

An Interpretation of the Hohokam Ballcourts in Arizona

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The Maya, like every other civilized people, sought relief from the daily struggle with life in games, gambling, dancing and religion. Evidently their favorite game was an ancient one played by both the gods of heaven and the underworld as well as by national heroes, a game called pok-ta-pok. Recovered figurines give evidence that some type of ballgame was widespread in Mesoamerica.

Numerous ballcourts have been excavated in Central America, including the famous courts at Chichen Itza in Yucatan and at Monte Alban in Oaxaca. But how did the concept of these ballcourts and the attendant games become a part of Southwestern United States culture?

In the Southwest, and specifically, Arizona, the three basic archaeological cultures in which one may look for analogies with Central America are the Anasazi, Mogollon, and Hohokam cultures. Of these three, the Hohokam of southern Arizona provide the greatest evidence of any comparison with the Mexican culture.

Wilcox documented that at least 193 Hohokam ballcourts were constructed on 154 sites in Arizona. Hohokam courts are difficult to date, but evidence indicates most ballcourts were probably built or used during the Sedentary period (A.D. 900-1100).

Four basic types of Hohokam ballcourts have been discovered and are based on five criteria: size, orientation, end units, shape and temporal relationship. The size of the ballcourts vary considerably and it is postulated that the size determined how many players were involved (from four on the smallest court to fourteen on the largest ballcourt such as the one excavated at Snaketown). Alley markers were evident down the center axis of the court and may have served as a form of serving or boundary line.

Where the ballcourts originated from and specifically how they were used has remained a mystery. Gladwin, Chard, Schroeder, and Ferdon among others, have questioned the origin and purpose of the ballcourts. Studies by Leyenaar and Stem have analyzed the nature of the ballgame, the equipment used, and rules which may have been applicable to the game. The scoring seems to have been a complex system. No doubt a lively ball was an important component of the game. Audience participation was likely for the contests and generally there was heavy betting associated with the ballgames.

Snaketown, discovered in 1935, was apparently a preeminent regional center for the Hohokam society. The ballcourt no doubt served as an important social entity, not only to solve interregional conflicts, and intracommunity disputes, but also to operate as a formal arena in which to play out a drama symbolizing peaceful interaction. What better way to impress outsiders, than to construct a grand edifice in which the ritual drama of the game could be acted out with great pomp and ceremony?

Although future archaeological findings may alter present analyses, evidence shows that Snaketown was a prominent place where cultural innovations produced a unique Hohokam identity. It seems plausible that the ballcourt played an integral role in this culture's development. How the ballcourt is connected to Mesoamerican culture remains unresolved. One fact remains clear. There was widespread regional abandonment in southern Arizona by the Hohokam around A.D. 1450. This marks the end, too, of Southwestern ballcourts.



Joan Hult and convention manager Larry Fielding.