

## THE UNDERWORLD AND THE CELESTIAL WORLD IN THE MAYA BALL GAME

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The presence of the ball game has been attested in Mesoamerica since the Middle Preclassic period and up to the Spanish Conquest. This activity, both a sport and a ritual, was performed in very different ways by all Mesoamerican peoples, as shown by the Precolumbian ruins that are spread between the southwestern United States and Honduras. The Maya likewise used to practice this sport. There are ruins and sculptures that describe such an activity, as well as painted ceramic vessels. The decipherment of the Maya script has also revealed new aspects of the game. Thus, there are testimonies that allow understanding of this activity, which among the Maya had already disappeared long before the arrival of the Spanish.

The Popol Vuh or sacred book of the Maya K'iche' (Tedlock 1985), is the only post-conquest indigenous text that makes reference to the Maya ball game. Bishop Diego de Landa, in turn, made no reference to the game practiced in the northern Yucatan Peninsula, except for one single sibylline phrase (Tozzer 1941:124).

In the Popol Vuh, among other things, there is a myth around two ball game matches where the lords of Xibalba (the underworld) confront two pairs of terrestrial twins, *Hun Hun Ahpu* and *Vucub Hun Ahpu* on one side, and *Hun Ahpu (Junte' Ajaw)* and *Xbalanque (Yaxb'ahlam)* on the other. The lords of the underworld come out victorious over the first duo. *Hun Hun Ahpu* becomes the father of the second twins. Later, following several adventures, the second pair of siblings wins, thanks to their shrewdness, over the lords of *Xibalba*. Thus, what we have here is a composition on two times, two camps, two matches, one defeat and one victory for each camp. In this K'iche' story, it is the ultimate victory of the twins that brings the myth to a close. The story mentioned is the primary source for all those who seek to interpret the Maya ball game and its meanings (Coe 1989; Freidel *et al.* 1993). However, there are iconographic representations in particular of individuals attired as players, standing or in a dynamic playing posture and showing original ornaments. Nevertheless, not all such pieces seem to follow the scheme described by the Popol Vuh.

The attempt was made to approach the messages conveyed by the representations of the ball game in the Maya area, limited to the Central Lowlands region during the Classic period (fourth to ninth centuries AD), that is, a relatively homogeneous *corpus*. According to the Popol Vuh, the ball game represents the place and time for the confrontation between the underworld and the upper world, the beings of

darkness and those of light. However, the underworld and the heavenly world in Classic Maya culture do not have the same connotations than hell and paradise do for Christianity. The underworld covers a whole set of different, positive and negative notions, just like the upper world does. In fact, if the Maya underworld is the place of darkness and death, it is as well the place of water, fertility and life. Death, or the sowing of the Maize God identified in the form of one of the elderly twins, is essential for his rebirth, and for the survival of humankind. Similarly, the sky is the place of the rain and the sun, but also of lightning and drought, both harboring so many threats to human life.

Nevertheless, there are in the iconography linked to the ball game, indications according to which the leaders attired as ball players could defend the camp of the underworld. These players are shown alone or opposed to other characters that bear signs typical of the heavenly world.

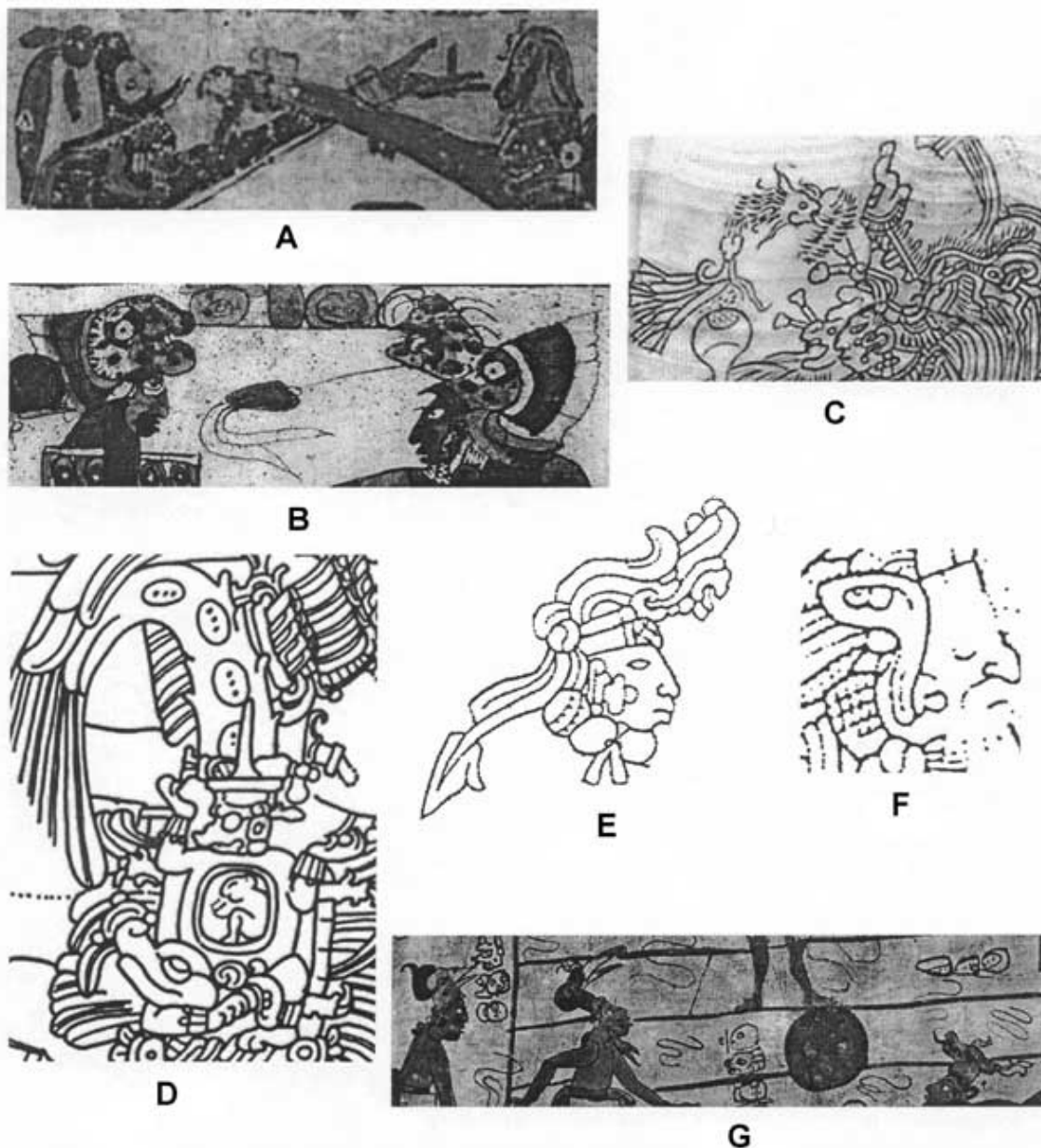


Figure 1. a-K1209, MVD; b-K6660, MVD; c-K3296, MVD; d-Yaxchilan, Step 8; e-Copan, central disc, ballcourt Allb; f-Copan, south disc, ballcourt Allb; g-K5435, MVD.

Would it be correct to say that all players represent one camp? Could a recurrence of this opposition be revealed in a significant number of pieces? Would it be correct to assert that players are representing both the underworld and the upper world? Which were the gods that the players were incarnating? Is the vision of the Popol Vuh a pan-Mayan one or instead, specifically K'iche'?

Essentially, this research will be focused on sculptures and ceramics from the Classic Maya area. The different characteristics of players of confronting teams will be explored. The attributes represented are mostly animal and vegetal in origin. Later, we shall look into other more diversified signs. Finally, we shall try to define in what way the occurrence of features displayed in the costumes of players could be approached. This will allow us to discuss the contexts represented and to test previous observations. The Classic Maya ball game is characterized by the rather standardized costumes of the players, which include yokes, kneepads for one leg only, and occasionally, some kind of protection for the arms. Players are frequently seen with headdresses and much ornamented and elaborated costumes, perhaps to render their status or the ritual context of the game. However, it seems unlikely that players could practice such an activity wearing that many adornments; then, what we have are idealized images of the person represented as a player in a different language that allows for interpreting the attributes of the characters involved. The artist makes emphasis on those details that help identify the particular player for the viewers of his piece (panel, stela or ceramic piece).

When many players are represented, they are often one in front of the other, with the ball resting in-between. However, it is not true that this apparent opposition is conveying a meaning of antagonism. Only one combination of criteria is enough to state that the players belong to the same team. Among other things, they were supposed to stand on the same side of the pseudo-separation represented by the ball, and kneepads were to be on the same leg.

## **ATTRIBUTES WITH AN ANIMAL ORIGIN**

The deer is the animal most frequently found in ball game contexts. This has already been explored by Nicholas Hellmuth (1996). It is seen as a headdress feature in ceramic pieces K2911, K3842, K4040 and K5435 of the *Maya Vase Database* (Figure 1g). It has antlers in vessels K1209, K1288, K2803 (Figures 1a and 2c), and a short beard in K1871, K2022, K2731, K4684 (Figure 2e). In piece K1921 (Figure 2b), it is shown hoisting its antlers and beard. The ear of the character at left of the Copan south disc (Figure 1f) is a deer ear. Hellmuth believes that such headdresses represent the attributes of the Old Deer Owner (*or Viejo Dueño de Venados* in Spanish). The deer plays a special role in the pre-Columbian world (Hocquenghem 1987:90). This mountain animal comes at times to feed on the milpas, and has been defined as a being that belongs to two worlds, the human world and the wild world, the world of the living and of the ancestors. In the ball game iconography, the deer headdress is opposed to the heron (K1209), to the headdress or "hat" (K1288), to

the feather tuft (K3842), to the quetzal (K2803), the turkey (K4040), and the dog (K2022).

The feline belongs in the underworld. In headdresses it is shown as a jaguar head (K5103 and K6660, Figure 1b), as its paw (Stela 7, El Ceibal), or its tail (Chinkultic disc and K7694; Figures 6c and 2d). It is frequently seen because of its skin, which seems to constitute the primary matter of the players' skirts. It is believed, however, that there is a difference of status to attribute the presence of the feline as a skin in skirts, or as a beast in headdresses. In the case of skirts, it would be pointing to the high rank of the personage. Instead, the presence of the feline head, its paw or its tail in a headdress, could render a will of appropriation of the value represented by this beast. It is represented in the stelae located at La Amelia (Figure 2a), as the symbol of the person captured by the king-player, perhaps as a place in the scene (*B'ahlamnal*). The jaguar is opposed to the turkey, to the "hat" (K4040) and to the dog (K6660).

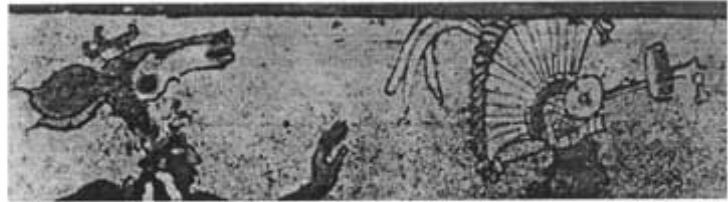
At times, the fish is also represented as a part of the players' attributes (steps 4, 5, 7, 10 and 12 from Yaxchilan, Panel 1 from La Amelia, K1209, K3296; Figures 5b-f and 2a). Fish go together with water lilies and are included among the attributes of the Water Lily Serpent god. There is only one example of the crocodile and it is shown in the costume of the player in Step 8, at Yaxchilan (Figure 1d). Crocodiles are beasts associated with the underworld. Birds are represented by the cormorant (Panel 1, Site Q, K2803, K2912, K4407 and K5435; Figures 4a, 2c, 5a and 1g), the heron (Panel 4, Site Q, K1209 where the bird is devouring a fish), the hummingbird (K2912), the turkey (K4040 and K6660; Figure 1b), and the quetzal (Tonina panel and K2803; Figures 3c and 2c). These animals are a symbol of the sky. The quetzal, in turn, raises an additional comment: as a feature of the costume it could represent the jaguar's pendant; quetzal feathers were used to manufacture countless headdresses. Besides, in Altar 2 from Cancuen and on Stela 7 from El Ceibal, there are individuals wearing feather skirts that may be interpreted as quetzal feathers. It could be assumed that such attires are not related to the inherent values of birds, but would rather define the status of the character, like the jaguar skin. On the contrary, the "tuft of feathers" headdress, observed in ceramic pieces K1921 and K3842 (Figure 2b), would be connected with a specific bird symbol which in cases like this would be opposed to the "deer" headdress. Vessel K4040 shows a "hat" headdress with the stylization of an indefinable white bird. Birds are opposed to the *Tlaloc* feature (Panel 4, Site Q and K2803; Figures 4c and 2c), to the deer (K1209, K5435 and K2803), and to the jaguar (K4040).



A



B



C



D



E

Figure 2. a-La Amelia, Stela 1; b-K1921, MVD; c-K2803, MVD; d-K7694, MVD; e-K2022, MVD.

In Mesoamerica, several supernatural serpents are associated with the aerial world (for example, the *chicchanes*). In Copan's sculpture (central marker in Copan Allb; Figure 1e), the head of the serpent constitutes the headdress of the mythical hero *Hun Ajaw*. At times, the serpent is part of the banners of the Serpent Water Lily deity, and in those cases, it would seem more closely associated with the underworld (Panel 2, Site Q-La Corona, Yaxchilan steps 4, 5, 8, 12, K3296, K7694: Figure 4b). The last animal observed was the dog. The breed was hard to establish, but the shape of its mouth or muzzle, of the teeth and ears, pose no doubt whatsoever. It may be seen on ceramics K2022 and K6660 (Figures 2e and 1b). It is opposed to players that wear deer and feline headdresses, confronting two animals associated with the underworld. The presence of dogs jointly with heavenly beasts is surprising;

traditionally –and admittedly- dogs were customarily linked to the underground world in West Mexico and the Mexican Central Highlands; consequently, research should be widened to include other dog representations beyond those present in the ball game. Was the dog linked to the upper world for its qualities as a domestic animal?

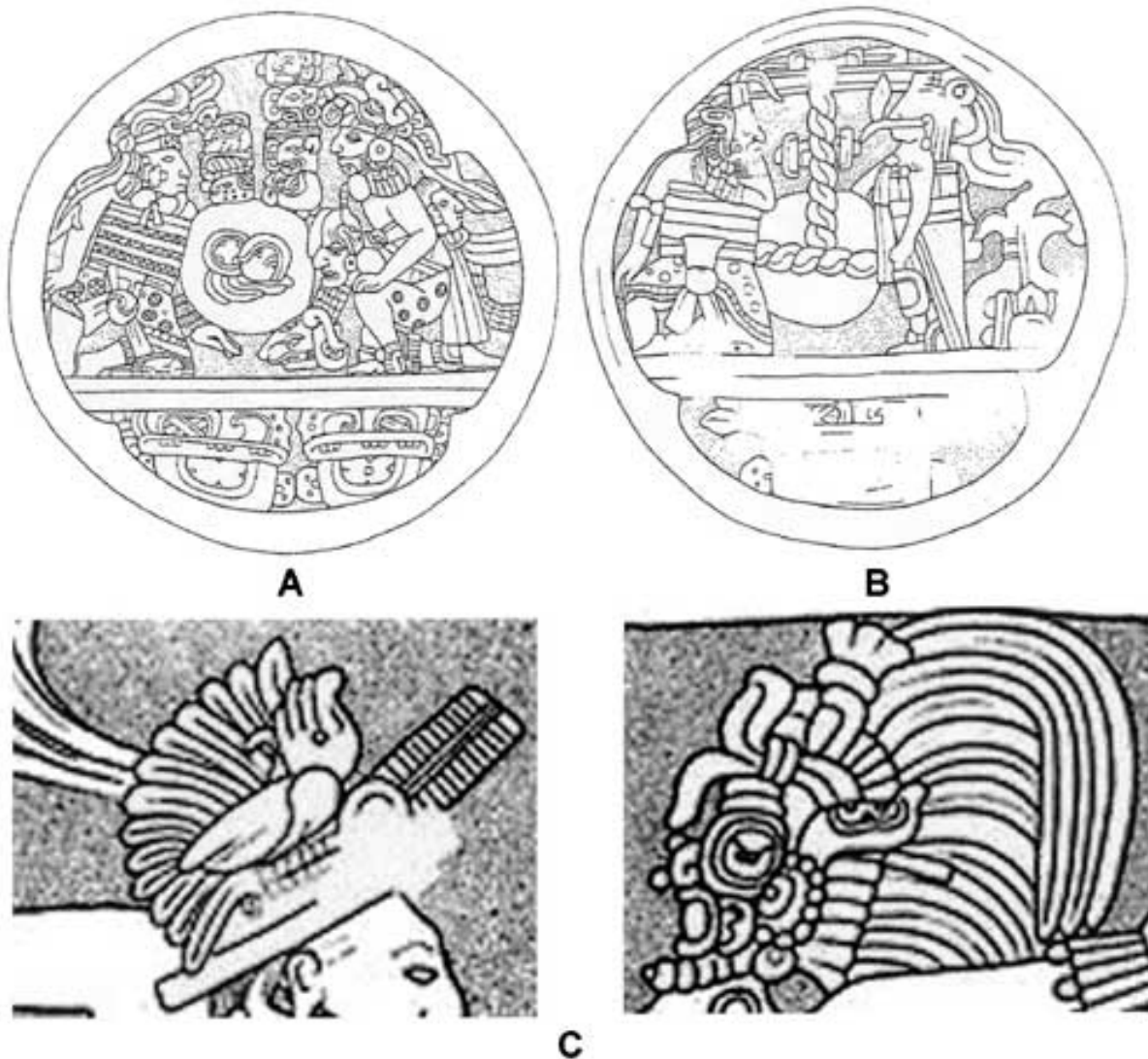


Figure 3. a-Copan, central disc, ball-court Allb; b-Copan, south disc, ball-court Allb; c-Tonina, panel.

### ATTRIBUTES OF PLANT ORIGIN

Water lilies are present both in sculptures (Altar 1, Cancuen, Stela 1, La Amelia, Yaxchilan steps 4, 5, 6, 10 and 12, in association with fish: Figures 2a and 5b, d-e), and in one ceramic piece (K1871). This water plant is associated with the underworld, as it grows in lakes and other mirrors of still water, a symbol of the entrance to *Xibalba*. A second plant associated with water is present. We refer to cacao, shown in ceramic piece K5103, on the belt of the central player. Cacao has

been traditionally linked to fertility and water, and is associated to the feline on the ceramic, thus confirming its status as an underworld plant.

Another plant is visible mainly in ceramic pieces. It is some sort of bulrush that projects from the front part of the player's headdress (K1209, K1871, K1921, K2345, K2803, K6660, K7694; Figures 1a, 2b-d and 1b). In all these examples, the player who carries this plant is the one located precisely in front of the ball. The ornament probably indicates the high rank of the player that wears it. It would seem it is a banner of some sort symbolizing, perhaps, the chieftainship of the team. On one particular ceramic piece (K5103), the three players are showing this bulrush, a trait rather hard to understand. One could presume they are three captains of three different teams, having a meeting before a competition. In fact, they are standing, with their arms crossed, and the ball is on the floor. The position of the ball would define the opposition between two captains of the underworld against one single captain of the upper world. Vessel K1871 shows one player only indirectly wearing this bulrush; in fact, the central player wears a headdress that represents a black divinity, while a blow gun or thin stick protrudes from the divinity, on top of which there is another small, black divinity that hoists the bulrush. Given the costume's harmony in this composition, we presume this might be the representation of one and the same team, probably in the action of training.

## OTHER FEATURES ADORNING PLAYERS

A rather frequent headdress in ceramics is represented by some sort of "hat", tall and with a curved rim (K7694, K2345; Figure 2d). This ornament is also found in fresco 8-21 at Naj Tunich. These headdresses are not associated with other particular features. Nevertheless, they are systematically opposed to the deer headdresses (K1288, K4040), to feline headdresses (K4040, K5103), and to skeleton headdresses (K5103). A different headdress referred to earlier in this work, is that which resembles a feather tuft. It is systematically opposed to the deer headdress (K1921 and K3842; Figure 2b). Some authors favor its assimilation to the "hat", but it is also believed to be a totally different feature.

One of the attributes appears three times (Panel 4, Site Q-La Corona, Tonina panel, and K2803; Figures 4c, 3c and 2c). It shows a headdress with the rounded features related to *Tlaloc's* "goggles". However, this headdress is symbolizing values of the underworld. In Panel 4 at Site Q, the glyphs have shown this to be *Chak Ak'aach*, king of Site Q (at the center), playing in Calakmul against the priest (*ti'huun*) of the Calakmul ruler. In vessel K2803, during the visit of *Sak Muwaan*, king of Motul de San José (kingdom of *Ik'a*) to *Hixwits*, who played a game against the character bearing the same *Tlaloc* motif in his headdress. The last headdress is identical to the one seen on the priest's head (*ti'sakhuun* and *yajawk'ahk'*) represented at the base of a sculpted incense burner found at Palenque (López Bravo 2000:43). In K2803, another player of the same team is shown with a deer headdress. The *Tlaloc* and deer headdresses are then opposed to the headdresses in the shape of hummingbirds and cormorants. Interestingly, this motif occurs in two similar cases, specifically, the visit paid by a king with a game being played by the visiting king against the royal priest who is wearing the *Tlaloc* ornament.

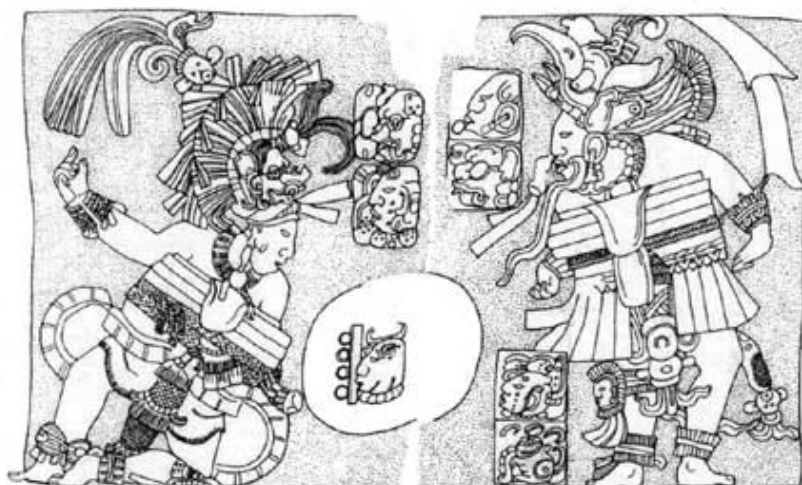
## THE DEITIES

Classic sources show a variety of deities associated with the ball game that cannot be explained in terms of the K'iche' myth. The texts and images of players in their costumes or wearing headdresses with attributes of supernatural beings allow for reconstructing a list of the player-gods. A number of leading characters or motifs of the Popol Vuh may be identified, though in a very dissimilar context.

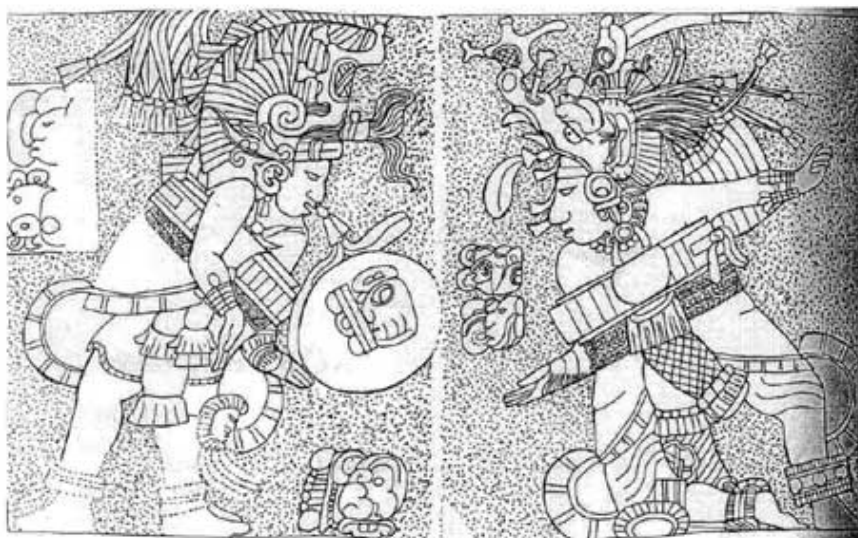
Since the studies conducted by Michael Coe (1989), researchers continue to identify the ball players as the twins or their opponents. However, there is only one known, relatively sure representation of *Jun(te') Ajaw (Hun Ahpu)* and *Yaxb'ahlam (Xbalanque)* playing ball together (Figure 5a). *Jun Ajaw* is seen on the central marker of Copan (Figure 3a), where, according to the inscription, he is the character that confronted king *Waxaklajun Ub'aah K'awiiil*, incarnating the divinity of darkness (Tokovivine 2002). He is associated with the serpent shown in his headdress. Among the paintings of the Naj Tunich cave, the image of the same twin is visible in the hat of a hunter ready to receive a ball in the court.

Some four texts say that ball players impersonated god *Hukte' Ajaw (HUK-TE'-AJAW-wa)*, identified by Marc Zender as *Vucub Hun Ahpu* or the Maize God's brother, after the Popol Vuh (2004: Figure 7). Players are shown either as *ub'aahil a'n* (u-R'AH-Ji-AN) or "impersonators" of *Hukte' Ajaw* "playing ball" *ti pitsiil* (ti pi-tsi-la), or participating in the particular type of game played with a ball the size of "twelve handspans" (*cha'lajun nahb'*).

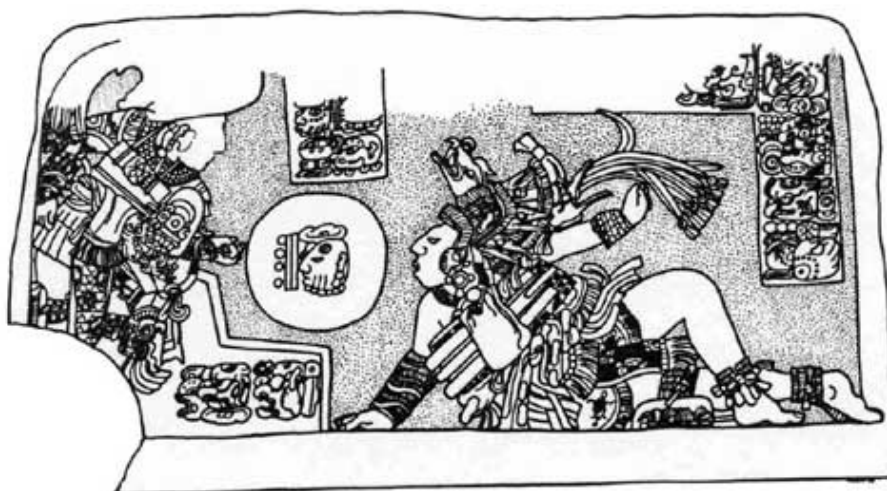




A



B



C

Figure 4. a-Site Q-La Corona, panel 1; b-Site Q-La Corona, panel 2; c-Site Q-La Corona, panel 4.

These inscriptions are not accompanied by representations of players, but the group of Codex-style vessels (including K1182, K2794 and K4012, MVD) allows for the identification of a *Hukte' Ajaw* as the “Old Deer Owner” (Figure 8a), whose association with the ball game was suggested by Hellmuth. The scenes depict a character much like the “Old Deer Owner” (with his typical profile, a beard, and deer ears), who is lying in bed, ill or in the process of dying. Above the deer, a woman escapes out of the scene. In K2794, the twins *Jun Ajaw* and *Yaxb'ahlam* (represented in the shape of a figure with two names), who also have deer ears and antlers, are seated in front of the bed. In K1182 and K2794, the central inscription reads *kuhchaj yatan huk(te') ajaw* (ku-cha-ja ya-AT-na HUK-AJAW) “*Hukte' Ajaw's* wife has been carried away” (Figure 8b).

Although the relationship between *Vucub Hun Ahpu* and *Huk Si'p*, the sacred patron of hunting and deer mentioned in the codex and colonial sources is not fully clear, both deities seem to have served similar functions. In page 13 of the Dresden Codex, the god *Huk Si'p* is shown with his wife –the deer known as *chan chi(h)nal winik* or “the person of the place of the four deer”. Interestingly, exactly four deer-men are shown in the scene depicted on K1182. *Hukte' Ajaw* (identified by his deer ear) is depicted in the south marker of the court at Copan, in front of the character that could be identified as the Maize God. They are both wearing the kneepads in the same legs (as opposed to the characters shown in the central marker), allowing to presume they belong to the same team.

According to the Popol Vuh, the ball game is shown in the middle of the myth that comes to an end with the creation of the world. The sacrifice and rebirth of the Maize God (Figure 3b), which is the most important act of creation, takes place precisely in the ball court. For a long time now, scholars who have conducted research on the Classic ball game have found the issue of sacrifice and creation in the texts and images of the hieroglyphic stairway at Yaxchilan (Figure 5b-e). The text from step 7 refers to three *ch'akb'aah* or *ahaal* beheadings within the ball court, a number of events much like the myths of creation at Palenque, although the beheadings at Yaxchilan took place thousands of years before the decapitations mentioned at Palenque. *Ahaal* still is the term used for one category of the most dangerous spirits in Ch'ol (Aulie *et al.* 1999:3). The sacrifices took place in *Ik'waynal Wakminal* –the place of the underworld associated with *Junte' Ajaw* in the inscription on the marker from Copan.

The god impersonated by the king in the context of this myth is *Yax Chiit Jun Winik Naah Kan*, or the Water Lily Serpent. The headdresses and masks of the protagonists in other stairways (Figure 5b-e), suggest that the majority of the players reincarnated this deity (the headdresses may be compared with an “ideal” mask of Water Lily Serpent represented in Stela 15 at Dos Pilas), accompanied by the Wind God and other supernatural, unidentified beings. The same subject is seen on Stella 1 from La Amelia (Figure 2a), where the king, wearing a similar costume, leads the dedicatory game and sacrifice of his captive. In the vessel K3296, MVD, the Copan ruler, *Yax Pahsaj Chan Yopaat* is shown in the mask of this deity, dancing after a ball game (Figure 5f).

On Panel 3 of Site Q-La Corona, the player with a *Yax Chiit Jun Winik Naab Kan* headdress is shown in front of the character with attributes that are typical of *Chaak*,

the Rain God (Figure 4b). His headdress is defined by a central feature with crossed bands, a knot beneath this cross projecting from the headdress, and one ear in the shape of a shell. A number of images on Codex vessels (K1152, K1644, K1815, K4011 and others) identify this particular *Chaak* as *Yax Ha'al Chaak*, or "*Chaak is the First Rainfall*". The Dresden Codex (page 41a) refers as well to the ball game as one of *Chaak's* activities.

The other *Chaak*, probably named *Chak-Hix-Chaak*, is shown in Panel 1 at that site, in front of the player with the attributes of "Jaguar God of the Underworld", identified by his special goggles, some sort of mandible or beard, and smoking jaguar ears (Figure 4a). Possibly, identical attributes are shown in the player's headdress depicted in Altar 2 at Cancuen. The inscription on a Copan vessel (K4651) refers to this deity as "*pitsiil*" or "ball player".



A



B



C



D



E



F

Figure 5. a-K2912, MVD; b-Yaxchilan, step 4; c- Yaxchilan, step 5; d-Yaxchilan, step 10; e-Yaxchilan, step 12; f-K3296, MVD.

Finally, the headdresses of ball players in the Chinkultic marker (La Esperanza; Fig. 6c), the central marker of the ball court at Copan (Figure 6a-b), and the player at the right on the Tonina panel (Figure 6d), belong to a deity recently identified as *Macuilxochitl* by William Fash (personal communication 2003), the patron of games in Central Mexico. The “hand” feature in his mouth has been analyzed by Baudez (1984), as a possible Maya representation of *Xipe Totec*. Taube (1992), attributes this feature to God Q (Figure 6e), but adds that this deity is present in the Postclassic period only.



Figure 6. a-Copan, central disc, court All b; b-A representation of God Q or *Macuilxochitl*, Copan (Schele 1987:2); c-disc, La Esperanza, near Chinkultic; d-Tonina panel; e-God Q in the Dresden Codex (Taube 1992: Figure 53e).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We were able to establish several criteria associated with the representations of ball players divided in two different groups: those found in the underworld (the jaguar, deer, fish, crocodile, water lily and *Tlaloc* features; deities *Hukte Ajaw*, owner of the deer, water lily serpent, jaguar god of the underworld and *God Q*), and those that are connected with the upper world (bird, serpent, dog, feather tufts and hat elements; deities *Chaak* and *Jun Ajaw*). In all representations the elements of the first group are opposed to those of the second.

Within the Maya world, the opposition between the two worlds is not rigorously defined. The underworld and the upper world have positive and negative values. The underworld is not an evil place *per se*, but rather, it is merely opposed to the celestial world. Actually, we have seen that the Maya underworld is the place of darkness and death, but of water and fertility as well. As to the upper world, it is defined by the rain and the sun, by lightning and drought. Kings would play ball attired with the attributes of players that defended one of the camps, and therefore we could assume that there were leading Maya families affiliated to the underworld or to the upper world. This could be compared with the well-known Aztec orders (eagles, coyotes, jaguars) that led the Mexican society.

Thus, the ball game could have been the arena of sporting competitions among such groups. It seems likely that several teams existed within the same city, to defend both camps. In Copan, *WaxklajunUb'aah K'awiil* raises the banners of the underworld and fights *Hun Ahpu*, at least in a symbolic fashion. Upon completion of the study of pieces representing ball players, a systematic opposition was made evident in the assemblage of vessels, founded upon identical criteria. Players would impersonate either the celestial or upper world, or the underworld. During the games, the deities of both camps were impersonated. The Popol Vuh is merely the sacred book of the Maya K'iche'. It is likely that other groups may have had a different view of the foundation myths. The underworld deserves to be defended just like the upper world. It would be interesting to proceed with this investigation, in an attempt to approach all those features that are not connected with the ball game.



K1383  
 u-B'AH-li-AN HUK-TE'-AJAW  
 ti-LAJCHA'-NAB'-b'a

A



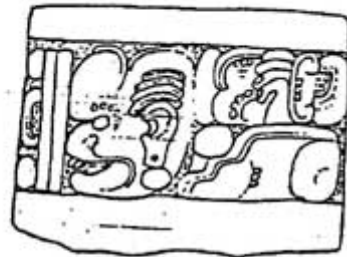
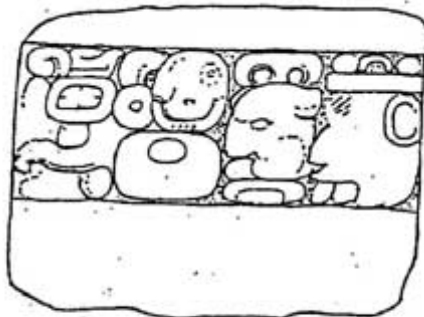
K635  
 u-B'AH-li-AN HUK-TE'-AJAW  
 ti LAJCHA'-NAB'-b'a

B

C



K3296  
 u-B'AH-li-AN HUK-TE'-AJAW ti pi-tsi



Escalera Hieroglifica, El Peru  
 ...pi-tsi-ja? u-B'AH-li-AN? HUK-TE'-AJAW

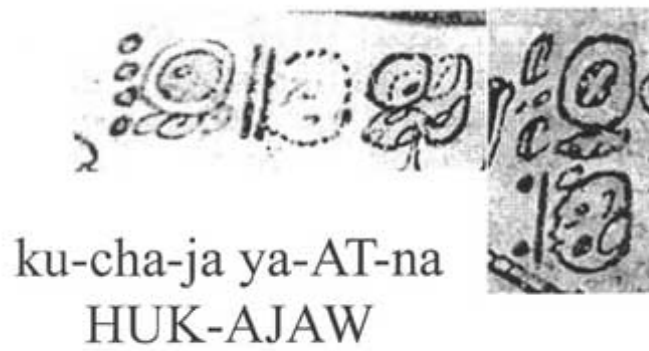
D

Figure 7. a-K1383, MVD; b-K635, MVD; c-K3296, MVD; d-hieroglyphic stairway, El Peru-Waka.

*Hieroglyphic Stairway, El Peru*



A



B

Figure 8. a-K2794, MVD; b-portion of K2794, MVD.

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