A Figurative *Hacha* from Buenavista del Cayo, Belize

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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

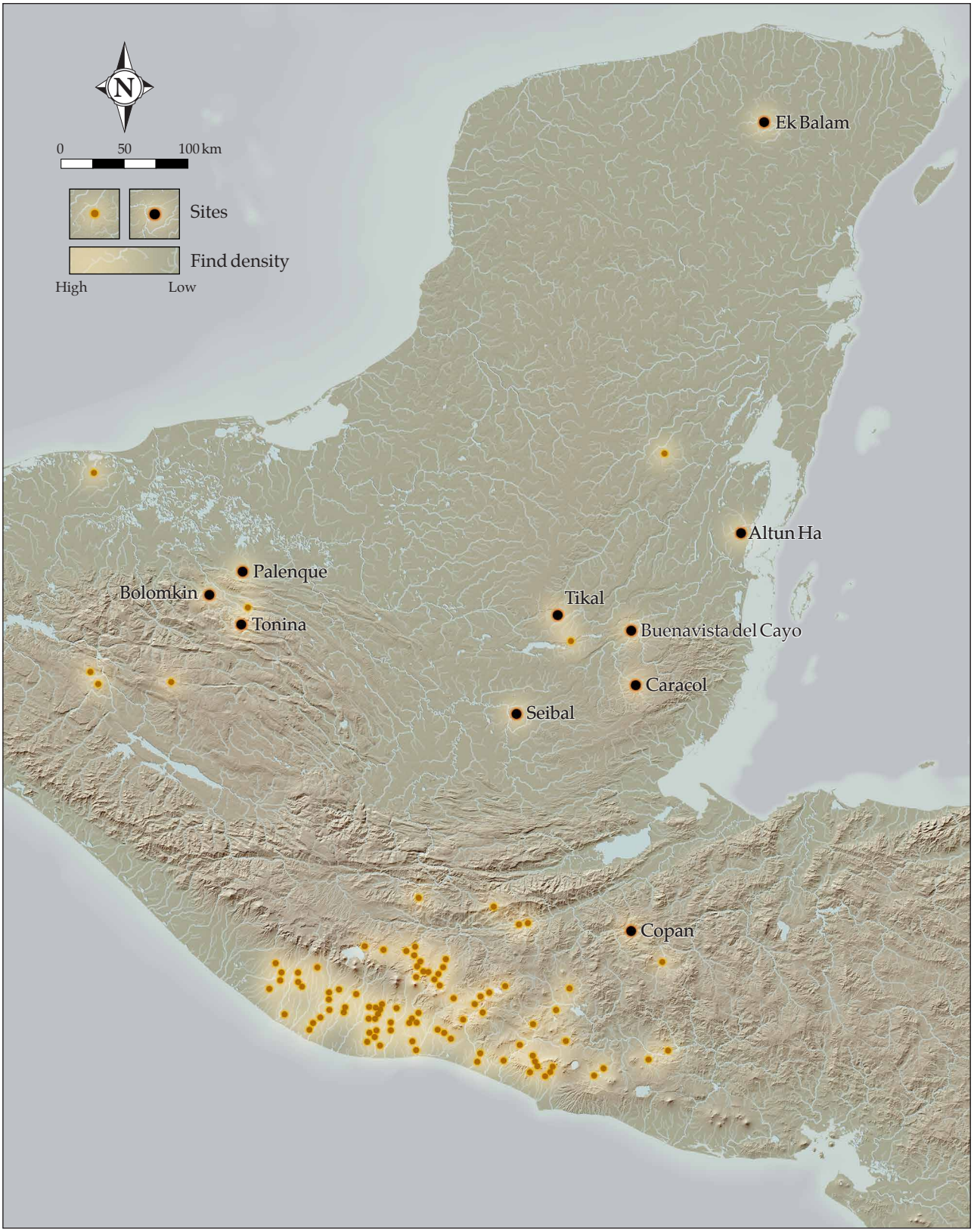


Figure 1. Map of the Maya area showing where ballgame-related paraphernalia has been found, including *yugo*, *hachas*, *palmas*, and *manoplas*. Note the high concentration of sites along the Pacific Piedmont of Guatemala as well as parts of adjoining El Salvador and the relative dearth of find spots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

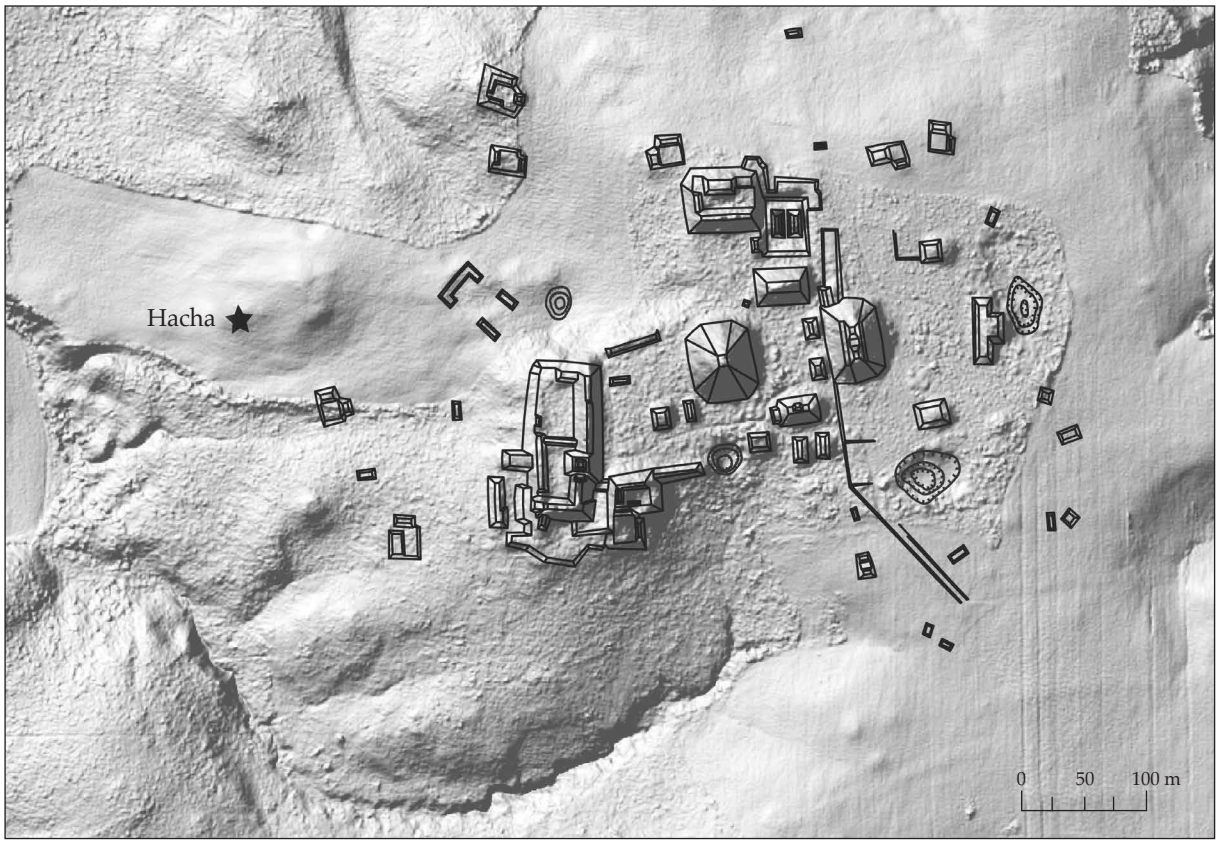


Figure 2. Map of Buenavista del Cayo showing the location of the BVW-006 group and the find spot of the *hacha* to the west of the monumental epicenter (map by Jason Yaeger).

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 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, decommissioning 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 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 marked

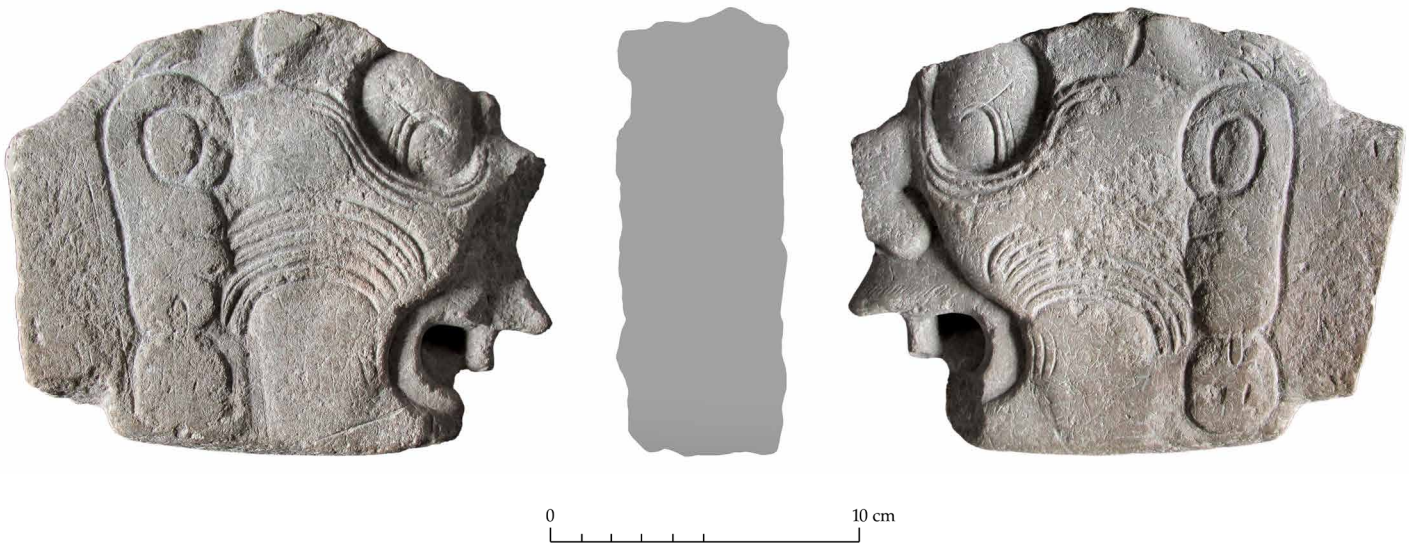


Figure 3. Two views of the *hacha* discovered at the BVW-006 Group in the western periphery of Buenavista del Cayo (photographs by Jason Yaeger; section by Christophe Helmke).

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 facet of Late Classic period (AD 670–780) (Peuramaki-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 Callar Creek, were home to more powerful hinterland families who were able to command significant labor to build their residences and associated ancestor 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, undoubtedly 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 feature 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 zones 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 turned 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 artifactual 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 water-logged sites with anaerobic conditions provide exceptional contexts for the preservation of organic materials. These include the remarkable spring site of El Manatí in the Olmec heartland of Tabasco, Mexico, where 37 wooden effigies and staffs, infant remains, polished greenstone celts, and 12 rubber balls have been found (Ortíz C. and Rodríguez 1999; Rodríguez and Ortíz C. 1997). Similarly, among the cache deposits associated with the House of the Eagles in the sacred precinct of the Aztec Templo Mayor, which are now below the level of the water table, a whole series of organic offerings have been found, including ten complete and two partial rubber balls (Filloy Nadal et al. 2000). Interestingly, the Olmec balls were found to have diameters ranging from 8 to 20 cm, whereas the Aztec ones only measured between 6 and 8 cm and weighed between 91 and 212 g (Filloy Nadal 2001; Filloy Nadal et al. 2000:6; Ortíz C. and Rodríguez 1999:242-243; compare with Coe 2003; Eberl and Bricker 2004; Zender 2004a). Another key discovery was made in the Maya area, in Burial 195 of Structure 5D-32, the final resting place of Tikal's 22nd king, Animal Skull (or K'inich Waaw; see Guenter 2002). The find in question was not the organic object itself, but a cast rendered in plaster of Paris. This find was made possible by exceptional taphonomic conditions. A fine-grained layer of sediments formed in an episode of flooding, partially filling the tomb and eventually solidifying as hardened silt, burying all the funerary furniture, thereby preserving the hollow impressions of the organic objects even though these had decayed centuries earlier. Realizing this, the excavators carefully filled the voids that they encountered, thereby preserving these ephemeral objects that had been committed to the memory of sand. This is how the funerary bier, a small throne with glyphic medallions, the panels of a carved box, statuettes of deities, vessels of wood and gourd, woven baskets, and most of the large protective ballgame belt of Animal Skull (Figure 4b) could be tangibly reconstituted, even though these were not preserved as such (see Guillemin 1968; Moholy-Nagy and Coe 2008:Figs. 226-235; Shook and Marquis 1996:17-18).

Aside from these highly unusual examples, there are hundreds of artifacts made of dense and heavy metamorphic and porphyritic stone that represent what can be best described as skeuomorphs or simulacra of actual ballgame gear—which is to say that they are stone rather than a perishable material such as wood, leather, or rubber, the substances with which ballgame gear was ordinarily made. As such these artifacts represent ritual effigies of actual gear, not objects that were intended to be used in the ballgame. Unfortunately the vast majority of these artifacts are in museum and private collections without provenance, which is precisely why the few key examples that have clear archaeological contexts are so highly informative. The cultures of Mexico's Gulf Coast are best known for the many stone renditions of ballgame gear, but these are also found at Teotihuacan in the central Mexican Highlands (Figure 4a), at several Lowland Maya sites, and especially at localities on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and El Salvador. Thus, whereas the skeuomorphs do not give us the opportunity to study actual examples of the protective gear worn by Mesoamerican ballplayers, these provide us with life-size proxies rendered in stone.

Chief among these artifacts are the *yugos* (Spanish for "yokes") which designate the large protective belt and which are found as closed ovoid or egg-shaped forms as well as open U-shaped forms (Miller and Taube 1993:193). These *yugos* are either plain but highly polished, or carved, bearing a whole series of different designs, including the characteristic interlaced volutes that were preferred among the Gulf Coast cultures (see Angulo Villaseñor 2004; Cabrera Castro and Andrade 2004). Two small figures or profiles are frequently added to the ends of U-shaped *yugos*. Examples of provenanced yokes from the Maya area include the dozens of fragmentary specimens found in the Palace at Palenque, which account for as many as 15 separate yokes (Cruz Romero 2012; Schele and Mathews 1979:Cat. 135-137, 861; Shook and Marquis 1996:49-50) (Figure 4c); the nine yokes found at Copan, including those excavated in Str. 81, one of the lateral structures of the House of the Bacabs (Riotti and Reina 1997:208; Shook and Marquis 1996:12; Webster 1989:Fig. 8, 21) (Figure 4d); and two fragments from Seibal (Willey 1978:182). An unprovenanced yoke has recently been reported, which was allegedly found

a b c d

Figure 4. Examples of ballgame *yugos*: (a) drawing of a fragmentary *yugo* carved with a shell-diving figure in Teotihuacan style (after Bernal and Seuffert 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).

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).

Another element of ballgame gear is termed a *yuguito* ("small yugo"), which may represent a knee-pad, considering its size and shape, and can be traced back to Middle Formative cultures, including Olmec San Lorenzo as well as Tlatilco in Central Mexico (Figure 6a). One example of a *yuguito* from Tabasco, now on exhibit in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, is decorated with a woven and pleated motif, suggesting that the knee pads were made of

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).

fibrous material that was woven together (Figure 6b). 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 (Ortíz 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

a b

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).

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).

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. Although *palmas* are commonplace among the cultures of the Gulf Coast of Mexico as well as the Pacific Coast of Guatemala and El Salvador (see Shook and Marquis 1996:225-233), they are quite rare elsewhere in Mesoamerica, where they are replaced by wedge-shaped elements known as *hachas* ("axes").

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

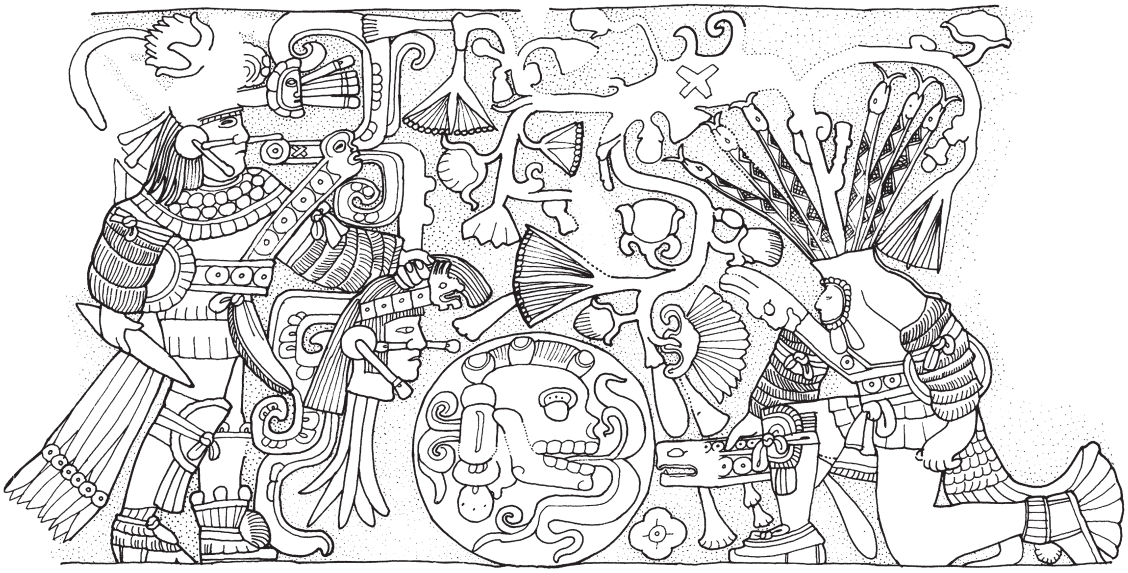


Figure 8. Detail of panel of the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza showing two ballplayers squaring off around a cranial ball. Both wear *yugos* and *palmas* protecting the sternum. The one has decapitated the other, and the defeated one still grasps a square *manopla* (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy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

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 *hachas* 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

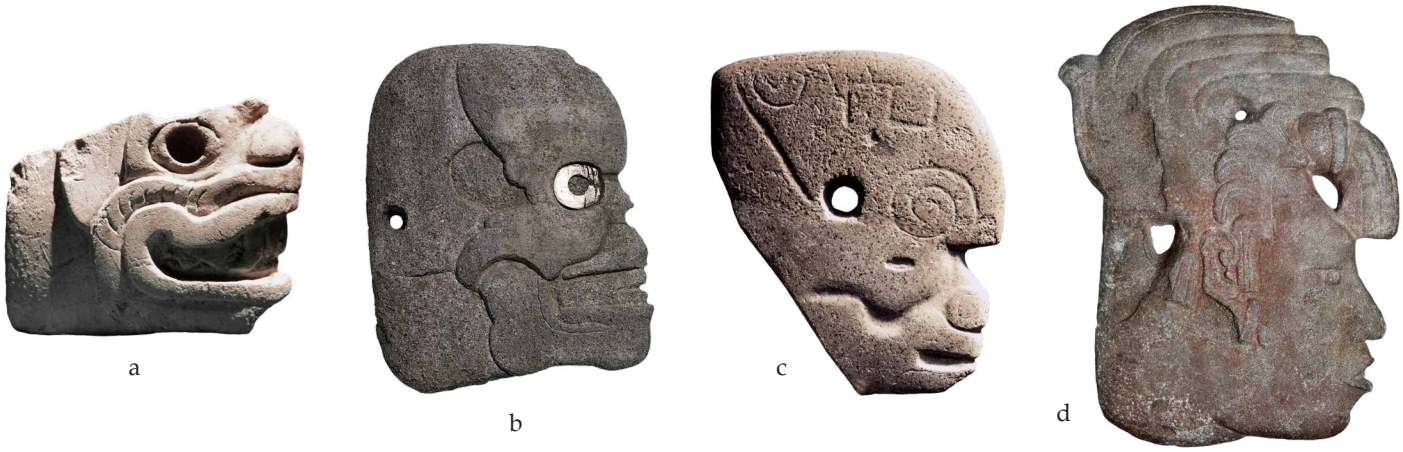


Figure 9. Examples of *hachas* in Mesoamerica: (a) *hacha* in the form of a puma's head, found at Teotihuacan (photograph by Christophe Helmke); (b) skull-shaped *hacha* from the House of the Bacabs at Copan (after Riotti and Reina 1997:Cat. 193); (c) *hacha* bearing the head of a spider monkey found 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).

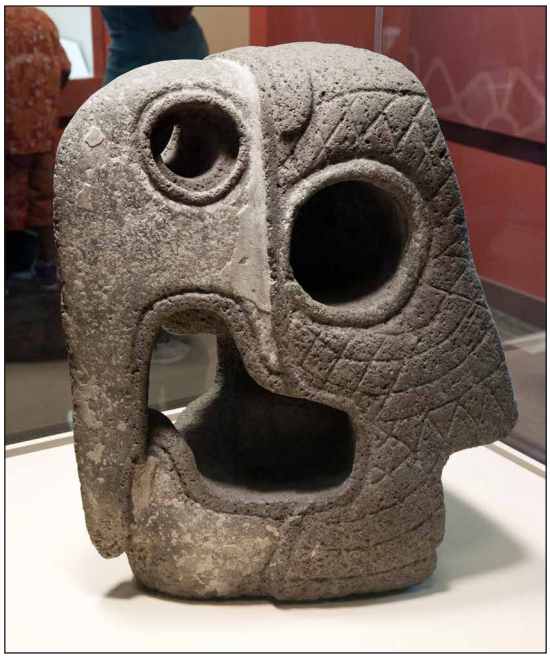
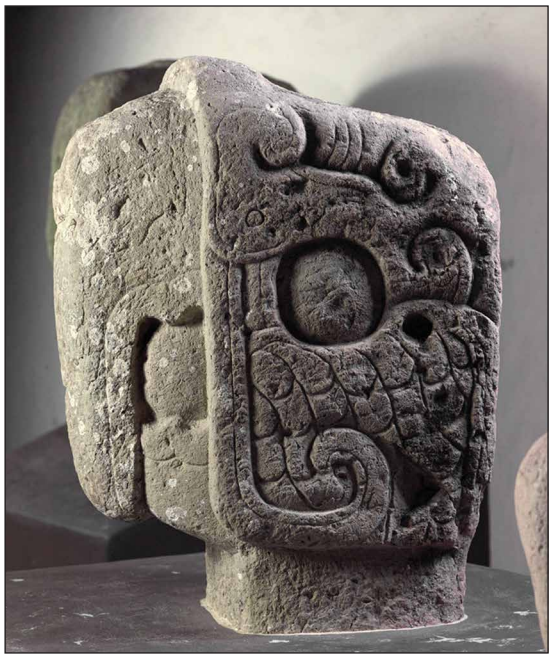
a  b 

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 Pérez de Lara).

at the back as the *hachas* (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 *hachas* 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 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 statuettes (Whittington 2001:Fig. 100), including a wonderful little statuette 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 2012:85-89; 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; Lounsbury 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 *xook* 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 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 quadripartite 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 quadripartite 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 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 Baknal Chaahk, labeled Tonina Ballcourt 1 with this

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 Maize 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).

Figure 13. The central marker of the A-IIB ballcourt at Copan showing the mythic contest between Juun Ajaw and Wak Chamiiy, wherein Copan's ruler Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil assumes the guise of the underworld entity (after Riotti and Reina 1997:Cat. 190).

same name, whereby in essence these historical ballcourts emerge as *the* location where the epic struggles took place 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 Ehb, as is made clear in the record of a ballgame officiated by Tajo'm Uk'ab K'ahk' in May 627, as recorded in the text of the hieroglyphic stair raised by Caracol's K'an II in AD 642 (see Freidel et al. 1993:353-355; Grube and Martin 2004:32; Helmke and Awe 2016:11).

Based on ethnohistoric accounts we know that Mesoamerican ballplayers were arranged into two opposing teams (e.g., Alegría 1951; Garza Camino and Izquierdo 1980). That this was also the case among the Classic Maya is supported by the configuration of ballcourts as well as the many iconographic depictions of games in progress (e.g., Barrois 2006; Hellmuth 1975; Zender 2004c). Importantly, a detailed examination of such scenes has revealed that the teams are distinguished by items of regalia and headdresses representing animals and supernatural creatures belonging to either the celestial or chthonic spheres (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; Helmke et al. 2007).

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 centipede 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 *manopla* 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 Wak Chamiiy ("six death/disease"), these go on to specify that this is in fact a historical scene, wherein Waxaklajuun 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 "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 (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, 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 "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, *yugo*, 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 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 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), diving 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 *uti'hu'un kalo'mte'*, which can be translated as "spokesperson of the paramount ruler," undoubtedly 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 Tlaalok—which by process of elimination must be tied to the terrestrial team. This independently agrees with proposed etymologies of the theonym Tlaalok, which stipulate that it involves the substantive *tlaal-li* "earth" (e.g., López Austin 1997:214; Siméon 1992:602).

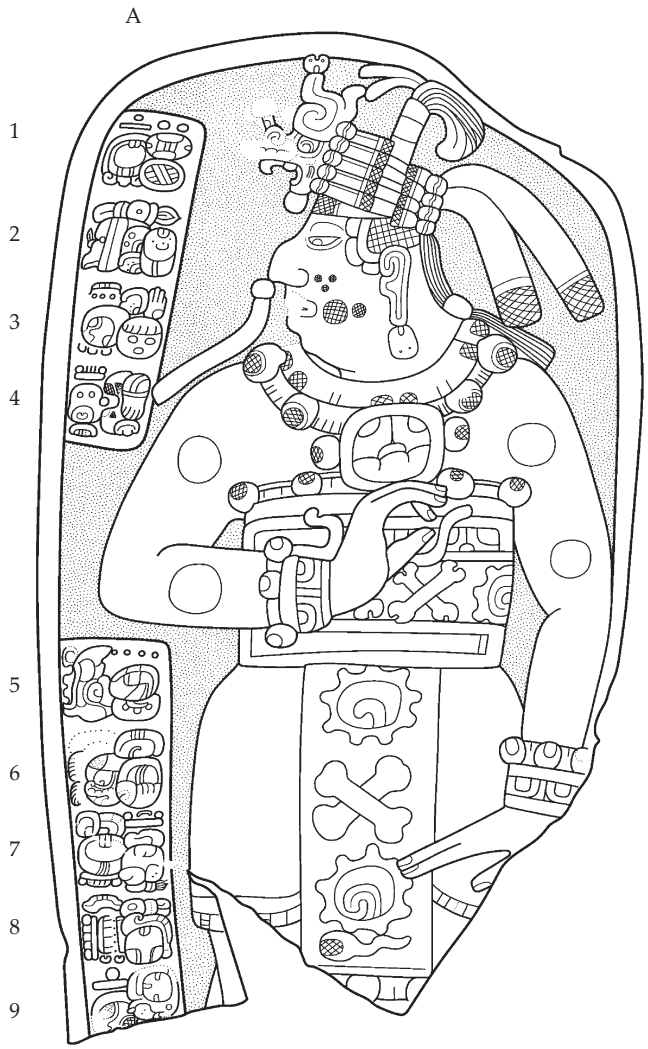


Figure 14. The front of Naranjo Stela 47, showing the local king on his accession dressed as the mythic Juun Ajaw in his guise as ballplayer (drawing by Alexandre Tokovinine, after Martin et al. 2016:Fig. 5).

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 (9.14.16.2.12), 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 Chapaaht (AD 723–739+), the ruler of Tonina who is thought to have commissioned the monument; another is Yuhkno'm

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

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 later

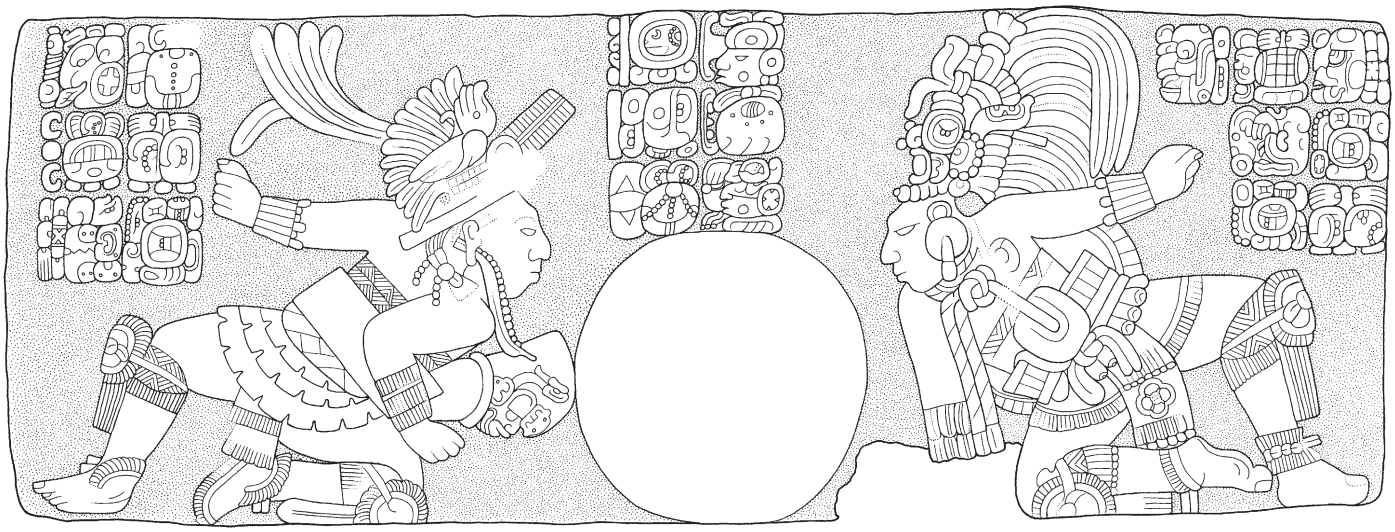


Figure 16. Monument 171 of Tonina showing a ballgame in progress in which two contestants frame a large ball. The figure to the left wears a broad-brimmed hat topped by a quetzal and impacts the ball with his *hacha*. This *hacha* is rendered laterally thereby revealing that it is adorned with GI and 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).

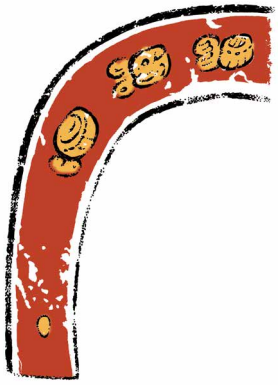
Tonina king by means of a relationship expression. Here we appear to have a conflation of multiple time scales, with an actual historical event of 727 set in the vantage of an earlier encounter, thereby invoking the venerable and once mighty ballplayer king of Tonina, K'inich Baknal Chaahk (Helmke et 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

[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).

Figure 17. Iconographic scene of a polychrome vase originally from a workshop tied to Motul de San José, Guatemala. The scene depicts the ruler, seated on his throne holding audience. Note the ballgame paraphernalia behind the king, especially the yoke inscribed with glyphs (see detail at right; photograph K2784 © Justin Kerr; drawing by Christophe Helmke).



or keepers of gear—extended beyond the upper echelon of the nobility and highest elite.

The *hacha* is all the more 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 unknown for Belize. This single discovery thereby greatly expands the sphere of distribution of these objects and sheds lights on their importance across social segments within highly stratified communities.

One remarkable scene represented on a polychrome vase now in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks bears commenting upon. 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). Subsidiaries 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 Chiapas (Sheseña and Lee 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* at Buenavista suggests that the inhabitants of the BVW-006 group were involved in the ballgame in a very definite and significant manner, in much the same way as suggested by the finds made at the Group of the Bacabs in the eastern periphery 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 K'inich Ahkul Mo' Naahb III (see Martin and Grube 2000:173; Schele 1991). At Copan the structure where the ballgame gear was found has been interpreted as a young men's house, a germane interpretation that may equally be applicable to the BVW-006 group, where ballgame paraphernalia has been found. On the basis of the Palenque data, BVW-006 may equally have been the residence of a high-standing official with close ties to the ruler of Buenavista. Thus whereas the hinterlands are usually ascribed a secondary role, or deemed to be of lesser importance, we can see that this is not the case, with great players and their symbolically charged objects participating as integral facets of the ballgame.

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