Playing with Power: Ballcourts and Political Ritual in Southern Mesoamerica

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by John Gerard Fox

Traditional studies of public architecture in Mesoamerica view it as a passive reflection of social complexity and ideology, an “inert container” for social action. In this study, I attempt to move beyond this static perspective by exploring the construction, dedication, and use of ballcourts as “lived space” in which social values and practices inhabit and activate geographical space. The dedication of ballcourts through the interment of foundation caches and burial offerings transformed this architecture into sacred and social places, defining them as suitable stages for ritual action. With archaeological data from recent excavations in west-central Honduras and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, I examine the use of ballcourts through a functional analysis of excavated materials. Evidence from these excavations and from ethnohistoric and ethnographic accounts suggests that interfacial ballgame rituals involved the competitive sponsorship of ballgames and feasts, providing strategic settings for the negotiation of power relations. These rituals centered on the redistribution of food and wealth and the symbolic renewal of agricultural fertility. I argue that the ballcourt, as a place with powerful supernatural associations, served as a stage for rituals in which political conflict was mapped onto and resolved through cosmological drama.

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In ritual action we not only seek to articulate the state of affairs as we experience it, we also exercise in ritual action our creative capacities to re-order that state of affairs. Rituals may celebrate and confirm the rhythms and shape of an established version of humanity and reality, but they may also celebrate and render articulate the shape and rhythms of a new emergent vision.

Roland Delattre, 1978

Large-scale public architecture, as the most highly visible material symbol of political authority, has traditionally been central to anthropologists’ definitions of social complexity. These definitions have generally focused on palaces, temples, and other monumental structures as reflections of that complexity, expressing elite control over human labor, material resources, and esoteric knowledge. In this study, exploring the role of public ritual in Mesoamerica, I view these public sites not as “inert containers” for social action [see Rodman 1992] but as meaningful settings in a “lived” landscape which were actively used and interpreted in ritual to create and manipulate perceptions of social difference.

Central to this study is an understanding of the process through which ritual practice is contextualized and given meaning within the built environment. In recent years, the study of “place” as a politicized social construct has received considerable attention from anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers alike [Rodman 1992; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994, Tringham 1994, Duncan 1990]. Geographical studies exploring changing values and meanings in built landscapes have been particularly effective in revealing the dynamics of discourse between social practice and constructed places. In Duncan’s (1989, 1990) study of the historic Sri Lankan city of Kandy, for example, the built landscape becomes a powerful symbol of both tradition and change in the changing political climate of the Kandy realm. These studies employ a definition of “place” which goes beyond physical location to include the cultural values and political meanings which are actively encoded in these locations, what Berdoulay [1989:130] has called “lived space.” Archaeologists have begun to employ such concepts in their study of social meaning in ancient built landscapes, transcending static interpretations of function to explore changes in meaning and use through time (e.g., Barrett 1994, Hodder 1994).

In Mesoamerica, and particularly in the Lowland

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Maya region, a number of recent studies have addressed meaning in the built landscape, focusing primarily on the planning and design of ceremonial centers by rulers as explicit architectural texts promoting political and supernatural power [Ashmore 1989, 1992; Tate 1992; Broda 1987]. These studies have demonstrated that Maya centers, like the "exemplary center" of historic Bali, served simultaneously as "microcosms of the supernatural order" and as "material embodiments of political order" [Geertz 1980:11–13]. The problem with reading Maya centers as architectural texts, however, is that most centers have complex architectural histories involving destruction, superimposition, and renovation. These histories reflect episodes of social change, conflict, and political contestation and do not in their present form reflect coherent design programs.

The study of ritual in an archaeological setting requires both a model of how ritual is effective in social motivation and an understanding of the processes through which ritual practices are encoded in material culture. Ritual, as an analytical construct, is quite often linked to or even confused with religion. Although ritual, as a form of highly patterned behavior, is often used to communicate religious beliefs, it serves primarily as a mechanism for social reproduction. While ideology exists in the cognitive realm, ritual is a form of social action which requires the fabrication, manipulation, and eventual deposition of material symbols. My approach to ritual derives primarily from the work of Turner (1967, 1969), who has emphasized the process through which ritual reorders social and cosmological relations, effectively resolving conflict. In this manner, "ritual becomes a mechanism of social and material reproduction, in that it sanctions the redefinition of people and things" [Richards and Thomas 1984:190]. Fundamental to this study is the notion that ritual may be central to political process, providing a strategic arena for the negotiation of power relations [see Bell 1992, Kertzer 1988]. While ritual, like any other form of communication, leaves open the possibility of multiple readings and interpretation [see Hodder 1987], the range of possible readings may be constrained and desired experiences evoked through the highly formalized nature of the ritual itself. Through such manipulation, "using appropriate symbolism, rituals generate and convert affective states into ideological positions, or the desirable into the obligatory" [Perttierra 1987:201].

In this study I will focus on ballcourts as a special form of public architecture encountered in most nucleated centers throughout Mesoamerica. Related structures have been reported and investigated in the American Southwest [Wilcox 1991, Wilcox and Sternberg 1983] and the Caribbean [Alegria 1983]. Masonry ballcourts, though occurring in a wide variety of forms [Smith 1967, Taladoire 1981], are generally characterized by two parallel range structures bounding an alley or playing field. The interior profiles of the paired structures mirror each other through a combination of sloping, horizontal, and vertical surfaces, presumably employed in the playing of games with rubber balls. Detailed information regarding the form and distribution of ballcourts, as well as the manner of ball play, is available elsewhere [Scarborough and Wilcox 1991, Taladoire 1981, Leyenaar 1992] and will not be reviewed here.

I will examine the use of ballcourts as facilities for social integration [see Hegmon 1989] in Mesoamerica. While my study centers on the systematic analysis of archaeological remains, it is informed throughout by relevant ethnohistoric and ethnographic data. The framework I employ in my archaeological analysis derives from the idea that buildings, like artifacts, have use lives in the course of which their form and function may change [Binford 1982]. In contrast with more traditional, functionalist uses of this concept, I assume that the use lives of a building are lived through the multiple meanings inscribed in them by their inhabitants [see Tringham 1994], only some of which may be recoverable. I begin with an examination of the construction and dedication of ballcourts through a reanalysis of caches and burials recovered in excavations throughout Mesoamerica. I interpret patterning in the locations and contents of these deposits as reflecting the processes through which ballcourts were sanctified and socialized, documenting their transformation into meaningful and powerful settings for ritual action. I then turn to the question of how ballcourts were used as public space. To address this question with archaeological data, I present the results of my own excavations in ballcourts from the previously unstudied Cuyumapa Drainage of west-central Honduras and compare them with the available evidence of ballcourt use from previous excavations. Through this multicomponent analysis of architectural and activity patterns, I argue that ballcourts, as facilities for social integration, housed a variety of related community rituals. In addition to ballgames these rituals centered on competitive feasts sponsored by elites and emerging elites. As tightly interwoven components of a ritual cycle, interfacial ballgames and feasts were sequenced by sponsors in deliberate dramas of self-promotion focusing on the competitive display and distribution of food. Through these ritual practices, ballcourts were transformed into stages for what Clifford Geertz [1972:437] has called the "dramatization of status concerns."

Ballcourt Establishment and Dedication

In a rare account of the rituals associated with ballcourts, the 16th-century Spanish chronicler Motolinía [1903:337–38] described the events surrounding the building of a ballcourt in Central Mexico:

When the court had been completed and plastered, at midnight on an auspicious day they put the heart in the court with certain witcheries, and in the middle of the court and in the center of the walls, one and a half estadus up on the inner side they set stones little smaller than millstones: each one had a
tenon which went into the wall, by which it was supported: each one of these stones had in the center a hole through which the ball could barely pass. When this had been done, in the morning they decorated two idols and put them on top of the walls of the tlaacho in the middle, one facing the other, and then they sang there before them and recited their chants, and others went as messengers to the temples to inform the priests that they made a ball court and fulfilled therein all the solemnities and ceremonies, that there remained nothing more to do but for a priest to go to bless and sanctify it. Several of those priests came, black as those who come from Hell, and took the ball and threw it four times against the court.

With its description of ritual participants putting “the heart into the court with certain witcheries,” this account appears to document the ritual establishment and dedication of a ballcourt, reflecting widespread Mesoamerican beliefs that buildings, in this case ballcourts, were animate entities subject to their own rites of passage. These beliefs were often materialized in ritual through the interment of caches and burials in the bodies of ballcourts and other types of buildings.

The establishment of ballcourts was intimately associated with the creation of community in Mesoamerica. The significance of these structures as symbols of community identity is revealed in Mexico migration legends which identify the construction of the ballcourt as an event linked symbolically to the creation of a social and sacred place. After the Mexica had reached Coatepec and established their villages and the temple of their patron god, Huitzilopochtli, they were instructed by that god to build a ballcourt (Stern 1950:64–65). In these migration legends, the transformation of wild, uninhabitable spaces into controlled, social places was partly accomplished through the imposition on the landscape of public, ritual architecture. In another Central Mexican account, the native chronicler, Itxilxochitl (1975:279, cited in Leyenaar 1992:123), tells us that Topiltzin, the ruler of Tula, proposed to his three rivals that the four of them rule his realm together and presented them with a model of a ballcourt made of four kinds of precious stone. In this case the ballcourt symbolically represented Topiltzin’s domain and all of its wealth and resources. This intimate association between ballcourts and the social landscape is further reflected in the Postclassic Mixteca-Puebla codices, in which numerous place-names are represented by variations of I-shaped ballcourts (Leyenaar 1992:123; Taladoire 1981).

The construction and dedication of ballcourts can be documented extensively in the archaeological record. The remains of these activities take the form of the buildings themselves, including the remains of plaster floors, stone monuments, including dedicatory stelae and carved stone markers; and the material remains of dedicatory activities, particularly the presence of caches and burials in sealed locations. Many scholars have dealt with ballcourt architecture (e.g., Smith 1961, Acosta and Moedano Koer 1964, Taladoire 1981) and to a lesser degree with ballcourt sculpture (see Taladoire and Colsonet 1991). I will focus here exclusively on archaeological deposits in ballcourts which may reflect practices relating to the dedication of these structures.

Although some activities relating to dedicatory practices are clearly not represented in the archaeological record, the interment of caches prior to or during the construction of ballcourts can be documented (table 1). Coe (1959:77) defined caches as “one or more objects found together, but apart from burials, whose grouping and situation point to intentional interment as an ‘offering,’” My approach to caches, following Joyce (1992), is to view them as the material remains of a sequence of ritual actions directed at the establishment and consecration of sacred space. In this manner caches may be interpreted as structured deposits (see Richards and Thomas 1984), communicating meaning through their structural and symbolic qualities. This approach reflects a shift in emphasis from the typological to the behavioral aspects of caches, recognizing that they represent a set of actions and beliefs which contextualized and publicized the dedication of sacred architecture.

Traditional archaeological approaches to ballcourts have been highly standardized, focusing on detailed descriptions of ballcourt architecture and the creation of chronological frameworks and typologies. As one component of my research on ballcourts, I studied reports of previous ballcourt excavations from all parts of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. Although the presence and sometimes the locations of artifacts and special deposits were often noted in these reports, few considered these data relevant to analysis and interpretation. Where this information is sufficiently reported, the systematic analysis of the locations and contents of dedicatory caches reveals rich meaning and symbolism in ritual practices.

The placement of dedicatory caches in ballcourts reflects attempts to link these buildings to a greater cosmography. Caches mark the alley centers in at least nine ballcourts throughout Belize, Chiapas, and Central Mexico. In Structure H6-2,3 at the Classic Maya site of Toniná, for example, three caches, all covered by circular stone markers, define the north, south, and center of the ballcourt alley (Becquelin and Baudez 1979:79–87). Under the central carved marker, a stone-lined pit contained nine pointed obsidian blades. In Maya cosmology the number nine was symbolic of death and the underworld, which was conceived of as having nine levels, each ruled by a separate deity. The north and south caches, in contrast, were covered by uncarved markers, and each contained only eight obsidian blades. The pattern of these caches stresses the completeness of the ballcourt center, linking it through the symbolism of the nine obsidian blades to the Maya underworld.

Caches also mark the south end of several ballcourts, including those of the Piedras Negras South Group (Satterthwaite 1933, 1944), Kaminaljuyú (Shook and Smith 1942:266), and Los Llanitos in El Salvador (Longyear 1944). At Piedras Negras five similar caches, consisting
### Table I

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<td>Coba, Yucatán</td>
<td>Under center of alley floor, in stone box</td>
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<td>Joyce (1926:221), Gann (1925:199); Satterthwaite (1933, 1944)</td>
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<td>Tonina, Chiapas, Ballcourt H6-1,3</td>
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of polychrome bowls, obsidian, and other materials, were placed beneath the floor of the southern playing field [Satterthwaite 1933, 1944]. These caches mark the direction associated in Maya thought with the underworld, again stressing the association between ballcourts and this supernatural realm. Despite a strong emphasis on central and southern locations, a large number of ballcourt caches occur in seemingly random locations within alleys and mounds, suggesting complex practices which may have involved processions and ritual circuits [see Vogt 1985].

The contents and layout of dedicatory ballcourt caches also exhibit significant patterning. Caches from excavated ballcourts may be grouped roughly into two major categories which, I argue, reflect distinct ritual practices involving the "sacralization" and the "socialization" of ballcourts as public space. The first category includes materials such as obsidian, greenstone, shell, and mercury, which come from powerful natural locations and have clear supernatural associations. The interment of these materials in ballcourts invested these places with supernatural power and linked them to a larger cosmography, thereby transforming them into sacred space. A *Spondylus* shell and greenstone bead cache found within the main ballcourt at Copan [Gordon 1896:20–21], for example, provides a microcosmic model of the universe, with the bead representing the earth and the shell the cosmic ocean. The placement of this cache in the body of the ballcourt transformed that building into a powerful architectural setting, marking it permanently as a sacred space.

The second type of cache frequently recovered from ballcourts is characterized by decorated ceramic vessels associated with the serving and consumption of food in the elite domestic sphere. Examples have been reported from Uxmal [Kurjack, Maldonado C., and Robertson 1991], Piedras Negras South Group [Satterthwaite 1933], Kaminaljuyú [Shook and Kidder 1942], Los Llanitos [Longyear 1944], and numerous other sites. The vessels from these caches, which include bowls, tripod plates, and cylinders, are usually found empty, but it is likely that many originally contained perishable food offerings.² Large deposits of *Pachychilus* snail shells in ball-

² In a rare case of preservation, residues on the interiors of cylinder vessels from a tomb at Río Azul, Guatemala, were analyzed and found to contain cacao, used widely by the Lowland Maya as the principal ingredient of an intoxicating elite beverage [Hall et al. 1996]. On many Maya polychrome vessels, hieroglyphic texts name individual vessel forms and occasionally their contents [Reents-Budet 1994:75–83].
court caches at Lubaantun [Joyce 1926:221; Gann 1925:199] and Pacbitun [Healy 1992:234; Healy, Emery, and Wright 1990] provide direct evidence of the use of food as offerings in ballcourt dedication rituals. In some ballcourt caches, serving vessels contain obsidian, greenstone, and other "undomesticated" materials, symbolically comparing their sustaining qualities to that of food and effecting social control over their supernatural properties. The ritual interment of serving vessels and real or symbolic food offerings in ballcourts invested these structures with the associations of the domestic world, establishing them as safe and appropriate settings for social action.

In addition to caches, ballcourts were in some areas dedicated through the interment of what appear to be sacrificial burials. In Tikal’s Triple Ballcourt, for example, two identical young female burials were placed within the benches of the two central structures in seated positions, facing each other across the ballcourt alley [field notes provided courtesy of Christopher Jones]. Such dedicatory burials, which occur most frequently in the Maya Highlands, serve simultaneously to commemorate the dead and to make an offering. The nature of the burial as offering is that the life of the individual is sacrificed (whether literally or symbolically) in order to give life to the building and, by extension, to the community it serves.

How, then, were dedicatory deposits used to activate ballcourts as sacred and social space? House dedication ceremonies in the contemporary Maya community of Zinacantan and similar practices among the historic Pueblo of the American Southwest provide relevant analogies for understanding pre-Columbian attitudes toward architectural space. Zinacantecan new-house ceremonies, directed at giving life to a house, essentially anthropomorphize the house through ritual [Vogt 1969:461–63]. Once a house is built the owner and his family, with the aid of a ritual specialist, "feed" the house a ritual meal and for several days care for and nurture the house like a sick person or a newborn. Pueblo ballcourts, employed in the dedication of kivas as well as houses, also involve the feeding of buildings with wafer bread, sacred cornmeal, tobacco, and seeds [Saile 1977]. Sacred materials such as eagle feathers, turquoise, and cactus pieces are placed in the four corners of the house and sometimes in pits under the floor.

Ethnohistoric accounts from Central Mexico provide further insight into the meaning of dedication rituals. An Aztec house-blessing ritual known as calmamalihua was performed by the owners prior to entering a newly constructed or renovated residence [Durán 1971:149]. This ritual involved feasting, dancing, and the offering of pulque to the four corners of the house. Durán suggests that similar rituals, which also included human sacrifice, were performed for the construction and renewal of temples and other public buildings.

The dedication of ballcourts through the placement of offerings involved a ritual process of both sacralization and socialization. Saile (1977:74) captured the essence of these actions in his discussion of Pueblo build-

Ritual Action and Ballcourt Use

The nature of ballcourt use has not been systematically addressed by archaeologists since Blom’s seminal 1932 article. The assigning of ballgames to archaeological ballcourts is based primarily on ethnohistoric and iconographic studies. Spanish descriptions of Aztec ballgames taking place in masonry ballcourts, along with Aztec and Classic Maya imagery showing ball playing in progress, were early linked to the archaeological remains of ballcourts being encountered in the Maya Lowlands [Blom 1932]. From that point on, the architectural morphology of ballcourts became the focus of archaeological study as the one material link to the ancient activity of ball playing.

While a direct connection between ball playing and ballcourts is strongly supported by eyewitness accounts and associated imagery, closer reading of these sources suggests that ballcourt use was both more complex than this and more intertwined with other social and political practices. Miller and Houston’s (1987) study of ballgame imagery on polychrome ceramics, for example, reveals that ball playing is regularly depicted as taking place on stairways rather than in ballcourts. As conflated representations, these depictions stressed the role of the ballgame as part of a more complex, extended ritual cycle. A systematic approach to ballcourts as social space, therefore, requires an understanding of ballcourts and associated rituals as polysemous, communicating multiple effects and meanings.

In order to address the question of ballcourt use with primary data, we conducted excavations between 1990 and 1993 in the Cuyumapa Drainage of west-central Honduras, investigating five ballcourts from two adjacent valleys. These excavations formed a component of the Proyecto Arqueológico Cataguaya y Olomán (PACO), directed by Rosemary Joyce and Julia Hendon in coordination with the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia. The Cuyumapa Drainage, located east of the Ulúa Valley along the Rio Cuyumapa (fig. 1), represents the first large area of alluvium east of what has traditionally been defined as the Southeast Maya Periphery. The overall project objective has been to explore the nature of social relations and complexity on
this cultural frontier. Excavations to date have identified settlement beginning in the Middle Formative period and extending into the Terminal Classic period. External connections throughout these time periods appear to have been directed both west into Mesoamerica and east into Lower Central America (Hendon and Joyce 1993, Joyce et al. 1989). The presence of Mesoamerican-style ballcourts in Honduras and El Salvador has traditionally been taken as evidence for a Lowland Maya presence or influence in the associated sites and regions. Ballcourts have to date been identified as far east as Los Llanitos (Longyear 1944) and Quelepa (Andrews 1976) in El Salvador and the Cuyumapa Drainage in west-central Honduras (Joyce et al. 1989). While the presence of ballcourts in these sites clearly suggests participation in widespread networks of communication (see Joyce 1991; Fox 1994:96–100), the role that these structures played in their respective societies has not previously been examined.

Survey and excavations in the PACO research area have identified seven ballcourts distributed in sites in three of the four parts of the Cuyumapa Drainage [fig. 2]. The distribution of ballcourts in this region suggests the presence of regional patterns in the placement of these public facilities. In each of the sites where ballcourts occur, they appear to provide the primary spatial focus for large-scale architecture. Two major templates for the incorporation of ballcourts into large-scale groups can be distinguished. The first of these incorporates large ballcourts (30–45 m in length) into a rectangular plaza composed of several large-scale mounds. This pattern may be found at PACO 5 in the northwestern Olomán Valley [fig. 3], PACO 17 in the southeast Cataguana Valley, and PACO 11 in the northeastern Cataguana Valley, all of which are located on the major river (Hendon and Joyce 1993). The second template links smaller ballcourts (16–29 m in length) with a single large-scale mound. This pattern occurs at PACO 2 in the northwestern Olomán Valley, PACO 14 and 15 in the southeastern Cataguana Valley [fig. 4], and PACO 9 in the northeastern Cataguana Valley. In contrast with ballcourts in plazas, these ballcourts are all located away from the primary drainage, upstream on tributaries (Hendon and Joyce 1993). Because PACO 15 has the earliest dated ballcourt in the region, it is likely that ballcourts associated with a single mound preceded ballcourts in a plaza as the dominant template.

Despite the presence of general patterns in the distribution of ballcourts in the Cuyumapa Drainage, ballcourts, like many other features of settlement in this region, are characterized by a high degree of diversity. As Hendon and Joyce (1993) have pointed out, even those ballcourts most similar in their orientation vary considerably in length and width. There is also considerable regional variation in the incorporation of ballcourts into the overall site layout. Hendon and Joyce (1993:30) have
suggested that the apparent diversity in ballcourt size and placement in the Cuyumapa Drainage “reflects freedom from centrally dictated or administered expectations about the construction and use of these facilities, symptomatic of intra-regional diversity also evident in the distribution of small-scale groups.”

The number and distribution of ballcourts within a region may reflect varying degrees of political centralization [Fox n.d.]. In both Central Mexico (Santley, Berman, and Alexander 1991) and the Valley of Oaxaca (Kowalewski et al. 1991) the centralization of regional authority is accompanied by a sharp decrease in the number of sites with ballcourts. As highly centralized political regimes emerged and populations became more concentrated in a few large centers, the number of ballcourts servicing these populations decreased, and those which remained were located in the larger centers themselves. Following this model, the distribution of ballcourts in the Cuyumapa Drainage suggests a lack of political hegemony and a high degree of competition between sites. In such an atmosphere, the ballcourts of the Cuyumapa Drainage may be interpreted not as the material reflection of an established political order but as facilities or tools for the negotiation of social relations on a regional level. In order to examine these ballcourts as tools for social negotiation, however, we must first understand how they were used.

With a total of seven closely spaced sites containing ballcourts, the Cuyumapa Drainage represents one of the densest concentrations of ballcourts reported in Mesoamerica. It therefore provides a rare opportunity to excavate a sufficient sample of these structures and to examine the function of ballcourts as public facilities within a particular regional system. Although five of these were tested and three were excavated on a large scale, I will focus here on the results of excavations at PACO 15 and, to a lesser degree, PACO 2.

The open-ended PACO 15 ballcourt (fig. 5), defined by two roughly east–west-oriented parallel mounds and an adjacent platform mound, has been dated by a suite of radiocarbon dates on charcoal to the Late Formative period, with a calibrated range for ballcourt use between roughly 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. To date, this ballcourt is the earliest recorded on the Southeast Maya Periphery, although it is coeval with the emergence of ballcourts in many other parts of Mesoamerica (Healy 1992, Scarborough et al. 1982).

Excavations conducted in 1992 focused on the identification and exposure of activity areas and refuse deposits, in addition to revealing the latest phase of mound architecture. In traditional excavations of ballcourts, trenches are excavated perpendicular to the alley, penetrating the mounds on either side. Materials recovered from such excavations are derived primarily from fill contexts and are therefore irrelevant for the study of ballcourt use. Considering ethnohistoric accounts which document the regular sweeping of ballcourts (Sahagún 1950–82, vol. 8:58; Stern 1950:80) and patterns of refuse disposal in residential structures, test excavations at PACO 15 were concentrated on the ballcourt's perime-
The density of artifacts in the ballcourt vicinity was predictably low, typical of ritual settings in which considerations of purity and pollution [see Douglas 1966] were symbolically important. Vessel forms represented in the PACO 15 midden assemblage include bottles, bowls, jars, and censers [fig. 6]. The most striking pattern in this and other ballcourt assemblages is the high percentage of "fancy" [Hendon 1978:317] bowls compared with other forms. Combining bowls and bottles from this assemblage, serving vessels account for almost 65% of the ceramics encountered in excavations. Comparable assemblages from elite residential contexts at Copan [Hendon 1987:tables 5.10, 5.11] and La Ceiba in western Honduras [Benyo 1986:table 19] yielded only 10–32% serving vessels, the most highly represented forms in these cases being large, undecorated cooking and storage jars.

Within the PACO 15 midden assemblage, there is some tendency for fancy, decorated bowls to occur in somewhat larger sizes than plain bowls with the same rim forms. This trend suggests that fancy bowls may have been employed in contexts where larger amounts of food and, by extension, larger groups were being served [cf. Blitz 1993:84–85]. Other vessel forms in this assemblage include a class of small, in-curved, short-necked jars most suitable for the transport and pouring of liquids. It has been suggested that such jars, which
compared closely with forms associated with beer brewing in Andean South America (Moore 1989, Hastorf and Johannessen 1993), may have been employed in the brewing and serving of a local variant of chicha (Fung 1995:175).

On the basis of the overwhelming predominance of serving vessels with an emphasis on large, fancy bowls and possible chicha jars at PACO 15 and other ballcourts excavated, I argue that ritual feasts were taking place in and around these structures. The primary activity represented in these ballcourt assemblages is the serving and consumption of food and drink, represented by bowls, bottles, and possibly short-necked jars. While some specialized food preparation is suggested by the occurrence of a handful of grinding tools, vessels suitable for cooking and long-term storage (see Smith 1985) are conspicuously absent from ballcourt assemblages, despite their occurrence in residential contexts within the same sites. The ritual nature of these ballcourt feasts is expressed not only by their occurrence in specialized ritual facilities with profound symbolic associations but also by a relative abundance of censer forms and figurines in the same deposits.

Excavations at the Terminal Classic ballcourt at PACO 2 (fig. 7) revealed similar though less dense mounds off the ballcourt's northwest and southeast corners (Ops. 2E–2J). Serving vessels also accounted for a high percentage of the ceramic assemblage and included two Ulúa Polychrome cylinders, imports absent in other site contexts. Rituals involving the burning of incense were also identified at this site, with censer fragments ac-

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**Fig. 5.** PACO 15 ballcourt group and excavations.

**Fig. 6.** Frequencies of vessel forms in PACO 15 midden (Ops. 2H, 2J–2M).

**Fig. 7.** PACO 2 ballcourt group and excavations.
counting for 12% of the ceramic assemblage. An associated altar platform located adjacent to the ballcourt (Ops. 2K-2S) yielded evidence of intense, localized burning in association with an unusual hearthlike stone arrangement. This deposit included numerous brazier plate fragments and parts of a large bird-effigy censer.

Materials recovered from previous ballcourt excavations elsewhere in Mesoamerica (table 2) argue for the widespread use of ballcourts for public feasts. Although most of these excavations were not designed to retrieve evidence of activities, a reanalysis of the artifacts recovered reveals patterns identical to those noted in ballcourt excavations in the Cuyumapa Drainage. Middens similar to those described above have been identified at a number of ballcourts in the Lowland Maya region and throughout Mesoamerica. At the Las Monjas ballcourt at Chichén Itzá, for example, Bolles (1977) mentions the recovery of 12 gallons of ceramic sherds from a trash deposit off the northeast corner. At Los Llanitos in El Salvador over 10,000 sherds were recovered from a similar trash deposit between the north wall of the ballcourt and the northern end-zone structure (Longyear 1944). Such deposits argue for the intense use of these spaces for activities resulting in the breakage and discard of ceramic vessels.

The vessel forms which occur in these ballcourt deposits are, as in the Cuyumapa ballcourts, almost exclusively fancy serving vessels. In the South Group ballcourt at Piedras Negras Satterthwaite found large, bottle-necked vessels, open bowls, and cylinders in a variety of locations (1933, 1944). At Uxmal in northern Yucatán (Ruz Lhuillier 1958:650–51) and contemporary Los Llanitos (Longyear 1944), similar assemblages have been reported, consisting of bowls, plates with hollow supports, and, at Uxmal, necked jar forms. At the main ballcourt of Copan, Gordon (1896:20–21) described a small jar with three hollow legs found intact inside the chamber of the west superstructure. Broad horizontal excavations at Copan's Terminal Classic ballcourt B yielded fragments of at least six Tohil Plumbate jars behind the staircase of the east structure (Fash and Lane 1983). Faunal remains, including deer, birds, opossum, and jute snails (Pachychilus), have been recovered from rare, well-preserved ballcourt deposits at Lubaantun (Hammond 1975:181–82, 385; Joyce 1926) and Colha (Eaton and Kunstler 1980) in Belize, Los Naranjos in Honduras (Baudez and Becquelin 1973:65), and Piedras Negras in Guatemala (Satterthwaite 1933, 1944).

These combined sets of data point to the use of Mesoamerican ballcourts for a variety of related ritual prac-

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tices including the playing of ballgames, ritual feasting, and other rites involving the burning of incense, the use of figurines, and in some areas human sacrifice. These practices appear to have spanned regions and time periods, suggesting shared Mesoamerican concepts of ballcourts as facilities for ritual action.

Ironically, ball playing itself, though well-documented in the rich corpus of ballgame iconography [Miller and Houston 1987, Schele and Miller 1986, Cohodas 1991] and in the accounts of 16th-century chroniclers [e.g., Motolinía 1903, Sahagún 1505–82, Durán 1971, Tezozomoc 1980], is almost invisible archaeologically. While the ballcourt itself, as a unique and specialized architectural form, along with prepared floors and sculptured markers, does support its use as an arena for ballgames, I would leave open the possibility that some ballcourts of unusual size and design may never have been so used. Rituals performed in such facilities could have emphasized the symbolic associations of ballcourts as sacred settings without exploiting them for active ball play. Indeed, a “symbolic ballcourt” stairway has been identified in the West Court of Copan as an architectural setting in which the symbolic associations of ballcourts could be invoked in ritual practices associated with warfare and captive sacrifice [Schele and Miller 1986:122–23].

Ballgames, Feasting, and Ritual Process

The nature and symbolism of the multistaged rituals performed in ballcourts may be inferred from isolated accounts of historic ballgame rituals from western Mexico to Amazonia. A 17th-century account of a ballgame ritual performed by the Acaxee of Sinaloa is valuable for the detail in which it presents the multiple stages of this ritual, spread out over a period of days [Beals 1933:12–13]. Intervillage competitions involved the participation of the entire community, men and women, uniting the participants through shared ritual. The activities which accompanied such contests included mock warfare, singing, dancing, and feasting, all within the ballcourt area [Beals 1933:12–13]:

When the two groups came together, they began to dance. The dancing was continued for three hours. The songs this first night gave their reasons for being joyful. The second night, the songs told of the valor and agility of their ball players. The following day, the women occupied themselves in preparing a feast for the day of the contest. If the challenging village won, the visitors were given a great feast, but, if it lost, the visitors were given nothing, the losers consoling themselves by eating the feast alone.

In this account and in analogous ones from throughout the Amazon, feasting and competitive generosity are pivotal features of ballgame rituals. In accounts of intercommunity competitions, feasts consistently followed ballgames and were sponsored and prepared by the leaders of the challenging village. In a 19th-century report of a ballgame played by the Chiquito of Amazonia, points scored were awarded in the form of corn cobs, the winning team being the one that had accumulated the most by the end of the contest. The winning team also earned the exclusive right to drink chicha [Stern 1950:17–18, after d’Orbigny 1845]. Many ethnographically recorded games from throughout the Americas appear to have been sponsored as a component of harvest festivals [e.g., Stone 1966:230]. In such contexts the relationship between these games and the renewal of agricultural fertility could have been directly invoked, providing a meaningful and timely setting for redistribution and gift exchange.

The link between ballgames and the symbolic production and distribution of food may also be seen in Mesoamerican iconography and mythology. Iconography associated with ballcourts consistently links the playing of ballgames with the perpetuation of agricultural fertility in a cause-and-effect relationship [Pasztory 1972, Cohodas 1975, 1991]. The outcome of mythological rituals depicted in the famous South Ballcourt panels of El Tajín, for example, is the production of pulque as a ritual beverage [Wilkerson 1991]. Throughout Central Mexico and the peripheral coastal lowlands the consumption of pulque was a central component of most ritual observances and feasts [Anawalt 1993]. In a thematically comparable scene from the panels of the Great Ballcourt at Chichén Itzá, the sacrifice of a ballplayer results in the emergence of squash plants and serpents from his severed neck [Cohodas 1978]. Similar themes, linking the ballgame to agricultural renewal and the ballcourt to the emergence place of corn, are expressed throughout the Popol Vuh, the historically recorded Maya book of creation [Edelict 1985, Baudou 1984, Schele and Freidel 1991].

Ballcourts, therefore, may be viewed as public arenas in which power relations were negotiated, reproduced, and occasionally transformed through rituals in which the layered symbols of ballgames and feasts were alternately evoked. As with other forms of political ritual in Mesoamerica, social relations were mapped in cosmological terms, with ballgames and feasts linked to cosmological conflict and the reproduction of agricultural fertility. In looking at the complex interplay of ballgames and sponsored feasting as related components of ballgame cycles, it is useful to compare the two as ritual performances with inherent structures and desired outcomes. In his discussion of the relationship between games and other rituals, Lévi-Strauss [1966:32] states, “Games thus appear to have a disjunctive effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers.” An important aspect of games and sports which must be considered along with this “disjunctive effect” is the unpredictability of their outcomes in comparison with those of most other forms of ritual [see Tambiah 1985:128].

With this in mind, I view Mesoamerican ballgames as interactional rituals in which social and cosmological forces were simultaneously set against each other. At stake was not only the prestige of the competitors and
their sponsors but also the resolution of supernatural forces and ultimately the perpetuation of agricultural fertility. The game was therefore an unpredictable event which may have provoked in participants a sense of danger and uncertainty typical of what Turner (1969) has described for the "liminal" phase of ritual. This unpredictability must also have contributed significantly to the "entertainment value" of the ballgame as public spectacle, an aspect of public ritual which should not be underestimated (see Geertz 1986:98–108).

In contrast to ballgames, sponsored feasting represents a form of ritual in which the procedural rules and the sequence of events are established, predictable, and highly formalized (Junker, Mudar, and Schwaller 1994:315). Following Clark and Blake (1993:17), public feasting may be seen as a form of "competitive generosity" sponsored by self-promoting sponsors "vying for prestige and social esteem." These sponsors or "aggrandizers" attempt, through a combination of generosity and public display, to increase their prestige, thereby increasing their effectiveness in mobilizing material and social resources. The effectiveness of such public display efforts is partly contingent on the sponsors' ability to impress others through pomp and pageantry. The intense political nature of such "challenge feasts" (see Beatty 1991:232–33) has been addressed in rich detail by a number of researchers working on chiefdom-level societies (Junker, Mudar, and Schwaller 1994, Dietler 1990, Gero 1992, Goldman 1970, Drucker 1967).

Through the ritual sequencing of ballgames and feasts, the sponsor made a strong claim to power. First, the occurrence of the ritual in the monumental setting of the ballcourt set it apart as "high" ritual with sacred as well as social ramifications. The ballcourt itself presented an imposing statement of the demonstrated abilities of the sponsor to mobilize acquired resources. The symbolic associations of ballcourts as portals to the underworld realm (see Gillespie 1992) further framed the associated rituals within a powerful, supernatural setting. If we view the multistaged ballgame ritual, following van Gennep (1960), as a "rite of passage," the ballgame itself formed a liminal phase in which confrontation and transformation took place and uncertainty ruled. The subsequent phase of aggregation or resolution was claimed by the sponsor himself in his formal, ritualized, and very public act of food sharing.

The coordination and sequencing of ballgames and feasts was not coincidental, therefore, but rather a deliberate strategy of ruling and emerging elites to produce public dramas through the manipulation of ritual. The sequencing of these dramas included a phase in which social and cosmological conflicts were acted out in the ballgame, with a feast then offered as a claim to resolution and an attempt to transform competition and conflict into coordination and allegiance.

Discussion

Returning to the Cuyumapa Drainage, I will apply the model I have argued here to explore the function of ballcourts within this particular regional system. The construction and use of ballcourts began early in this region at the Late Formative period site of PACO 15. The erection of monumental architecture may have begun slightly earlier at the site with the building of a single large platform mound. The definition of public centers with large, earthen mounds was already taking place at a number of contemporary Honduran sites, including Yarumela and Los Naranjos (Joyce 1991:23–24). This transformation of the built environment seems to relate directly to the emergence of regional elites and an increase in the level of social complexity.

The addition of a ballcourt east of the large earthen mound at PACO 15 during the Late Formative period created a more extensive and impressive space for public ritual. While the renovation of central mounds to include plaza groups was taking place at other Honduran and Salvadoran centers at this time, the construction of a ballcourt in this public space appears to have been a local innovation based on more distant models. Ballcourts make their first appearance in many regions of Mesoamerica during this time period, though the earliest examples may be assigned to the Middle Formative period (Agrinier 1991:175–77). Typologically, the PACO 15 ballcourt is comparable to contemporary examples from Belize [e.g., Cerros, Colha, Pacbitun], although ceramics from the site suggest close affinities with El Salvador and highland Guatemala.

I argue that the construction of the ballcourt at PACO 15 was an attempt by a local "aggrandizer" to acquire prestige through the assertion of long-distance affiliations (see Helms 1988) and the creation of an impressive stage for rituals of public display. Interestingly, the site is located away from the primary drainage, upstream on a tributary. The construction of a ballcourt in this location suggests an assertion of centrality by an otherwise marginal site. If we assume that, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, competitive feasting was by the Late Formative already taking place in the residences of emerging elites, the sponsorship of feasts and ballgames in the PACO 15 ballcourt represented a powerful statement by some political actor. Feasts in the monumental setting of the ballcourt would have been both more impressive and more symbolically charged than feasts in domestic settings. By linking these feasts to the cosmological drama of the ballgame, the sponsor claimed prestige by demonstrating control over both social and supernatural resources.

While the intervening time period is less clear, we know that by the Late to Terminal Classic period ballcourts are found at numerous sites throughout the region, where they are incorporated into plazas and associated with other public architecture. The political environment appears to be more complex than it was in the Late Formative, but the evidence from excavated sites suggests that ballcourts continue to be the sites of rituals involving feasting. Unlike that in the Ulúa Valley and other parts of western Honduras, Late to Terminal Classic settlement in the Cuyumapa Drainage seems to have been decentralized, characterized by a number of closely spaced competing centers with dispersed settle-
ment. Whereas in the Ulúa Valley ballcourts occur in only a few large regional centers, in the Cuyumapa Drainage ballcourts are abundant, occurring at six sites [Fox 1994]. The political climate of the Late to Terminal Classic Cuyumapa Drainage, then, was one in which a number of essentially equivalent political entities were actively engaged in the negotiation of prestige and power. In this context, ballcourts served as visible manifestations of these competing communities and their respective claims [Fox n.d.] and as locations for elaborate social rituals focused on public display and competitive generosity.

Although competitive feasting was probably a central component of many ballgame rituals from Mesoamerica to the Antilles and Amazonia, the exact choreography of these rituals would have varied considerably across time and space, being employed and reinterpreted according to local interests, political climates, and situational needs. In the Lowland Maya region, for example, ballgames appear to have formed a major component of royal rituals making direct reference to warfare, human sacrifice, and political legitimacy [Miller and Houston 1987]. In parts of Amazonia, in contrast, related ethnographically recorded ballgames were more concerned with reinforcing community identity and promoting social cohesion. While, as I have attempted to demonstrate here, there are broad patterns in the use of ballcourts and the symbolism of ballgame rituals throughout the Americas, the role of these rituals within local sociopolitical systems must be explored through regional archaeological studies.

Conclusions

Ballcourts and other forms of public architecture were central to processes of social differentiation taking place during the Middle to Late Formative periods in Honduras and throughout Mesoamerica. As facilities for social integration ballcourts provided meaningful settings for what Goffman has called “focused gatherings” (1961:9–10), creating and reconstituting communities through participation in coordinated labor and shared ritual. These settings acquired social and religious meanings incrementally throughout their use lives. The initial construction of large-scale public architecture was linked to the fabrication of a community identity which cut across and exploited existing bonds of kinship. Ballcourts, through their placement and through the games and rituals they housed, became forums for “representative communication between the cacique and the people” [Lovén 1935:338].

Through the interplay of powerful offerings, Mesoamerican people dedicated and consecrated ballcourts, transforming them into safe and meaningful stages for ritual. I have argued that food was an essential medium in these rituals, simultaneously giving life to these structures and placing them under the control of social forces and individual actors. The inclusion of obsidian, jade, mercury, and other highly symbolic materials in these caches invested ballcourts with the powers and association of supernatural realms. These various actions were central to the establishment of ballcourts as suitable stages for political rituals. Studies of Mesoamerican political economy have frequently considered ballcourts to be markers of centralized authority within regional settlement systems [e.g., de Montmollin 1989, Santley, Berman, and Alexander 1991, Kowalewski et al. 1991]. Processes of centralization and decentralization in many regions can be measured through the contraction and expansion of ballcourt distributions [Santley, Berman, and Alexander 1991]. Further studies have demonstrated that the presence of multiple ballcourts at certain large centers reflects competition and internal divisions along moietal and/or political lines [J. W. Fox 1991, J. G. Fox n.d., Michels 1979]. These studies, which have been based primarily on regional surveys, have consistently implied a central role for ballgame rituals in the creation of social identity and political power in Mesoamerica.

I have sought to contribute to this discussion by presenting a model for the role of ballgame rituals in the negotiation of power relations in Mesoamerica. Where previous studies based primarily on iconography have stressed the symbolic associations of the ballgame with the renewal of cosmic order [e.g., Schele and Freidel 1991; Cohodas 1975, 1991], I have combined archaeological data with other relevant sources to emphasize the importance of ballgame rituals in the reproduction of social and political order. In particular, I have stressed the relationship between ballgames and the social realms of food production and redistribution, thus drawing the ritual process into the economic and political spheres, where it becomes a strategic arena for the negotiation of power relations [see Bell 1992].

Further research is needed to understand the role of ballcourts and other public architecture in the emergence of social complexity in Mesoamerica, a task which will require rigorous methodologies as well as appropriate theoretical models. Despite a wealth of research on the topic, many archaeologists still approach ballcourts and other public structures as static architectural entities, ignoring sources of data and new perspectives from related disciplines which might allow us to put life back into them. Methodologically, our understanding of ballcourts as active space would benefit from more systematic excavations which give equal emphasis to horizontal and vertical relationships. In general, public architecture should be approached as domestic settings, which have been for years, as activity areas in which spatial relationships of materials can be plotted and behavior contextualized.

Further research on ballcourt use and political ritual will be best conducted on a regional level. While I have presented such an analysis here, a more rigorous long-term study would involve comparisons among materials recovered in residential settings and those from ballcourts and other ritual facilities, shedding more light on how ritual practices in public settings intersect with the daily negotiation of power relations in residential contexts.

An emerging interest in the anthropology of place
draws together the interests of archaeologists, whose studies of material culture and architecture can benefit from a greater emphasis on human agency, and social anthropologists, who need to situate their social actors within meaningful landscapes. Social practices acquire meaning from their spatial settings while at the same time changing these places with new infusions of meaning and symbolism. By moving beyond functionalist notions of space, archaeologists may begin to explore the dynamic nature of inhabited places, contributing uniquely to lively discussions of culture and practice.

**Comments**

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Fox offers a thoughtful contribution to the growing animation of archaeological consideration and representation of the past, particularly with regard to ancient architecture. Although more traditional descriptions and analyses of ballcourts (and other architectural forms) remain exceedingly useful, the space-as-lived approach taken in this and kindred writings reinforces the social and behavioral nature of anthropological goals in understanding the built environment, ancient or modern (e.g., Adams 1989, Binford 1982, Keller 1994, Ringle 1993, Tilley 1994). As a fellow Mesoamericanist I enjoyed following the specific inferential arguments regarding the use of ancient ballcourts. Four broader aspects of the presentation elicit further comment.

First, there is here a healthy blurring of boundaries drawn analytically among architectural forms. That is, although ballcourts are indeed recognizable as a distinct formal type of architecture, that useful distinction is not allowed to obscure continuities in behavior potentially associated with features and spaces of quite different appearance. Fox places creation, dedication, and use of ballcourts within a larger cultural context of behavior related to defining and inhabiting significant locales, from public monuments to domestic compounds. While retaining analytic focus on one kind of feature, he valuably keeps in sight and calls attention to more encompassing patterns in treatment of the built environment, and I think it is important to retain that breadth of interpretive context [see, e.g., Ashmore 1991:206, 215].

Second, Fox nicely indicates clear methodological implications of the behavioral orientation he adopts. It is an “old” idea that where we excavate (or survey) determines what we’ll find. But the reminder is still useful, and sometimes we need prods to break conceptual sets, to help us reconsider just what it is we’re looking for and why [e.g., de Montmollin 1989]. In this case, inquiry into arenas such as ballcourts has tended strongly to highlight the elements of the court itself, to retrieve constructional details, dedicatory caches, and evidence of construction age and sequence. It is, however, the “ancillary” areas adjacent to the court itself that have provided the “central” evidence for feasting and related activities associated with the courts. Fox’s work highlights again the utility of thinking creatively about both what activities we might be missing and what new traces of them we might find by looking in new places.

Third, Fox redraws our attention to ballcourts as potentially sensitive diacritics of social order and social change. Like other architecture of social integration [e.g., Hegmon 1989], ballcourts are traces of social evolutionary shifts, the materialized response to changes in social stress. In this case, Fox alludes to the first appearance of ballcourts in times of emerging regional elites and cites published discussions on fluctuation in court numbers as varying inversely with shifts in political centralization [Kowalewski et al. 1991, Santley et al. 1991]. I am reminded of a very insightful essay by William Ringle [1993] identifying a trio of architectural innovations—ballcourts, causeways, and imposing ancestral shrines—whose first appearance in Late Preclassic (Late Formative) times he saw as responses to the initial waves of political centralization in the Maya lowlands. The first two kinds of features were attempts by the ruling elite to integrate a larger, more fragmented populace, while the third Ringle portrays as an expression of localized resistance to centralization of authority. I mention this both as complement to Fox’s and many others’ cogent arguments about the dynamic political roles of building and space and to suggest that the time is ripe for a synthesizing review of Maya and Mesoamerican architecture from a sociopolitical perspective [e.g., Broda, Carrasco, and Matos Moctezuma 1990, Flannery and Marcus 1976, Low 1995, Taube 1994, and other papers from the 1994 Dumbarton Oaks conference on Maya architecture; cf. Thomas 1992].

Finally, I’d like to address the contention that Maya centers “do not in present form reflect coherent design programs.” Fox is certainly right that observed site plans of these centers usually incorporate “complex architectural histories involving destruction, superimposition, and renovation.” That fact does not prevent us, however, from discerning episodes of site planning and potentially tracking the “social change, conflict, and political contestation” represented in sequences of architectural modification. The appearance and proliferation of ballcourts, as just cited, are one example of this, dealing with individual buildings. The same is true of larger assemblages. Indeed, excavation data from a number of Maya centers [e.g., Tikal, Copan, Xunantunich] are detailed enough to allow suggestion of evolving programs of site planning by successive rulers [e.g., Ashmore 1989, 1991; Fash and Stuart 1991; Jones 1991]. Establishing the requisite chronologies is time-consuming and expensive but eminently possible. The really hard part is convincingly attributing motive. But, as Binford [1962], de Montmollin [1989:33, 34, 237], and others remind us, we should dare to ask the questions that interest us and
then develop the appropriate means to answer those questions.

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Fox implores archaeologists to contribute to “the study of ‘place’ as a politicized social construct” and provides us with an excellent example of how one might do so. His study is informative and, for the most part, convincing. Through systematic examination of the long-neglected artifact and feature associations of Mesoamerican ballcourts, Fox demonstrates that these sacred places were consecrated with dedicatory caches and were the scene of frequent feasts. He identifies two complementary components of ballcourt ritual: the game and the feast. Social and cosmological conflicts, he argues, were expressed through a ballgame and then resolved with a feast. He proposes a political scenario in which ballgames and competitive feasts were sponsored by “aggrandizers” engaged in self-promoting machinations. He contends that successful elite control of ballcourts and the associated ritual cycle is indicated, over a period of time, by the concentration of large ballcourts at major centers and the disappearance of small ballcourts at lesser centers.

Fox does not address two common characteristics of ethnographically known Native American ballgames: (1) their use as a device for dispute resolution or a substitute for war and (2) gambling on their outcomes as a form of exchange [Santley, Berman, and Alexander 1991, Stern 1950, Venum 1994]. Although he does call our attention to the ballgame as a symbolic form of conflict resolution, he does not emphasize the political efficacy of this aspect of the ballgame. Because factionalism is a constant threat to the growth and consolidation of regional political formations, elites may have attempted to prevent potential internal strife by routinizing and amplifying the ballgame as a peaceful surrogate of war. Kin-group and community rivalries may have been redirected, made predictable, and controlled at low cost through the ballgame, thereby reducing the risk of violent confrontation and fission.

The potential relationship between gambling sports and political organization has received little attention from archaeologists [DeBoer 1993]. As an integral social component of Native American ballgames, gambling generates and disperses wealth, making it an attractive target for elite control. Elites may have regulated gambling as a form of exchange at Mesoamerican ballcourts by scheduling the game cycle, restricting the game location, and restructuring ballcourt activities.

Fox presents us with some insightful research. I wish, however, that he had been more explicit about the long-term political implications of the ballgame ritual. He implies that the ballgame, with demonstrated links to wealth displays, status competition, sanctity, and political legitimacy, was an institution through which aggrandizers or emergent elites might develop and extend their political authority. If so, he does not specify how such a process occurred. While I think Fox has made his case that the ballcourt was the focus of intense political activity, I doubt that efforts by local aggrandizers to extend an authority based on ballgame competitive feasting into other social or economic realms would have met with much success. If aggrandizers were also partisan participants mired in the interfactional rivalries of ballgame competition, then their attempts at controlling the ballgame ritual would have been easily checked by others of similar status. Alternatively, if sponsorship of ballgames and feasts was transferred from local kin-group partisans to an elite person with chiefly authority or power beyond the local level, then the ballgame ritual might have been reconfigured to serve the goal of political centralization. Intercommunity competition, localized at ballcourts, may have created an ideal opening for leaders or their functionaries to regulate the events by proclaiming the nonpartisan benevolence of a regional, not local, authority. Since it has been established that the ballgame ritual was formalized as an element of state religion by the Classic period [Cohodas 1975, Pasztor 1978], appropriation through political hegemony would seem to be the most likely mechanism for the political transformation of the game. Chiefly co-optation or appropriation of community-level ballgames would provide yet another opportunity for paramount leaders or their representatives to exercise the role of legitimate mediator at the local level.

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Fox is to be commended for attempting to separate the Mesoamerican rubber ballgame from its architectural counterpart, the masonry ballcourt, in order to allow prehistorians to understand both of these phenomena better. The ballgame is properly viewed here within a context of public action, as part of a sequence of ritual events whose purposes were located in the social and political domains as much as if not more than in the cosmological [as I have argued on other grounds Gillespie 1991]. Fox has undertaken pioneering work in investigating preexisting archaeological data pertaining to ballcourt excavations. He then adds important archaeological evidence from his own work to the ethnohistoric and ethnographic record in order to detail more completely the kinds of activities associated with this setting, of which the ballgame was only one. The ballcourt is thus recognized as a multipurpose venue with a highly charged role in maintaining the dynamics of both social and cosmic relationships.

The logical trajectory of his analysis should be carried farther. In proposing that “ballcourts, as facilities for social integration, housed a variety of related community
rituals," it seems unwarranted to state, from the archaeo-
logical evidence for food consumption associated with
a ballcourt, that this feasting was therefore a major com-
ponent of a ballgame ritual. Similarly, having shown
that no one template is sufficient for determining the
purposes and contexts of ballgames and ballcourts for
every region and time period in which they occurred, it
seems unwarranted to apply information on ballgame
practices from other areas and temporal periods to the
Cuyumapa Drainage without first considering other pos-
sible explanations. The archaeological evidence is
sound, but the interpretations are still only loosely tied
to that evidence, based on a chain of hypotheses that
await further testing.

The Cuyumapa Drainage ballcourts are located along
the southeastern "border" of Mesoamerica, among
neighbors of Maya peoples. Fox's explanation for the
early presence of these ballcourts as resulting from indi-
vidual efforts of competitive local "aggrandizers" and
the related notion of "competitive feasting" on the part
of the elites form a provocative proposal. These ideas are
based on data from outside of southeastern Mesoamerica
and need to be more firmly placed within a larger model
of the construction and negotiation of social relation-
ships among both elites and commoners within this par-
ticular region.

The evidence for competitive feasting in association
with games comes from lowland South American trib-
level societies, and a sizable leap is required to adjust
that scenario to the level of competition not among vil-
lages but among "individual local aggrandizers" in chief-
level societies who sponsored competitive ball-
games to enhance their own prestige but then afterwards
offered feasts to "attempt to transform competition and
conflict into coordination and allegiance." The notion
of competition among these aggrandizers is based on a
model of ballcourt distribution developed for Central
Mexican data by Santley, Berman, and Alexander [1991]
in which the density of ballcourts serves as a "proxy
measure" for the scale of centralization [1991:17]—more
ballcourts indicating less centralization. This model is
actually more complex than is presented by Fox, in order
to account for, for example, the huge number of ball-
courts described for the highly centralized Aztec state.
Fox takes the large number of Cuyumapa Drainage ball-
courts as indicating a lack of centralization and, by
default, identifies the presumed presence of competition
among these sites as the motive for the construction of
so many ballcourts. However, the more significant
variable correlated with their distribution, according to
the Central Mexican model, was the "politicization" of
the ballgame—the degree to which it was played as "an
alternative means of acquiring additional revenue or ter-
ritory at minimum expense" [1991:17]. This variable
must first be identified for the Cuyumapa Drainage,
along with the degree to which individuals, elite groups,
or communities were involved in ballcourt-associated
rituals (including ballgames).

Fox appropriately generalizes his approach to ball-
courts by indicating that the reconstruction of the ball-
court as "a 'lived' landscape . . . actively used and inter-
preted in ritual to create and manipulate perceptions of
social difference" should be extended to other forms of
public architecture. None of these structures should be
viewed in isolation from others. Ballcourts are rarely iso-
lated architecturally, and the activities that took place
within and adjacent to them need to be viewed within
the larger architectural setting of which the ballcourt is
one component. Fox has therefore pointed a way to
highly productive new research and analysis that will
move studies of the Mesoamerican ballgame out of the
narrow categories of cult and sport and into the broader
sociopolitical spectrum to delineate more clearly how
ballcourts—with or without the ballgame—served as
"facilities for social integration."

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Fox, as the credit for an ingenious and nuanced vision
of public architecture in southern Mesoamerica. Bal-
courts are his target. He blends theory and data to con-
front static typologies of these buildings, and, implicitly,
other kinds of structure as well. By situating through eth-
ography, archaeology, and comparative anthropology
he shows that architectural function and meaning are
not as simple or unidimensional as some have supposed.
Yet he does not dismiss typology. The formal regularity
of ballcourts, their playing alleys with axial markers,
and their parallel, sloping walls are precisely the features
that allow him to focus on this problem. A correspond-
ing regularity in pottery points to the serving and con-
sumption of food and, less certainly, of intoxicating be-
verages.

We can imagine a Bourdieu or Giddens smiling benev-
olently on this study. Somewhat more distant hover
Fox's phenomenological godfathers, Husserl and Heide-
gger. Spaces are "lived" or "negotiated." They emerge,
physically embodied or defined by buildings, only to
shift in response to changed political and ritual circum-
stances. The built form follows function, function in-
fluences built form. The hermeneutic approach, which
sees Mesoamerican landscapes as fixed texts, is banished
to the dunce's corner—rightly, I think. [Fox might put
this less acerbically.] Landscapes do not have only one
story to tell. To view them as single, coherent "narra-
tives" is a questionable conceit. A patron's wishes,
channeled through his designers and workforce and me-
diated by available materials and building technology,
may be expressed more directly in a single building, but
later changes to that building, the emplacement of new
rituals or modifications of old, and the construction of
other structures nearby will make our grasp of those
wishes muddy at best and perhaps irrelevant to an un-
derstanding of long-term changes in the built envi-
ronment.

Fox makes us acutely aware of what we, as archaeolo-
gists and students of ancient architecture, are up against,
particularly with prehistoric materials or contexts in which living informants can no longer be interrogated. No one doubts that there are long-standing patterns at many sites, both Maya and non-Maya. While arguing for "lived" space, with its potential for an infinitude of individual responses, perceptions, and uses, Fox also suggests that some ballcourts, perhaps many of them, were used for ancillary rituals such as feasting. Elites used these structures for political theater—one wonders how many "games" had predetermined outcomes—and as part of a strategy in which the forms, meanings, and metaphors of everyday life were grafted to political purposes. (In a similar vein, Stone [1992] comments on the appropriation of both "wilderness" and the "natural landscape" as a means of capturing and harnessing topographic symbols for elite self-service.) All of this makes for a convincing argument.

However, "lived" space is inherently ontological, personal, and individualistic, albeit conditioned by cultural patterns. We know that it exists, but, when taken to its logical extreme, as we are invited to do by its introduction here, can such "space" be detected and studied by archaeologists? In this connection Mayanists may wish to reexamine Hall's proxemics, although even that approach will fail to unveil the psychological intimacies implied by the notion of "lived space" (Hall 1974). At the least proxemic research would suggest the range of interior space—corridor and courtyard dimensions consonant with Mesoamerican preferences. (There are sufficient data on Classic Maya palaces to attempt such a study.) But I also believe that Fox has flushed out vexing philosophical problems that we, as archaeologists, are ill-equipped to address.

Fox is a fine and careful student of archaeology. He moves persuasively from sheet midden to an inference of competitive feasting. From our civil and rewarding correspondence he knows of my reservations regarding some aspects of his model. As an explanatory concept, "feasting" raises some very hard questions. Who was on the guest lists of these competitive gluttonies? Are there different kinds of feasts, and, if so, how are we to distinguish them? To an archaeologist, what differentiates a midgame snack from a subsequent (or prior) meal of ostentatious and studied political meaning? What is the relation of deposits left by such feasts to extraordinary deposits of crushed goods, including serving vessels, such as Tikal Problematic Deposit 21 [Iglesias Ponce de León 1987]? I recognize that this list of questions is slightly mischievous and probably unfair. It asks that Fox not only construct a plausible argument but prove the operation of his scenario at places like PACO 15. The one methodological advance that might buttress his argument is the practice, applied at Copán by David Webster and his students [Webster and Gonlin 1988] and by Kevin Johnston at Itzá (1994), of full stripping and excavation. With limited resources, Fox did exceptional work in his excavations in Honduras, but I would recommend the expedient of far more extensive exposure to understand the minilandscap around a ballcourt.

I have two other comments that go beyond the present paper. The notion that ballcourt construction reinforced "community identity" tacitly assumes a strong voluntary component, when in fact the presence of forced labor lies at the very heart of some discussions of Mesoamerican economy. The problem of corvée or tributary labor and production needs to be studied with explicit applications of theory to data, as Abrams [1994] has attempted to do at Copán. Would an enforced absence from my milpa or other pursuits make me, a Mesoamerican peasant under the royal thumb, grateful for the resulting enhancement in communal identity? I am aware of responses to this question—that the exploited are made ideologically unaware of their exploitation, that food is offered in return for labor, etc.—but the issue remains of sorting out who did the building and why. Second, Fox properly emphasizes the central ritual and practical importance of food in Mesoamerican societies. What is needed is a volume analogous to Chang's superb Food in Chinese Culture (1977) that explores not only culinary traditions [Coe 1994] but the full symbolic, economic, and political gamut of Mesoamerican foodstuffs, drawing on the rich archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric information that forms our legacy as specialists in the region. With this paper, Fox provides the beginnings of such a study and offers his readers a compelling merger of varying sets of data. "Playing with Power" plays powerfully with current notions of architecture and the use of space. Along with other studies [e.g., Houston n.d., Kent 1990, Lococek 1994], Fox's contribution makes us think harder about human behavior and the built environment. I hope that this stimulating study will be followed by many others of comparable quality.

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Fox focuses on ballcourts as a special form of public architecture found throughout Mesoamerica. Through an archaeological analysis of ballcourts as architectural space he explores the role of public ritual in the creation and negotiation of social power in Mesoamerica. During his investigations he gave special attention to caches in or near ballcourts, up till now a mostly neglected aspect of study. He is perfectly right in saying that "the systematic analysis of the locations and contents of dedicatory caches reveals rich meaning and symbolism in ritual practices." As far as I know Fox is the first to give a selected sample of ballcourt caches, their locations and contents—an eye-opener with regard to a very interesting aspect of the use of ballcourts, reminding us that not all ballcourts were used in the same way. Apart from the different architectural forms of ballcourts, the relics and the paintings on vases and walls point in this direction. Because of the "domestic" content of some ballcourt caches, Fox believes, quite rightly, that competitive feasting was a central component of many ballgame
rituals, but we should not forget that the game itself should always be connected with those rituals. Ballcourt architecture is so special, so recognizable (like that of churches in our era), that a ballcourt cannot be just a location for "elaborate social rituals," even if "focused on public display and competitive generosity."

I am very much aware that it is impossible to have at hand all the articles and books related to this very popular topic, but for further study including the results of Fox’s investigations The Mesoamerican Ballgame [van Bussel, van Dongan, and Leyenaar 1991], including papers by Wolfgang Haberland on the distribution of ballcourts and caches in El Salvador and beyond, by Merle Greene Robertson on the reliefs of Chichén Itzá and their meaning, by van Turenhout on the sociocultural context of the ballcourt of Nohmul, and by van Bussel on the Maya ballgame as an intermediary may be of use. Despite this very understandable omission, Fox’s study is inspiring, contributing new and very valuable aspects to the study of the Mesoamerican ballgame.

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While some archaeologists probably think we know everything there is to know about ballcourts, we really know very little. Thus Fox’s paper is a welcome addition. Fox succeeds in making us rethink the multiple roles of ballcourts in Mesoamerican society. His paper has made me ponder several matters, including the ways in which an archaeologist could document the three broad themes he emphasizes: (1) interfacational ballgame rituals, (2) competitive sponsorship of feasts, and (3) negotiation of power relations.

In regard to the first theme I was left with several questions. What does “faction” mean in this context? Does it suggest that the two teams came from different sections of the same lineage, different wards of the same site, different archaeological sites, or different polities? Without hieroglyphic texts, how might we determine where the factions or teams came from? Further, what are the implications if the teams were from different polities or from two lineages within the site?

Similarly, with regard to the second theme I wondered how we might determine whether the sponsor was a lineage section, a lineage, a residential ward, an entire community, or an elite family. We should give this some thought.

With regard to the third theme one obvious possibility is that such ballgames served in conflict resolution. In Mexico it has been suggested that when two polities competed for the same desirable item [land, water, or whatever] victory for one side could be interpreted as indicating supernatural support for its position in the conflict. The outcome of the game might thus preclude criticism of the human decisionmakers, since the result was seen as reflecting a celestial decision.

Fox’s new ballcourt data come from an area with chiefdoms. It would therefore be interesting to know how he views the role of decisionmaking and ballcourt use in early chiefdoms, late chiefdoms, and late states in other parts of Mesoamerica. Possibly he would say that although the architectural form—the ballcourt—suggests continuity in function, such courts might have been used in different contexts and for different kinds of decisions by chiefdoms and by states [this would be my position].

Two principal difficulties tend to emerge in the study of ballcourts: determining the in situ activities and dating the structures themselves. Fox tackles both problems, and if he had had more space he might have discussed both at greater length. Since ballcourts were often kept clean, we frequently lack in situ artifacts, making it more difficult to infer the range of activities that took place on the court itself. Fox addresses this problem by turning to caches [and cache dedications], to the middens adjacent to the ballcourts, and to reconstruction of the meals [the food and beverages] enjoyed by those who attended the game. Appropriately, he attempts to repeople the empty courts that we find in the archaeological record, embracing an “actor-centered” approach to the function of the game. His efforts to reconstruct the original range of activities that once characterized these “sacred places” are promising and worth pursuing.

Ballcourts cannot be dated from surface sherds. In Oaxaca, for example, we have found that stratigraphic excavations are absolutely necessary. One of our prime examples is the ballcourt of Dainzú in the eastern Valley of Oaxaca, which was once thought to be “early” because its surface was littered with Terminal Formative sherds. Upon excavation, it turned out to be Postclassic in date, with earlier sherds merely incorporated into the fill of its sloping walls [Marcus and Flannery 1996].

In sum, Fox has moved the study of ballcourts away from the purely symbolic/cosmological sphere and positioned it firmly in the sociopolitical and economic spheres. The ballcourt may have been an arena for a very wide range of activities in different times, in different regions, and in societies at different levels of sociopolitical complexity. The seemingly standardized architectural form may in fact mask considerable variability.

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Fox’s article contributes to a growing archaeological literature on new approaches to the analysis of prehistoric architecture. I appreciate his call for an anthropology of place requiring archaeologists to consider human agency and social anthropologists to place “social actors within meaningful landscapes.” Fox’s fundamental point—that Mesoamerican public architecture represents a “lived landscape”—is extremely important. His article directs archaeologists towards a new way of understanding a
prominent yet analytically overlooked element of the archaeological record: the built environment. For this he should be applauded.

His point that Maya centers have complex architectural histories and thus may not “in their present form reflect coherent design programs” is an important caution; we cannot assume that the built environment reflects a coherent, textile statement suitable for interpretation. His discussion of caches is very careful, and his distinction between rituals of sacralization and rituals of socialization is broadly useful.

I am less convinced by Fox’s evidence for feasting in association with ballcourts at PACO 15 and other Mesoamerican sites. He argues that the archaeological evidence indicates “competitive feasts sponsored by elites and emerging elites,” an inference based on a higher-than-expected proportion of serving vessels in the assemblage from PACO 15. Because of its crucial role in his argument, we need to know more about the context and nature of the ceramic assemblage. Fox describes the vessels, figurines, obsidian blades, and grinding tools as “on a surface associated with the ballcourt’s back terrace.” Do the ceramics represent a single depositional event or several events? Are these primary or secondary deposits? Is this deposit simply the debris from “the regular sweeping of ballcourts,” or is this an activity locus? At best the ceramic evidence may suggest that food consumption occurred on the edge of the PACO 15 ballcourt; even if the deposit is nonresidential, it does not necessarily follow that the food was consumed as part of a deliberate strategy orchestrated by a local “aggrandizer.” For all the reasonableness of Fox’s feasting hypothesis, it is only weakly supported by the data.

For example, I do not see how the data presented in table 2 indicate “the widespread use of ballcourts for public feasts.” Archaeological evidence of food consumption/preparation (e.g., domestic ceramics, metates/manos, faunal remains) is documented for only 5 of the 11 ballcourts listed [Los Llanitos, Los Naranjos, Piedras Negras, Totoná, and Oxmal] and for 3 of those sites the contexts of the data are either unknown or imprecise. It seems a stretch to argue that the 200 altered Pachytilus shells from Lubaantun Structure 4 are evidence of feasting when each shell represents a scant 5 g of meat and thus the cumulative evidence of feasting at Lubaantun represents one-third of an adult’s daily nutritional requirement [see Healy, Emery, and Wright 1990: 177 for details]. From table 2 a stronger case could be made that ballcourts were the sites of lithic manufacture, however improbable such a scenario may seem. I am not suggesting that feasts were insignificant in Mesoamerica or elsewhere; I am questioning the archaeological evidence for feasting in ballcourts. Archaeologists need to distinguish between what might have happened and what did happen, and that requires specific, robust archaeological data.

Fox’s broader point—that ballcourts “may be viewed as public arenas in which power relations were negotiated, reproduced, and occasionally transformed through rituals”—simply must be correct in a general manner. And yet a wide range of rites may have been performed in such spaces. Perhaps a broader view of alternative modes of social action would illuminate the political symbolism of ballgames in Mesoamerica and contribute to a larger body of archaeological theory about prehistoric built environments.

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Fox presents a stimulating challenge to Mesoamerican archaeologists—to eschew simplistic interpretations of prehistoric architecture in favor of grasping the multiple simultaneous uses to which these edifices were put and their changing functions and meanings through time. Accomplishing this objective requires, as he notes, careful application of archaeological field techniques and articulation of theoretical frameworks which sensitize researchers to the complex interplay of economic, political, and ideological variables that generated the patterns revealed by excavation and survey. Fox successfully conveys the excitement and potential of this approach in his study of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ballcourts. Our comments are therefore restricted to a few suggestions for advancing the general project he outlines.

A major area that needs further exploration is the problematic relationship between the concepts of function and meaning in the interpretation of human behavior and its material residues. As Fox indicates, it is possible to reconstruct what happened in and around an ancient building through careful study of patterned associations among objects and features recovered in relatively undisturbed contexts. Such inferences can be strengthened and elaborated through the judicious use of ethnographic analogies. Fox, for example, makes a good case that ballcourts were sometimes venues for large-scale feasts, drawing on archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric data to support this view. Excavated Cuyumapa ballcourts, therefore, may well have functioned as arenas for food sharing. The meaning of these and other actions occurring within and around ballcourts—their political, economic, and ideological significance perceived or unrecognized by the people involved—does not follow directly from functional reconstructions. Such interpretations are very theory-dependent, researchers operating from different perspectives arriving at equally diverse conclusions as to the meaning of the same set of activities. It is imperative, therefore, that the conceptual framework guiding investigation be chosen carefully to maximize accomplishment of stated objectives. Fox is attempting that most difficult of archaeological tasks, an emic understanding of prehistoric human behavior. The conceptual scheme selected to inform this study, Victor Turner’s reworking of structural-functionalist theory to encompass the symbolic realm, may not be the best choice for the job at hand. Like most structural-functionalist formulations,
Turner’s work stresses the integrative effects of social action. This theme is manifest at several points in Fox’s article, where ballcourts appear as symbols of community and rituals performed within their confines help resolve conflict by mapping social interactions onto enduring cosmological relations. Structural-functionalist schemes also encourage a static view of society, with behaviors acting to promote cooperation and frustrate disruption, what is the source of change? Certainly it is hard to imagine significant social modification coming about from any but external sources, such as shifts in the physical environment or intersocietal relations [e.g., invasions]. When Fox postulates that ballcourt rituals functioned in power negotiations among factions he seems to be breaking free of the static, self-reproducing view inherent in the structural-functionalist paradigm. The result of these negotiations, however, is still reaffirmation of the established order. Finally, there is a tendency in Fox’s argument, derived in part from structural-functionalism, to assume that all competent adults in a society interpret symbols in the same way. This proposition is crucial to his discussion of ballcourt rites: they can only have their postulated economic, political, and social effects if there is consensus on the meaning of cult actions and objects. Such views may be appropriate to the study of the small-scale, relatively egalitarian and homogeneous societies with which structural-functionalists worked. As Fox notes, however, ballcourts and their associated rituals appear in a wide range of societies and likely played somewhat different roles in each. The framework he employs might work well in discerning meaning where social distinctions are minimal and the numbers of interacting people small [e.g., the several South American cases he discusses]. When attention shifts to societies with well-defined factions organized hierarchically, we must question the precepts on which Fox’s analysis is based. A theory is needed in this case that encourages exploration of how common symbols were interpreted differently by members of varied blocs and how rituals of all sorts might have been manipulated in interfactional contests over power. Ballcourt feasts might, for example, be less celebrations of social unity than opportunities to express class exclusivity and domination; it all depends on who was invited. A ballcourt’s location within the overall site structure, secluded or easily accessed, might provide some insights into this topic, as might the nature of feast residues, exclusively elite wares linked to high-ranking individuals, or a mix of serving vessels indicating participation by people of diverse social statuses. The very meaning of the ballgame and its attendant symbols might be openly or covertly debated within a society. Excavation of the Late Classic [A.D. 600–950] ballcourt at the site of La Sierra in the Naco Valley, northwestern Honduras, for example, suggests that this construction was the focus of conflicting interpretations [Henderson et al. 1979, Schortman and Urban 1994]. The only ballcourt known from the contemporary valley, the La Sierra example seems to have been part of a material complex inspired by foreign [primarily lowland Maya] models and exclusively linked to Naco paramounts. As the power of the latter waned sometime near the end of the Late Classic, the masonry ballcourt facade was systematically dismantled, and circular stones that probably once marked the alley were removed. These shaped stones are found in final-phase constructions of various sizes within and beyond La Sierra, usually as parts of thresholds. Such findings tentatively suggest that the ballcourt was viewed by Naco residents not as a focus of community integration but as a manifestation of a uniquely elite ideology. When the holders of that belief system lost power, their subordinates were more than happy to decommission the court and recycle its components.

Theories are conceptual tools variably suited to the pursuit of particular goals. Little is gained and much may be obscured by treating ballcourts as a single phenomenon explicable by the same principles in all times and places. Fox’s interpretive scheme is an insightful approach to the study of ballcourts under certain circumstances. When those conditions do not apply, a new framework suited to the nature of the societies being investigated is needed. Shifting focus from egalitarian to hierarchical societies may require putting structural-functionalism aside in favor of such marxist-inspired formulations as those that appear in “practice theory” [Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1984, Roscoe 1993]. These formulations of course have their own problems but also have the advantage of stressing the competition and tensions usually found in complex sociopolitical systems better than structural-functionalist viewpoints. This article raises several important points, and we very much look forward to seeing where Fox and his colleagues will take the discussion.

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For me the most important contributions of Fox’s article are its analysis of the ballcourt as a focus of political transactions and the evidence he has amassed concerning the ritual/feasting behaviors that were apparently essential to this function. His work contributes to a growing tradition of scholarship focused on royal/elite political feasting as a component of both the emergence of politically centralized societies and their expansion and incorporation of other polities [e.g., Morris 1982, Patterson 1991, Gyselen 1992]. Perhaps the most hopeful message of his research is that we can in fact find reasonably convincing residues of these behaviors provided that we look in the right places.

Looking in the right places presupposes that we have good historical or ethnographic models of these behaviors, and fortunately this is so, although one must look, as Fox has done, farther afield than southern Mesoamerica. One analog that he does not mention is the Panamanian kun game [see Helms 1979:28–31]. Kun contests were sponsored by ambitious men who, as hosts, en-
deavored to impress guests not only with their sporting prowess but with the size and political devotion of their followings, which could number in the hundreds or even thousands of people. Distribution of great quantities of food was essential to krun events, which were in part arenas for venting political grievances in socially acceptable ways. Although ethnographically observed krun events took place in basically egalitarian contexts, Helms suggests that they were survivals of more complex chiefly forms of rivalry carried out in a region where a version of the Mesoamerican ballgame may have been played in pre-Columbian and postconquest times.

Although it is unclear how extensive Fox’s ballcourt excavations were, the accompanying illustrations indicate very small exposures. Without laterally extensive excavations it is difficult to know exactly what kinds of patterns one is dealing with, and I think that this is especially a problem when trying to make sense out of the objects or sets of objects that symbolically “activate” the built environment of the ballcourt, presumably parts of larger ensembles. We tend to associate ballcourts, the events that took place in them, and the meanings of these events with a generalized Maya Great Tradition that crosscuts political boundaries. An interesting issue for future research is how the obvious variability in ballcourt offerings squares with this notion.

My main concern with the evidence of feasting was initially that Fox had picked up only the terminal residues of whatever activities took place around ballcourts and that these might not be at all representative of activities associated with their earlier, primary uses. Deposits at several ballcourts appear to be very similar, however, thus seemingly eliminating the possibility that he is dealing with highly idiosyncratic terminal events. The methodological lesson here is that sample size is essential to the demonstration of pattern.

Fox clearly thinks that the protagonists in ballcourt ceremonialism were leaders from different polities—one presumably the host and the other the guest. I wonder if there might not have been an intrapolity dimension to such feasting and status rivalry as well. In 1981 we excavated stone ballgame paraphernalia, including whole and broken yugos and hachas, from one of the structures at the elite Group 9N-8 in the urban core of Copan. Artifacts were found right above the floor and had clearly fallen from the upper parts of the burned building. So far as I know this is one of the only “primary” deposits in which such materials have been recovered, and the structure is plausibly a young men’s house where ballplayers lived. As rivalry heated up among the great nobles and the royal line weakened in 8th-century Copan, ballgame ceremonialism may have been a factor in internal jockeying for power. One of Fox’s important evolutionary insights is that “possession” of an active ballcourt is a kind of barometer of multicenter political centralization. Perhaps the reverse is also true and as Classic centers declined factional teams and new ballcourts signaled decentralization.

What I like least about the article is the rather condescending tone of the first part, which is encumbered with fashionable discourse (in my opinion adding little to the argument) and characterizes early Mayanists as misguided in their perceptions of architecture. I doubt that Blom, Morley, Thompson, or others of our predecessors thought of Maya places as “‘inert containers’ for social action.”

Reply

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The comments contribute valuable insights and perspectives to my discussion. My study, like many archaeological projects probing the meanings of ritual practices, perhaps raises more questions than it answers. I am pleased that most of the commentators were inspired to raise specific questions and suggest future directions for engaging if not answering them. Contrary to Moore’s epistemological vision of archaeology as arbitrating “between what might have happened and what did happen,” I have presented my research in terms of plausible scenarios rather than confirmed truth statements. It is my hope that this process of questioning and critique will improve our understanding of the role of ritual in social and political change and point the way for further research.

My study involved a number of levels of analysis and interpretation, weaving together archaeological evidence, ethnography, ethnohistory, and iconography. As expected, the comments address all these components in varying degrees, from low-level interpretations of physical evidence to higher-level interpretations of meaning and social dynamics.

Webster and Moore both raise questions regarding my excavations and interpretations of ballcourt deposits in the Cuyumapa Drainage. Webster is concerned that my excavations may not have been extensive enough to provide a full picture of activity patterns. As I mentioned in my discussion of PACO 15, the excavation units indicated in figure 3 were chosen after an extensive program of test-pitting around the perimeter of the ballcourt. This approach, employed in all of my ballcourt excavations, was designed to locate areas with significant densities of artifacts. While 100% exposure of the ballcourt area would be ideal [given the time and money], I am confident that test-pitting provided a clear representation of artifact and feature distribution. In response to Moore, the accumulation of activity debris into sharply delimited middens on the perimeter of the court suggests secondary deposits, recalling sweeping episodes noted in various ethnohistoric accounts.

Moore questions the archaeological evidence for feasting in ballcourts, implying that the quantity of data is insufficient to support such an interpretation. Ironically, there is more archaeological evidence for feasting in ballcourts than there is for ball playing. Ballcourts, like
many other ritual settings, are notorious for yielding scant material evidence of activities. In ritual spaces, notions of purification (cf. Douglas 1966) often dictate the regular cleaning and disposal of debris from activity areas. The presumed occurrence of ballgames in these facilities would have provided an additional practical need for a clean-swept surface. These conditions conspire to produce archaeological contexts in which the quantity of debris does not provide a useful measure of the intensity and nature of use. As Richards and Thomas (1984:189) demonstrated in their study of henge monuments in England, the structural qualities of ritual deposits are generally more diagnostic than the quantities of refuse.

While conceding that there is evidence for food consumption in ballcourts, Moore implies that the inference of feasting is based solely on the preponderance of serving vessels in assemblages. In fact, I suggest feasting on the basis of serving-vessel size, form, and decoration (all of which point to specialized food events distinct from those taking place in domestic contexts) and the staging of these food events in the ballcourt. Feasts can be distinguished from mundane food events on the basis of their total social context, not simply their scale (see Powers and Powers 1984). The occurrence of the PACO 15 food events, involving the consumption of chicha and the burning of incense, in the nonresidential and symbolically loaded context of the ballcourt strongly argues for their classification as ritually charged feasts. This argument is further supported by ethnographic and ethnographic accounts of such feasts occurring in ballcourts.

As Houston rightly cautions, feasting is a poorly defined and poorly understood concept and requires more sophisticated models than many now available. In reality, it represents various shades in a spectrum of formalized food-sharing events. While the exact nature of feasts may be undeterminable in many archaeological situations, much can be inferred from their spatial context. I argue that the ballcourt, as public architecture with rich symbolism, frames and contextualizes the various rituals which take place in it, including feasts. In this sense, feasts in ballcourts are inherently different from feasts in residences, no matter how lavish. These contextual cues may, however, be subtle and certainly merit further study in both contemporary and archaeological situations.

Both Marcus and Webster raise challenging questions regarding the nature of interfacational competition in the context of ballgame rituals. What were these factions? What kinds of power struggles were negotiated through ballgame ritual? Who sponsored these events, and how were they interpreted by participants? As Marcus points out, some of these questions are unlikely to be answered in the absence of written texts. I have argued that ballcourts, while retaining considerable continuity in function and symbolism across Mesoamerica, nevertheless served as powerful tools for different political purposes. At the Quiché Maya capital of Uatatlan, the central ballcourt was used to mediate conflict between moieties, with the line that physically divided moieties territory bisecting it (J. W. Fox 1991:315). At Chichén Itzá, the presence of 13 ballcourts suggests a quite different political background for their use (Kurjack, Maldonado C., and Robertson 1991). The association of a number of these ballcourts with elite residential groups may betray power struggles or power sharing within the polity itself, a scenario which is supported by other lines of evidence (Kurjack and Robertson 1994). At sites like Chichén Itzá, extensive excavation and precise dating of ballcourts may provide a better understanding of local political organization and social change. I like Webster’s suggestion that decline in royal power in Late-to-Terminal Classic Maya centers may be accompanied by changes in ballgame ceremonialism. The appearance of a second ballcourt at Copan (Fash and Lane 1983) outside of the Main Group in the Terminal Classic may reflect a shift in power away from the royal center. The significance of this shift is highlighted by the fact that the main ballcourt, originally built in the Early Classic, had served for centuries as a major repository for symbols of royal power (Kowalski and Fash 1991).

Urban and Schortman suggest potential pitfalls in moving too quickly from function to meaning in the interpretation of ballgame rituals. However, they appear to confuse my emphasis on the intended effects of communal ritual with the assumption that “all competent adults in a society interpret symbols in the same way.” Clearly, the sponsors of ballgame rituals made every effort to constrain and direct the responses of participants, making the desirable seem obligatory (cf. Pertierra 1987:201) through effective deployment of powerful symbols. Despite such efforts, as Urban and Schortman note, resistance is always an option. The malleability of ballcourts and associated rituals as tools of power no doubt gave them a central role in such power struggles. This likely accounts for their survival as cultural institutions over 2,000 years of social and political change.

While Urban and Schortman accuse me of structural-functionalist excess, Houston imagines Bourdieu or Giddens “smiling benevolently” on my study. I use Victor Turner in order to explore how ritual works, what he calls the “ritual process” (1969). I stress the integrative role of ballcourts and ballgame rituals as their primary intended use, while recognizing that the need for such integration often implies the assertion of some exclusive status, some affirmation of “us” vs. “them.” As Urban and Schortman cogently argue, “it all depends on who was invited.” Giddens’s structuration theory assumes a structure which is both the medium and the outcome of social practice (1984). Resistance takes place in opposition to some order or structure which has been established through the successful efforts of active agents. The process which I have argued was at work in ballgame rituals was instrumental in the establishment of social order and the marking of social difference. In Urban and Schortman’s example, the dismantling of the ballcourt at La Sierra was an act of resistance to the established elite order. This act reveals the importance of the ballcourt as a symbol of that dominant order. Ur-
ban and Schorntan remind us that we cannot assume ideological conformity in the interpretation of symbolism and ritual.

Gillespie raises reasonable concerns regarding the use of analogies and models from different regions to explain the role of ballcourts in the Cuyumapa Drainage. Archaeologists too often employ analogies that appear to “fit” the data without questioning their appropriateness. My supporting evidence for competitive feasting in association with ballgames comes primarily from western Mexico and lowland South America. As Gillespie notes, using tribal-level Amazonian societies to interpret the chiefdom-level rituals of central Honduras requires adjustments of scale and complexity. There is, however, an underlying unity in the symbolism and meaning of ballgames throughout the Americas, as Gillespie herself has demonstrated [1991:317]. In her study Gillespie notes that despite different levels of organizational complexity between Mesoamerican and Amazonian societies they both employed the game as a means of marking social and cosmological boundaries [1991:343]. Ballgame rituals that served to reinforce community and promote social cohesion among Amazonian tribes appear to have been used to negotiate power struggles, resolve conflicts, and create factions in the chiefdoms of southern Mesoamerica. Ultimately, however, I concur with Gillespie that models of social relations in the Cuyumapa Drainage, as in other regions, must be derived from an intensive analysis of regional dynamics.

Blitz provides a valuable critique by questioning the long-term efficacy of ballgame rituals for extending and maintaining political authority. In the example of the Cuyumapa Drainage he is quite right in suggesting that attempts by the elite to extend their authority through ballgame rituals would have been limited by others of comparable status. The evidence that is available at this point indicates that political centralization was never achieved in this region, if in fact it was ever a goal. Returning to the malleability of ballgame rituals as political tools, I would argue that these rituals were initially employed by emerging elites to assert social differences between competing lineages or communities. This is supported by the apparent establishment of distinct external exchange networks as indicated by the presence of imported ceramics and lithics. Following the establishment of rivalries and networks, ballgame rituals may have been redirected, as Blitz suggests, to resolve intercommunity disputes and control conflict. The long-term presence of ballcourts as central institutions in Mesoamerican societies is testament to the efficacy of these facilities and the rituals they housed as tools of power in an ever-changing political climate.

The link between warfare and ballgames, emphasized by Blitz, has been documented for Mesoamerica primarily through the study of iconography and ethnohistory. Alternatively, the game has been proposed as preparation for warriors [Kowalewski et al. 1991], as a substitute for war [Taladoire and Colsonet 1991], or as a symbolic complement to ritualized warfare [Miller and Houston 1987]. While the use of the ballgame for dispute resolu-

tion seems likely, the available evidence would argue against its having served as a substitute for war. Iconography, particularly from the Lowland Maya region, presents some ballgames as complements to ritualized warfare resulting in captive sacrifice [Fox 1993, Miller and Houston 1987]. In these cases the ballgame served as part of a ceremonial cycle emphasizing the reproduction of cosmic and social order.

I agree with Blitz that the role of gambling in political organization deserves greater attention. Gambling provides an opportunity to generate and redistribute wealth that would complement the goals of competitive feasting. The notion of gambling in ballgame rituals could be extended beyond material wealth to include the life-and-death wagers implied in some ballgame iconography. As Humphrey [1979] has suggested, such high-stakes contests may take on the characteristics of “deep play” as described by Geertz [1972].

As for Webster’s assertion that I misrepresented early studies of Maya architecture, my intention was not to belittle the work of these great scholars but simply to highlight the “tyranny of methodology” [Moore and Keene 1983:5] that has often prevented archaeologists from asking new questions of their data and rethinking their approaches to the archaeological record. Fortunately, in a forum like this we have the rare opportunity to share ideas, question assumptions, and redirect our research in new and fruitful directions.

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Prizes


Wanted

Contributions to a symposium to be held as part of the Third International Rock Art Congress in Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 1–6, 1997, entitled “Global Perspectives of the Earliest Paleocart.” The question of the beginnings of “art” has long been recognized as crucial to our understanding of the origins of human language, human consciousness, and human culture as well as the development of modern human cognition and the formulation of past and present human concepts of reality. The processes responsible for these developments remain very poorly understood, as least in part because their study has been dominated throughout the 20th century by a single model, that of the Upper Paleolithic "cave art" and mobiliary art of Europe, especially western Europe. Recently this model has come under sustained and coherent attack, particularly with the recognition of earlier art evidence from other continents and the trend towards taphonomic explanations. The picture that is emerging differs dramatically from the old model and is proposed to be the core topic of the symposium in question. Contributions are solicited from specialists of whatever discipline. Abstracts of 100–150 words should be sent to R. G. Bednarik, IFRAO, P.O. Box 216, Caulfield South, Vic. 3162, Australia, or P. G. Bahn, 428 Anlaby Rd., Hull HU3 6QP, England.