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Maya Ritual and Myth: Human Sacrifice in the Context of the Ballgame and the Relationship to the Popol Vuh

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Maya Ritual and Myth: Ritual Human Sacrifice in the Context of the Ballgame and the Relationship to the Popol Vuh

Abstract

The ballgame existed as an integral facet of Mayan life. Ritual and mythic expression are inextricably linked to the execution of the ballgame and are deeply integrated into Mayan culture. Ritual human sacrifice is an unquestionable aspect related to the ballgame. The Maya rulers extended the outcome of the ballgame by satisfying the deities through ritual and human sacrifice (Scarborough 1991:143). The Quiche book of epic narratives, named the *Popol Vuh,* is a recurring theme in the exploration of the ballgame and it is deeply weighted with mythic significance. A discussion of how this theme is interwoven into the political, social, and religious aspects of Mayan society will be addressed in this paper. The architecture of the ballcourt possesses significant attributes which define and display the important role of Mayan ritual and mythic expression. The court existed as a sacred and ritualistic space and was believed to be a threshold between the Middleworld and the Underworld. Iconography associated with the ballcourt and ballgame will be presented to support the mythic and ritual incorporation in Mayan life. The function of ritual and myth exist in a complementary role and possess a relationship of interdependency. The importance of these mythic narratives and the relationship of human sacrifice and the ballgame that exist in these stories are evidence of a historical connection and thereby deeply rooted into the lives of the Maya.

Keywords: ballgame, ballcourt, ritual sacrifice, *Popol Vuh*

Introduction

The magnificent structural and architectural remains that still predominate through the forest canopy are testimony to the great achievements made by the Mayan culture in Mesoamerica. The geographic range of the Mayans include portions of the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador (Coe 1966:17). The area in which the ancient Maya lived and modern Maya peoples still inhabit is called Mesoamerica, yet this area is not limited to just Mayan habitation.

Mayan history was divided into three main phases, each containing several subdivisions. Civilization emerged in Mesoamerica around 1500B.C. and is defined as the Preclassic period, and continues until A.D. 200. This phase includes three subdivisions, the Early Preclassic (2000-900 B.C.), the Middle Preclassic (900-300 B.C.), and the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.-A.D. 200). The period during which the Mayan civilization arose was in the Late Preclassic. The next phase of Mayan civilization is called the Classic period (A.D. 200-900). This phase is considered to be the "golden age" of the Mayas (Schele and Miller 1986:11). The Classic period includes two subdivisions, the Early Classic (A.D. 200-600) and the Late Classic (A.D. 600-900). The final phase of Pre-Columbian Maya history is called the Postclassic, which dated from A.D. 900 to the Spanish Conquest of the Mayan region in 1541. [1]

The Mayan civilization of the New World is characterized as highly advanced people, politically, economically, socially and intellectually. The Mayans possessed keen knowledge of the solar system and the movements of the cosmos, and therefore employed an accurate calendrical system. The Mayans also developed a hieroglyphic writing

system, which recorded the history of these peoples, which made possible the reconstruction of the ancient Mayan civilization and provided accurate knowledge about the succession of Mayan rulers. The pictorial carvings with which the hieroglyphic writing was incorporated into has told a story that defies the once common held belief of the nature of the Mayas. The Maya were once thought to be a peaceful culture and removed from such activities as human sacrifice and blood offerings (Schele and Miller 1986:15). One mode by which human sacrifice was employed was in the context of the ballgame. A deeper, mythic connotation is held with ballgame sacrifice and the stories in the book of epic Quiche Mayan narratives of the *Popol Vuh.* This theme is interwoven into the political, social, and religious facets of Mayan society. The function of ritual and myth work in a complementary pattern, void of a hierarchical association, which postulates that the implementation of these entities into Mayan society is important in the continuation of Mayan life. What this paper intends to establish is the exploration of the role of ritual human sacrifice among the Maya with particular reference that this ritual possessed in the context of the ballgame. A look into the relationship of ballgame sacrifice and the presence of this theme in the *Popol Vuh,* translated by Dennis Tedlock, will be addressed.

The Ballcourt and the Ballgame

The existence of the ballgame encompassed an important role in Mayan culture. It existed as a form of ritual and mythical expression. The game not only flourished among the Mayans, but also throughout much of Mesoamerica. The ballgame was filtered into many aspects of the Mayan culture. The game was a political, social, and religious exhibit within the context of a masonry court (Scarborough and Wilcox

1991:130). The archaeological remains of these masonry courts still exist, yet there are no records that indicate the precise manner in which the game was played. What knowledge is known, however, provides an important insight into how the game was incorporated into the framework of the Mayan culture. Among the many Mayan sites which house the remains of a ballcourt, variation exists from site to site with reference to size and spatial position within the site. The variation can be attributed to regional and temporal differences of structure but may not be limited to that with the possibility of different forms of play (Stern:34). The stone carvings that exist on the structure of the ballcourts, and the iconography depicted on ceramic vessels and other media provide knowledge about the intricate interfolds of the game and the ritualistic contexts in which it occurred.

The Ballcourt

The architecture of the ballcourts differs from site to site with respect to the temporal zones in which they exist, the period when the courts were constructed, and for what function they were providing. The informal playing courts, which are characterized as having earthen playing surfaces, were surely utilized, but here but we will focus on the formal masonry courts which exist in the archaeological record while the former, as stated by Scarborough (1991:134), only has few possible marker posts and very little remains which have survived. The typical architecture of the ballcourts in relation to the geographical zones in which they exist will be provided next, although it is important to note that there is still architectural variation within these given zones. In the Mayan Lowlands (areas of Campeche, Yucatan, Quintana Roo, northern Chiapas, Guatemala (El Peten), Belize and western Honduras) the ballcourts are characterized as being open-

ended with undefined end-zones which may have provided the function for the restriction of public access into this area (de Borhegyi 1980:11-12; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:134). This would support the idea that this area possessed a highly ritualized space and the execution of the game was subject to the ruling of the Mayan elites. In this zone, the presence of a number of courts with vertical walls (as opposed to sloping walls) with horizontal, paired stone rings attached to the center, upper-portion of each of the opposing walls are apparent. De Borhegyi (1980:12) suggests that the presence of these rings were early Post-Classic additions which represent a radical change in the playing rules of the game. The changes in the court structure in later times, which proposes different play, may have had a correlation with a change for the reasons why the games were executed. For example, the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza that was erected in Post-Classic times possesses this architectural style and may have been due to outside influences such as the Toltec. Toltec inspired architecture is apparent throughout this site and specifically in the ballcourt. Perhaps play subsumed between these opposing forces in a struggle between the invading Toltec and the defending Maya in a battle to substantiate their place within this area. Given this significant context, the Mayans may have developed or adapted to a different form of play, which resembled warfare, to vie for the land. The struggle is apparent in the iconography on the ballcourt which depicts these cultural entities engaging in ballgame battle, which will be elaborated on later in this section.

Ballcourts that exist in the highland Mayan area (areas of highland zones of Chiapas, Guatemala, southwestern Honduras and western El Salvador) possess the character "I" shaped court with a narrow playing alley, flanked on both sides with sloping

walls (de Borhegyi 1980:15). A major feature of this zone is the horizontally, tenoned paired stone heads attached to the opposing stone walls, which de Borhegyi (1980:16) suggests had similar function as the stone ring markers which may have represented a change in the play of the game. These heads were significant in as much as they represented the close relationship of the rubber ball and human heads, which is discussed later in this paper.

In the Pacific coastal areas (Pacific coastal plains and slopes of Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador), a comparatively small number of ballcourts have been identified although there exists many stone monuments which represent ball players (de Borhegyi 1980:17).

The proximity of the ballcourts among and within these ancient cities also suggests that these arenas were an integral aspect in Mayan life and to the Mayan elites. Generally, these courts are situated near palace compounds and temples in the main acropolis area (Schele and Miller 1986:246). The position of these ballcourts near to the structures associated with the ruling elites may also have a direct correlation to the size and the architecture of the court with that of the amount of authority that the ruling elite possessed. Ashmore (Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:139) proposes that the elites attempted to assert their authority by manipulating building space in an administrative arena. This proposes that the ballcourt was central in the lives of the Mayans and existed in a highly sanctified space due to its proximity to other important ritual centers. The structures that the ballcourts are situated near could also maintain an important relationship. For example, at Chichen Itza there exists an adjacent structure to the ballcourt termed the *tzompantli*, or skull rack where the skulls of the decapitated human

players were displayed (Gillespie 1991:322). The fact that this structure is situated near the court validates the notion that the game was a highly ceremonial affair which would have been sanctioned by the elites and society. Scarborough (1991:143) suggests that in the ritualized game, the predicted outcome, and not the actual game itself, was rarely in question. This displays the important role that the governing elites held with the execution of the ballgame.

The Ballgame

The ballgame was played with a rubber ball, fashioned with the collection of latex from the available trees, and the players wore hip and knee protectors to deflect the ball rather than using their hands (Coe 1967:50). The ballgame was executed for many reasons, which include social functions, for recreation or the mediation of conflict for instance, the basis for ritualized ceremony, and for political purposes, such as acting as a forum for the opposing groups to compete for political status (Scarborough 1991:141). The many functions display the intricate interweaving of the ballgame into the lives of the people. The ballgame served as an expression for Maya ideology and group solidarity (Scarborough 1991:143). The ballgame functions to promote group cohesion which in turn provides for a solid framework for the ritual ballgame and related sacrifice to flourish. Scarborough (1991:141) suggests that recreational play facilitated the continued popularity of the game, but he also suggests that the strong ritualization that encompassed the game was most evident in a community sanctioned masonry court. "The enduring quality of the game is demonstrated by the longevity and distribution of the masonry court...such longevity not only required the strictures of the elite, but the enthusiasm of the sustaining population," (Scarborough 1991:143). The sacred quality of

the ballgame was a factor that influenced the lives of the Maya community and it served to unite a community with a common shared belief. Scarborough (1991:144) establishes that, "The court was a public statement of the integration in which households, villages, and districts came together to reaffirm sociopolitical and ideological alliances."

When the ballgame was executed ritualistically, specific elements accompanied it. Symbolic meaning was associated with certain aspects of the court. The playing field was essentially believed to be the threshold from the Middleworld to the Underworld and was therefore considered a sacred space. Fox (1991:235) asserts that the stairways on the north and south ends present in the architecture of some the courts are perceived as ritualistically descending into the Underworld. Cohodas (1991:254) also states that the axial orientation, the absence of end zones, and the line of three markers of the typical Classic Mayan court, "emphasize architectural symbolism of the world axis which demarcates a cosmological passage through the earth's surface into the Underworld." These connotations display the ballgame as deeply embedded into Mayan cosmology. Gillespie (1991:341) suggests that building a ballcourt transformed natural space into cultural space. The cultural space that is created with the existence of a ballcourt provides the framework for ritual and mythic manifestations to exist.

The Ball Players

The absence of the presence of women depicted in ballgame scenes and representations suggest that men held the position of ball player among the Maya (Stern:38). The participants in the ritualized ballgame would have been captives and would have been placed on opposing teams to vie for the victory, essentially their lives. Foreign kings were the most desirable captives and were considered as trophies of the

kings who had captured them (Schele and Miller 1986:250). Schele and Miller (1986:250) suggest that following the capture of these foreign kings, they were most likely to be subsequently put to death in the context of the ballgame.

Iconography and Symbolism

The symbolism of the game is deeply interwoven into the iconography associated with the ballgame. Depictions of ballgame scenes appear on diverse media, including the structure of the ballcourt, ceramic vessels, and other important ritual centers.

The ballcourt iconography depicted at the site of Chichen Itza often shows players witnessing a decapitation, in which this theme is present on six panels on the sides of the Great Ballcourt and on two panels on the Red House Ballcourt (Kurjack, et al. 1991:145) (see figures 1 and 2). Tozzer (Kurjack et al. 1991:152) suggests that the games depicted on the ballcourt panels are played between the original Mayan inhabitants of the site and the invading Toltec from Mexico who established themselves at Chichen Itza. Two carved panels depict the victorious Mayan players decapitating a Toltec player and the remaining four panels on the Great Ballcourt show Toltec players decapitating the unsuccessful Maya (Kurjack et al. 1991:152).

The balls depicted in the stone carvings at Chichen Itza have a symbolic connection to the head of a human player. These depictions show balls which possess a hallow core which is formed by a human skull (Schele and Miller 1986:248). The separation of the head from the rest of the body is significant due to the fact that the major vehicle by which humans were sacrificed in the context of the ballgame was death by decapitation (Gillespie 1991:323). The Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza displays the head of a decapitated player in the middle of the ball (Schele and Miller 1986:244, 251)

(see figures 3 and 3.1). A further exploration of decapitation will be noted later in the paper.

At the Mayan site of Yaxchilan, a massive structure, termed Structure 33, was erected under the rule of Bird-Jaguar and this structure served to function as the arena in which ritual activities were executed (Schele and Freidel 1991:290). The central step of this structure depicts a ballgame series with Bird-Jaguar shown as the main player (Cohodas 1991:263) (see figure 4). Several clues exist that determine the scene as being a somewhat ritualized event rather than a sporting event. The ball depicted in this carving is shown as having a bound human captive encompassed within. Bird-Jaguar is depicted in a position to deflect the ball and is wearing an elaborate costume. The arena in which ballgame sacrifice is executed is not the typical masonry court, but rather a stairway (Schele and Freidel 1991:291). Glyphs that typically associate ballgame scenes appear carved on staircases (Schele and Miller 1986:250). Taladoire and Colsenet (1991:167) suggest that ceremonial activities tied to the ballgame, did not have to necessarily be performed on the court. In the *Popol Vuh* the Hero Twins were taken to various houses to participate in events to avoid death, and Schele and Miller (1986:249) suggest that sacrifice was the sequel to play and an integral aspect of the ballgame and they suggest that it occurred in a "house." Schele and Miller (1986:249) also propose that "house" in Classic times would usually mean the chamber located on the top of the stairs of a pyramidal temple. Schele and Miller (1986:250) suggest that if sacrifice occurred in this context, then the events associated with this may be taken from the accounts in the *Popol Vuh*. The events included the captives forcefully participating in the ballgame, then the defeated captives were taken to a temple described above, and

bound in the form of a ball, then subsequently thrown down the stairs of the temple (Schele and Miller 1986:250). As mentioned above, the ball in this carving is shown as a bound human who is heading in the direction of Bird-Jaguar and in this context, the ball is shown as the victim (Schele and Freidel 1991:291; Schele and Miller 1986:251). The important connection of the ball in the carving to that of the accounts in the mythic narrative is that the ball is being shown as traveling down the staircase, as if being thrown off of the temple in a ritualized ceremony.

The carved center marker at the Mayan site of Copan, depicts the relationship between sacrifice and the ballgame. The ballplayer on the left is named by the glyphs as Hun-Ahau, which is the equivalent of one of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuh* named Hunahpu, the player on the right is the death god of sacrifice, and the God of Zero, and the last three glyphs refer to the ruler of Copan, 18 Rabbit, but is incorrectly recorded as 13 Rabbit (Schele and Miller 1986:251). Schele and Miller (1986:251) propose a possible interpretation of this marker. They suggest that 18 Rabbit was captured by the King of Quirigua who recorded his victory over 18 Rabbit on every monument that consequently followed the establishment of his reign and the king may have sacrificed 18 Rabbit in a ballgame (Schele and Miller 1986:252). This suggests the ultimate fate of 18 Rabbit as one that met with sacrifice. Schele and Miller (1986:252) propose that since 18 Rabbit's name was only mentioned in the glyphs of the stone marker and not pictorially, he may be associated with the ball that is present in the carving. Numbers that are typically associated with the ball include the number 13, therefore the "error" in the naming of 18 Rabbit as 13 Rabbit may not have been an error at all (Schele and Miller 1986:252).

Twin or paired deity figures are frequently depicted in scenes associated with the ballgame. These pairs can be viewed in scenes on the Pearlman Vase (figure 5) and the Vase of the Seven Gods (Cohodas 1991:264-270). Cohodas (1991:270) proposes that the most important pair that is associated with the sacrificer complex in ballgame scenes is the mythic Headband Twins from the *Popol Vuh.* The association of the ballgame and sacrifice is evident with the presence of the Twins. These deities are also seen on Classic funerary ceramics (figure 6).

The connection between the ballgame and ritual sacrifice is evident on the archaeological remains, but a connection can also be made regarding the language and the association of this theme therein. The Mayan word for the ball, *quiq,* means literally sap or blood, referring to the latex of which it is constructed (Stern:35). The sap can be seen as a metaphoric blood which flows from the tree to give rise to the execution of the ballgame and in this respect, can imply further meaning. The significance of blood in the ballgame, which implies death, is tremendous and this interpretation of the connection of blood and the ball correlated with the notion that the ball is synonymous with the human head is important.

Modern Accounts of the Ballgame

Recreational play of the ballgame would have likely occurred in ancient times and may have taken place on informal courts which have not survived in the archaeological record. Unfortunately the specific way in which the game was played does not exist in the archaeological record either. Modern peoples of Mesoamerica play a game that is speculated to be the most similar to that of the ancient Pre-Columbian game of the Maya. The study of the modern play of the ballgame is important for the reconstruction of the

game. Scholars speculate that the modern play of *ulama* that exists in western Mexico resembles the game played by the Mayans on the ancient masonry courts of Yucatan, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras (Popson 2003:42). The deep history of the game is attractive to scholars who are interested in learning the dynamics of the ancient game and the rituals that were associated with it (Popson 2003:43). The modern presence of the game in this small Mexican village between the Sierra Madre Mountains and the Pacific coast (Popson 2003:42) is living testimony of the integral role that the ballgame held in the lives of the ancient ancestors of these modern players.

Ritual

One universal definition of ritual does not exist rather there are myriad methods by which to define this term, but the definition proposed by Leech is mentioned here. Ritual may be defined as "nonrational means" to achieve a culturally sanctioned outcome, where the behavior associated with these actions is purposed to be highly repetitive and to a given degree, elaborate (Leach 1972:333). Perhaps, the repetitiveness of such ritual actions serves to reinforce the culturally significant aspects from generation to generation. This reinforcement establishes a cultural history which remains an integral aspect in the lives of the people and exists to define the culture comprised of the people.

Ritual is deeply embedded into many aspects of Mayan culture. Vehicles of ritual expression include bloodletting, killing or sacrifice, burning fires, the use or offering of copal incense, and offerings maize, jade, and obsidian to name a few. However, this section will focus on ritual human sacrifice among the Maya. The methods of sacrifice vary dramatically, and may be particular to different contexts in which sacrifice was employed. Heart excision, beating with thorny branches, being thrown down the sides of

temple structures, and voluntary acts, such as jumping into cenotes are some methods of ritual sacrifice described by Schele (1984:7). The employment of ritual human sacrifice in the context of the ballgame is of particular importance pertaining to this paper. Cohodas (1991:270) emphasizes that many of the Mayan ballcourts were too small for actual play and may have been constructed solely for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. The Maya rulers extended the outcome of the ballgame by satisfying the deities through ritual and human sacrifice (Scarborough 1991:143). There is also a connection between the ballgame ritual and Mayan cosmology through the relationship between the boundaries of the Middleworld and the Underworld (Fox 1991:213).

Human Sacrifice

Human sacrifice was a pervasive theme interwoven into Maya life. It became so embedded into parts of the Maya area, namely Yucatan, Chiapas, and Guatemala, that sacrifice continued, albeit in secrecy, after the Spanish conquest, and prevailed into the Colonial period, and eventually into the nineteenth century (Soustelle 1984:2). The incorporation of human sacrifice into political agendas is what stabilized the existence of sacrifice in the life of the Mayas. Demarest (1984:228) states that Classic Maya human sacrifice existed as a mode of legitimization and sanctification of the elite's political power. He further notes that there is a shift in the legitimization of human sacrifice from the Late Preclassic period to the Classic. A shift occurred from the legitimized, individual based authority to that of the legitimization of political polities as a whole which therefore transformed into a global struggle between states and not individuals (Demarest 1984:230). It was in this magnified arena where political power was

sanctioned by human sacrifice and as a result did not diminish rapidly with the presence of support stemming from the community.

The act of sacrifice in the ballgame can be considered a metaphorical parallel to movements of the cosmos. Parsons (1991:197) proposes the connection of sacrifice in the ballgame to the cosmos by saying,

> Esoteric meanings attached to the movements of the rubber ball, the layout of the courts, the action of the players, the outcome, and post-game sacrifices fundamentally pertained to concepts of primary cosmic cycles-equinoxes as well as seasonal agricultural fertility. Emphasized were the pervading dualities of dry season-rainy season, sky-Underworld, day-night, sun-moon, morning-evening Venus, and most especially death-rebirth. There was a preoccupation here with the Underworld, including the passage and transformation of sacrificed ball players, which primarily symbolized the diurnal death and rebirth of the sun (and correspondingly the moon). The sacrifice of the sun in the west through the guise of a "privileged" ball player assured the sun's successful Underworld passage and its ultimate transformation and rebirth in the east.

The sacrifice of the ball player ensured the continuation of the cycle of Mayan cosmology. Agriculture fertility is a theme that is closely linked to the movements of the cosmos as the result of human sacrifice. The seasonality of the agricultural season is closely associated to the seasonality of the movements of the cosmological phenomena as the sun, moon, and constellations (Gillespie 1991:320). Parsons (1991:319) suggests that agriculture fertility held important significance in ritual sacrifice of the ballgame. The sacrificial act was a metaphor symbolizing the regenerations of maize, vegetation and life (Parsons 1991:197). The death of a sacrificed player and the subsequent life that is given to the reassurance of the continuation of the cosmos is positively related to the death and rebirth of the agricultural season.

Although there are myriad ways in which humans were sacrificed in Mayan culture, there is mainly one evident, recurring mode by which sacrifice occurred in the

ballgame. Almost all of the evidence for sacrifice in the ballgame context includes death by decapitation and it is posited that decapitation is a major theme associated with the ballgame (Gillespie 1991; Parsons 1991; Schele 1984). Depictions of sacrificed victims are present on much of the ballgame paraphernalia. De Borhegyi (1980:24) suggests that severed heads were incorporated in the game itself whether it is equipment or depictions on the ballgame attire. He proposes that the heads may have been used as balls, and the long flowing hair that these heads are shown to possess may have been advantageous to the players, making them easier to throw across the court (de Borhegyi 1980:24). The heads may have also served a function within the scoring of the game also. Not only were the heads hung over the walls of the court as a symbol of victory and defeat, but during Pre-classic and Classic times, they may have been used as targets or goals in which the game balls were thrown against them (de Borhegyi 1980:24). De Borhegyi (1980:24) also suggests that the stone hachas, worn by the players, and the horizontally tenoned heads and the tenoned rings on the court may have replaced the exhibition of the trophy heads of earlier times.

Gillespie (1991:317) explores the "Rolling Head" myths which are present in numerous New World mythology and which are intimately related to games. The heads and skulls represented in ballgame iconography were discussed here and their symbolic significance is noted. Gillespie (1991:326) suggests that the ball used in the game is a symbolic representation of the human head. The relationship of the ball as a symbolic head is a recurrent theme throughout Mesoamerica and it even persists in the Old World (Gillespie 1991:326). This connotation between the ball and the head can also be seen in the *Popol Vuh* in which a decapitated head is used in lieu of a rubber ball. As noted

earlier, the iconography depicted on the ballcourt at Chichen Itza displays a human head used as a ball in a scene where the defeated ballplayers are being decapitated (Schele and Miller 1986:244). Gillespie (1991: 326) suggests that, "one way decapitation is related to the ballgame is that the ball, a necessary instrument of the game, is equated with a bodiless head, and it must be procured by removing someone's head, either symbolically or literally."

The lifeless head then is equated with the ball, but the object of the game is to maintain the constant motion of the ball, so invariably that head must also possess that characteristic, one with lively motion. In this context, decapitation would produce a head, once freed from the body, and would possess the ability to have motion to jump, fly, and roll (Gillespie 1991:326). In this respect, decapitation serves to transform a motionless head, one that is attached to the body, to that with maneuverability when freed from the constraints of the body. With this view, the ball is essentially "lifeless" while attached to the body. Ritual sacrifice by decapitation serves to symbolically give life to the ball or head.

Popol Vuh

The Mayan version of the ballgame can be found in the mythic narrative of the Third Creation in the *Popol Vuh*. This is significant since it defines the important link of sacrifice and ballgame in a mythic context. There is an apparent link to the Underworld and the ballgame with relation to the *Popol Vuh* in which Schele and Miller (1986:243) state that this link plays a significant role in mythology of death and sacrifice. The account in the *Popol Vuh* of the mythic Hero Twins engaging in a ritualized ballgame with the Lords of the Underworld provides insight to the highly ritualized, mythic

implication of the ballgame. This is also important to draw a parallel to the intense meaning that the game held in the lives of the people and the connectedness that the people may have shared with the ballgame and their historic ancestry. The ballgame account in the *Popol Vuh* consisted of the whole of the Third Creation story, also providing significant proof that this sport was an integral aspect in Mayan mythology. Below, I will describe the mythic narrative relating to the ballgame and sacrifice.

The brothers One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu were great players of sports. They would play ball all day, continuously bouncing the rubber ball. One day they were playing ball loudly on the road to the Underworld, or Xibalba, and they disturbed the Lords of the Underworld. The Lords proclaimed, "What's happening on the face of the earth? They're just stomping and shouting. They should be summoned to come play ball here. We will defeat them..." (Tedlock 1985:106). The Lords were angry and they believed that the brothers were disrespecting them. Xibalba desired the play equipment of One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, including their kilts, yokes, their arm guards, their panaches, and headbands.

The Lords of the Underworld sent messenger owls to summon the brothers to participate in a game of ball in Xibalba. The messengers traveled to the ballcourt where the brothers were playing, named the Great Abyss at Carchah. The messengers requested that the brothers play at the desire of the Lords of the Underworld in which the brothers agreed, and they were guided down the road to the Underworld by the messengers. They succeeded treacherous travel through steep cliffs and raging rivers filled with spikes. Then they arrived at Xibalba where they met with One Death and Seven Death. The

Lords told them that they will play a game of ball the next day and that they must wear their equipment. Afterwards, the brothers were sent off to their sleeping quarters.

After their departure, the Lords proclaimed that they just wanted to sacrifice the brothers the next day and that it would be quick and easy because the Xibalba playing equipment was very powerful. They described their ball as a spherical knife, and provided the name of White Dagger. The ball is said to be ground down cutting implements to make it smooth and the surface of the ball is ground bone to keep it firm.

When the brothers encountered One Death and Seven Death they were told that the very same day they will be sacrificed, and that they were. The Lords had deceived the brothers and they met with their subsequent death. The Lords buried the brothers at the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice. The head of One Hunahpu was severed from the body and only his body was buried. The head was then displayed in the tree by the side of the road, which afterwards bore fruit. The Lords of the Underworld were amazed that the tree bore fruit, that of which it never did before. The head of One Hunahpu transformed into the tree itself, then all of Xibalba grew these trees and they could no longer tell which tree was that of One Hunahpu. When the daughter of one of the Underworld Lords tried to pick fruit from a tree, the skull of One Hunahpu spoke out to her. He then spit into her hand which symbolized that he had just impregnated her. When her father noticed that she was pregnant he ordered that she be sacrificed. As a result she fled to the Middleworld and sought refuge in the house of One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. Shortly thereafter, the maiden named Blood Woman gave birth to twins named Hunahpu and Xbalanque. It was evident that these twins possessed great power.

When the twins grew older, they continued to play ball in the court of their father. Again, the Lords of the Underworld were disturbed. Due to the disturbance, the Lords issued messengers to invite the brothers to play a game of ball in their court. The twins accepted the invitation and descended into the Underworld. Unlike their father and uncle, the twins were not capable of being outwitted or deceived. When the time came to play the game, the Lords suggested that they use the ball of Xibalba to which the brothers denied and offered to use theirs, or rather their father's and uncle's which they left behind. The Lords insisted that Xibalba's ball be used and the brothers agreed. When the ball was in play Hunahpu deflected it with his yoke sending the ball tumbling to the floor of the court in which the White Dagger protruded. The brothers noticed this and proclaimed that they will not continue to play with that ball, so the lords agreed use the ball of the brothers'. In this game, the brothers deliberately lost to the Lords of the Underworld and were issued to pay the prize in flowers, or pay with their lives. The twins outwitted the lords by convincing ants to obtain flowers from their own garden.

Days passed and the games continued where they played to a tie. Every night the brothers successfully overcame the tests that the Lords of the Underworld had prepared for them. One night the brothers were placed in the House of Bats to rest for the evening, where they resorted to sleeping in their blowguns to avoid the wrath of the bats. When the bats stopped making noise, Hunahpu extended his head from the blowgun to determine how long they had until dawn. At that instant, Hunahpu was decapitated and the Lords of the Underworld displayed his head on the ballcourt and proclaimed that they will use his head in the next ballgame match. Thinking innovatively, Xbalanque summoned the animals to gather food and bring back to him. Xbalanque transformed a

squash into the replacement head for his brother. Then he and the rabbit devised a plan to fetch the head of his brother at the next opportunity.

The next day, play began and the ball that was dropped into the court was the head of his brother and it was kicked into the nearby brush. This was the rabbit's cue to impersonate the ball by rolling in the opposite direction, thereby giving an opportunity for Xbalanque to retrieve his brother's head and restore his body to full life. Though the twins were not defeated, they outsmarted the Underworld Lords by sacrificing themselves, therefore to not give the satisfaction to the Lords. The lords sprinkled their bones into the river, where they would later resurface as vagabonds who could perform miraculous tricks. They performed sacrifices and then brought the victims back to life. The Lords were so amazed by the brothers' skills that they shouted, "Do it to us! Sacrifice us! Sacrifice both of us!" (Tedlock 1985:153). One Death was the first to be sacrificed, in turn, the brothers did not return life to this Lord. Seven Death witnessed that One Death did not come back to life and he then begged for his life to be spared. Hunahpu and Xbalanque successfully defeated the Lords of the Underworld. The brothers ascended into the sky and positioned themselves at the throne of the celestial bodies of the sun and the moon. [2]

Duality of Ritual and Myth

The role of ritual and myth in Mayan culture, with reference to ritual sacrifice in the ballgame as a theme in the *Popol Vuh*, exist in a complementary role which is interrelated into Mayan life. Neither ritual nor myth exist in a hierarchical fashion, but rather exist in a relationship of interdependency. The functioning of these two cultural constructs results in community solidarity, which helps to define Mayan culture.

Myths are "symbolic descriptions of phenomena of nature" (Kluckhohn 1972:93). The Third Creation narrative in the *Popol Vuh* proposes how the celestial bodies of the sun and the moon were established. Essentially the creation myth was being enacted through the ritual of the ballgame and sacrifice, therefore establishing a deep and sacred context. The performance of ritual maintains a tangible place in a mythical world.

The apparent functioning of ritual and myth among the Navaho in Kluckhohn's explanation of these two entities of culture may possibly appear to function in much of the same manner as the Mayans. Kluckhohn (1965:101) states, "Myth...not only acts as a justification, [but] a rationale for ritual behavior and as a moral reinforcement for other customary behaviors." Ritual and myth work together and exist as a preliminary function (a function that is necessary to provide an outcome), which in turn work to establish an outcome beneficial to society. The function of myth and ritual can provide a reassurance of an expected or desired outcome, whether it is political stability or the projection thereof, or community cohesion. The function of these constructs at the societal level promote solidarity through the establishment of a formalized "statement" of the cultural values which reinforce the continuity of culture and also the society in which it persists (Kluckhohn 1972:100). On a smaller scale, Kluckhohn (1972:100) proposes that the fixity of ritual and myth is important in the ever-changing and unpredictable lives of the individual. This may also promote functional relationships among the individuals in the society and among the ruling elites.

Kluckhohn (1965:102) quotes a statement by a psychologist which describes a psychological basis for the dual function of ritual and myth by saying,

> ...human beings (and also other living organisms to varying degrees) can be motivated either by organic pressures (needs) that are currently felt or

> by the mere anticipation of such pressures, and that those habits tend to be acquired and perpetuated (reinforced) which effect a reduction in wither of these two types of motivation.

If Maya rulers seek to affirm or reaffirm their authority and explicitly make their rulership known, the function of the ritual ballgame sacrifices will establish just that. Kluckhohn (1965:105) goes further to say that,

> Ritual is an obsessive repetitive activity-often a symbolic dramatization of the fundamental 'needs' of the society whether 'economic' 'biological,' 'social,' or 'sexual.' Mythology is the rationalization of these same needs, whether they are all expressed in overt ceremonial or not.

The fact that the presence of ritualized human sacrifice in the mythic ballgame context persisted throughout history proposes that its execution was significant in the functioning of society.

To not practice these sanctioned rites was to deviate from the norm, thereby potentially upsetting the aptly functioning society. Radcliffe-Brown (1965:74) mentions that one who is to prohibit a ritual from occurring, which has maintained the connotation that to refrain from this practice is to meet with undesired consequences, the status of the ruler is also met with negative consequences. To counteract this state means that the restoration of the established actions pertaining to ritual and myth are needed.

Discussion

The role of the ballgame in Mayan culture is unquestionably important. Ritual and mythic expression are inextricably linked to the execution of the ballgame and are deeply integrated into Mayan culture. Ritual human sacrifice is a pervading aspect occurring with the execution of the ballgame. This theme is interwoven into the political, social, and religious facets of Mayan society which posit the deep ingrainment of these

themes into the individual lives of the people. The Pre-Columbian Mayan people were living representations of their historic and mythic history. They were actively playing the roles which were defined in the historic account of the *Popol Vuh*. The continuation of the cosmos and essentially Mayan life is represented through the ballgame and ballgame sacrifice. The constant motion of the ball being the object of the game could imply further meaning. The movement of the ball represented the constant movement of life and the cycle of the celestial beings. The functioning of the ballgame and sacrifice ensured that life would continue, and as a result of this connotation, the ballgame and sacrifice flourished in Mayan society. It also existed to provide a forum for the Mayan peoples to be connected through a common shared ideological belief. Scarborough (1991:130) importantly notes that the ballgame, "unified the social and ideological fabric of a complex society." The performance of ritual sacrifice containing a mythic context persisted in Mayan society and existed to define the Maya culture and provide them with a living historical connection.

NOTES

1. These dates were taken from Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller
The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Mayan Art. (New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1986. Pp. 27).

2. The summary of the Third Creation story is derived from the translation of the *Popol Vuh* by Dennis Tedlock. (Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings. Translation. 1985. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster).

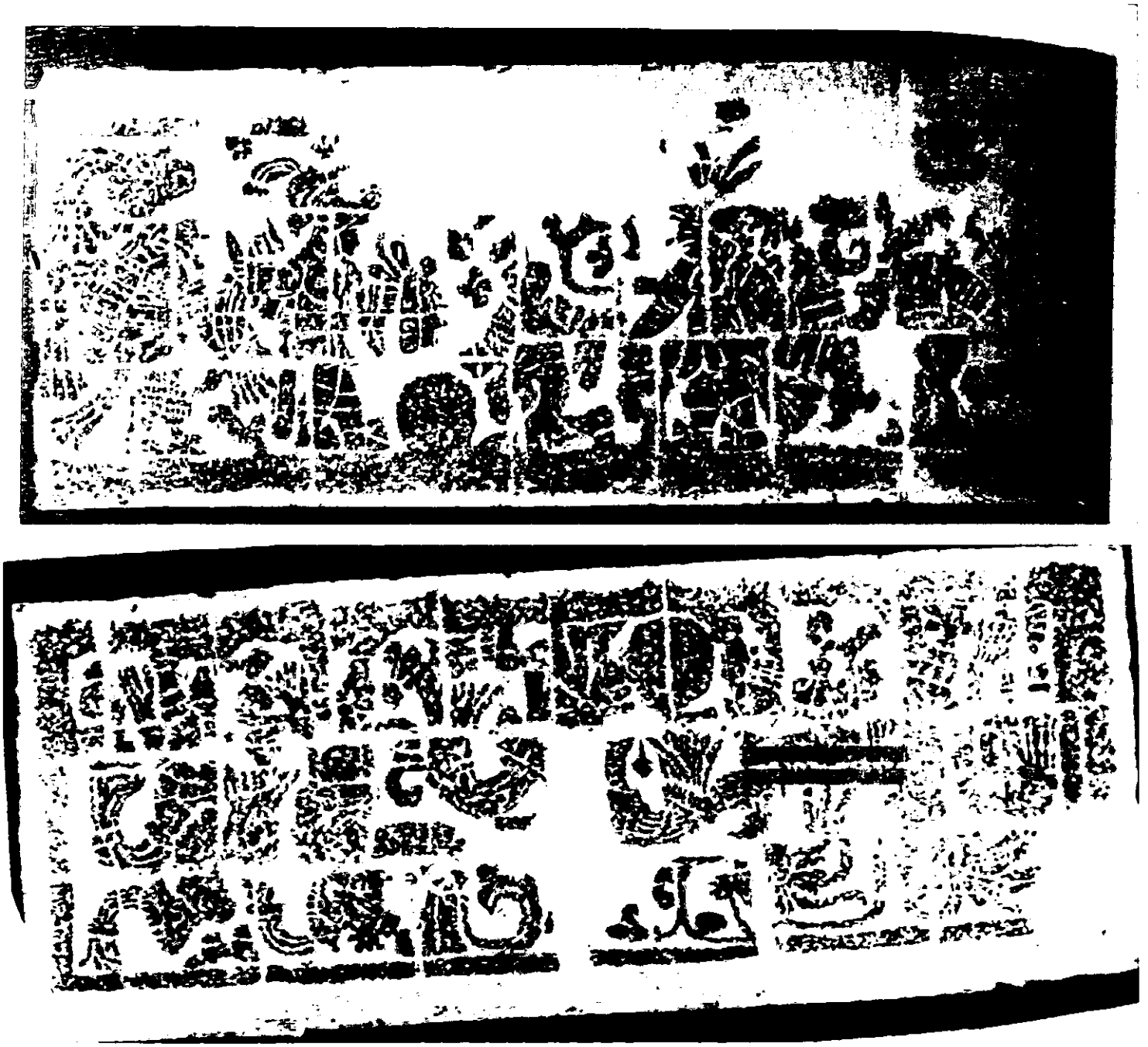

Figure 1. West-central panel from the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza. These panels depict Maya and Toltec players in a decapitation scene. (Kurjack et al in Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:153-153).

Figure 2. Decapitation scene from east and west panels of the Casa Colorado (Red House) ballcourt at Chichen Itza. (Kurjack et al in Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:151).

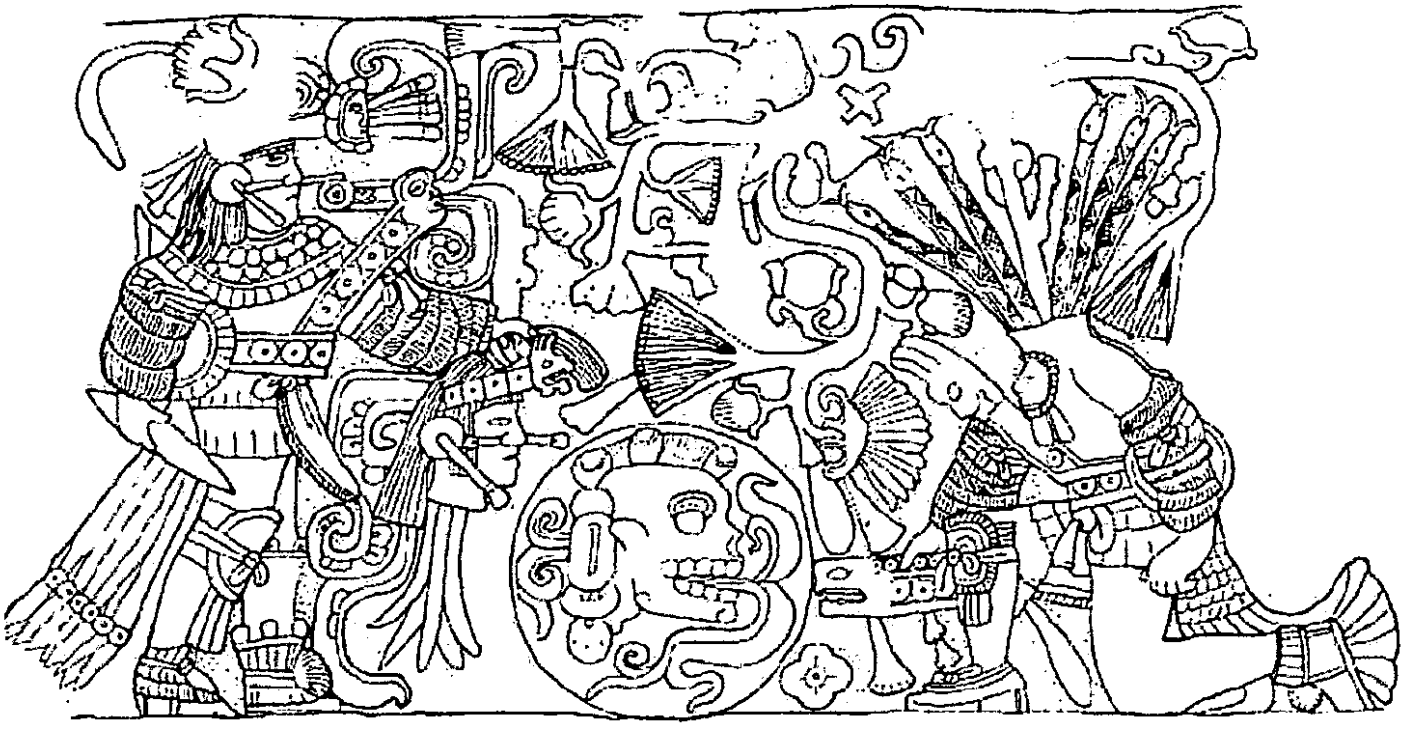

Figure 3. Panel from the Great Ballcourt at Chichen Itza. This panel shows a decapitation scene with the incorporation of a human head into a ball. (Schele and Miller 1986:244).

Figure 3.1. Detail of a human head within a ball from Chichen Itza. (Schele and Miller 1986:251).

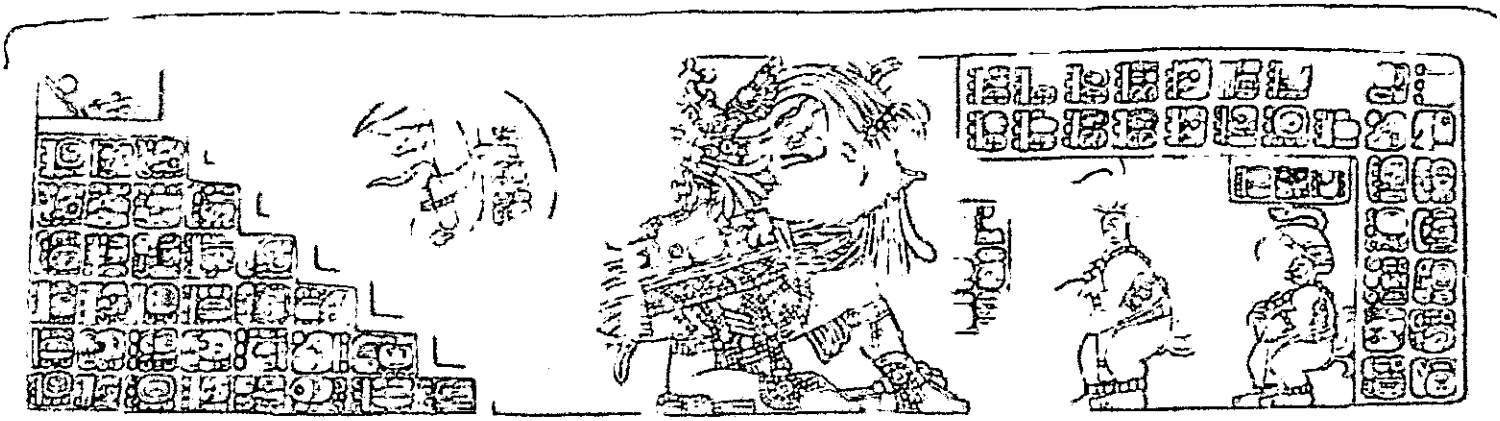

Figure 4. Step VII of the hieroglyphic stairs from Structure 33 at Yaxchilan. Ballgame scene depicting Bird-Jaguar as a ball player deflecting a ball with a bounded victim within. (Schele and Miller 1986:250).

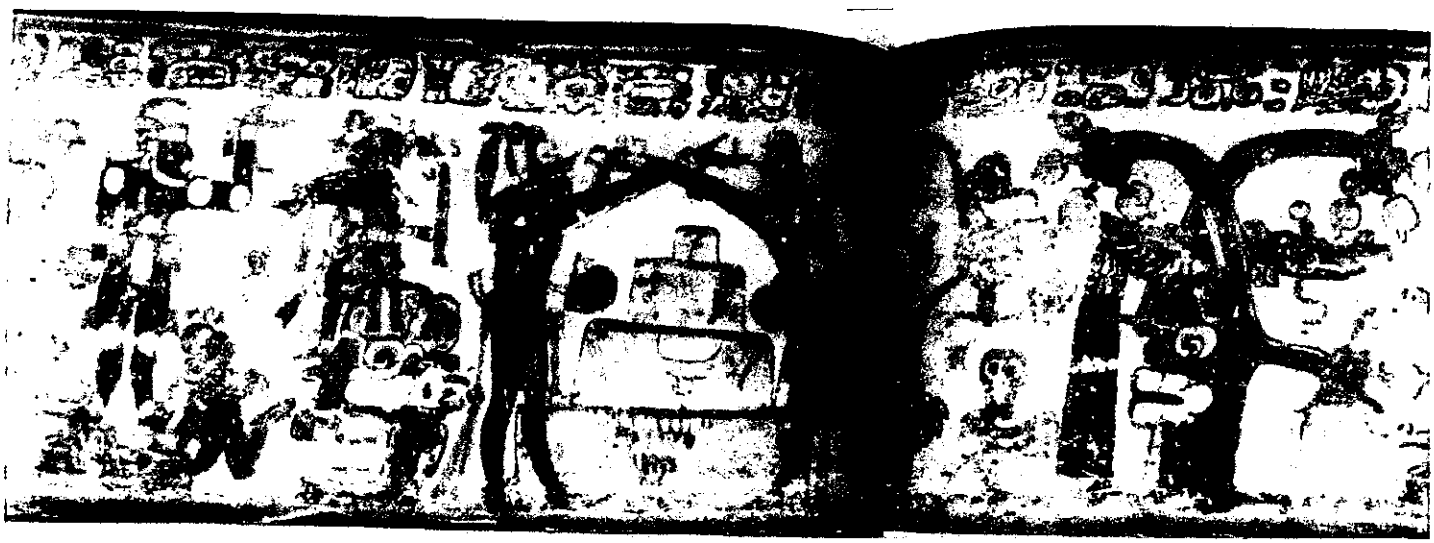

Figure 5. Roll-out of Tepeu I vase from the Pearlman collection. The paired mythic Headband Twins are present in the scene to the left of the central scene of the opposing ball players. These scenes are proposed as representing the cosmic connection of the Underworld and the ball players. The juxtaposition of red and black color, depicted by the ball players and the Headband Twins, represent the gateway through which the sun decends into the Underworld. (Cohodas in Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:264-265).

Figure 6. Codex-style plate showing the Headband Twins with Young Lord. (Cohodas in Scarborough and Wilcox 1991:271).

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