



PUEBLO GRANDE MUSEUM

Profiles No. 13

PORTALS TO PREHISTORY: MESOAMERICAN AND SOUTHWESTERN BALLCOURTS

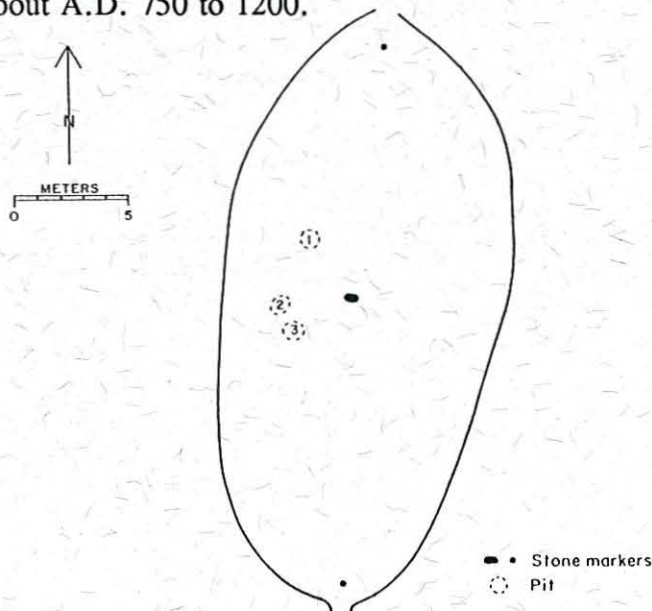
In the ideology of Mesoamerican peoples, ballcourts were symbolic of the passageway between the spiritual upper and lower worlds. Mortals were placed in communication with the gods through playing the ballgame, which was analogous to a mythical drama. Ballcourts found in ruins today are the physical remnants of belief systems and activities. For us, ballcourts are portals to prehistory, points of contact between the past and present. Through archaeological investigation, researchers have learned much about the social organization and world view of ancient cultures.

Different forms of ballcourt architecture are found from central America throughout Mexico and into the southwestern portion of the United States. One of the most intriguing aspects of the distribution of these features is that the prehistoric Hohokam of southern Arizona had significant contact with cultures in West Mexico. The adoption of the ballcourt in southwestern prehistoric cultures appears to have become a means to link different peoples in the social network that encompassed all of the greater Southwest and northern Mesoamerica.

Hohokam ballcourts were simple to build, even with only a digging stick. What they are is a fairly large, shallow, oval hole in the ground with the excavated dirt piled up to make an embankment. The base of the hole is smoothed and plastered as needed to produce a symmetrical floor surface that sloped up slightly toward the edges and then more steeply onto the embankments. At either end of the long axis is an opening or entryway that sometimes leads up to a small cleared space. Most of these courts are 25-35 m long and about 15 m wide, measured "crest-to-crest" on the embankments. About one-in-five courts are twice this size.

Sometimes small pits were placed in the floor of the court, or stones were set in it; however, few of the over 200 Hohokam courts now recorded have been

totally excavated, and the pattern of "floor features" is variable and difficult to interpret. The space on top of the embankments and around the perimeter was sufficient for several hundred people to stand watching the activities that took place within the court. While anyone standing farther away would not be able to see as well, particularly if the activities inside the court were screened by an audience standing or sitting on the embankments, the courts were nevertheless physically accessible to everyone in the Hohokam villages, whose populations were probably only a few hundred people each. Unlike Hohokam platform mounds, most of which date to a later time period than the ballcourts and were enclosed by palisades or compound walls, thus restricting access to them and limiting the visibility of activities that took place on or near them, ballcourts were places of "public" activity in a very egalitarian and inclusive sense. Their architecture may be simple, but their importance as places of public ceremony in Hohokam villages probably was of profound importance to those people for centuries. Archaeological data suggests they were built from about A.D. 750 to 1200.



Drawing of Hohokam ballcourt from Pueblo Grande

Nineteenth century observers were not sure what to make of Hohokam ballcourts. Repeatedly, they guessed they were reservoirs, even though their embankments were usually high all around, providing no way to channel water into them. More creative was the suggestion that they were threshing floors, despite the fact that maize, beans and squash--unlike Old World crops like wheat, oats or barley--are not harvested by "threshing." Even more creative was the inference of Frank Hamilton Cushing that they were "sun temples." Cushing led the first professional archaeological expedition to the American Southwest to do excavation, spending a year and a half during 1887 and 1888 in the Salt River Valley. Pueblo Grande was the first site in which he dug, but most of his work was concentrated at Los Muertos, located where southern Tempe is today. Cushing spent four years living at Zuñi Pueblo and knew a considerable amount about their religious beliefs. His conclusion that the Hohokam courts were "sun temples," as we shall see, may be remarkably correct. Curiously, however, from his excavations in a court near modern Mesa, Cushing also thought the courts were roofed using a basketry technique, an idea that no subsequent observer has found credible! To the contrary, the courts were open to the sky and had to be repeatedly repaired due to erosional damage.

The next person to study Hohokam courts was Frank Pinkley, who for many decades was the Superintendent at Casa Grande Ruins. Constantly asked questions he could not answer about the 45 m long court found there, in 1918 Pinkley tested this court and two others. He placed a test hole inside at both ends, in the middle, and at both sides of each court. He found all of them had carefully prepared floors. Under a large stone set in the center of one court he also found a small marine shell and a "bangle" of turquoise, supporting the idea that the courts were dedicated places of public ceremony and ritual. He now had a story he could tell to visitors!

A new interpretation was proposed by Emil W. Haury in 1937. Trained at Harvard University where

he learned about newly discovered Mayan ballcourts, Haury recognized certain basic analogies between the Mayan courts and a large "earthen bowl" at the site of Snaketown on the Gila River which he excavated in 1934-1935. The embankments of the large Snaketown court are 62 m long by 33 m wide, crest-to-crest. They reminded Haury of the long, parallel benches and playing walls of Mayan courts. Half of the Snaketown court was excavated, and two pits were found, one in the middle and the other at one end, both on the long axis. In Mayan ballcourts, Haury knew that sculptured stone discs were often placed at either end and in the middle along the long axis to mark the zones of play. Arguing by analogy, he predicted the Snaketown court would have another floor pit at the unexcavated end. So he put down a test hole and--there it was! Later, the famous Mayan archaeologists A. V. Kidder and Sylvanus Morley visited Snaketown and they agreed with Haury about his ballcourt interpretation.

Soon after that, John McGregor excavated several courts in the Flagstaff area, finding that they are identical in nearly all respects to those found in the Phoenix Basin. He consulted Linton Satterthwaite, the archaeologist who was digging the Mayan site of Piedres Negras, and who would publish in 1944 one of the best descriptions of the architectural elements of these courts. Satterthwaite also agreed that the southwestern "earthen bowls" were ballcourts where some version of the Mesoamerican ballgame was played.

The earliest formal ballcourts in Mesoamerica date to about 700 B.C., and evidence found in the form of clay figurines suggest that ball game's existed a millennium earlier than that. The first Europeans to see a New World ballgame were Christopher Columbus and his crew when they were on Hispaniola in the Caribbean. Cortez and other Spaniards later saw the game played in Mexico by the Méxica (the people who spoke the Aztec language). A solid rubber ball was used and if the players could get it through one of two rings mounted on the sides of the court's centerline, they won the game. Great wagers

were bet on these games by all levels of Aztec society, not the least of all by the players, who sometimes risked their lives if they lost. Ballplayers were thought to represent deities who periodically died and were reborn, the sacrifice of the player being an expression of society's commitment to what was understood as the natural order of things.

Emil Haury's hypothesis that the Hohokam also built ballcourts implies that a significant cultural connection existed between Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. The excavations at Snaketown had revealed evidence of many such connections, including copper bells and iron-pyrite covered sandstone discs with polychrome decorations using a technique called *pseudo-cloisonné*. They were manufactured in West Mexico. While there is also some evidence for a low frequency of religiously-motivated human sacrifice in the American Southwest, in Haury's time and today there is no indication of that practice in connection with Hohokam ballcourts. But a solid rubber ball was found in a Hohokam village site in 1909. Haury had it chemically analyzed: it apparently was made from the rubber produced in the bark of the *guayule* plant, which is native to the Chihuahuan Desert.

Not all archaeologists accept the claim of significant cultural connections between Mesoamerica and the Southwest. Donald Brand, a cultural geographer who taught at the University of New Mexico, as early as 1939 denied that the Hohokam "earthen bowls" were ballcourts. He suggested they were simply dance plazas. It was not until 1967, however, that a well-conceived and elegant argument was published. Edwin Ferdon (1967), who had been a student of Donald Brand, and was then Assistant Director of the Arizona State Museum (where Haury was Director), showed unequivocally that the formal properties of the Hohokam courts contrasted with the Mesoamerican ones. The latter are made of stone and have rectangular, flat playing alleys while the Hohokam courts are made of earth and are oval with a slightly sloping floor. Perhaps, then, they were dance

plazas, not ballcourts.

Ferdon thus challenged what had become a fixed belief. It is interesting to note that a decade earlier, in 1955, Ferdon had similarly shaken up established belief by publishing a paper that showed numerous architectural parallels of Anasazi buildings to Mesoamerican ones, suggesting that Mesoamerican *pochteca* (traders) were responsible for their construction. This was a claim for Mesoamerican-southwestern connections even more radical than Haury's! Ferdon's methodological point is that the question is open, neither side of the issue having a lock on the truth.

The present author first became involved in the interpretation of Hohokam courts and the larger issue of Mesoamerican southwestern connections in 1979 during the excavation of Los Hornos in Tempe. Among the 1,002 prehistoric features unearthed at the site was a ballcourt. The basic oval shape and its prehistoric episodes of repair had survived more than 50 years of contemporary agricultural disturbance.

With the aid and interest of several colleagues, Wilcox spent the subsequent four years surveying and mapping ballcourts and associated features at several Hohokam sites including Snaketown. His interest led to an archival study that pulled together data on 193 Hohokam ballcourts at 154 sites.

The general argument made by Wilcox is a reply to Ed Ferdon's challenge to Emil Haury's ballcourt hypothesis. If the ballgame, not the ballcourt, diffused to the Southwest from Mexico, then it is a functional comparison, not merely a formal one, which is critical to the question of what kind of activities occurred in them. Clearly, dances of various kinds could have been conducted there, but, functionally, the Hohokam courts are suitably designated for playing several versions of the Mesoamerican ballgame. This perspective also directly led to a new evaluation of the nature of Mesoamerican-Southwest connections.

Any lingering doubts Wilcox may have had about the functional possibility of playing ballgames in Hohokam courts evaporated in November of 1990 when Wilcox was invited to participate in the Fourth Festival of Sinaloan Culture, held in Culiacan, Sinaloa. In addition to over 30 scholars who gave formal papers, the organizer, Doctora Teresa Uriarte de Lambastida, and her assistant, Maestra. Martha Turok, invited about 150 men from all over Mexico who still play many kinds of ballgames, all of which are thought to be derived from aboriginal games. One of these games is hip ball (*ulama*) played with an 8-pound, solid rubber ball. Pacing the area where two teams (of seven men each) faced off, Wilcox found it measured only 12 by 20 paces: such a game could readily be played in a Hohokam court!

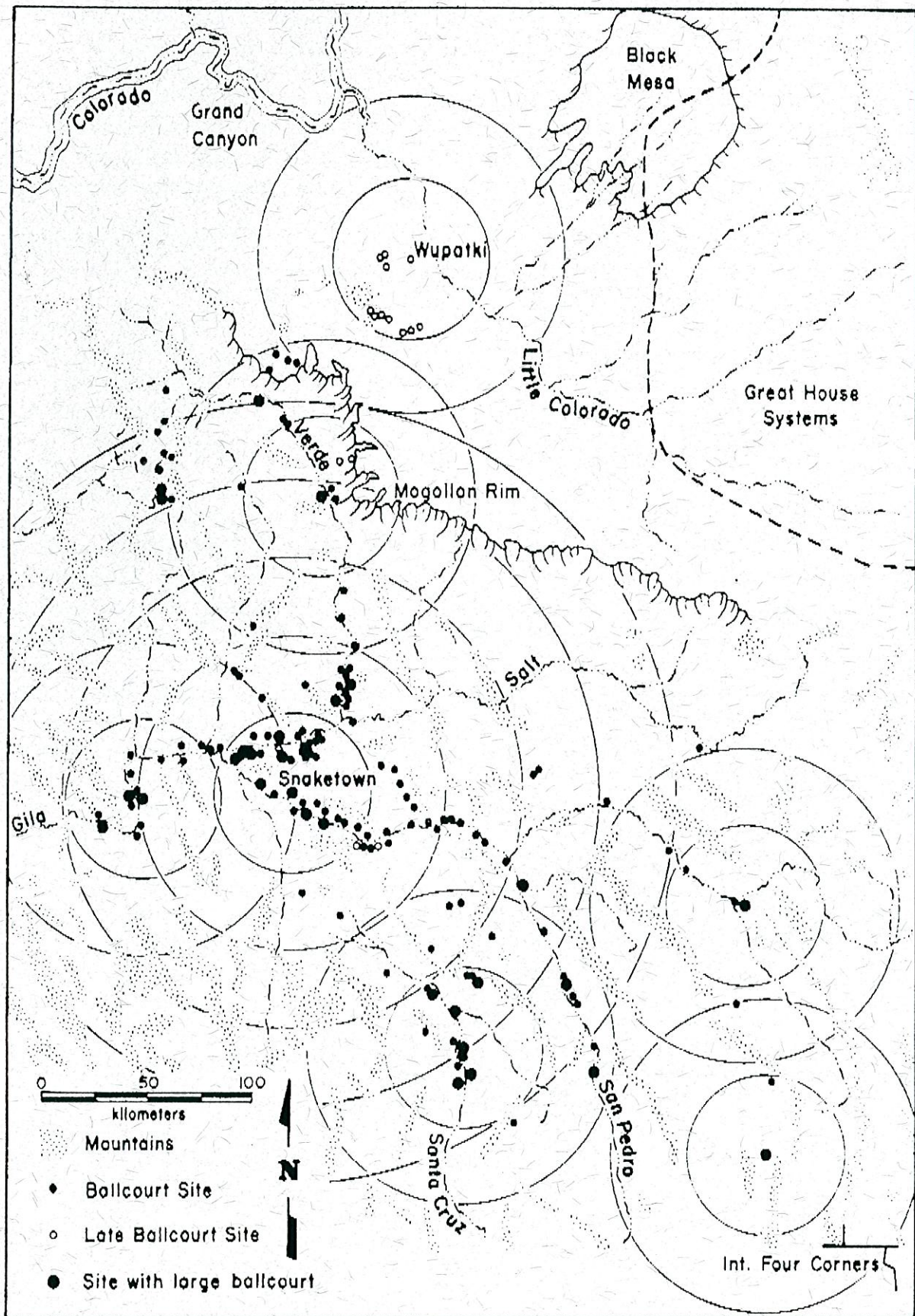
A great deal more has been learned about both Mesoamerican and Hohokam ballcourts during the past decade. During that time no less than three major international symposia on the Mesoamerican ballgame have been held and two are published. It has become widely recognized that the ballgame was a centrally important institution in the societies of Greater Mesoamerica, a key metaphor of the relationship of humans to the universe. Fertility and the continued rebirth of the bounty of nature was one of the principal underlying concerns in these beliefs. The players represented deities locked in a perpetual struggle, the outcome of which directly affected the fertility of the earth and the survival of humans.

The Quiché Maya origin myth, the *Popol Vuh*, recorded by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century--and now brilliantly translated into English by Dennis Tedlock (1985)--provides us with considerable insight into the complex conceptions involved in these beliefs. Hero twins struggle against the forces of evil in the Underworld, playing the ballgame with them and overcoming many other tests of ingenuity, teaching us about the ethical values of these people. Successful at last, the hero twins emerge from the Underworld and go up into the sky to become the sun and the moon. The Hohokam quite possibly had similar myths.

The exhibition, *Portals to Prehistory, Mesoamerican and Southwestern Ballcourts*, explores many of the modern ideas about these interesting features, examining in some detail the cultural relationships between the American Southwest and West Mexico. Data are presented that allow the visitor to compare the scale and organization of regional and macroregional social systems in these culture areas. The structure of the distribution of ballcourts and the changes in such structures through time are a basis for inferences about economic organization and political interaction. Bold new interpretations of southwestern prehistory are proposed that will require innovative new research to test. Earlier interpretations are presented and re-examined, and new ideas are suggested. In all of this we find, again and again, that the modest earthen features repeatedly found in Hohokam sites which, arguably, are ballcourts, provide us with an entryway to the past, a portal to prehistory. By passing through this portal we can join with all previous researchers in the unceasing quest for truth and the grail of human understanding.

David R. Wilcox, Exhibit Curator





Map showing the distribution of ballcourt sites

Portals at Pueblo Grande

The exhibit, *Portals to Prehistory: Mesoamerican and Southwestern Ballcourts*, was first presented at the Museum of Northern Arizona during the winter and spring of 1992. It explores nearly a century of research devoted to determining the origin, function, and meaning of architecture identified as ballcourts in several diverse cultures that existed in Mesoamerica and the prehistoric North American Southwest. The exhibit's curator, Dr. David R. Wilcox, Associate Curator of Anthropology at the Museum of Northern Arizona, has been at the forefront of the investigation of Hohokam and Anasazi ballcourts. Within the exhibit, he suggests a number of hypotheses concerning origin and function for these unique site features.

Pueblo Grande Museum and Cultural Park is pleased to make this exhibit available to its audience. The Museum staff and Auxiliary are grateful to the Museum of Northern Arizona, its Exhibit Staff, and Dr. Wilcox for their cooperation in transforming the exhibit to suit our institution.

Barbara L. Moulard, Museum Curator

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