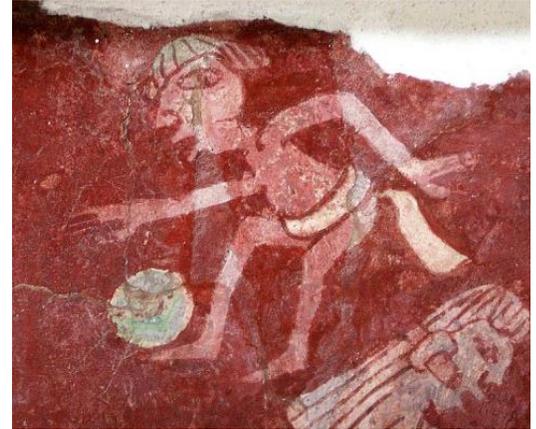


Mesoamerican Ball Game

Directions: Read and annotate the article below with your partner, taking note of important information. Following the reading, you will take part in a microlab discussion with your group of four, so be ready!

The Mesoamerican Ballgame or Ollamalitzli was a sport with ritual associations played since 1,400 B.C. by the pre-Columbian peoples of Ancient Mexico and Central America. Different versions of the sport were played in different places during the millennia, and a modern version of the game, Ulama, is still played in a few places by local indigenous populations.



The rules of the ballgame are not known, but judging from its descendant, Ulama, they were probably similar to racquetball, where the aim is to keep the ball in play. The stone ball court goals, through which players attempted to shoot the ball, are a late addition to the game.



In the most widespread version of the game, the players struck the ball with their hips, although some versions allowed the use of forearms, rackets, bats, or handstones. The ball was made of solid rubber and weighed as much as 9 lbs, and sizes differed greatly over time or according to the version played.

The game had important ritual aspects, and major formal ballgames were held as ritual events, often featuring human sacrifice. The sport was also played casually for fun by children and perhaps even women.

Pre-Columbian ball courts have been found throughout Mesoamerica, as far south as Nicaragua, and possibly as far north as what is now the state of Arizona. These ball courts vary considerably in size, but all have long narrow alleys with sidewalls against which the balls could bounce.

The ballgame was a ritual deeply engrained in Mesoamerican cultures and served purposes beyond that of a mere sporting event. Fray Juan de Torquemada, a 16th century Spanish missionary and historian, tells that the Aztec emperor Axayacatl played the game against Xihuitlemoc, the leader of Xochimilco, betting his annual income against several Xochimilco chinampas (man-made agricultural islands). Ixtlilxochitl, who lived at the same time as Torquemada, relates that Topiltzin, the Toltec king, played against three rivals, the winner was to rule all.



These examples and others are cited by many researchers who have made compelling arguments that the ballgame served as a way to defuse or resolve conflicts without genuine warfare, to settle disputes through a ballgame instead of a battle. Over time, then, the ballgame's role would expand to include not only external mediation, but also the resolution of competition and conflict within the society as well.

This "conflict resolution" theory would explain why stronger states with few rivals had fewer ball courts than weak states with many enemies. Scholars also note that warfare imagery is often found at ball courts.

The association between human sacrifice and the ballgame appears rather late in the archaeological record, no earlier than the Classical era of the Maya. The association was particularly strong within the Maya cultures, where the most explicit depictions of human sacrifice can be seen on the ball court panels.



Captives were often shown in Maya art, and it is assumed that these captives were sacrificed after losing a rigged ritual ballgame. Decapitation is particularly associated with the ballgame – severed heads are featured in much Late Classic ballgame art, and there has even been speculation that the heads and skulls were used as balls.

For the Aztecs the playing of the ballgame also had religious significance, but where the Maya saw the game as a battle between the lords of the underworld and their earthly adversaries, the Aztecs saw it as a battle between the forces of night led by the moon and the stars. But apart from holding important ritual and mythical meaning, the ballgame for the Aztecs was also a sport and a pastime played for fun, although in general it was reserved for the nobles.

ANSWER THE QUAESTIO: Based on what you have learned and discussed about the ballgame, as well your knowledge of Mesoamerican civilizations in general, do you think Mesoamerican civilization should be admired today? Why or why not? Give specific examples.