Two Prehispanic Sculptures From Santa Catarina in Coyoacan

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To Jaime Abundis

The Tepanecs were skillful carvers of basalt who developed a high-level school of sculpture in their principle settlements in the Basin of Mexico: Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, and Coyoacan. According to sixteenth-century sources, they were frequently called upon by the Mexica rulers of neighboring Tenochtitlan to create important public monuments. Unfortunately, relatively few of these have survived to the present day. This article addresses three that remain in the Coyoacan district of Mexico City.

A visit to the churches and colonial mansions of Mexico’s capital often brings pleasant surprises, not only to aficionados of the colonial art of New Spain but also those interested in the plastic arts of the societies before the European conquest. For instance, an ancient tepetlacalli or stone coffers from the Late Postclassic (AD 1250–1521), located in the interior of the Chapel of the Cuadrante de San Francisco in Coyacan, was brought to our attention by Alberto Peralta de Legarreta (Peralta de Legarreta 2011; see also López Luján and López Austin 2010, 2011). A quadrangular prism of basalt measuring 62 cm on its sides and 25 cm in height, its side walls are covered by twelve maize cobs carved in bas-relief (Figure 1). Today this tepetlacalli serves as a baptismal font, a function for which it was adapted by enlarging the upper cavity and fashioning a circular drainage hole in one of the sides. In this article, we will consider two other cases in old buildings of the Santa Catarina neighborhood of Coyoacan.

Figure 1. Tepetlacalli or stone coffer decorated with maize cobs, used today as a baptismal font in the chapel of the Cuadrante San Francisco, in the Coyoacan district. Photo: Alfredo López Austin.

A Serpent Head

The first sculpture that we will describe can be observed in the so-called Casa de Alvarado, located at 383 Francisco Sosa Street (Figure 2). This beautiful mansion in the style of Moorish-influenced medieval Spain dates to the second decade of the

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eighteenth century and is famous because it served, at different times, as the residence of two lovers of Mesoamerican art: the American archaeologist Zelia Nuttall and the poet Octavio Paz. It currently houses the National Sound Library and encloses within its walls one of the most pleasant gardens in the south of the capital. Here, amidst cypresses, orange trees, and oaks, reposes a small carving in basalt, measuring 21 by 23 by 45 cm, whose origin is unknown to us (Figure 7). The biologist Norma Valentín, of the Subdirectorate of Laboratories and Academic Support of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), explains that in a schematic way it depicts the head of a venomous snake. Its characteristics pertain to the family Viperidae and possibly the genus Crotalus. Between the eye and the nostril there is a slight depression that could evoke the thermoreceptor orifice. The mouth is ajar and inside it can be seen long fangs—some straight and others curving backwards—as well as a protruding forked tongue.

A Ballcourt Marker
Even more interesting is the second sculpture, sheltered within the Casa de Cultura “Jesús Reyes Heroles” at 202 Francisco Sosa (Figure 4). This is a slightly later construction, dating to the end of the eighteenth century, that once housed a modest paper mill. Today it serves as an active community center for education and recreation.

Near the entrance, the visitor encounters the only sizeable carving that has been found so far in the urban nucleus of the Postclassic settlement, an exceptional tlachtemalacatl or ballgame marker. The renowned architect and chronicler of Coyoacan, Luis Everaert Dubernard (1992, 2007), suggests that it would have been discovered around 1750, when the foundations of the erroneously named “Palace of Cortés,” that is, of the current municipal headquarters, were built.

On the other hand, the lawyer José Lorenzo Cossío Jr. (1942) states that the piece comes from the prehispanic mound known as “El Cerrito,” which was built at the modern confluence of Ignacio Allende Street and Miguel Hidalgo Avenue in downtown Coyoacan. He refers in particular to the old house of Dr. Agustín Coronado, located at number 5 Allende, as well as the house adjoining it to the south, a premises now occupied by a bakery and a hamburger restaurant. In its surface area, Cossío estimates that “El Cerrito” would have measured twenty meters north by south by forty east to west, and eight to ten meters in height.

In this regard, it is worth noting that our colleague Juan Cervantes, of INAH’s Archeological Salvage Directorate, and his team have recently recovered rich data about this prehispanic mound:

... on the eastern edge of Plaza Hidalgo and under Calle Allende, two more buildings have been registered. One is a stucco platform, made with a core of stones and earth, which extends at least 30 m along the axis of the street. Another, located towards the junction with Hidalgo Avenue, is in a foundation with stucco plaster that must have had at least a stepped upper body. ... It is possible that both elements formed part of a single construction that served as the base for the structure located under the Casa del Cerrito. (Cervantes et al. 2014:45, 48)

The interesting thing for our purposes is that according to Cossío some of his informants told him that they used to play on that mound at the end of the nineteenth century, “these being the same people who say that a ballgame disc and similar things were found there.” In any case, whatever the exact origin of the tlachtemalacatl, it is certain that it belonged to a ballcourt located in the civic-ceremonial area of Coyoacan, which consisted of several pyramidal foundations, platforms, and plazas.

As attested in a black and white photograph from the Casasola Archive, this ballgame marker was displayed around 1930 at the northern end of the Plaza Hidalgo. Ten years later, it was still in place, although now resting on a masonry pedestal, as seen in a pair of vintage images published by Cossío. As a result of the remodeling of the garden in the seventies, the sculpture followed an uncertain route, making successive stays in a room of the municipal building, a storeroom of a cleaning service, the garden of the Coyoacan Cultural Forum, a room for temporary exhibitions of the National Museum of Anthropology, and finally the garden of the Reyes Heroles center. We have been able to photograph it and draw its reliefs courtesy of Rubén Haro (Figure 7).

The tlachtemalacatl of Coyoacan was carved in solid basalt and measures 80 cm in maximum diameter, with an internal opening 19 cm in diameter. On both sides it has somewhat indistinct bas-reliefs that have been
interpreted as four coyotes by Everaert Dubernard (2007) or as a dog accompanied by a butterfly according to Ramzy Barrois (2006). However, a meticulous visual examination with raking light makes it clear that it depicts an individual of male sex, prone and decapitated. He wears a triangular loincloth, textile pendants, and sandals with heel guards, as well as a tubular nosepiece made of greenstone (chalchiuhtlicocatl), wristbands, and anklets. Significantly, he wears an emblem of maize ears (cenmaitl) at the small of his back and seems to hold another in one of his hands.

All of these are clear indications that the sacrificed character is the maize god Centeotl himself, or one of his earthly representatives. The above is in line with the recent proposals of Eric Taladoire (2015), who relates the ballgame, rather than astral rituals, to the agricultural ceremonies of heart extraction and decapitation, as well as the symbolic complex of rain-moisture-fertility. It suffices in this brief context to evoke page 27 of the Codex Borbonicus, where Centeotl appears playing ball with Ixtlilton, Cihuacoatl, and Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, deities associated with this complex (Figure 8).

The Artists of Coyoacan

In the middle of the fifteenth century, as narrated by the historian Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc (1987), Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina summoned the famous sculptors of Coyoacan on two occasions to participate in the remodeling of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. He sent for them the first time, along with a group of Tepanec artists from Azcapotzalco, to entrust them with the making of a large stone cuauhxicalli that was to crown the renovated pyramid. And, as a sign of his power, he ordered them to carve on the side of that sacrificial cylinder the defeat inflicted by the Tenochcas in 1430 on the Coyohuaque and the Azcapotzalcas commanded by Maxtla. A few years later a similar scene took place, when Motecuhzoma brought back the sculptors of Coyoacan and Azcapotzalco to the imperial capital, although now accompanied by those of Tlacopan, Texcoco, Xochimilco, and Chalco. On this occasion, the mission of the artisans would be more complex because, in the words of Alvarado Tezozomoc, they would carve, “with very subtle artifice,” “the bundles of each god..."
subjected to Huitzilopochtli.”

The reading of these two brief passages leaves no room for doubt about the great skill of the sculptors of Coyoacán, causing us to discern in that Tepanec city a carving school of a high order and with its own characteristics, such as there were to the east of the Basin of Mexico, in Texcoco, and also to the south, in Xochimilco, Tlahuac, Chalco, and Tlalmanalco. The sculptures that we have described in this article, as well as a pair of beautiful feathered serpents that we have analyzed elsewhere (López Luján 2016, English translation forthcoming in The PARI Journal), are archaeological testimonies that lead us to sustain this conclusion.

Acknowledgments

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References


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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 plowed fields, leading to the discovery in 2013 of 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 a 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 Karlik phase (800-650 BC), but the first known monumental architectural 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 terrace 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 phase (AD 240/420-540) and the Late Classic Gadsen (AD 540-670) phases (Ball and Taschek 2004).

During the Ahcabnal phase, two burials were...
Helmke, Yaeger, and Eli

A Figurative Hacha from Buenavista del Cayo, Belize

Figure 1. Map of the Maya area showing where ballgame-related paraphernalia has been found, including yugos, hachas, palmas, and manoplas. Note the high concentration of sites along the Pacific Piedmont of Guatemala as well as parts of adjoining El Salvador and the relative dearth of find spots in the lowlands. Lowland sites mentioned in this text are labeled (map by Precolombia Mesoweb Press with Eva Jobbová, based in part on Shook and Marquis 1996:Map 1).

Figure 2. Map of Buenavista del Cayo showing the location of the BVW-006 group and the find spot of the hacha to the west of the monumental epicenter (map by Jason Yaeger).

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 palaeographic 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 2004:138). 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, decommissioning of the early ballcourt, and construction of another ballcourt to the north, Buenavista reached its maximum extent (see Ball and Taschek 2004:135). 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 dynasts 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 settlement zone immediately around Buenavista reached its greatest population density during the early part of the Late Classic period (AD 600–760), and it showed very little decline in population in the later acer of Late Classic period (AD 760–900) (Eli 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 complex, 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 Calzar Creek, were home to more powerful hinterland families who were able to command significant labor to build their residences and associated corn or shrines, and whose material possessions included imported ceramics and objects of great value, such as pottery with painted glyphic texts (Kurnick 2013).

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 a squared tenon, referred to as a “Rear Tenon” in the literature, which is essentially just a basal notch with an obtuse angle (known as the Standard Mounting Area), with a more pronounced inset at the top (see Shook and Marquis 1996:66–67). The angle of the basal angle measures on average 110°, which is relatively commonplace for hachas of this type. The top of the hacha is broken, evidently along a circular perforation towards the back where it appears to have been fastened, a typical feature for this type of artifact.

The hacha is carved to represent the profile of the head of the deity known as GI of the Palenque Triad (Figure 3), as we will discuss in greater detail below. In this the hacha found at Buenavista is exceptional, since the vast majority of hachas represent animals drawn from the natural realm, especially bats, birds of prey, jaguars, deer, parrots, snakes, simians, armadillos, and peccaries (see Shook and Marquis 1996:75–174). That being said, anthropomorphic hachas and skull-form specimens are known (Shook and Marquis 1996:103–128, 175–186), although deities are rather rare and otherwise only include the Maize God (Shook and Marquis 1996:123), as well as a long-lipped wind deity (Shook and Marquis 1996:209, 211) and what may be a Classic precursor to Xipe Totek (Shook and Marquis 1996:189–196).

The hacha was discovered in the summer of 2013 during Mark Eli’s survey of the settlement zone in the recently plowed fields surrounding Buenavista. This area had been mapped by MMT, but Eli was resurveying the area to verify the mapped structures and inspect the material turn-up by the plow in order to reconstruct the occupation histories of the mound groups and identify any specialized production zones on the basis of artistic materials recovered by 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 bifaces were found on the top of the mound as well. The configuration of the adjacent groups and surface materials 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 waterlogged 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, Mayan altars of stucco effigy, and stone yokes (see Guenter 2002). The find in question is carved to represent the profile of the god K’inich Waaw; see Guenter 2002). The find in question was not the organic object itself, but a cast rendered in the hollow impressions of the organic objects even if 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 bifaces were found on the top of the mound as well. The configuration of the adjacent groups and surface materials 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.

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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 . . .") and included 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 mano 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 a

![Figure 4. Examples of ballgame yugos: (a) drawing of a fragmentary yugo carved with a shell-diving figure in Teotihuacan style (after Bernal and Scuffert 1970:Fig. 26); (b) detail of one of the ends of the cast of the ballgame yugo or "yoke" 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 Riotti and Reina 1997:Cat. 192).](image)

![Figure 5. Drawings of a selection of the shell inlays of the yugo found in the vicinity of Bolomkin, Chiapas (drawings by Christophe Helmke, based on photographs courtesy of Alejandro Sheseña).](image)

![Figure 6. Example of yuguitos: (a) specimen from Tlatilco, attesting to the antiquity of ballgame paraphernalia in Mesoamerica; (b) yuguito from Tabasco replicating a woven motif (photographs by Christophe Helmke).](image)
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 a fragmentary forearm protector, also made of stone, way to substantiate this is via excavations. At Ek Balam, (see Pendergast 1982:148, Fig. 86), although the only specimens found at Caracol (photographs © Royal Ontario Museum).

The causeway that runs northwest of the site’s epicenter (see Pendergast 1982:148, Fig. 86), although the only way to substantiate this is via excavations. At Ek Balam, a fragmentary forearm protector, also made of stone, has been found, although it was found in a midden in proximity to the ballcourt (Lacadena 2003:67-69). The example from Ek Balam was also meant to cover the top of the hand, as evidenced by the fragmentary handle that is preserved on its lower surface (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2003).

The objects known as palmas (“palms”) exhibit elongated forms that usually flare out at the crown, hence the name (Miller and Taube 1993:130-131). Palmas were frequently decorated to assume the shape of birds and crocodiles, and depictions at Chichen Itza represent upright serpentine creatures (Krochock and Freidel 1994; Schele and Miller 1986:244, Fig. VI.3) (Figure 8). These were designed to be mounted on top of the yugo, and to cover and thereby protect the sternum of the player. In addition, palmas and hachas 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

Figure 7. Examples of manoplas and forearm protectors: (a–b) two skull-shaped specimens from Teotihuacan (photographs by Christophe Helmke); (c–d) two views of a comparable specimen found at Caracol (photographs © Royal Ontario Museum).

Figure 8. Detail of panel of the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza showing two ballplayers squaring off around a cranial ball. Both wear yugos and palmas protecting the sternum. The one has decapitated the other, and the defeated one still grasps a square manopla (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

Figure 9. Examples of hachas in Mesoamerica: (a) hacha in the form of a puma’s head, found at Teotihuacan (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (b) skull-shaped hacha from the House of the Bacabs at Copan (after Riotti and Reina 1997:Cat. 193); (c) hacha bearing the head of a spider monkey found in the royal palace at Palenque (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (d) unprovenanced hacha depicting the head of the Maize God (after Whittington 2001:Cat. 136).
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 natural entity known as Wukub K’aqix, “Seven Macaw,” in the Popol Wuuj and its connection to the Hero Twins and the ballgame (see Christenson 2007), one might well conclude that the Mesoamerican ballgame shared a pan-Mesoamerican mythological narrative involving cultures heroes who excelled at playing ball, and who ultimately would defeat a giant and monstrous bird as well as the lords of death and the underworld (see Nielsen and Helmke 2015). Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that hachas were part and parcel of ballgame gear, since we have clear depictions of players wearing them in pictorial iconography and ceramic statues (Whittington 2001:Fig. 100), including a wonderful little statue depicting a ballplayer with a bird-shaped hacha mounted on a yoke (Whittington 2001:Fig. 61) (Figure 11).

GI and the Ballgame

The Buenavista hacha represents the profile of the deity known as GI of the Palenque Triad (see Berlin 1963; Helmke 2012:285-89; 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. 1993:811), 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; Leomsbury 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 coals or “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 Helmutth 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 quadrupartite 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 quadrupartite 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, Yaxuan 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 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 Ehb, “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 Bakubl Chaahk, labeled Tonina Ballcourt 1 with this
same name, whereby in essence these historical ball-courts emerge as the location where the epic scenes of these 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 “heels”—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.

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, Hukte’ 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 “Ajl 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, goggles, and loincloth. Other deities that were impersonated by ballplayers include Ik’ K’uh, the “wind god,” and a particular manifestation of the thunder deity Chaahk (possibly Chak Xib Chaaahk), both tied to the celestial team (e.g., Tokovinine 2002; Whittington 2001:240; Zender 2004a:4-5).

In this regard we should also comment on a panel from La Corona, which shows a game or contest that took place in AD 687 at the ballcourt of Calakmul (see Schele and Miller 1986:256-257) (Figure 15). The scene focuses on a vassal of the king of Calakmul, the ruler of La Corona, one Chak Ak’ Paat Kuy (Stuart 2015), divining 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 utihu’un ka’al’tse’, which can be translated as “spokesperson of the paramount ruler,” understood in reference to Yuhkno’m Yich’aak K’ahk’ the contemporary king of Calakmul (see Zender 2004c: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 Thalakl—which by process of elimination must be tied to the terrestrial team. This independently agrees with proposed etymologies of the theonym Thalakl, which stipulates that it involves the substantive tlah-tli “earth” (e.g., Lopex Austin 1997:214; Siméon 1992:620).

Returning to the hacha from Buenavista 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 Monument 171 from Tonina provides us with vital evidence (Graham et al. 2006:116). This panel, apparently dedicated on October 30, AD 727 (9.14.16.12.12), 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 Chapaah (AD 723–739+), the ruler of Tonina who is thought to have commissioned the monument; another is Yuhkno’m
Took’ K’awil (ad <702–731+), 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 latter 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 and 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

Figure 15. A panel depicting the king of La Corona competing at Calakmul against a representative of the local court (photograph K2882 © Justin Kerr).

Figure 16. Monument 171 of Tonina showing a ballgame in progress in which two contestants frame a large ball. The figure to the left wears a broad-brimmed hat topped by a quetzal and impacts the ball with his hacha. This hacha is rendered laterally thereby revealing that it is adorned with GI and topped by the Shell-winged Dragon. The hacha of the figure to the right is rendered frontally and thereby seen as a narrow blade along the sternum (drawing by Ian Graham, after Graham et al. 2006:116).

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1 This finds 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 was 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 commenting upon this. The vase (KZ784) represents a courtly scene, wherein what may be the ruler of Izitme is seated on his broad throne and holds audience (Figure 17). Subordinates are seated before 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 Chicapas (Lee and Whiting 2004), and it also matches a fragmentary yoke discovered at Palenque (Cruz Romero 2012:54, n. 4).

Thus, whereas most evidence that survives to this day stems from the royal segments of society, with most depictions of ballplayers focused on individual kings, the Buenavista hacha speaks of the importance of the ballgame to substantially larger segments of society. Whereas this is perhaps unsurprising, without the Buenavista hacha the picture appeared considerably different. The hacha suggests that the inhabitants of the BW-006 group were involved in the ballgame in a very definitive and significant manner, in much the same way as suggested by the finds made at the Group V of the eastern ceremonial centre of Copan (Webster 1989). At Palenque fragmentary yokes have also been found outside of the palace, in Group C and also Group IV, the residence of Chak Suutz’, a high-status lieutenant of the eighth-century king C and also Group IV, the residence of Chak Suutz’, a high-status lieutenant of the eighth-century king. Within highly stratified communities.

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