

## 6 THE MAYA BALLGAME: REBIRTH IN THE COURT OF LIFE AND DEATH

The Mesoamerican ballgame is a fascinating thing: both the game and the rubber ball have intrigued outsiders and observers ever since they set foot in the region more than 500 years ago. The courts of Europe were agog at their first sight of trained, muscular ballplayers from Mexico; Fray Sahagún's comments about this strange, exotic material inform the reader that it is "bouncing, noisy, noise-making," so that even its aural qualities were astonishing.<sup>1</sup> But the ballgame also absorbed the attention of ancient Mesoamericans. We know this because they left behind a set of material remains for the ballgame that differs both quantitatively and qualitatively from all others.

To understand what I mean, we might consider any other ritual of ancient Mesoamerica. We can think about the rites of passage of a Mesoamerican leader—an *ahau* among the Maya, for example, or a *tlatoani* among the Aztec. Much of the material imbued with value and power was actually perishable and probably much of it was particular. A great (but perishable, mind you) litter in which the king might be paraded around—the sort we know of from the graffiti at Tikal, Guatemala, for example—housed not only a king but also particular gods; it was refurbished and reused through time, but only ever to be sat in by the ruling king himself. The scaffold within which a new king was raised up at Piedras Negras, Mexico, may have emphasized its perishable, temporary nature, as well as the individual identity of the particular new lord, who is always named. Representations of the feature draw attention to rope lashings, swag curtains, and straw effigies, as well as to the sacrificed child at the base. None of these things lasts in the tropical

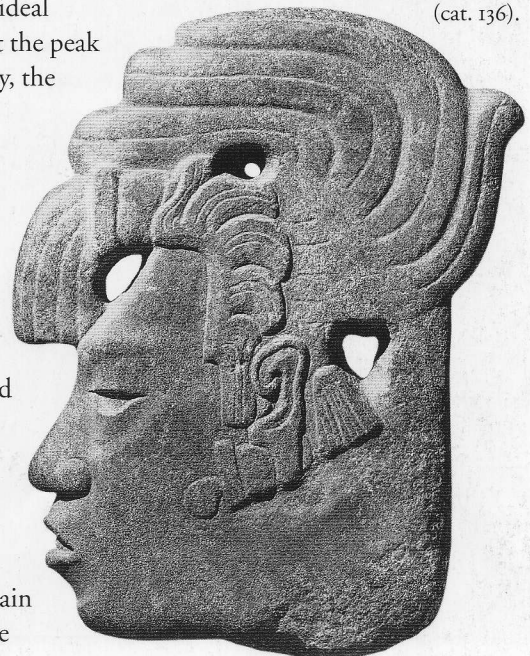
rainforest and neither does the reign of any individual king.

Yet the material culture of the ballgame was to an unusual extent designed for eternity. The standard inventory of what we think of as the ballgame paraphernalia was both specific—it seems highly unlikely that *hachas* or *palmas* (see Scott) served any significant secondary purpose other than to identify winners or players—and yet generic, for such works may well have been designed to suit any winner. Most *hachas* and *palmas* that survive were made in Veracruz, but as Tatiana Proskouriakoff demonstrated half a century ago, that production was also robust in highland Guatemala (fig. 82), among the Maya, where such works were made into the Postclassic Period.<sup>2</sup> No example of such an object among the Maya has ever been found that names a particular owner: they emphasize, instead, the beauty of the ideal ballplayer, a young man at the peak of his powers. Additionally, the works that specify the ballgame have been more readily identifiable than much of Mesoamerica's other material culture. Since the works stand out—and for many years also seemed the province of good sport and fair play, unlike some of Mesoamerica's other rituals—they have been especially appealing to modern scholars.

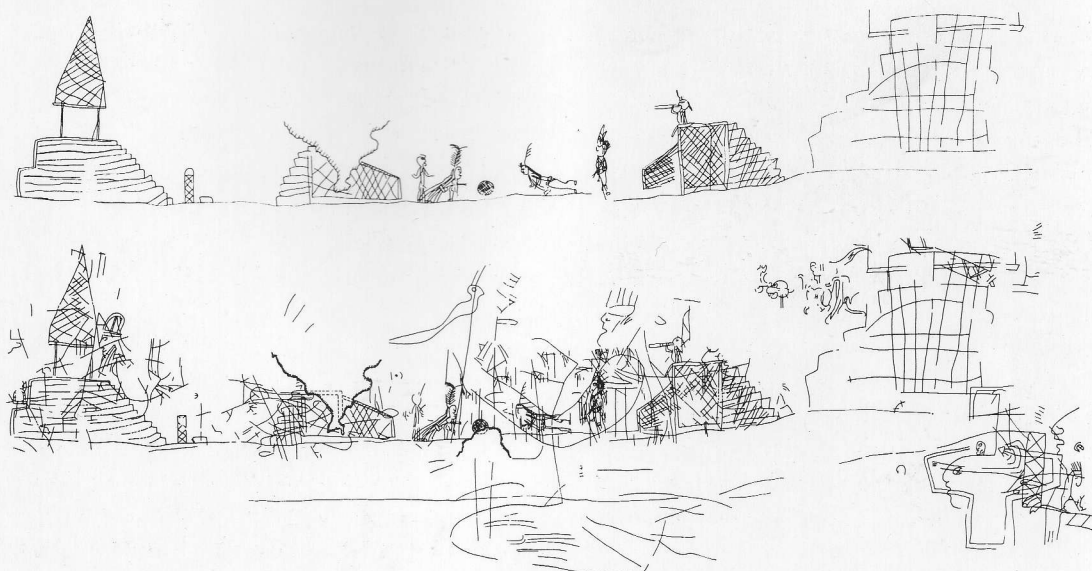
The chief material remain of the ballgame among the

81 The rubber ball divides the scene on this cylinder vessel into two groups of opposing players. An additional player provides musical accompaniment. Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–800; Mexico, Campeche; *pottery*; 8.25 × 6.25 in (21 × 15.8 cm); National Museum of the American Indian (cat. 108).

82 Although most *hachas* and *palmas* come from Veracruz, they were made in the Maya region, such as this Maize God *hacha*. Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 700–900; Mexico, Chiapas, Palenque; *stone*; h. 12 in (30.5 cm); Art Institute of Chicago (cat. 136).



83 Two drawings of a graffito of a ballgame at Tikal, Guatemala. Palace observers scratched an image of the ballgame in play, although this particular palace building, 5D-43, did not provide direct observation of the court. Note in the lower version of the drawing that what looks like the plan of a ballcourt has also been attempted.



84 Incised scene of ballplayers along the wall of Structure K6-K at Piedras Negras, Guatemala. Two ballplayers are poised in play, while the ball itself is not represented. With the striking rendering of the back view of the figure at left, the artist has also understood how to capture the human body in various postures, almost as if a single individual posed for both views.



Maya is, of course, the ballcourt itself, the architectural setting where the game was played. As with all Maya architecture, the ballcourt varied dramatically in size, location, and scope at different Maya cities. At Tikal, the centrally located court seems almost marginal, given its relatively small scale, until one considers that the dominating feature of the Great Plaza, Temple I, forms one of its end zones, and that extensive viewing areas were created by the platforms of the Central Acropolis, Tikal's principal palace complex. Palace observers scratched the odd ballgame graffito into the walls, providing a more direct sketch of play than we find in works composed for more discerning clients, even though the palace wall where this particular image was found did not provide a direct view of the court (fig. 83). At Piedras Negras, ballcourts form part of the royal palace groupings, as if ballcourts, like sweatbaths, may have belonged to particular lineages. But the most dramatic

ballcourt belongs to Copán, Honduras. There, the main ballcourt (for there are other less grand ones) functions as a microcosm of both the entire site and the larger Copán valley. The ballcourt's long parallel and sloping sides mimic the valley, and its northern end guides the eye to the open saddle in the distance, the great cleft akin to the very form that the Maya gave to the personified mountains. In replicating such a space in the ballcourt, the Maya channeled the power of the earth into the space of humankind. The Copán court reveals the natural world to be the framing walls of nature's own court, with all of Copán its alleyway.

Despite the range of size of Maya courts, almost all evidence suggests that just two players saw action on a single team at once. The Tikal graffito shows a pair of opposing players, each with a reserve standing right behind him, much like the way play is shown on Maya pots (fig. 81). Incised into the slabs that form one of the walls

for play at Piedras Negras is a pair of players, seemingly team-mates, who are rendered with dramatic foreshortening—and without a representation of the ball, forcing the viewer to conjure it up, in play (fig. 84). A few pots suggest that three players may have been engaged at once, but it is easy to imagine that no more than four players, two per side, may well have faced off in any given round of play.

Like most aspects of Maya culture, Late Classic (A.D. 600–900) ballgame



material is the best preserved, if only because the sample from the vastly expanded populations in the 7th and 8th centuries is so much greater. The subject of the ballgame certainly appeared during the Early Classic (A.D. 300–600) era, but even the noble title, *pits*, or “ballplayer,” rarely appears until late in Classic times, although this may simply be a factor of the relatively fewer number of texts that survive from the period.<sup>3</sup> Particularly during the 8th century, Maya artists created all sorts of works celebrating the ballgame. Some of these were the most generic—say, *hachas*—while others range to the most specific, in which a particular Maya lord might be named as the winner or loser of ballgame play.

### Rules of the Game

Players used their hands only to put the ball in play, and then otherwise ricocheted the ball off the walls using upper arms, hips, and thighs. But the balls themselves were dangerous: heavy and sometimes moving at great speed, such a ball could break a bone, if not a neck, or damage internal organs. The size of the ball must have varied greatly, although some representations, as, for example, at Chichén Itzá (see fig. 74), can have no relation to the size of the actual ball used in the very court where the representation occurs. The huge ball of the Chichén Itzá Great Ballcourt could not have been bounced high enough even to make contact with the diminutive rings set 20 ft (6 m) above the alley—not to mention actually passing through them! No Maya rubber ballgame balls have survived archaeologically, but modern balls of northern Mexico and archaeologically excavated Olmec balls provide evidence for a ball never more than 12 in (30 cm) in diameter and sometimes quite a bit smaller. The representation of human skulls on the ball, as at Chichén Itzá, may suggest that the Maya made hollow balls by placing skulls in the center—thus lightening them and improving their bounce.

Some works of art provide rich detail of the protective armor that ballplayers donned. Because the most powerful strokes emanated from the hips, players wore their most extensive padding at the middle of the body, usually wrapped around waist yokes. These yokes were probably made of wood, since few survive from the Maya lowlands, although they commonly survive in stone elsewhere. But the Maya padding is usually represented as if quilted—perhaps cotton cloth filled with unspun cotton or with kapok, the silky product of the ceiba tree that until recently filled life-preservers.

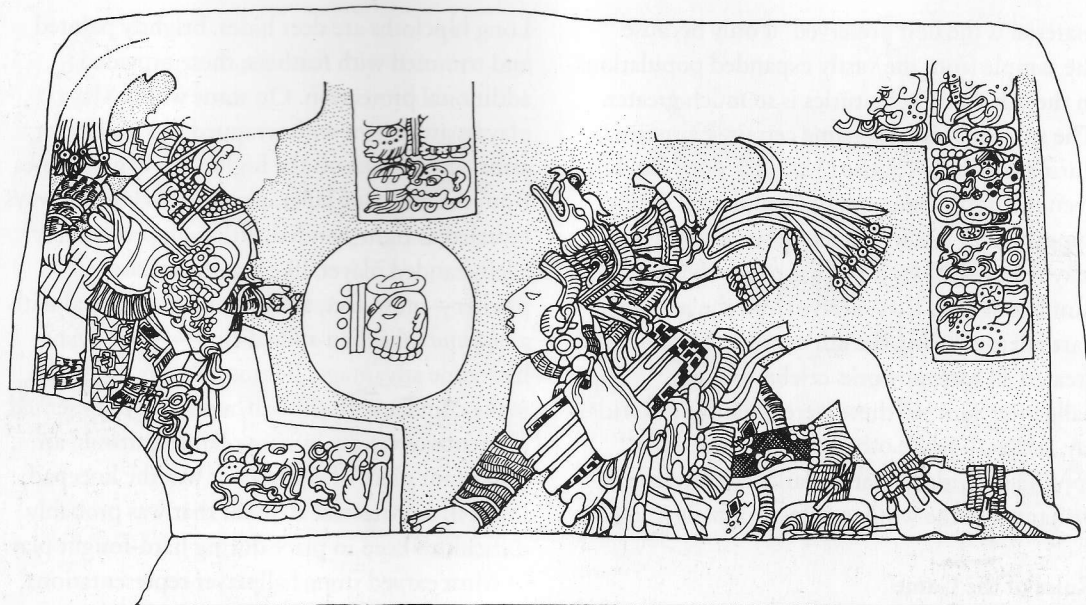
Long hipcloths are deer hides, brightly painted and trimmed with feathers; these provided additional protection. On some works Maya players are shown with wrapped legs and lower arms, and at least on the highly life-like figurines from the island of Jaina, players are almost always revealed as right-handed, although presumably a left-handed player, like a modern baseball pitcher—or, in fact, an Aztec warrior armed with a *macana* (obsidian-spiked club)—would have had some advantage. Because players lunged to make contact with the ball, a posture represented particularly vividly by some Jaina figurines, an important piece of equipment was the kneepad (fig. 85), a protective element that was probably difficult to keep in place during hard-fought play.

Most carved stone ballplayer representations feature the headdresses of Maya gods. The Art

85 Ballplayer wearing a bird headdress; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–800; Mexico, Campeche, Jaina Island; pottery, 7.8 × 3.6 in (19.7 × 9.2 cm); Mint Museum of Art (cat. 104).



86 Dressed in balloon headdress, skull pectoral, and skeletal Tlaloc waist figure, the player at left on this panel appears as the victorious warrior destined to defeat the fallen player at right, whose sacrifice is prefigured by the punched cloth cut-outs that he wears. Carved panel with ballplayers; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 700–900; Guatemala, Usumacinta River region; Art Institute of Chicago.



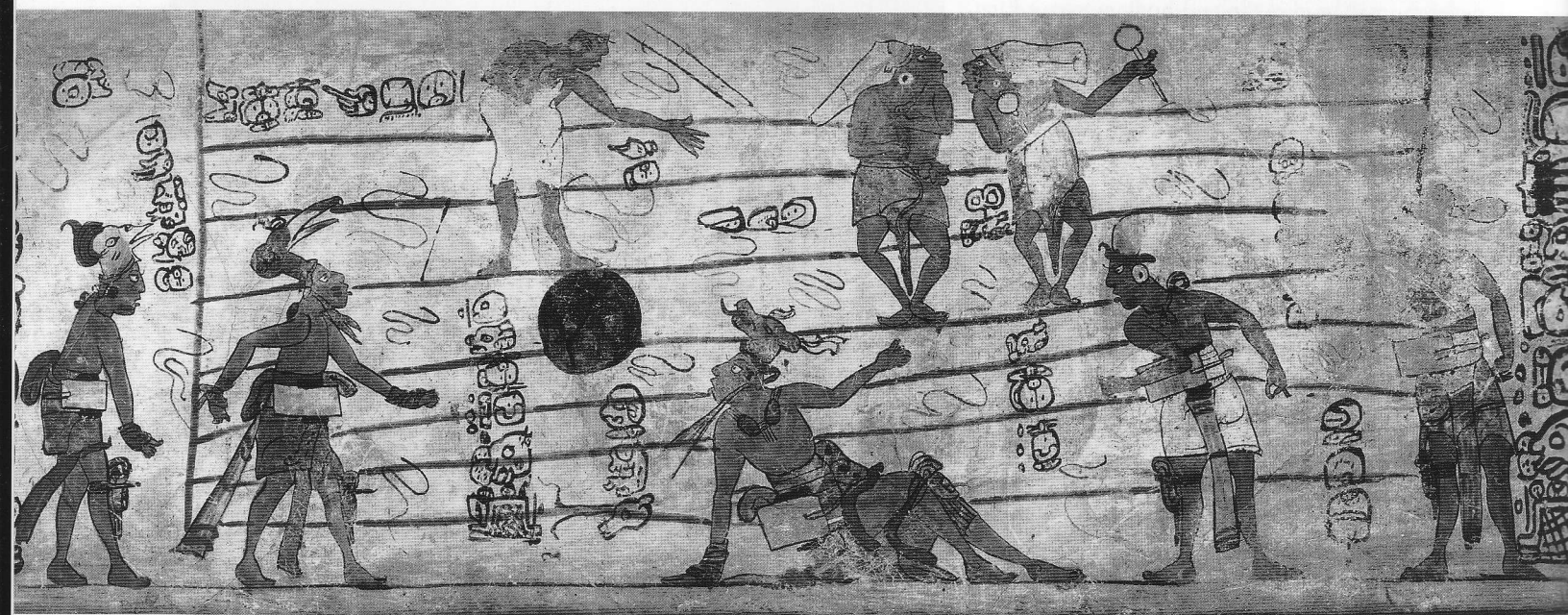
87 This lively ballplayer vessel features two teams of two players each, who face off, while a conch shell trumpeter and two dancers with rattles provide musical accompaniment. The fallen player with deer headdress may have met his demise. Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 700–900; Guatemala, northern Petén region; pottery; St. Louis Art Museum.

Institute of Chicago panel from Site Q shows the victorious player at left in what can be recognized as the headdress of a god of war and sacrifice, even though that part of the panel is damaged (fig. 86). At least one other ballplayer panel from the Site Q sequence wears the headdress of Chac, often mistakenly thought of as a benign god of rain, but who frequently wielded his lightning axe as a god of human sacrifice. Yet most Jaina figurines and ballplayers on painted ceramics don deer and vulture headdresses, or sometimes the broad-brimmed sombrero—what is usually called the “hunter’s hat.”<sup>4</sup> As Nicholas Hellmuth has shown, hunters of deer wear their prey. The deer headdress is the most common headgear in painted ballgame ceramics. The hunter’s hat is

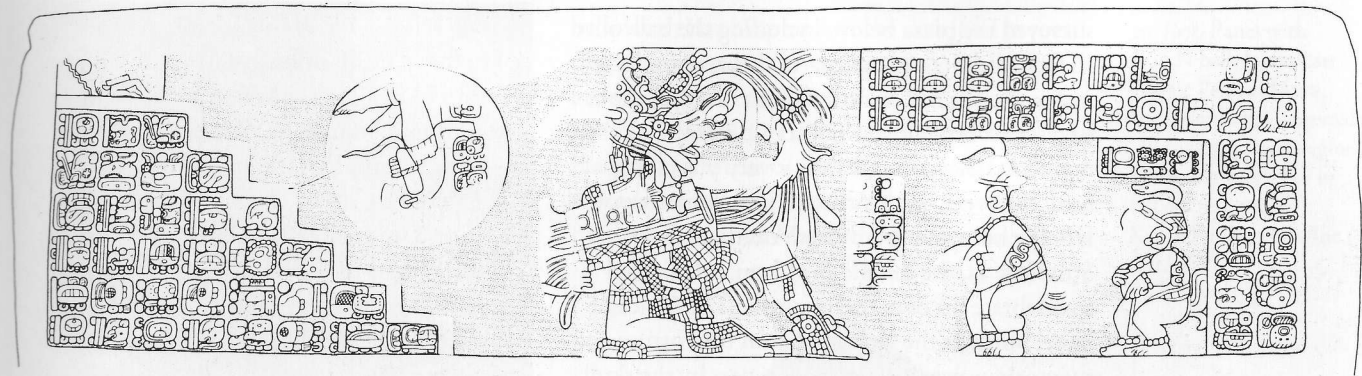
characteristic of the Hero Twins, the great mythic ballplayers and blowgunners (in other words, hunters of birds) about whom I will have more to say below. What links these two sets of headdresses—Maya gods of war and sacrifice and hunting garb—is that war and hunting were linked in the Mesoamerican mind: war was sometimes called the “hunting of men,” and the dry season was the time for both activities. Both hunting and making war were the province of noble young men, and these events could culminate in the ballgame.

#### Architecture of the Ballgame

One of the more puzzling features of the representations of the Maya ballgame is the way







the architectural setting is portrayed. As we have already noted, the ballcourt can be center stage of Maya public space. With its two parallel walls, generally with sides that slope toward one another, the ballcourt would seemingly be a straightforward subject for representation—as indeed is sometimes the case (see fig. 83). But, in fact, when architecture is represented, artists typically sketched in what would seem to be stairs, rather than the sloping walls. Some such representations may feature the flight of steps in the end zone, which were constructed, for example, at both Yaxchilan and Copán. The St. Louis ballgame pot may feature one of these end zone constructions, where the musicians provide musical support and the scorekeepers or referees may have the best vantage points (fig. 87). The artist of this pot strives also to show that play of the game, in front of these stairs, and presumably within the court itself, is ongoing. In an innovation that we may read as only partly successful, the animated squiggles at the feet and around the body and ball reveal both sound and active movement. Such conventions are common in modern cartoons but exceedingly rare in any earlier means of representation.

Some other representations of play of the game against stairs explicitly show the stairs to be the risers of pyramids, where two players face off against what looks like a lopsided wedding cake. Presumably such representations relate to that of



88 Step 7, Hieroglyphic Stairs 2, Mexico, Chiapas, Yaxchilan, Structure 33. Dated A.D. 744, probably executed c. A.D. 755. Bird Jaguar the Great plays ball against the steps of a great pyramid, probably Structure 33 itself, and defeats a captive rendered as the ball. Note the miniature scene inset at upper left (*detail, left*).

Step 7 of Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairs 2, where King Bird Jaguar the Great poises to strike a ball that features a trussed captive on its surface, upside-down and perhaps with a broken neck (fig. 88). This captive—and others, such as the captive described in the text of Tikal Altar 8—are the captives of war, captives who were dispatched in a public ritual that probably brought the ballgame to an end.

Like the Yaxchilan step, the Chicago ballgame panel (see fig. 86) was probably a central step in an assemblage of related but individual scenes, including the National Museum of the American Indian and the Kislak panels (figs. 89 and 90), and these may have been set into a flight of stairs or perhaps directly into a ballcourt. The Yaxchilan step comprises the top riser of Structure 33, whence the king would have

surveyed the plaza below, including the ballcourt. In fact, with its inset miniature representation of a player and a ball against a flight of steps, the step seems explicitly to point out that the representation pertains to this very place, atop Structure 33. And this trussed unfortunate soul is being bounced to his death on the steps of Structure 33, the temple Bird Jaguar dedicated to celebrate his own rise to power. The Chicago panel portrays the victor at left in the costume of a victorious warrior, signaled in part by the skull around the neck and the balloon headdress. Sprawled in front of him is a warrior in defeat, his legs too tangled to move, the ball heading straight for his head. The many birds of his costume signal his demise and preparation for death, as does the cut and punched cloth that

swaddles him. Other captives, too, prepare for either life or death in the ballgame. A Jaina figurine who holds a ball (fig. 91) has been shorn and tonsured, indicating, as it did for Samson in the Bible, a certain death.

#### Sacrifice, Death, and the Maize God

For many years the Maya ballgame of the southern lowlands had been thought to be different from the ballgame portrayed at Chichén Itzá, where human sacrifice is depicted explicitly.<sup>5</sup> But what the Yaxchilan and Chicago panels reveal is that the Maya game had the potential to end in sacrifice throughout the 1st millennium A.D., and not just at Chichén Itzá.

The role of human sacrifice in the ballgame is also evident in the great Maya religious and

89 Panel with Hero Twin ballplayer; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–800; Guatemala, Usumacinta River region; stone, 10.9 × 15 × 0.8 in (27.6 × 38.1 × 2 cm); National Museum of the American Indian (cat. 112).







historical narrative, the *Popol Vuh*, recorded by a Quiché nobleman in the mid-16th century. There, following the story of the sequential attempts by the gods to create a sentient being, the reader learns of the story of first a pair of brothers, Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu, and later the pair of twin brothers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, born to Hun Hunahpu by a princess of Xibalba, the Quiché Underworld. Expert ballplayers on earth, Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu accept the call from the Underworld gods to join them in the ballgame, but the boys from earth are no match for the wily old gods. Quickly dispatched both by guile and in play of the ballgame, the brothers are sacrificed.

The decapitated head of Hun Hunahpu is stuck in a calabash tree, where its spittle impregnates a young goddess, who must then flee to earth. She bears the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who grow up to surpass their father and uncle in skill and wiliness. Called once again to Xibalba, they outwit the old gods and eventually resurrect their father, whose body was buried in the ballcourt. According to the story, the Hero Twins ascend to the heavens, becoming the sun and possibly Venus.

Although the story is not transparent, scholars have realized in recent years that Hun Hunahpu, who is decapitated and then brought back to life, is the Maize God, and so the story of the life cycle of maize also lies at the heart of the matter.<sup>6</sup> Hun Hunahpu himself is not the greatest

ballplayer, but his progeny, the demigod heroes that humans emulate in defying the gods of death, are masters of the game. Life is both taken and renewed in the ballcourt. The ballcourt is the place where fortunes are reversed, and then reversed again. It is the ultimate place of transition, and the Maya seem to have found this

90 (left) Panel with God N ballplayer; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–800; Guatemala, Usumacinta River region; stone; 10.9 × 15 × 0.8 in (27.6 × 38.1 × 2 cm); Kislak Foundation, Inc. (cat. 113).



91 War captive ballplayer; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 700–900; Mexico, Campeche, Jaina Island; pottery; h. 9.3 in (23.7 cm); New Orleans Museum of Art (cat. 124).

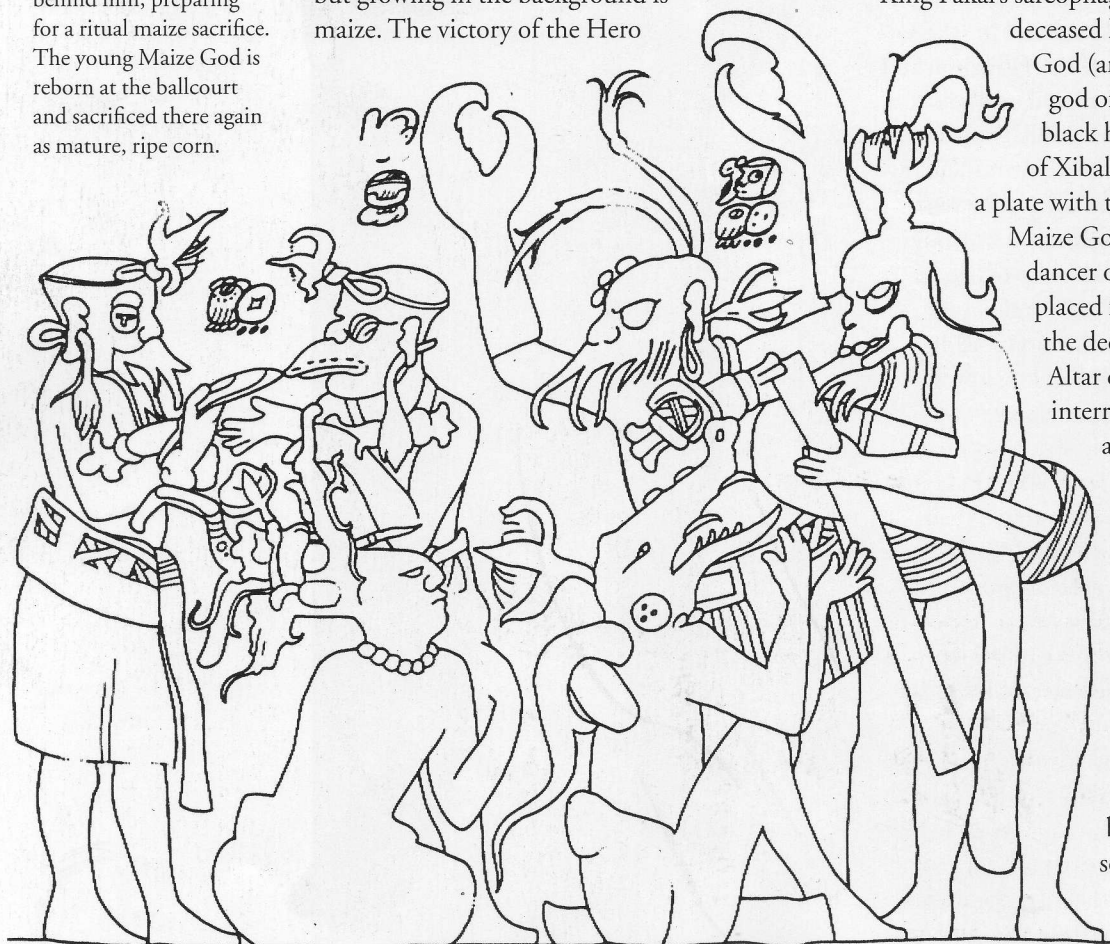
92 Hero Twin ballcourt marker; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 550–850; Mexico, Chiapas; stone, 23 × 24 in (59.8 × 61 cm); North Carolina Museum of Art (cat. 39).



particular characteristic of the game absorbing. The round markers that studded the alleyway of the Maya ballcourt emphasize the liminal and dangerous qualities of the space itself (fig. 92). Most are framed by the quatrefoil that marks an opening, or portal, and the scene within is then happening elsewhere, in another time, or space, but revealed transparently to those on earth—what David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker have called the “glass-bottom boat” effect.<sup>7</sup>

At Copán, heroes face off against death gods, but growing in the background is maize. The victory of the Hero

93 Drawing of a detail of a mural from Room 1, Bonampak. Here the young Maize God sits in front of two hooded ballplayers. They stand behind him, preparing for a ritual maize sacrifice. The young Maize God is reborn at the ballcourt and sacrificed there again as mature, ripe corn.



Twins liberates maize and allows the story of humankind to proceed—as in fact it does in the *Popol Vuh*, moving quickly from this supernatural era to the historical one. The ballgame seems to situate all the pieces in their appropriate places: heavenly bodies rise; humanity’s required foodstuff becomes available, if seasonal, for the life cycle of maize requires annual “decapitation,” or harvest; and humans themselves emerge smarter, able to parry successfully with gods, who are then often represented at a small scale.

Where modern ballgames depend on instant replay, the Maya ballgame guaranteed eventual rebirth for maize and humanity. The story of the ballgame is also one of the stories of the Maize God. In the murals at Bonampak, Mexico, the Maize God sits with ballplayers, presumably before reenacting their shared story (fig. 93). It is the Maize God who returns from the dead, and it is he that Maya kings emulate at their death.

He summed up human perfection in his physiognomy and attire: he was the ideal young man, the man of the hunt or the battlefield. For many Maya kings, the Maize God epitomized the resurrection they sought in death, as, for example, on Copán Stela 11, or on the surface of King Pakal’s sarcophagus at Palenque—where

deceased kings rendered as the Maize God (and also as K’awil, the Maya god of lineage) rise up from the black hole, the visual presentation of Xibalba. In numerous tombs, a plate with the image of the lively Maize God, either as a whirling dancer or as a chief scribe, was placed face down over the head of the deceased, as for example at Altar de Sacrificios.<sup>8</sup> Those who interred the noble dead created

a small breathing hole in the plate that can be likened to the “psychoduct” that linked the dead King Pakal’s tomb to the outside. In this way, a king was not reborn as a Hero Twin but rather as the Maize God, young and beautiful, in whose regeneration in the ballcourt humanity would see its own cyclical rebirth.

Consistently, plates feature the Maize God



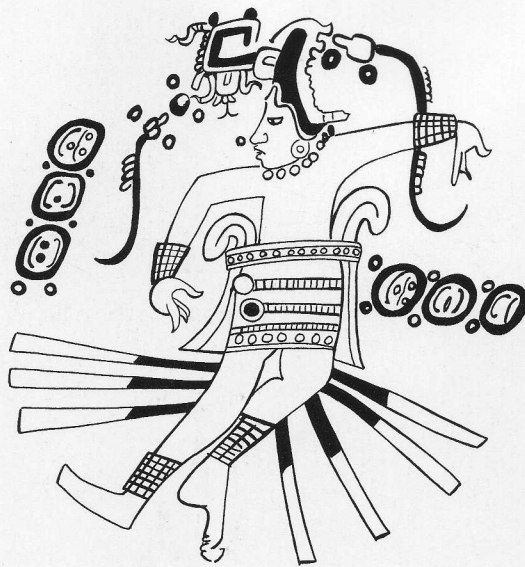
or a related entity (figs. 94 and 95). In life they may have served up the first fruits of renewal; in death they offered the promise of resurrection.

### Representing the Ballgame

Finally, a return to the question about the nature of the representation itself. Certain ballgame scenes are among the most complex Maya representations. Explicitly, in some of these scenes a subsequent event is implied. On the Chicago panel, for example, the fallen ballplayer is represented in the garb of the sacrificial victim, as if the next stage is foreshadowed—and presumably understood by an educated observer within the culture. In this way, the visual—where so clearly the verbal action is play—obviates the necessity for the next verbal reference, which would be death. This also makes it possible for the image to be polyvalent, and to make intelligible within a single scene what requires a series of sequential verbal statements. In this way, the Maya artist began to exceed through visual means what could be achieved textually.

Other representations call on us to conjure up some missing piece of the action. The Hudson Museum figurine (cat. 105) has taken the ball under his arm, and he looks around alertly, as if scouting for a team member to whom he can launch the ball. For another Jaina figurine, found nearly 40 years ago on the island, there is no ball in sight, yet the player remains in eternal play; the ball is absent—yet the viewer knows that it is there, somewhere. Here the artist makes us see the invisible. Were the ball to be in evidence, the motion would come to an end, so the artist has realized that only through absence can he make us see motion. At Piedras Negras (see fig. 84) the two players are carved into a single side of the court, with no ball in evidence here either. But we see their outlines almost as if we were seeing shadows or silhouettes, keeping the space in play, especially when not in use. No ball is in evidence: were it, then the scene would be frozen, instead of ever-pregnant with action. When the Maya set carved ballplayers on the sides of staircases, as they did at La Amalia or Seibal in Guatemala, they kept the play suspended. But those players framed against stairs also remind us of the sacrificial death on stairs, sometimes emphasized by the carving of captive bodies on risers or treads.

Perhaps this is, in the end, the source of the fascination of the ballgame: in this lively group of representations among the Maya there is also the raw anxiety of a contest that ends in death. But the works themselves, even where death is



94 The fully resurrected Maize God is dressed as a ballplayer, completing the cycle of death and rebirth. Detail drawing of plate with Maize God ballplayer; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–900; Guatemala, Petén Region; *pottery*; 2.75 × 14 in (7 × 36 cm); Mint Museum of Art (cat. 137).

explicit or implicit, insist on a living presence, on a vibrancy rarely seen in ancient works of art—in part because what we see goes beyond what is represented, and because an anticipated rebirth is inherent in death itself. These works are alive and vivid, and in that quality, they take the viewer from the 21st century into a world of the past.

95 (*below*) Dancing in the center of this plate is the resurrected Maize God. In the circular band surrounding him are the 20 day signs of the Maya calendar. Plate with Maize God; Late Classic Period, Maya, A.D. 600–900; Guatemala, Petén Region/Tikal; *pottery*; 4 × 12 in (10.2 × 30.5 cm); Mint Museum of Art (cat. 135).

