

Historical Speculation: The Maya Case

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About 300 A.D. the Maya, of Central America, entered their Classic Period. Over the next 600 odd years they constructed a network of imposing cities that ranged from the parched plains of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, through to the jungles and volcanic mountains of El Salvador, Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala. With their brilliant art, sophisticated mathematics and astronomy, intricate glyph system, and soaring temple-pyramids and palace complexes, they left an indelible impression upon the New World—and a forest of question marks!

Compared to the Aztec and Inca civilizations, we know relatively little of the Classic Maya, despite a wealth of available artifacts. Lamentably, much of our “knowledge” amounts to mere speculation based on Spanish descriptions of the Historic Maya and the Aztec following the dark days of the conquest—observations made some 600 years after the Classic Maya had disappeared!

One of the enigmas facing us revolves around the ball court and its associated game. Excavations have revealed that at least one court was constructed close to the central plaza in the heart of every major Classic Maya community. Over the years a number of vases, figurines, bas reliefs and stelae have come to life that graphically represent players in action. Drawing on these artifacts and the accounts of the Conquistadores, contemporary scholars have proposed an exciting, but extremely sacred and deadly contest, in which bloody sacrifices were the order of the day.

The primary thrust of this study was thus to research the rubber ball game as it was played by the Maya of the Classic Lowland centres of Honduras, Belize, Guatemala and the neighbouring states of Mexico, from approximately 300 to 900 A.D. With this end in mind, the author embarked upon museum and archival research in North America and Europe, and engaged in fieldwork in Mesoamerica during 1979 and 1980.

It quickly became apparent that what little information existed on the Classic Lowland Maya game was speculative in nature and based on the Mexican rubber ball game as played by the Veracruz, Toltec, and Aztec peoples, and by the Highland and Yucatan Maya, who were subjected to central Mexican influence. The end result has been a totally erroneous picture of the Classic Lowland game. Detailed study of Lowland artifacts suggests a contest that differed significantly from the stereotyped “Mesoamerican Rubber Ball game”; however, we are still not in a position to offer many definitive statements about this activity. While the structure is emerging, the context remains obscure.

As a byproduct of this investigation, the author, frustrated by distorted data and sweeping generalizations, pleads with scholars:

- 1) To be patient with historical research—answers are not always readily available, and indeed, at a certain point in time, it may be impossible for conclusions to be anything more than tentative.

- 2) Not to speculate when working with a limited data base, for such speculations lead to gross generalizations that frequently serve no purpose other than to obscure or distort reality, and thus considerably hamper future research.
 - 3) To begin the textual analysis before undertaking a contextual evaluation, and in so doing carefully separate temporal and spatial data.
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