

A Ballgame with Big Consequences

Ballplayer's Yoke, Unidentified Veracruz Artist

If you look closely at this carved yoke, you'll notice people and animals that connect us to an important ancient Mesoamerican practice: the ballgame.

The outer curve of the yoke depicts a lizard-like creature. This saurian sticks its tongue out and stands on detailed front legs and doubled hind legs. Carefully carved and chiseled designs cover the middle and lower portions of the piece. At the ends of the sculpture are two male figures, each with a prominent nose, lips, and almond-shaped eyes. They wear beaded necklaces, earplugs, and abstracted headpieces. The inside curve of the yoke is rough, while the rest of the piece is polished to a smooth finish.

From the Veracruz region of present-day Mexico, this carved yoke is an example of remarkable artistic skill. It also offers us a chance to understand the Mesoamerican culture surrounding the ballgame. Ballgames most likely originated with the Olmec people, who lived throughout modern-day southern Mexico during the Preclassical period (1800 BCE–250 CE).

Because the game was outlawed by Spanish colonizers who invaded and colonized the area five centuries ago, many details of the rules have been lost. Ballcourt sites, artifacts, and artworks found in tombs and caches throughout the region offer insight into the game and help modern-day athletes keep the game alive.

The ballgame likely took place on a court with players who skillfully bounced a heavy rubber ball without using their hands or feet. The aim of the game could have been to keep the ball in play or to bounce it through vertically oriented hoops on the walls of the court. The game may have functioned as entertainment, a political tool, a substitute for warfare, or a reenactment of the battle between life and death.

The BMA's yoke, made of serpentine stone, is a version of a protective belt worn around the ballplayer's waist, as the rubber ball was dense enough to be deadly if it struck the body directly. Yokes used during the game were made of wood and leather and have not survived due to their decomposition. However, stone representations, such as the BMA yoke, have stood the test of time. They may have been given as trophies or used in symbolic ways.

The ballcourt was seen as a place where the natural and supernatural met, and so the game had significance beyond this world. The saurian on this yoke is associated with water and, thus, the afterlife or underworld. The two men, dressed in jewelry that represents their status, may be players with close ties to these realms.

Challenges for students

- There's so much more to learn about the Mesoamerican ballgame by looking at artwork. Have students choose an artwork from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to explore and then present to their classmates. Focus on visual clues and evidence found in the artworks.

Visit artbma.org/mesoamerican-ballgame

- After watching the ancient game played by present-day athletes in the video below, lead your students in a discussion of how the game relates to those they play. Make Venn diagrams of similarities and differences between the games:

Visit artbma.org/mayan-championship

- In low-relief sculpture, the design projects only slightly from the surface. Have students make their own low-relief sculptures.

For a step-by-step guide, visit artbma.org/low-relief-sculpture

Print the following pages for your students.



Unidentified Veracruz Artist. *Ballplayer's Yoke*. 800–1200. Veracruz, Mexico. Serpentine stone with magnetite veins. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from Frank J. and Elizabeth L. Goodnow Collection; and Primitive Arts Fund, BMA 1961.16

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Ruins of El Tajín ballcourt, 800–1200, Veracruz Culture.

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