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Two Late Preclassic Ballcourts at the Lowland Maya Center of Cerros, Northern Belize

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The rubber-ball game is a characteristic feature of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilization. Masonry courts designed for variants of the game are relatively common at lowland Maya sites of the Late Classic period (660–900 A.C.). Before this period, ballcourts are extremely rare in this region; the developmental history of the game, therefore, remains obscure. Two masonry courts dating to the Late Preclassic period (400 B.C.–150 A.C.) have been discovered at the lowland Maya center of Cerros, northern Belize. The two courts are described in detail in terms of construction techniques, masonry style, architectural design and overall position in the settlement. It is concluded that these courts are neither experimental nor unique and, therefore, that more masonry courts will be discovered dating to this period. It is further suggested that the apparent absence of courts during the Early Classic period (300–600 A.C.) is a real hiatus reflecting the adoption of a variant of the game played without masonry courts.

Introduction

The competitive rubber-ball game has long been recognized as a characteristic feature of Mesoamerican civilization. Despite the evident popularity of the ballgame throughout the region during the Classic era (ca. 300–900 A.C.), the origins and developmental history of this institution remain obscure. Because the major piece of equipment in the game, the ball, was made of rubber it is common sense to presume that the game originated in the tropical lowland areas where this material occurs naturally.¹ Yet sporadic discovery of ballcourts of the pre-Christian era in such Highland contexts as Chiapas² and

Oaxaca³ suggests that the game was already a regional phenomenon prior to the rise of the Classic civilizations. This combination of data and deduction has raised perplexing problems for students of the ancient Maya. On the one hand, the Maya established the greatest of the topical lowland civilizations; on the other, the ballgame as empirically identified in the form of courts does not appear in force until quite late, during the Late Classic period (600–900 A.C.).⁴ Indeed, only two Early Classic (300–600 A.C.) ballcourts have been reported, and these are at Palenque⁵ and Copan⁶ (FIG. 1) on the far margins of the Maya realm.

1. Suggested early occurrences of the ballcourt in the gulf coast homeland of the Olmec include La Venta (L. W. Wyshak and R. Berger, "Possible Ball Court at La Venta, Mexico," *Nature* 231 [August 1971] 650) and San Lorenzo.

2. Ballcourts are reported from Middle Preclassic contexts on the Upper Grijalva River by Gareth W. Lowe, "The Mixe-Zoque as Competing Neighbors of the Early Lowland Maya," in *The Origins of Maya Civilization, A School of American Research Book*, R. E. W. Adams, ed. (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque 1977) 226.

3. Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Evolution of the Public Building in Formative Oaxaca," in *Cultural Change and Continuity*, C. E. Cleland, ed. (Academic Press: New York 1976) 219.

4. Stephan F. de Borhegyi, "The Pre-Columbian Ballgame: A Pan-Mesoamerican Tradition," *Verhandlungen des XXXVIII Internationalen Amerikanisten Kongresses* 1 (Stuttgart-Munich 1968) 499–515.

5. Robert L. Rands, "The Rise of Classic Maya Civilization in the Northwestern Zone: Isolation and Integration," in Adams, ed., op.cit. (in note 2) 159–180.

6. Gustav Stromsvik, "The Ball Courts at Copan, with Notes on

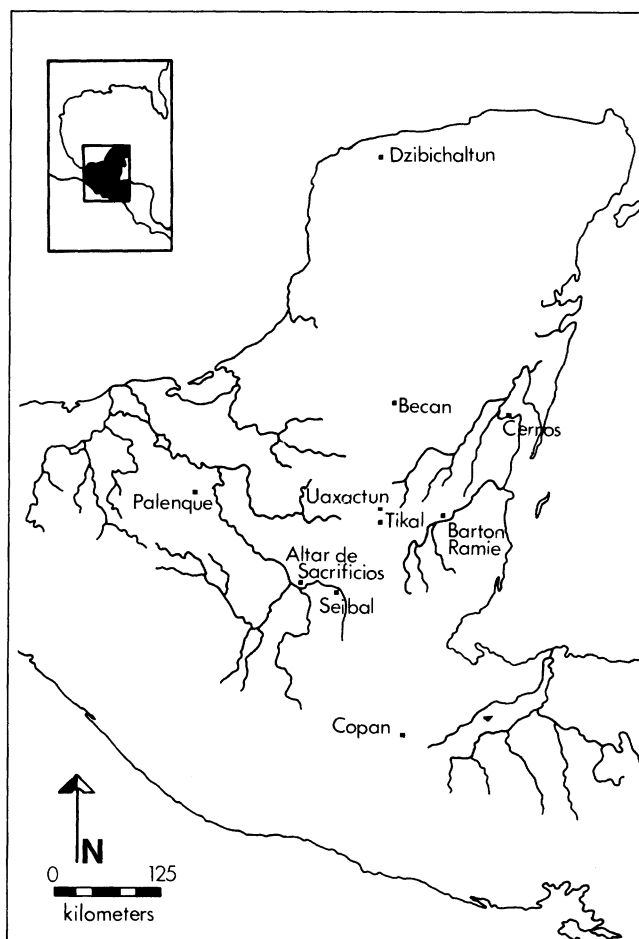


Figure 1. Sites with known major Late Preclassic occupations in the Maya area in addition to Palenque and Copan and sites with reported Early Classic ballcourts.

Investigations at the Late Preclassic (300 B.C.–100 A.C.) lowland center of Cerros in northern Belize⁷ (FIG. 2) have

Courts at La Union, Quirigua, San Pedro Pinula, and Asuncion Mita," *Contributions to American Anthropology and History* XI (55), *Carnegie Institution of Washington Pub.* 596 (Washington, D.C. 1952) 183–214.

7. Archaeological research at Cerros has been carried out under the auspices of Southern Methodist University since 1974. The authors wish to thank Archaeological Commissioner Harriot Topsey of the Belizean government and former Commissioner Elizabeth Graham Pendergast for permission and help in carrying out this research. Illustrations and plans in this report were produced by Karim Sadr and Chris Vallender from original drawings by K. Sadr, B. Mitchum, S. Carr, and S. Lewenstein. The authors are grateful to Sue Lewenstein for her careful excavation and notes on Structure 50D and to the workmen from Chinux village for their hard work. Research at Cerros has been carried out with funds provided by citizens of Dallas, Texas, and major grants from the National Science Foundation (BNS-7824708 and BNS-7815905).

yielded another piece of this intriguing puzzle in the form of two substantial masonry ballcourts. Diagnostic ceramics in sealed construction fill date these courts to late Late Preclassic times (ca. 100 B.C.–100 A.C.), 300–400 years before the Early Classic examples. The presence of two courts at one site in this early context, the high degree of technical and stylistic similarity between them, and the integration of these buildings into the overall design of the community all point to the conclusion that the ballgame was a well-established institution among the lowland Maya who occupied Cerros. That the Preclassic Maya should have practiced the ballgame is not surprising in theory granted the known distribution elsewhere. What becomes surprising in light of this new evidence is the distinct lack of ballcourts during the Early Classic period. Some possible explanations for this situation are offered at the end of this report, but because Preclassic ballcourts have been rarely described in detail the Cerros courts will now be discussed at length.

Ballcourts and Community Design

The bulk of the visible architectural remains at Cerros (FIG. 2) are contemporary and date to the Tulix ceramic phase⁸ (ca. 100 B.C.–100 A.C.), a brief but intense flowering of the community followed by sudden abandonment.⁹ The ballcourts, Structure groups 50 and 61, both date to this phase and are roughly contemporary with other major public architecture. Both courts are oriented N-S and appear to lie on a broad N-S medial axis bisecting the site as defined by the canal perimeter and the pyramidal Structures 3 and 4 of the center proper. Additionally, the westward primary axis of a major isolated pyramid, Structure 29B, and its associated plaza, appears to intersect the medial axis of the site at a point approximately equidistant from either ballcourt. There is reason to suspect that this arrangement is deliberate, for there are three building platforms at the summit of Structure 29B.¹⁰ The central platform is oriented to the west, but the flanking platforms are oriented to the north and south. The positions of the ballcourts relative to Structure 29B reflect this combination of orientations.¹¹

8. Personal communication from Robin Robertson-Freidel, project ceramist.

9. David A. Freidel, "Culture Areas and Interaction Spheres: Contrasting Approaches to Lowland Maya Evolution in Light of Evidence from Cerros, Northern Belize," *AmAnt* 44 (1979) 36–54.

10. David A. Freidel, "Civilization as a State of Mind: the Cultural Evolution of the Lowland Maya," in *Origins of the State in the New World* (tentative title), Grant Jones and Robert Kautz, eds. (Cambridge University Press, in press).

11. The general orientation of the Structure 50 group is N4°E and of the Structure 61 group, N1°E.

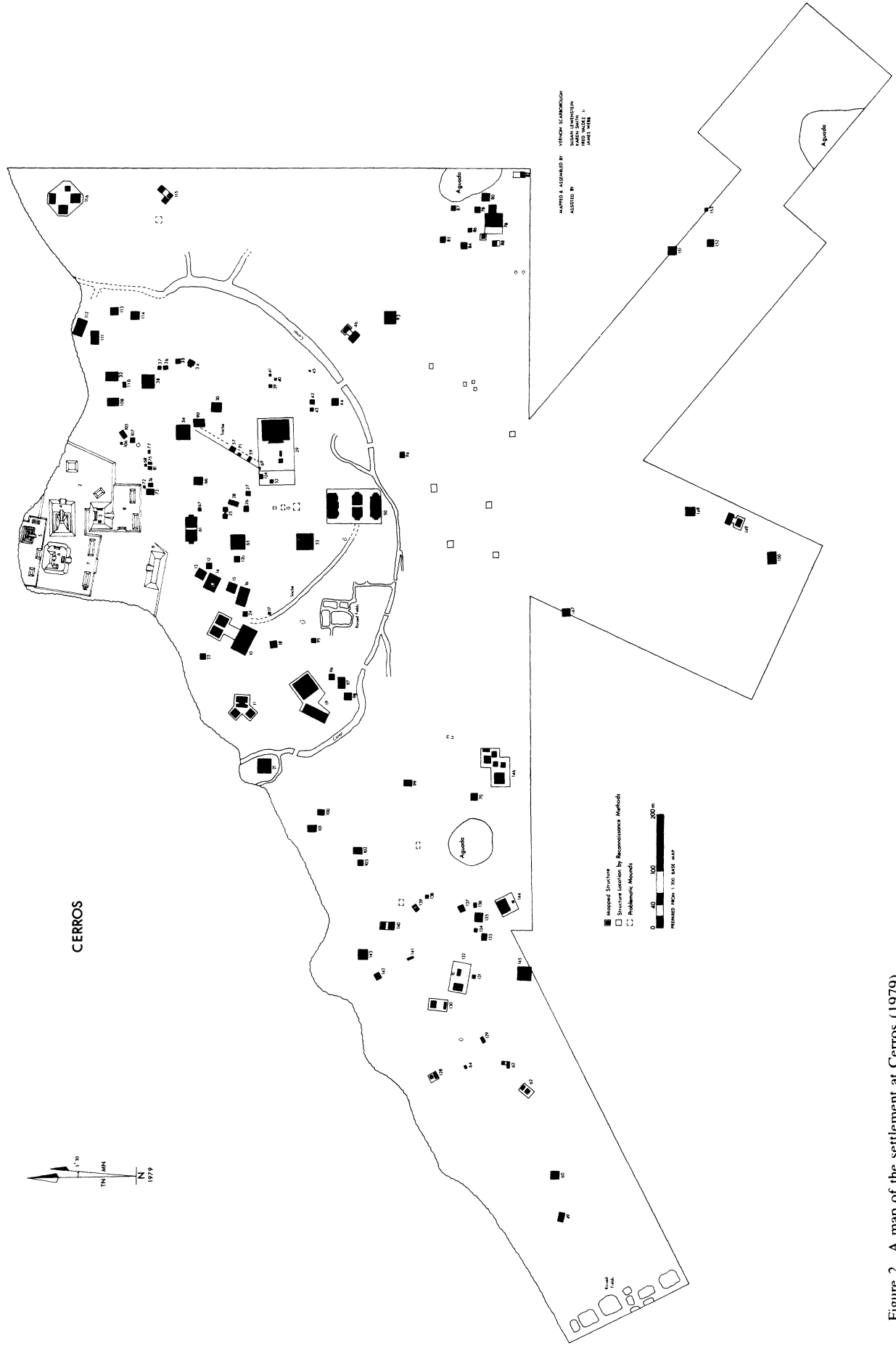


Figure 2. A map of the settlement at Cerros (1979).

Excavations in the Structure 61 Group

The Structure 61 group is composed of two parallel buildings resting on a low substructure (FIG. 3). The substructure is termed 61A, and the two buildings are 61B to the west and 61C to the east. The group was mapped and briefly investigated during the 1978 field season with a test excavation (2 m. \times 2 m.) in the alleyway. Two hard plaster floors were located, and these were underlain by limestone rubble and midden. A sizeable hole, 1.65 m. in diameter, was found intruding through both floors. The group was not discovered to be a ballcourt until the following 1979 season, when the original test unit was extended to form a 2 m.-wide trench cutting across the alley east and west to the buildings with extensions to the south along the bench of Structure 61B and to the north along the bench of Structure 61C (FIG. 4). All together, an area of 20 sq. m. was horizontally excavated within the playing alley, Structure 61A, 22 sq. m. were cleared on Structure 61B, and over 51 sq. m. were exposed on Structure 61C. While excavation was aimed primarily at architectural exposure of the surface, the 2 m.-wide E-W trench across the alley was excavated to sterile palaeosol, a 2 m. \times 4 m. unit at the foot of the eastside stairway of Structure 61C was excavated to the palaeosol, and a probe 50 cm. wide was placed through the west-side bench of Structure 61C. These deeper penetrations yielded the sealed ceramic samples of the Tulix phase in association with construction of the ballcourt. Excavation was carried out in natural and architectural strata and all matrix was run through quarter-inch mesh screen.

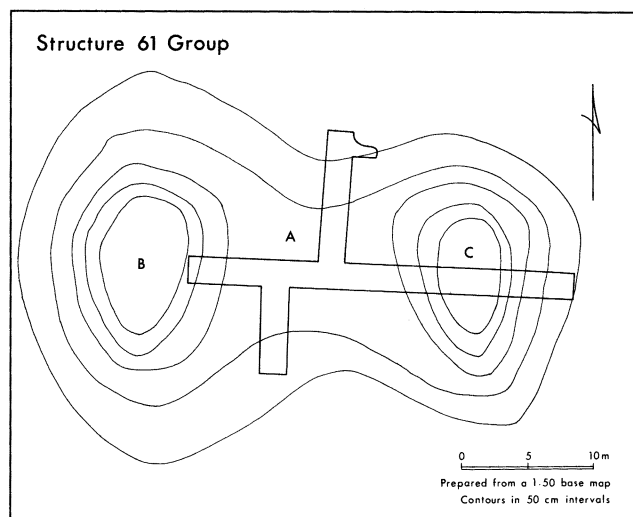
Structures 61B and 61C are ca. 2.7 m. high in their present state of preservation. At the base, they are 22 m. (N-S) \times 18 m. (E-W), with inclined benches on the sides facing the alley. The alley is 4.1 m. wide in the E-W trench. The northern and southern edges of Structure 61A were not determined by excavation, but the drop-off in elevation indicates that the playing alley terminated at the ends of the buildings. This circumstance yields a level playing surface of about 88 m.

The sloping faces of the benches angle between 20° and 30° with the alley floor (varying with the area measured). As a consequence of preservation it is not clear whether there was a sharp angle between the surface and the top of the bench or a more rounded edge. The small patch of flooring at the tops of the benches shows a slight incline (2° or less). The preserved width of the sloping faces averages 1.2 m., but this should be considered a minimum estimate. The width of the bench tops is ca. 2.5 m. from the juncture with the sloping faces to the upper playing walls.



Figure 3. Overview of excavations in the Structure 61 group showing the playing alley and exposure of the bench areas.

Figure 4. Topographic plan of the Structure 61 group showing horizontal extent of excavation.



The upper playing walls mark the juncture of the benches and the buildings proper. These walls are also sloping, but the slope angles differ sharply on 61C (81° from horizontal measured on masonry) and 61B (36° as measured on plaster surfacing). No doubt the difference is partially attributable to preservation of the plaster surface, but time did not permit confirmation of this supposition through excavation.

Trenching across the summit and on to the east side of Structure 61C revealed the presence of a stairway giving access to the summit. From exposure of preserved

masonry treads, the length of this stairway can be estimated at ca. 4 m. Although the stairway was not cornered, its disposition relative to the building clearly indicates that it was outset. A rough construction wall was found underlying the stairway that might mark the edge of the mound. If this is so, then the stairway was outset about 2 m. No evidence of superstructures was found on either Structure 61B or 61C.

The construction techniques employed in the ballcourt (FIG. 5) were revealed in the E-W trenching operations and are as follows. Initially, a 3 cm.-thick layer of white lime marl was laid down on the black sterile palaeosol. This was evidently the foundation for subsequent construction, a common technique at Cerros. Subsequently, a 12 cm.-thick layer of dark grey marl and trash was deposited on the white marl outline. This layer presumably constitutes secondary use of habitation debris from the immediate vicinity, although the limited exposure confines this to a supposition. The next level clearly is part of the construction effort: a layer of cobble-sized rubble in reddish brown dirt 50–60 cm. thick. This layer yielded the substantial sample of Tulix phase sherds used to date construction of the ballcourt. Overlying this construction level is a 6–10 cm.-thick hard plaster floor. This floor extends the length of the alley and underlies Structure 61C at least as far to the east as the upper playing wall. A small patch of flooring in front of the stairway on the

east side of Structure 61C is at the same elevation as the first floor in the alley. Under the stairway itself, however, no hard plaster flooring was discovered. Instead, there is a thick marl layer of the kind identifiable as a construction leveling layer. It appears that the hard plaster flooring was laid down on the alley and on the surface where the benches were to be built, but only a layer of marl was placed where the buildings proper were to be raised. There are two lines of support for this reconstruction. In the first place, it can be demonstrated that the flooring underlying the benches and surfacing the alley is an integral feature of the construction of the ballcourt, for while the flooring underlying the bench is smooth and unworn, the same flooring on the alley is heavily spalled and worn through use. Secondly, there is no evidence of a juncture at the upper playing wall. Instead, the rubble construction is continuous from the building proper into the bench area.

The building and benches built upon this floor have a hearting of irregular small rubble in a matrix of tan dirt and marl. The masonry on the buildings varies from roughly dressed coursed blocks 35–40 cm. on the long side to smaller 15–20 cm.-long loaf-shaped blocks on the upper playing walls and the stepped underfacing of the sloped bench sides. The blocks on the bench faces were not beveled and slope was achieved by stepping back only. Overlying the stepped wall was a layer of

Structure 61 Group Southern Profile

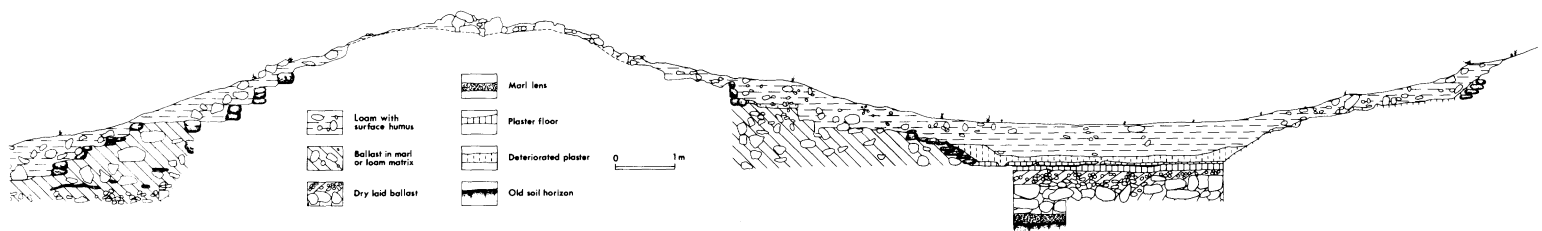


Figure 5. Stratigraphic profile of the Structure 61 group on the E-W axis.

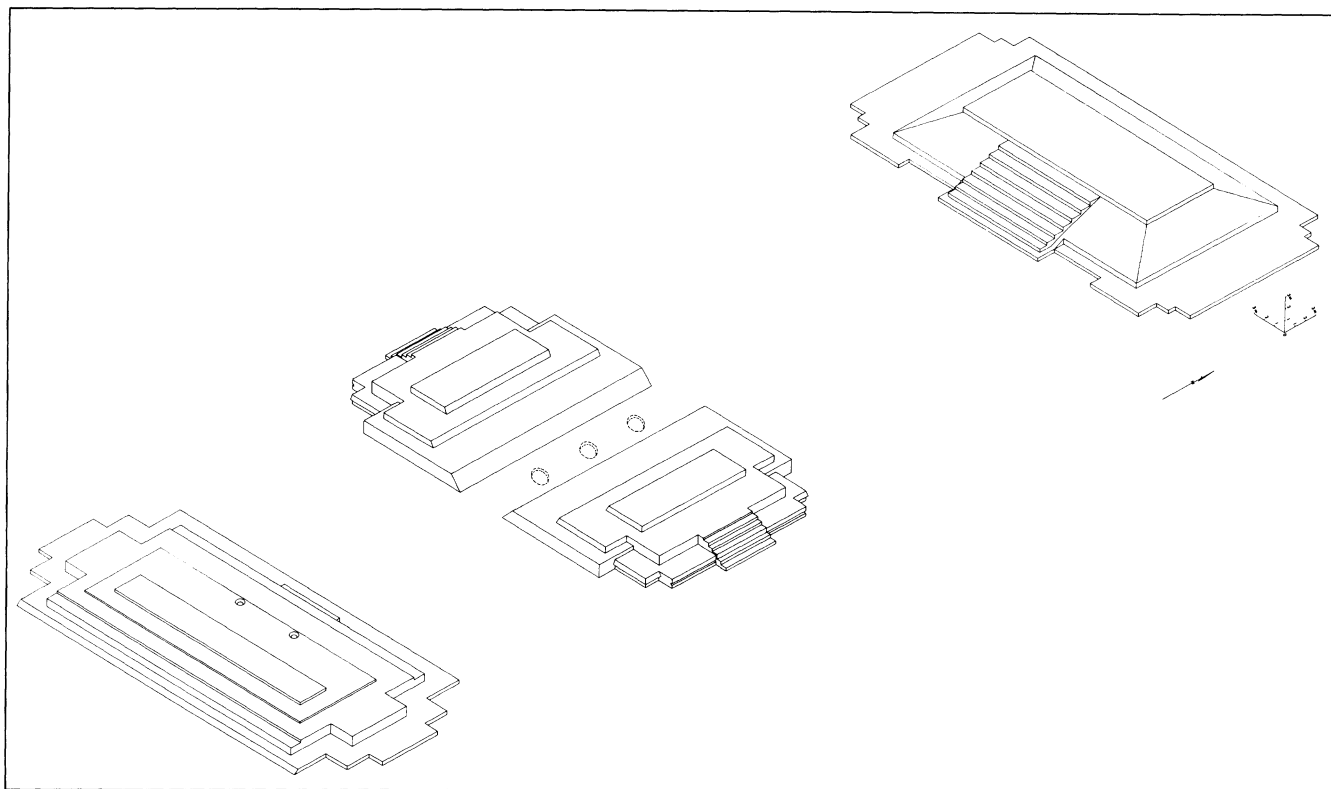


Figure 6. Isometric reconstruction plan of the Structure 50 group.

small flat stones in a marl and plaster concrete. The level surface thus achieved was then covered with a layer of hard plaster. Small loaf-shaped blocks are a common Late Preclassic masonry style at Cerros.

In the course of time a second plaster floor was laid directly on the first one in the playing alley. Preserved plaster surfacing of the bench slopes is found overlying this second floor. This plaster surfacing extends a maximum of 30 cm. out from the masonry onto the alley floor and allowed a smooth surface over the steps and flagstones underneath. There is evidence for two plasterings on the bench surfaces. It is possible that at one point a lower secondary bench in plaster was built out from the bench faces, for there is a clear juncture of worn plaster on the playing surface of the alley with smooth, unworn plaster about 30 cm. out from the juncture of the playing alley and the plastered slope of the bench. While it is possible that the sides next to the bench received less wear than the center of the court, the clarity of the line suggests the presence of a plaster extension out onto the court and the consequent narrowing of the playing alley. Evidently in the course of replastering the slopes of the benches these supplementary extensions were removed and the alley was restored to its original dimensions. One

fragment of plaster painted a deep red was found near one of the benches on the alley. This fragment is our only evidence for painted decoration on this court.

As mentioned above, a circular hole was found penetrating the alley during the 1978 season. The hole is 1.65 m. in diameter and 1 m. deep. Despite the fact that this hole is situated 1 m. south and 75 cm. east of true center, its sharp round outline and clear antiquity point to its being the location of a court marker. If this is the case, then the marker, probably a stone, was presumably removed at the time that the community was abandoned at the end of the Late Preclassic period. The appropriate locations for end-zone markers have not yet been excavated. Another feature on the upper surface of the bench on Structure 61B may pertain to a court marker. A plaster patch was found on the surfacing exposed in the E-W trench. Upon excavation, a posthole-like feature was found ca. 20 cm. in diameter and 10 cm. deep. This feature was filled with plaster from the patch, in clear contrast to the light grey marl of the weathered surfacing around it. Tenoned sculpture has been associated with early ballcourts in the southern Maya Highlands¹² and

12. Richard M. Rose, personal communication, 1977.

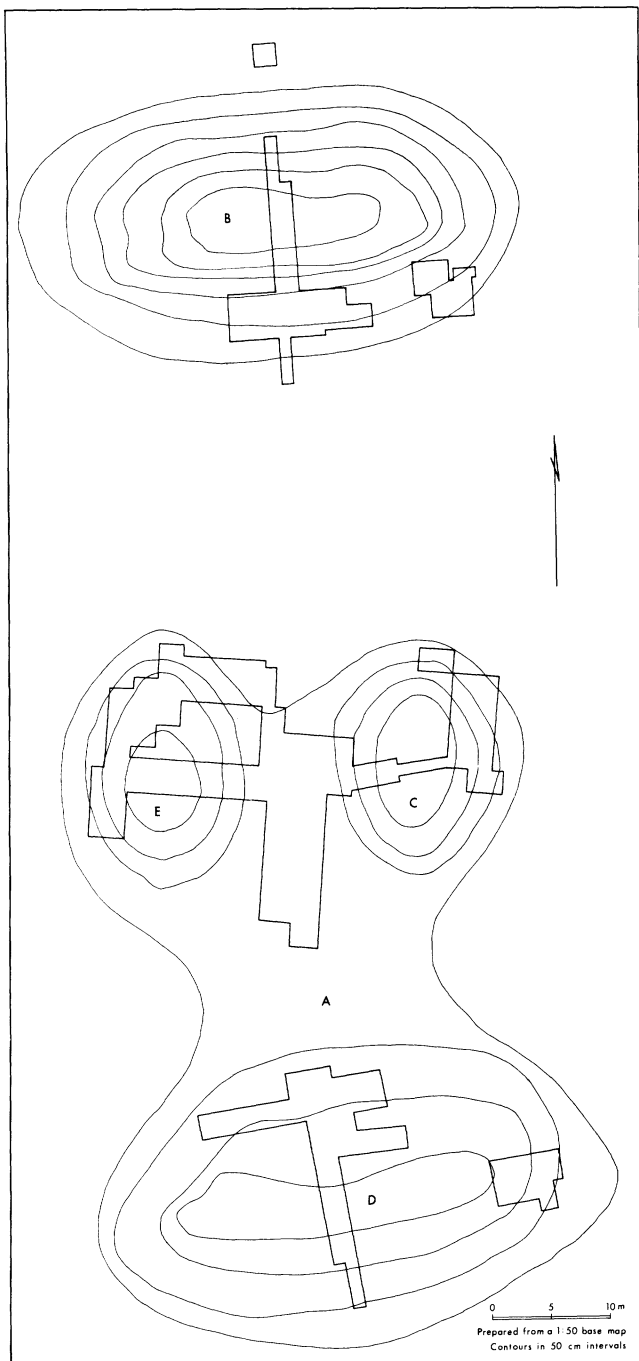


Figure 7. Topographic plan of the Structure 50 group showing the extent of excavation.

a functionally similar marker may have been used here at one point. This feature is south of the true E-W axis of the court, but it is in line with the hole in the alley.

In summary, the Structure 61 group is an open-ended ballcourt consisting of two parallel buildings flanking a raised alley. The buildings have broad, low benches fac-

ing the alley and these benches have sloped surfaces. The upper walls where the benches meet the buildings proper also show a slight positive batter and we surmise that the entire surface of the bench up to these walls constituted fair playing area. The obvious practical function of the sloped vertical faces of the benches is to encourage the ball to bounce upwards off of them. There is evidence that the court once contained markers, but if so they were removed in antiquity. Access to the summit of the buildings was provided by outset stairways set against the "back" sides on the central axis. There is no evidence that these buildings ever supported superstructures. Excavation reveals that the court was raised in a single construction effort and then subsequently refurbished several times. Ceramic trash associated with this construction effort dates to the Tulix phase, late Late Preclassic times.

Excavations in the Structure 50 Group

The Structure 50 group was discovered and topographically mapped during the 1978 field season. The group consists of a presumably continuous low substructure of rectangular form, long axis N-S, that covers ca. 1700 sq. m. This substructure is designated 50A, and upon it there are four buildings: Structures 50A and 50B, the "end-zone" ranges; and Structures 50C and 50E which define the court proper. These last are analogous to Structures 61B and 61C (FIG. 6). Limited tests on the NW corner of Structure 50E and on the south-side centerline of Structure 50B in 1978 revealed well-preserved masonry and yielded sealed Late Preclassic ceramic trash. At that time, the group was thought to be a large elite residence compound and was slated for intensive investigation on that basis. It only became apparent during excavations in 1979 that we were dealing with a ballcourt.¹³ All together, excavations resulted in 89 sq. m. of horizontal exposure on Structure 50B, 52 sq. m. on Structure 50C, 125 sq. m. on Structure 50D, 123 sq. m. on Structure 50E and 63 sq. m. in the playing alley between Structures 50C and 50E (FIG. 7). Excavation was aimed primarily at obtaining accurate architectural data, but deep trenches were placed into Structures 50B, 50D, and 50E and the playing alley to obtain sealed ceramic samples and information on internal construction. Ceramic trash in association with the buildings was uniformly sparse, but reasonable pottery samples of the Tulix phase were obtained from the stairway of Structure 50E, from flooring bordering the northern edge of that building, and from the hearting

13. Our thanks to Gareth Lowe and Thomas Lee who, lacking the conceptual blindness of lowlanders to the possibility of Preclassic ballcourts, readily recognized the Structure 50 group for what it was and informed us early in the 1979 season.

of Structure 50B. It is on the basis of these samples that the ballcourt is dated to late Late Preclassic times. Additional support for this dating is supplied by a substantial Early Classic reoccupation of the group. At that time it clearly functioned as a household compound: thick deposits of domestic trash in the form of utility wares, chipped stone, bone, and shell covered the buildings and the alley dating from this period.

Structures 50C and 50E forming the court proper are slightly smaller than their counterparts in the Structure 61 group; they average 18 m. (N-S) \times 14.5 m. (E-W). Each is preserved to a maximum height of 2.1 m. At 4.2 m., the width of the playing alley is nearly identical to that found in the Structure 61 group. The total level playing surface can be calculated to be 75.6 sq. m., slightly smaller than the one in the Structure 61 group.

Like the buildings in the Structure 61 group, Structures 50C and 50E have benches with sloped vertical faces bordering the playing alley. These benches are 3 m. wide and 1.1 m. high above the alley floor. Sections of plaster surfacing from the sloped vertical faces of the benches were found on both sides of the alley. These faces form an angle of roughly 50° with the alley, considerably steeper than the slopes in the Structure 61 group. The stepped block masonry face behind the plaster, however, has an average slope of 30°. Evidently the construction of the bench faces in the two groups differs slightly here: a thick layer of plaster and marl concrete separates the playing surface from the underlying masonry in the Structure 50 group. Only a small patch of the plaster of an upper bench surface was found on Structure 50C and it is not possible to tell whether or not it was sloped as in the case of Structures 61B and 61C. The upper alley-side surfaces of Structure 50E were found to be in poor condition; the comparable sections of Structure 50C were well preserved. Hence our descriptions of the upper inner side of the court comes from one building only, but it is reasonable to presume that the two were roughly symmetrical here. The juncture of the bench and the building on Structure 50C is marked by an upper playing wall as in the Structure 61 group. This wall is 50 cm. high and has a batter of 70°. In contrast with the Structure 61 group, there is a second playing wall set back 2 m. from the first. Like the first one, it is 50 cm. high and has a positive batter of 60°. Evidently this uppermost wall pertains to a platform at the summit of Structure 50C, for the east "back" wall was also found, yielding a width of 4 m. The analogous "back" wall of a summit platform was exposed on Structure 50E. The length of these platforms was not determined through excavation, but the conformation of the mounds suggests that the ends, like the sides, were set back from the wall of the substructure terrace associated with the first playing wall (FIGS. 6-7).

It is impossible to know with certainty if this uppermost wall was intended to be part of the field of play, but the batter suggests that it was.

Because of the exigencies of time and effort in the field, we know virtually nothing about the end and "back" walls of the Structure 61 group, but we have substantial information on these sectors of Structures 50C and 50E: they are two-terraced substructures surmounted by low-summit platforms. The terraces are constricted on the back sides to yield a fat T-shaped plan for the buildings. The wide sections of the lower terraces that directly join with the sloped bench faces are vertical and plain, and so are the side and back walls of the upper terrace (FIG. 6). The walls of the lower terraces on the constricted back sides are decorated: there are apron mouldings on the sides and inset panels on the back flanking the stairways. Fragments of painted and molded plaster were found in the vicinity of these inset panels on Structure 50C, suggesting that the panel carried a decorated façade. Unfortunately, no such plaster was found in situ. Nevertheless, it is clear that the "back-side" approaches to these buildings were important enough to merit considerable architectural elaboration.

As in the case of the Structure 61 group, access to the summits of Structures 50C and 50E was facilitated by outset stairways on the backsides. These stairways are both ca. 4.5 m. wide and are outset 1 m. from the lower terrace walls. Fragments of six treads were located on the stairway of Structure 50C, taking the stairway to the upper surface of the second terrace. Only the lower three treads were preserved on the Structure 50E stairway.

Fragments of masonry walls, a single course high, were discovered on the summit platform of Structure 50E. No such comparable evidence for a superstructure was found on Structure 50C. An educated guess would place these walls on Structure 50E in the Early Classic domestic reoccupation of the group rather than in the original Late Preclassic court design. Our reasoning is as follows. No plaster flooring was found in association with the walls on the summit of Structure 50E; nor was there any plaster on the summit of Structure 50C. Elsewhere on these court buildings, wherever the original Late Preclassic walls are preserved, fragments of plaster flooring are to be found. It is reasonable to surmise that the walls helped to accumulate debris and preserve the flooring. If the summit walls on Structure 50E were part of the original design, and if we make the plausible assumption that the summits were originally plastered, then we could expect plaster to be preserved next to these walls. On the other hand, if the walls were foundations for a perishable Early Classic superstructure, we would not expect plaster to be preserved next to them. Early Classic house flooring at Cerros is characteristically of

a soft lime marl that is easily destroyed. Under the circumstances it seems likely that the court buildings of the Structure 50 group like the Structure 61 group buildings, are devoid of superstructures in their original design.

The Structure 50 ballcourt contrasts most clearly with the design of the Structure 61 ballcourt in the presence of massive end-zone buildings. The association of these buildings with those on the playing alley lacks direct stratigraphic documentation in the form of a connecting trench. Nevertheless, there are reasonable empirical grounds for arguing that these buildings form part of the ballcourt complex. Firstly, the hard plaster floor fronting these structures is within 10 cm. of the elevation of the final alley floor. This circumstance indicates an absence of any major demarcation between the end-zone buildings and the court proper. Secondly, the positioning and orientation of the end-zone buildings (FIGS. 2, 6) clearly show that they are integral to the overall design of the complex in its final Late Preclassic form. Finally, ceramic trash dating to the Tulix phase was discovered in sealed contexts associated with the construction of these buildings (although the sample for Structure 50D was small). This contextual association indicates that the end-zone buildings were part of a major construction effort in the overall complex prior to abandonment and Early Classic domestic reuse. Unless the court changed function during primary, Late Preclassic, use; it is only reasonable to suggest that these buildings were an elaboration of the group as a ballcourt.

The design of the end-zone buildings is quite different from that of the court buildings; and while the end-zone buildings share important features, such as inset corners, they differ in many respects. Structure 50B, the northern building, is 34 m. long, 18 m. wide, and 3 m. high. Excavation exposed a stairway 9 m. wide on the centerline of the south side facing the court. This stairway evidently gave access to the summit; for while only the lower three treads were well preserved, traces of the upper stairway could be found to within a meter of the summit. This stairway is outset 1.75 m. from the flanking wall of a low terrace. This terrace, 20 cm. high and 75 cm. wide, is virtually a broad basal moulding. The wall rising behind this low terrace is preserved to a height of 45 cm. The conformation of the mound above this wall and the absence of substantial fall over it indicates that the wall did not continue to the full height of the building, but rather sloped back or continued up in a series of terraces. In the absence of preserved sections of upper building, we have reconstructed the wall as a continuous slope (FIG. 6), but this reconstruction is admittedly conjectural.

Excavation also exposed the complicated sw corner on Structure 50B. This corner is a rectilinear form, inset

1.75 m. (N-S) \times 1.5 m. (E-W). The corner within is 1 m. (E-W) \times 0.75 m. (N-S). Evidently this corner projected out from the building, for the southern side wall at the corner is 75 cm. south of the flanking low terrace next to the stairway.

There is a slight possibility that Structure 50B supported a superstructure. An E-W trending wall was discovered while trenching along the centerline. While this wall could have functioned as the foundation for a perishable superstructure, it is important to note that the wall descends into the hearting of the building as a "construction pen" wall designed to inhibit lateral slumpage (a common technique at Cerros). Hence it is just as likely that exposure of this wall at the summit is simply a result of construction fill settling around it.

Structure 50D is situated 64 m. south of Structure 50B and forms the southern side of the group. This building is 34 m. long, 16 m. wide, and 2.2 m. high. The building is designed as a sequence of three low, broad terraces (FIG. 6) surmounted by a long, narrow platform. Indeed, these terraces are so low (40 cm. or less) that they virtually constitute a set of steps surrounding the building. Furthermore, the second terrace has an additional step notched into its northern and southern sides making access to the summit, or any part of the sides, even easier. A physically superfluous but formally desirable additional step (4 m. wide) between the first and second terrace marks the "stairway" in the center of the northern side of the structure facing the court. It would be impossible to demonstrate that the north side of Structure 50D functioned as the sort of "grand-stand" occasionally depicted on Late Classic Maya polychrome vessels showing the ballgame,¹⁴ but the design of the terraces is certainly appropriate to such a function.

Excavations on the NW and SE corners of Structure 50D indicate that these were inset on both the first and second terraces in a manner similar to Structure 50B, although the insets here are somewhat deeper and more dramatic. Finally, although we have no preserved masonry to report on the northern "back-side" of Structure 50B, we can state with certainty that there is no formal stairway on the centerline of the southern "back-side" of Structure 50D. The lower terrace wall on this southern face is quite well preserved and, interestingly enough, shows a positive batter of 40°.

The summit of Structure 50D yielded circumstantial evidence of a perishable superstructure. Two well-built,

14. Nicholas M. Halmuth, "Pre-Columbian Ballgame: Archaeology and Architecture," *Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research (FLAAR) Progress Report*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Guatemala City 1975) 3-30.

masonry-lined postholes were discovered on the northern edge of the third, uppermost, terrace. These postholes are 50 cm. in diameter and have a preserved depth of about 40 cm. (the bases are lined with flagstones). These holes are appropriate housing for thick posts. The perfect alignment of the postholes with the edges of the tread denoting the "stairway" suggests that they supported jambs for a broad doorway. Unfortunately, limitations in time precluded any search for additional postholes. In light of this possibility, however, the long, low platform resting on the third terrace has the appropriate conformation and dimensions of a bench of the kind common in later Maya buildings.

In terms of basic design, the Structure 50 group court may differ from the Structure 61 group in another feature besides the end-zone buildings: the initial playing alley of the Structure 50 group is of the sunken type (FIG. 8). We cannot be certain, however, that the original alley in the Structure 61 group was not also sunken, for only in hindsight did this possibility present itself. As noted in the construction history of the Structure 50 group that follows, there are two floors on the alley; this parallels the known situation in the Structure 61 group.

The construction history of the court proper, Structures 50C and 50E (FIG. 8), is based upon trenching in the E-W centerline of the stairway of Structure 50E, trenching in the alley, and deep excavations on the NW and SE corners of Structure 50E. As in the case of the Structure 61 group, this court was built in a single construction effort. In-

itially, a thin marl outline was placed on the sterile black palaeosol over the area to be covered by the court. The marl was then covered with a construction level of small rubble grading into gravel at the top. This layer evidently served to level the gentle undulations of the original ground surface and varies from 25 cm. thick under the alley to virtually nothing under the floor fronting the stairway of Structure 50E. Upon this rubble a layer of marl and plaster concrete 2 cm thick was laid as an underflooring. Then the foundations of the buildings were raised and the hard plaster flooring of the alley was laid down. The plaster flooring in front of the stairway was also placed directly on this concrete layer. The margins of the playing alley to the north and south were then raised an additional 18 cm. with gravel in a marl matrix in order to achieve the alley's sunken form. These margins were then plastered over and the edges sloped down to the alley floor. As a result of this procedure, the center of the plaza where it borders the alley is roughly 30 cm. higher than the edges of the plaza beyond the backside stairways. This cant is certainly appropriate to drainage, although how they managed to keep the court from turning into a wading pool remains a mystery. Evidently getting the slope from center to side was a little tricky, for on the NW corner of Structure 50E the plaster floor had to be raised 10 cm. above the concrete underflooring with soft marl. As a consequence, the lower course of the building was buried here before the court was completed.

Structure 50A, B, & C Northern Profile

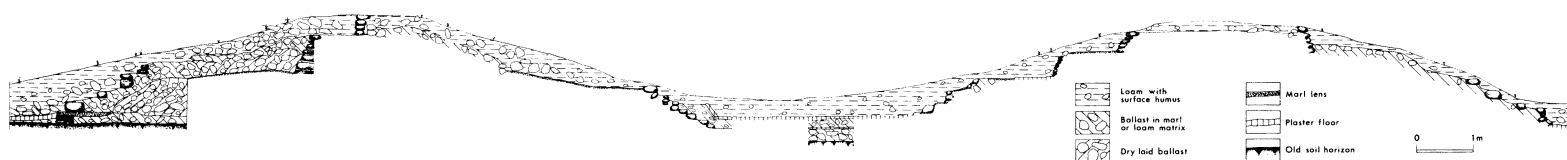


Figure 8. Stratigraphic profile of Structures 50C and 50E and the playing alley on the E-W axis of the group.

As in the case of Structure 61 group, the benches were built out over the hard plaster floor of the playing alley. In similar fashion, the sloped northern and southern edges of the sunken alley were built on the margins of this plaster floor. As in the case of the Structure 61 group, the sloped surfaces of the benches were achieved by stepped courses of small, loaf-shaped blocks. In contrast, however, there was no layer of intervening flagstones in the Structure 50 group court. The core of the benches was made of medium and small rubble in a matrix of dirt and marl.

In addition to the loaf-shaped blocks of the benches, two other kinds of masonry were used on the ballcourt buildings. The upper playing walls were made of fairly small flat stones of irregular size laid in rough courses. These seem to be simply larger and less finished versions of the loaf-shaped blocks. The constricted "back-sides" of the buildings, however, are sheathed in beautifully dressed rectangular blocks that are carefully coursed and fitted; the blocks used in the apron molding are nicely beveled. The finely dressed stones in the walls of Structure 50C are slightly smaller than those in Structure 50E; 10 cm. \times 15 cm. versus 15 cm. \times 25 cm. on the face. The superior quality of this masonry is surprising in light of common practice at Cerros, but there is no reason to doubt that these walls are part of the original court. We are evidently dealing here with an admirable precedent to the fine block masonry of Early Classic architecture. Common sense dictates that the rationale behind the added effort of fine dressing is the consequent decrease in the amount of slaked lime plaster finally applied and the ease of achieving a level surface in plaster. In notable contrast to Early Classic examples, these walls are not systematically chinked. Lastly, the treads of the stairways are built of rougher rectilinear blocks varying in size from 10 cm. \times 15 cm. to 25 cm. \times 50 cm. on a face. Overall, the variability in masonry in the court structures appears to have been an integral feature of the construction strategy: areas intended to carry a thick coating of plaster have commensurately cruder underlying masonry. But of course this begs the question: why thin plaster on the back-side and thick on the benches? Surely masons capable of the back walls could have put finely beveled blocks on the sloping benches. Granted the strong similarities between the benches in the two courts at Cerros, the implication of this line of reasoning is that certain traditional conventions of construction in this sacred architecture were being strictly adhered to, despite the availability of more advanced techniques.

As noted previously there is circumstantial evidence for court markers in the Structure 61 group. There is

similarly circumstantial evidence for markers in the alley of the Structure 50 group court. Large holes were found in both the original sunken floor and the subsequent raised floor. One reason to believe that these holes are not simply the result of tree disturbance or later use is that the holes in the final floor do not directly overlie the earlier ones, but rather are shifted slightly to the SE.

As in the case of the Structure 61 alley, the central hole is situated east of the N-S axis, a distance of 1 m. in the Structure 50 group. Here, however, the hole is on the E-W axis. The second hole in the Structure 50 alley is situated 3.5 m. south of the central hole, roughly halfway to the end of the court as defined by the beveled plaza edges. The second hole is also east of the N-S axis of the court. Both the holes measure roughly 1.5 m. (E-W) by 1 m. (N-S) and are oval in plan. Evidently the stones were harder to remove in this court, for the edges of the holes are angular and broken in contrast to the hole in the Structure 61 group. The holes in the lower alley were only partially exposed but they appear to have about the same dimensions.

Finally, it is possible that the Structure 50 group court at one time had a low plaster extension of the bench slope, as surmised for the Structure 61 group: a fragment of raised plaster appropriate to such an extension was found against the bench of Structure 50E.

In contrast to the court proper, the end-zone buildings appear to have been raised rather hastily and with poorer quality masonry. In the case of both structures our understanding of construction history is based upon trenches along the E-W centerline that penetrated the "front" side to mid-point.

As with the court structures, Structure 50B begins with a dirty white marl outline 3 cm. thick overlying the black clayey palaeosol. The bulk of the structure was then raised with dry medium and small angular rubble inside construction pens of medium to small dry-laid rubble. Evidently these pens were raised only a few courses at a time above the fill and no attempt was made to tail the pen walls into the fill as in some other buildings at Cerros. Two separate layers of pens were used in construction, the upper off-set from the lower. The rapid and expedient use of this standard Cerros construction technique points out that its function went beyond stabilization of dry fill, which would have been a tenuous supposition at best in this case. Here it seems likely that the primary function was to provide a handy and consistent unit of measure for the logistics of mining, transporting, and stock-piling of fill. No doubt the organization and allocation of labor likewise benefited.

Along the margins of the building, a hard plaster floor

was laid down on a ballast of gravel and trash about 40 cm. thick. This shift in fill occurs at the juncture of the stairway and is marked by a low construction wall that outlined the plan of the future building. The trash here yielded our sealed ceramics sample of the Tulix phase. A comparable outline wall in stacked rubble was found at the SE corner of the building. On the margins of this plaster floor, the treads of the stairway and the walls of the structure were raised. The masonry varies from small to medium-sized, loaf-shaped blocks in a thick grouting of marl.

In general, the construction strategy employed in the raising of Structure 50D is identical to that used in the other end-zone building: marl outline on black palaeosol followed by dry rubble in pens capped by gravel flooring ballast and plaster surfacing. In one interesting respect this strategy was not followed. Along the southern "back-side" of the building, underlying the plaster flooring and rubble, was the white-cream marl of weathered bedrock. The palaeosol had been evidently scraped away and no marl preparatory surface had been laid down. A possible explanation for this peculiar circumstance is as follows. The southern edge of the ballcourt complex, as defined by Structure 50D, is some 20 m. north of the perimeter canal surrounding the heart of the community at Cerros during Tulix times. Clearly this canal was a major source of construction fill as it averages roughly 10 m. in width and is nearly 2 m. deep in excavated contexts.¹⁵ On the basis of associated ceramics and a C-14 determination¹⁶ it can be argued that the canal is older than, or contemporary with, construction of the ballcourt. If the canal is older than the ballcourt, it is reasonable to suppose that construction fill was hauled to the court site by canoe and then transported by foot to the building locations. Alternatively, if the canal was in progress then the fill was hauled directly out of it. In either case, the creation of a temporary gently sloping accessway through excavation would have facilitated transport of the fill from the canal. Finally, it should be noted that the south-side trench on Structure 50C yielded a sealed sample of Late Preclassic sherds.

In summary, the Structure 50 group ballcourt is iden-

tical in design to the Structure 61 group court with the following notable exceptions: 1) the Structure 50 playing alley definitely has a sunken court in its original form and this defines level playing areas; 2) the court buildings in the Structure 50 group have summit platforms with battered alleyside walls that might have been included in the field of play; 3) the Structure 50 group includes substantial end-zone buildings that are presumably well outside the field of play, but which are appropriate in location and design for the function of viewing stands. Whether these end-zone buildings were part of the original design or a later addition associated with the raising of the alley to plaza level remains unknown.

The construction strategies employed in the two ballcourts are the same with minor variations. Major shared features include the use of a thin marl outline on the building site, the use of a leveling rubble bed capped with concrete or marl underflooring, the use of construction pens, the use of loaf-shaped masonry, and the creation of bench slopes with stepped walls. The employment of superior-quality dressed masonry in the Structure 50 group may be a notable exception to this similarity, but the comparable areas of the Structure 61 group were not exposed. In general these are techniques used in the majority of public buildings at Cerros. This fact demonstrates that the ballcourts were built by the people of Cerros themselves in the course of the emergence of the community as a major center during the Tulix phase of the Late Preclassic period.

Conclusions

Several lines of evidence presented in the body of this report support the contention that games played in masonry ballcourts were an integral feature of public life at the Late Preclassic lowland center of Cerros. Not only are the courts made with the same general construction techniques employed in other public architecture at the site, but they clearly are also expressions of a standardized architectural design for such facilities. Associated ceramics document contemporaneity of the courts with other public buildings at Cerros in its final Late Preclassic form and the courts are part of an overall design for public architecture in the center.

These data force us to consider two alternatives concerning the disposition of the ballgame in the Late Preclassic Maya lowlands: the people of Cerros were the lowland exception and maintained extraordinary ties with societies outside the lowlands where the ballgame is known to have been practiced; or, the ballgame is a normal feature of major lowland centers in the Late Preclassic period. In regards to the first possibility, it must be admitted that the Cerros courts are remarkably similar

15. David A. Freidel and Vernon Scarborough, "Subsistence, Trade and Development of the Coastal Maya," paper presented at a symposium in honor of Dennis E. Puleston, in St. Paul, 1979.

16. The date reads as follows: half-life 5568; 350 ± 145 B.C.; half-life 5730; 419 ± 145 B.C.; calibrated: 421 ± 145 B.C. Date run at Southern Methodist University Radiocarbon Laboratory, SMU #774. This is a tentative date subject to more precise tabulated values. Ceramics associated with the canal include diagnostics of the C'Oh phase, the middle of three Late Preclassic phases at Cerros, according to Robin Robertson-Freidel.

in construction and design to the only reported contemporary courts elsewhere, in the valley of Oaxaca.¹⁷ But in the absence of other evidence indicating some direct and intimate relationship between these widely separated areas this correlation must at best be viewed as indicative of wide-spread standardization in courts during the time period.¹⁸

When we take into consideration the total assemblage of public architecture at Cerros¹⁹ there is no evidence to suggest that the site is peculiar or deviant from lowland conventions. The same kinds of architectural design, stucco decoration and iconographic themes are reported from such sites as Tikal²⁰ and Uaxactun²¹ in Guatemala; and Lamanai in Belize.²² If Cerros was in the cultural "mainstream" in other respects, it seems unlikely to us that it was exceptional in its ballcourts. Under the circumstances we would prefer to attribute the lack of reported Preclassic ballcourts to the fact that such pristine Late Preclassic public centers as Cerros, unburdened by later major construction, are a rare phenomenon in the lowlands. We would further anticipate that as Late Preclassic public architecture becomes better known, more ballcourts will be forthcoming.

The Early Classic situation is rather different. In the first place, the corpus of information on Early Classic public architecture is substantially greater than that from the Late Preclassic period. Hence the absence of ballcourts more closely approaches the status of negative evidence. In the second place, the common patterns marking the transition between Early and Late Classic public architecture are 1) continued modification and reconstruction on the same location, and 2) shifting of the site center and cessation of construction on the Early Classic locations. The two reported Early Classic courts are representative of these dynamics. At Copan, the Early Classic court directly underlies Late Classic ballcourts. At Palenque, the Early Classic court is part of an abandoned focus for the center. Now, one cannot altogether preclude the possibility that Early Classic courts exist in

lowland centers but are thoroughly buried and hidden under massive Late Classic plazas or buildings. Nevertheless, given the patterns described above, it seems highly unlikely that Early Classic ballcourts were simply missed at such sites as Tikal, Uaxactun,²⁴ and Altar de Sacrificios²⁵ in the interior of the peninsula. In light of this reasoning, we suggest that the absence of reported ballcourts in the Early Classic sites of the interior lowlands is a true reflection of a hiatus in the construction of masonry courts between Late Preclassic and Late Classic times.

We readily grant the extremely tenuous and speculative status of this pattern, but suppose it turns out to be confirmed? The interpretive possibilities are intriguing. In the first place, it may be more than coincidental that the ballgame is played without masonry courts at Teotihuacan—the dominant society in Middle Classic (400–600 A.C.) Mesoamerica.²⁶ The relationship between the lowland Maya and the city of Teotihuacan remains complicated and obscure, but definitely involved ritual activities and paraphernalia. At the very least, the case of Teotihuacan raises the possibility that the postulated hiatus in masonry courts registers a change in the way the game was played rather than temporary abandonment of the game as such.

Secondly, the lowland Maya may have genuinely given up the game during Early to Middle Classic times as a consequence of changing central institutions. Joseph Michels has recently suggested that ballcourts at Late Classic Kaminaljuyu were maintained by chiefs for the purpose of resolving conflicts between their constituencies.²⁷ The courts at Cerros contrast with those at Kaminaljuyu in that they are not associated with elite residence complexes. Nevertheless, the Cerros courts do define the major N-S axis that divides the site into roughly equal parts. It is reasonable to conjecture that the ballgames played at Cerros involved competition and conflict

17. Flannery and Marcus, op.cit. (in note 3) 219.

18. In the typology of Jacinto Quirarte, the Cerros courts are Type 2 or Type 2a, see J. Quirarte, "El Juego de Pelota en Mesoamerica: Su Desarrollo Arquitectónico," in *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 8 (1972) 83–96.

19. Freidel, op. cit. (in note 9).

20. William R. Coe, "Tikal, Guatemala, and Emergent Maya Civilization," *Science* 147 (1965) 1401–1423.

21. Oliver G. Ricketson and E. B. Ricketson, "Uaxactun, Guatemala: Group E 1926–1931," *Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication* 477 (1937) 73–80.

22. Personal communication from David Pendergast, 1979.

23. Personal communication from Chris Jones and W. R. Coe: there is a ballcourt at Tikal that might date to Early or Middle Classic times.

24. A. Ledyard Smith, "Uaxactun, Guatemala: Excavations of 1931–1937," *Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication* 588 (1950) 73–74.

25. A. Ledyard Smith, *Excavations at Altar de Sacrificios: Architecture, Settlement, Burials and Caches*. *PapPeaMus* 62:2 (1972) 121.

26. Color illustrations of courtless ball players depicted on the Tepantitla murals can be found in Bradley Smith, *Mexico: A History in Art* (Doubleday and Co. Inc.: Garden City, New York 1968) 68–69; Rene Millon, B. Drewitt and G. Cowgill, *Urbanization at Teotihuacan I: The Teotihuacan Map* (University of Texas Press, Austin 1973).

27. Joseph W. Michels, *The Kaminaljuyu Chiefdom. The Pennsylvania State University Press Monograph Series on Kaminaljuyu*, J. W. Michels and W. T. Sanders, eds. (University Park 1979) 229–232.

between factions within the community as well as competition between communities. It is possible that the postulated hiatus in masonry courts signals important reorganization in the way that dispute was adjudicated within and between lowland Maya polities. Were this the case, then the disappearance of the ballgame would be linked with the advent of the stelae portraying rulers, celebrations of dynasty carved in stone and painted on pottery, and the depiction of dieties as human beings. Taken together, these changes in public material culture evidently manifest the consolidation of power in the office of ruler throughout the Early Classic Maya lowlands. The divine inspiration of kings may have replaced the ballgame in the settlement of dispute.

This hypothesis works well enough for adjudication within the realm of a single ruler, but what of dispute between polities? If the ballcourt were an arena for equals, the court of a ruler surely was not; and the hypothesis implies the existence of a hierarchy of authority such that disputes between polities could be settled peaceably by appeal to higher-order rulers. Hierarchy of this kind is demonstrable in Late Classic hieroglyphic texts²⁸ and may be detectable in the Early Classic.

The intriguing feature of "hiatus" phenomena, however, is that the eclipse of such classes of material culture is only temporary. During the 6th century A.C., for example, there was a dramatic decline in the production of carved stone stelae²⁹ followed by a greatly increased geographic distribution and general proliferation of these monuments. Similarly, small pottery figurines presumably used in domestic ritual are present in the Middle Preclassic period (1000–400 B.C.), drop out of the record during the ensuing Late Preclassic, and then reappear during the Early Classic. As in these cases, when ballcourts reappear during the Late Classic they are relatively abundant and prominent features of public ritual. Does the resurgence in ballcourts signal the erosion of ruling power relative to an increasing elite constituency? Until we have more confidence in the ballcourt hiatus it is premature to speculate further, but it is possible that this and other gaps in the Maya record constitute a processually significant class of phenomena.

28. Joyce Marcus, *Emblem and State in the Classic Maya Lowlands* (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. 1976) 32–43.

29. Gordon R. Willey, "The Classic Maya Hiatus: a 'Rehearsal' for the Collapse?" in *Mesoamerican Archaeology: New Approaches*, Norman Hammond, ed. (Duckworth and Co., Ltd.: London 1974) 417–430.

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