are better characterized as portable statues, possibly used as markers along the nose of the sloping bench of a ballcourt, considering the shape and obtuse angle of the notches. As such, some of the objects that have been grouped under the label hacha may well be markers or trophies representing teams or individual players, which were placed on the sides of ballcourts on certain occasions. Even at the Epiclassic site of Xochicalco, in the central Mexican Highlands, the southern ballcourt was embellished with markers in the shape of macaws that also exhibit the same notch
at the back as the hacha (López Luján et al. 1995:54-55) (Figure 10a). These are so stunningly similar to the macaw head markers from Copan’s ballcourt as to suggest that they convey the same fundamental symbolism (see Fash 2011:92-93; Fash and Fash 1996:130-132) (Figure 10b). What is significant here is the degree to which these sculptures resemble each other as well as hacha in general. In addition, knowing the role of the supernatural entity known as Wukub K’aqix, “Seven Macaw,” in the Kiche’ myth recounted in the Popol Wuuj and its connection to the Hero Twins and the ballgame (see Christenson 2007), one might well conclude that the Macaw sculptures and the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame: (a) stone sculpture associated with the southern ballcourt of Xochicalco (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (b) tenoned head in the shape of a remarkably similar macaw head on the earlier phase of the ballcourt at Copan (photograph © Jorge Pórez de Lara).

GI and the Ballgame

The Buenavista hacha represents the profile of the deity known as GI of the Palenque Triad (see Berlin 1963; Helmke 2012:85-89; Stuart 2005, 2006). Although this deity figures prominently in the texts of Palenque, where it appears as part of a local triad of patron deities, GI is also known from several other sites throughout the Maya Lowlands. Although the designation GI is far from satisfactory, until the name of this deity has been deciphered we will have to content ourselves with the label. Earlier scholars have attempted to identify GI as the deified embodiment of the World Tree (Freidel et al. 1993:418 n. 21, 431 n. 33; Wagner 2001:287), as a dominant aspect of the mature Maize God (Freidel et al. 1993; Schele and Mathews 1998:411), as a personification of the thunder and rain deity Chaahk (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986;49; Wagner 2001:282-285), or even as an aspect of the elder of the Hero Twins (Freidel et al. 1993:108, 351, 370; Leornsbury 1985; Schele and Mathews 1998:210). Based on current understanding, however, these identifications and their multiplicity seem rather implausible. What can be said is that GI is an aquatic deity, or at the very least a supernatural entity closely associated with bodies of water in general and the sea in particular. Clues are provided by the deity’s squared eyes, scrolled pupils, whisker-like fish fins framing the mouth, and prominent shark’s tooth. These features are all shared by depictions of assorted sharks, which more often than not are depicted as fanciful and supernatural creatures (Hellmuth 1987:Fig. 154-159; Jones 1985). In many cases GI is also depicted with a Spondylus shell earflare as well as maxillary barbels at the corners of the mouth (e.g., Hellmuth 1987:Figs. 17-18, 119; Schele and Miller 1986-49), features that further suggest that this deity is an aquatic being. The fish barbels are particularly significant since this is a feature of bottom-dwelling fish such as catfish and certain species of shark. At times, GI is also shown wearing a headdress that is fashioned from the head of a shark (see Hellmuth 1987:Figs. 71, 73) or the head of the water lily monster replete with shark’s tooth as canine (Hellmuth 1987:Figs. 72). Other aquatic creatures that figure in the various headdresses of GI include waterfowl such as the heron or egret and the so-called Shell-winged Dragon (Hellmuth 1987:Figs. 75-95, 108-109, 111; Helmke and Nielsen 2013:373-376; Stuart 2005:120-121). At times the central feature of the headdress is the so-called quadrirpartite badge that is composed of a wide and shallow offering dish marked with the glyph for k’in, “sun,” which contains a spiny oyster shell (Spondylus sp.), a stingray spine, and a third element exhibiting crossed bands (Hellmuth 1987:Figs. 75-95). The quadrirpartite badge implies that GI is somehow related to the rising sun and may even represent a particular aquatic aspect of the solar divinity K’inich (Robertson 1974; Stuart 2005:164-169).

The representation of GI on the hacha makes clear the pivotal role of myth in the ballgame. This is also made patent in the monuments that weave myths of the distant past into the historical present by depicting ancient Maya kings dressed as mythic heroes. Thus at Yaxchilan, Yaxuun Bahlam IV (r. AD 752-768) is shown playing the ballgame in October 744, wherein the captured king of Lakamtuun has been trussed up as a ball and cast down the stairs (Figure 12). Accompanied by supernatural dwarves, the scene is replete with references to the mythic past, including text that delves into distant reaches of time and names the ballcourt at Yaxchilan as Ux Ahaal Ebb, “three conquest stairway.” This echoes the name of the mythic location where a series of three supernatural entities were defeated (Freidel et al. 1993:353-387; Gutierrez 1993). Much as at Yaxchilan, the seventh-century king of Tonina, K’inich Bakunl Chaahk, labeled Tonina Ballcourt 1 with this

Figure 10. Macaw sculptures and the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame: (a) stone sculpture associated with the southern ballcourt of Xochicalco (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (b) tenoned head in the shape of a remarkably similar macaw head on the earlier phase of the ballcourt at Copan (photograph © Jorge Pórez de Lara).

Figure 11. Clay figurine of a ballplayer wearing a distinctive bird-shaped hacha above the yoke (after Whittington 2001:Fig. 61).

Figure 12. The ballgame of AD 744 in which Yaxuun Bahlam IV of Yaxchilan impersonates a deity and performs pivotal events of the epic wherein the Maya God and underworld deities are defeated. The mythic past is recounted in the steps of the ballcourt and the historical present is rendered in the caption to the right (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).
same name, whereby in essence these historical ball Courts emerge as the location where the epic players Of course, and inevitably the historical players were made to emulate their mythic forebears. Like their counterparts to the south, the Snake kings also named their ballcourt the UX Ahaal Eeb, as is made clear in the record of a ballgame officiated by Tajo’m Uk’ab K’ahk’ in record of a ballgame officiated by Tajo’m Uk’ab K’ahk’ (after Rietti and Reina 1997:Cat. 190). In this scheme the heavens are characterized by birds, including vultures and hummingbirds, as well as snakes and, oddly enough, dogs, whereas the terrestrial realm and the underworld are particularly represented by spotted felines, deer, and water lilies (Barrois and Tokovinine 2005). In this scheme the heavens are characterized by birds, including vultures and hummingbirds, as well as snakes and, oddly enough, dogs, whereas the terrestrial realm and the underworld are particularly represented by spotted felines, deer, and water lilies (Barrois and Tokovinine 2005). This opposition is nowhere clearer than on the central marker of the A-IIB ballcourt at Copan (Figure 13). This monument represents the mythical encounter between Juun Ajaw (“one king”)—the elder of the two heroic figures in the mythic epic of the Classic period—and a lord of the underworld, depicted with a skeletal headdress and a human hand replacing his lower jaw (Kowalski 1989). Juun Ajaw kneels into the large ball that has been hurled at him by the underworld divinity, who wields a mace in the shape of a rabbit’s head. Surprisingly, whereas the accompanying glyphic captions do name the heroic figure as Juun Ajaw and the underworld lord as Waks Chamiit (“six death/ disease”), these go on to specify that this is in fact a historical scene, wherein Waksaklujuun Ubaah K’awiil, Copan’s thirteenth king, impersonated the underworld deity. This is surprising since one might suppose that ancient Maya rulers would have viewed themselves as heroic figures rather than denizens of the underworld. Nevertheless, based on such scenes, it would seem that certain ballplayers preferred to view themselves as “heeds”—to use the wrestling term—rather than conventional “good guys.” Thus, teams identified and opposed themselves not only by means of attributes and features tied to either the heavens or the earth, but also by emulating, invoking, and taking on the guise of supernatural entities and deities tied to the ballgame (see Tokovinine 2002; Zender 2004a).

Mythical entities that were impersonated include not only the mythic hero Juun Ajaw, but also his father the Maize God (Boot 2014) and his uncle, Huiska’ Juun Ajaw, who by all accounts was an accomplished ballplayer (Zender 2004a:4-5). A particularly striking example is found in the iconography of the recently discovered Stela 47 at Naranjo. There the local king Ajasaaj Chan K’inich (also known as “Aj Wosal”) is dressed on the day of his accession as a ballplayer and assumes the guise of Juun Ajaw (Martin et al. 2015:616-617) (Figure 14). The underworld trials against the lords of death are implied by the crossed bones and disembodied eyes that adorn his necklace, yoyo, and loincloth. Other deities that were impersonated by ballplayers include Ix K’uh, the “wind god,” and a particular manifestation of the thunder deity Chaahk (possibly Chak Xib Chaahk), both tied to the celestial team (e.g. Tokovinine 2002; Whittington 2001:240; Zender 2004a:8). In this regard we should also comment on a panel from La Corona, which shows a game or contest that took place in 687 at the ballcourt of Calakmul (see Schele and Miller 1986:256-257) (Figure 15). The scene focuses on a ball-game of the king of Calakmul, the ruler of La Corona, one Chak Ak’ Paat Kuy (Stuart 2013), dividing in the playing alley to deflect the ball while facing his opponent, who has been pushed into the ballcourt’s endzone. The opponent of Chak Ak’ Paat Kuy is said to be the ut’hu’un kalo’nte’, which can be translated as “backpresso of the paramount rule,” undeniably in reference to Yukhno’m Yich’aak Chaahk’ the contemporary king of Calakmul (see Zender 2004a:12). Whereas the headdress of Chak Ak’ Paat Kuy is decorated with a row of bird heads, implying a celestial association, the hacha of the spokesperson clearly depicts the head of the Teotihuacan Storm god—the prototype to the Aztec deity Tlaloc—which by process of elimination must be tied to the terrestrial team. This independently agrees with proposed etymologies of the theonym Tlaloc, which stipulate that it involves the substantive tlaal-li “earth” (e.g., López Austin 1997:214; Siméon 1992:602). Returning to the hacha from Buenavista del Cayo we can thus conclude that GI was yet another divine patron of the ballgame, but we are left to wonder which of the two teams GI exemplified. In this connection Monuments 171 from Tonina provides us with vital evidence (Graham et al. 2006:116). This panel, apparently dedicated on October 30, 727 (9.14.16.1.12), depicts two ballplayers, one bracing himself on his right hand, the other using his hacha to deflect the ball or bounce it back into play (Skidmore 2004) (Figure 16). Some confusion remains as to the identity of the two protagonists depicted, since the accompanying glyphic text provides three names (Stuart 2013). One of these is Yich’aak Chaapaah (723–739+), the ruler of Tonina who is thought to have commissioned the monument; another is Yukhno’m
Took’ K’awil (AD 727–731+), the contemporary ruler of Calakmul (see Martin and Grube 2000:112-113), whereas the initial part of the text mentions the late K’inich Baknal Chaahk (AD 688–704+), the earlier ruler of Tonina renowned as a patron of the ballgame (Helmke et al. 2007; Martin and Grube 2000:181-183; Skidmore 2004). Considering the specific phrasing of the captions one plausible reconstruction would see the two ballplayers as a nimble K’inich Baknal Chaahk squaring off against the king of Calakmul, the latter connected to the later Tonina king by means of a relationship expression. Here we appear to have a conflation of multiple time scales, with an actual historical event of 727 set in the vantage of an earlier encounter, thereby invoking the venerable and once mighty ballplayer king of Tonina, K’inich Baknal Chaahk (Helmke et al. 2007; Stuart 2013). Remarkably, the hacha of K’inich Baknal Chaahk is embellished with the profile of GI, with a Shell-winged Dragon emerging from his head. His opponent, the king of Calakmul wears a headdress exhibiting an underworld deity, replete with storm god goggles and the ear of a deer, indicating that he is a part of the underworld team. This would imply that K’inich Baknal Chaahk was the captain of the celestial team, and the quetzal that he sports in his broad-brimmed hat-like headdress corroborates this interpretation. As such we are left to conclude that despite the aquatic features of GI, he was conceived of—at least in the context of the ballgame—as a celestial divinity.1

Final Thoughts
The discovery of such an exquisite carved stone hacha at Buenavista is surprising. The function of the BVW-006 group where the hacha was discovered remains enigmatic, and, while the size and morphology of the adjacent groups suggest that they were the residential complexes of wealthy families, they are not the largest residential groups found in the near periphery of Buenavista. The absence of evidence of stone carving activity in the surface materials leads us to infer that the hacha was not made by the residents of these groups, but was owned or used by them. Thus its presence suggests that participation in the ballgame—whether as players

1 This find confirmation at Palenque in the three temples of the Cross Group dedicated to the triadic deities. The Temple of the Cross, which is dedicated to GI, is the tallest of the group, again implying that GI was in essence a heavenly deity (Stuart 2006:90-91).
or keepers of gear—extended beyond the upper echelon of the nobility and highest elite.

The hacha is also remarkable considering the paucity of such artifacts in the central Maya lowlands. With the exception of a handful of manoplas, prior to the discovery of this hacha such stone simulacra were un-known for Belize. This single discovery thereby greatly expands the sphere of distribution of these objects and sheds light on their importance across social segments within highly stratified societies.

One remarkable scene represented on a polychrome vase now in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks bears comment upon its use. This vase (K2784) represents a courtly scene, wherein what may be the ruler of Itzimte is seated on his broad throne and holds audience (Figure 17). Subordinates are seated by the king and although attentive to the words of the monarch, also speak in hushed voices at the back. To the left of the king is an attendant who reaches out a bowl with small delicacies. Behind him are a series of objects and paraphernalia pertaining to royal pageantry and the ballgame, including a headdress, a lidded box, a cylinder vase, and most interesting of all a yoke inscribed with glyphs. This is the same type of yoke as that mentioned above inlaid with shell glyphs from the Bolomkin area of Chiapas. Additionally, this discovery of this interesting of all a yoke inscribed with glyphs. This is the same type of yoke as that mentioned above inlaid with shell glyphs from the Bolomkin area of Chiapas. Additionally, this discovery of this hacha at Buenavista suggests that the Buenavista hacha is not unique to this site, but represents a regional tradition.

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Wagner, Elisabeth


Webster, David


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Yaeger, Jason


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Zender, Marc


Zorich, Zach

Chichen Itza, Great Ballcourt, West Central Panel detail (rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson).