

**BALLCOURT ICONOGRAPHY AT
CARACOL, BELIZE**

by

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ABSTRACT

One of the more commonly known aspects of the ancient Maya culture is the ballgame. This ancient ballgame was played by most Mesoamerican cultures on a constructed ballcourt and many major Mesoamerican sites have at least one, if not more than one. Contemporary Mesoamericans still play versions of this ballgame today, but without the use of the ballcourts, questioning the importance and purpose of the ballcourt that is no longer the case today.

After over a century of research, scholars have yet to unravel all the cosmological and mythological mysteries of the ballcourt and its purpose to the ancient Maya. Although the archaeological record rarely supports the well-known Postclassic Hero Twin myth, most scholars continue to use this myth to interpret Classic ballgame iconography. In this study, I link Classic period ballcourt architecture and iconography at Caracol to Preclassic cache practices, to an Early Classic tomb, and to an elite Classic structure, demonstrating a widespread set of cosmological symbols that were not exclusively reserved for the ballcourt. I suggest that the four eroded figures on Caracol Ballcourt Markers 1 and 2 represent east, west, zenith, and nadir, and that the north-south alignment of Classic Southern Lowland ballcourts was the result of a vertical visualization of the three ballcourt markers. This study shows that the Maya ballcourt was a cosmogram, intended to delineate sacred space and demarcate a portal into the underworld.

To my parents, I am eternally grateful for the unconditional support.
And to my amazing daughter who had to live in the same house with me during all of
this. I know it was hard for you to understand sometimes.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

There are several aspects of the ancient Maya civilization that are widely studied: pyramid temples and large epicenters; hieroglyphic writing; a complicated calendar system; and, the ballcourt. Almost every ancient Maya city had at least one ballcourt; most had more than one. However, despite extensive excavation and research on Maya ballcourts, as well as ballcourts in surrounding Mesoamerican areas, there has yet too be a unanimous agreement on the mythological and cosmological details encompassing the ancient Maya ballgame. A large portion of what has been written about the Classic Period Maya ballgame contains references to the Hero Twin myth from the Postclassic *Popol Vuh*, yet the archaeological record rarely shows clear and distinct ties to this myth. For example, in reference to “three-conquest” ballcourts and stairs, Tokovinine (2002:1) states that “none of the *hux-‘ahaal* structures’ dedicatory inscriptions contain any direct reference to the hero twins.

The fact is that iconography pertaining to the ballgame is often difficult to interpret with confidence. It also tends to be inconsistent from site to site, although regional themes can be often found in the iconographic record. Barrois (2006:372), in an extensive dissertation on ballcourt iconography throughout Mesoamerica, shows that the visual manifestations of iconography displayed on Mesoamerican ballcourts can be grouped geographically and chronologically. These regional variations do not always permeate throughout the entire Mesoamerican area; nor do themes even remain clearly linked amongst those sites that have been identified as Maya.

Ballcourt iconography often seems to be related to mythological or cosmological

themes, but the task of interpreting ancient and esoteric thoughts can be complicated due to a multitude of variables, the most obvious being the mutation of myths over long periods of time and space. Kubler (1962:26) writes “our historical discriminations still are too imprecise to document these mental changes generation by generation, but the outlines of large, coarse changes are clearly evident.” Epigraphic breakthroughs and the development of more rigorous archaeological field methodologies has led Mesoamerican scholars to “recognize that archaeological information reflects not only material conditions but also ideas and ideologies (Mock 1998:3). If one looks closely, there are cosmological undertones in Maya iconography and architecture that are similar and more consistent than what would initially appear to be the case, as if within all the artistry of generations of master- builders and artists there existed a common thread of meaning in the messages that were being conveyed. This common thread is also found in caching practices. Mock (1998:3) qualifies this common thread, or Mesoamerican worldview, as “unified by a few deep structural principles,” but these principles undergo periodic changes through time and space, transforming and undergoing alterations, making common ideologies difficult to identify (Mock 1998:4).

The suggestion that I make in this thesis is that this Mesoamerican worldview, found ubiquitously throughout Mesoamerica in caching practices dating from the Preclassic and extending into the Postclassic (D. Chase 1988:86,90), as well as in iconography that is found on ballcourt and non-ballcourt related structures, was the impetus for the actual construction plan for the majority of Southern Lowland Classic Period ballcourts. I argue that ballcourt markers, where they existed, as well as the north-south alignment of such positioned ballcourts, served a cosmological purpose. I

demonstrate that many Classic Period Southern Lowland ballcourts contained the same worldview symbolism as layered and quadripartioned caches, as well as symbolism found in other archaeological contexts, but on a large and publicly-visible scale. Postclassic period ballcourts, as well as those ballcourts which are aligned in an east-west direction, or which do not contain three ballcourt markers, are not addressed in this study.

As previously mentioned, one of the issues in the interpretation of Classic Period ballcourt iconography has been the overwhelming use of the “Hero Twin” myth from the *Popul Vuh*, a Postclassic Quiche’ Maya myth of the creation of humans and the universe. Because the *Popul Vuh* was written in the Postclassic by anonymous Guatemalan Highland authors (Tedlock 1996:30; D. Chase and A. Chase 2009), the myth should be considered questionable in its reliability when dealing with Classic Lowland Maya iconography. Tokovinine (2002:3) states that of all the *Popul Vuh* characters, “only the Maize God and Jun’Ajaw hero twin might patronize the game.” Likewise, although numerous unprovenienced ceramics may show scenes from the Hero Twin myth, “these same images are unusual in materials recorded from the archaeological record” (D. Chase and A. Chase 2009). Considering that iconographic themes can be found grouped geographically and chronologically (Barrois 2001:372, and understanding that theological concepts can undergo changes through time and space (Mock 1998:4), it is then reasonable to argue that a Postclassic Highland myth may not be applicable to Lowland Classic interpretations. In the following investigation of the ballcourt markers from Caracol, there is no indication that the Hero Twin Myth is represented in the iconography.

Although there have been many attempts to define Maya public architecture in terms of cosmology (Ashmore 1991:200), there has yet to be a unanimous decision as to whether or not the Maya, or all Mesoamericans, actually built their cities to represent the cosmos at all (Flannery and Marcus 2000:7; Scarborough 1991:139). However, as a result of this study, it is suggested that the Lowland Maya ballcourt may have been designed to function as a cosmogram and that it included Preclassic cosmological ideologies seen in caching practices that were later adopted by the Classic Maya and incorporated into the ballcourt structure.

CHAPTER 2 - CARACOL BALLCOURT MARKER ANALYSIS

Caracol Ballcourt Markers 1 and 2, henceforth referred to as CBM 1 and 2, recovered in the 1985 and 1986 field seasons by the Caracol Archaeological Project, (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: Figs. 24 and 26) are stylistically of the same set. Both show two figures facing away from each other with foliage emerging from the center and spreading above them (Figs. 1A and 1B). Houston (1987:93) suggested that CBM 1 showed “a sun god and an animal, possibly a rabbit or jaguar” while CBM 2 consisted of “the ‘God of Number Nine’ and a skeletal deer.” Rubbings by Merle Greene Roberston (www.mesoweb.com/pari) provide additional perspectives (Figs. 3A and 3B).

CBM 1 was found lying 8 meters from the southeast corner of Ballcourt A, while CBM 2 was found in the center of Ballcourt B (Fig. 2). Because of their identical thematic styles, it is obvious that both markers are of the same set. However, it is unknown at the present time which ballcourt CBM 1 and 2 were originally located, or if the location of CBM 2 in the center of Ballcourt B was its primary location. The manner in which both markers were found, one marker in the center of one ballcourt and the other marker near an outside corner of the other ballcourt, indicates that they most likely are not in their original locations and had been re-set differently than their primary contexts (Houston 1987:93). The suggestion in this paper is that they were originally located on Ballcourt A, with CBM 1 on the north end and CBM 2 on the south end, with an additional marker (discussed at the end of chapter 6) in the center. This suggestion is entirely speculative at this point and would require further study.

Unpublished photos taken by Harri Kettunen permit a new drawing of CBM 2 that clearly shows a jaguar head facing away from what is most likely an image of God N emerging from his shell, as well as underwater iconography in the form of a fish nibbling on water lily buds (Fig. 4B). Additional photographs taken of CBM 1 enable a more confident identification of the figures. One is a rabbit, while the other is the Sun God (Fig. 4A). These photographs highlighted two important features of the Sun God, a curled tendril on the side of his mouth and the T-shaped incisor protruding from underneath the upper lip.

The jaguar, known to be the form that the setting sun takes as it begins its journey through the underworld (Sharer and Traxler 2006:739), is associated with west and his image is common at Caracol. For example, numerous Late Classic incensarios have been found at Caracol which exhibit the nighttime jaguar aspects of the Sun God; some of which were associated with eastern residential shrines (A.Chase 1994:166,175; A.Chase and D.Chase 1994:56).

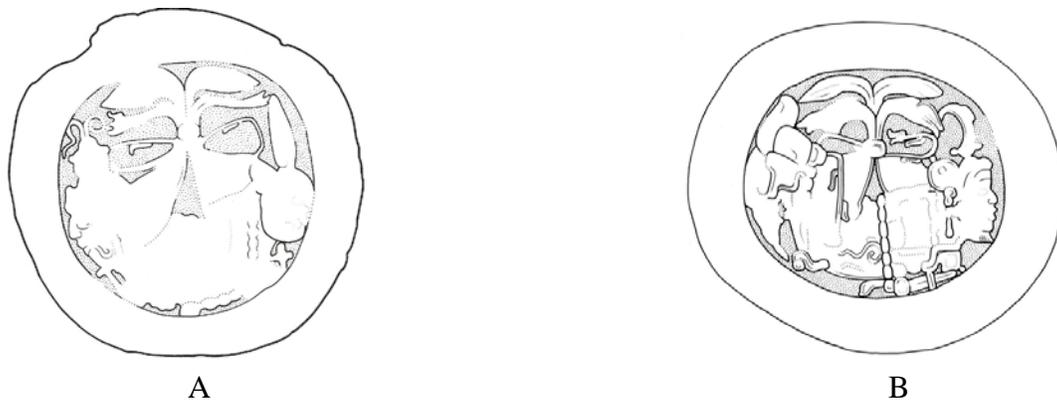


Figure 1 - Caracol Ballcourt Markers
(Drawing by S. Houston in A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: Fig 24 and 26).

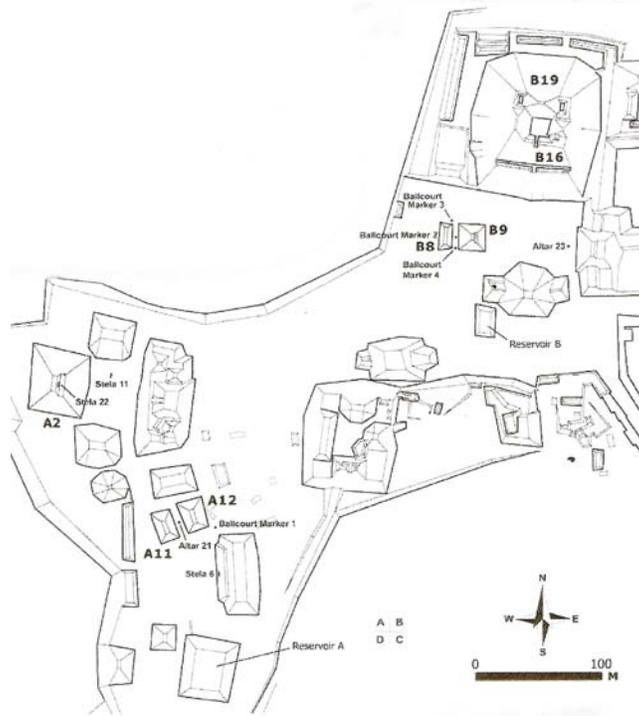
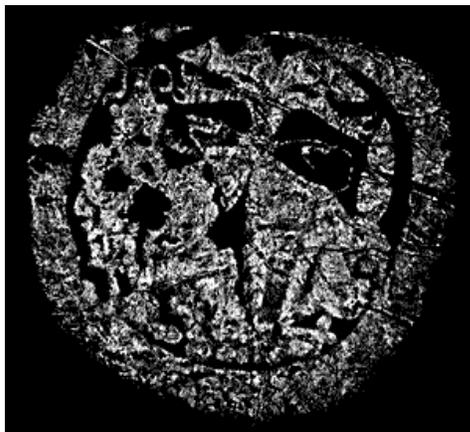


Figure 2 - Caracol epicenter sitemap.
 (Helmke et al. 2006:2; after A. Chase et al. 1991).



A



B

Figure 3 - Caracol Ballcourt Markers
 (www.mesoweb.com/pari © Merle G. Roberston. Used with permission.)



Figure 4 - Caracol Ballcourt Markers
(Drawings by Patsy Holden 2009)

The figure facing away from the jaguar on CBM 2, as previously mentioned, appears to be God N emerging from his shell. A similar image of God N on a ceramic bowl (Fig. 5) was found in a royal tomb in Santa Rita Corozal (A.Chase 1992:36). God N is often associated with Venus. Kerr image 2774, an unprovenienced ceramic, is but one of many demonstrations of God N and his association with Venus, as he emerges from the mouth of a serpent which contains the Venus glyph (Fig. 6).



Figure 5 - Santa Rita Corozal bowl
(D. Chase and A. Chase 2005:114, Fig. 7b-a).

CBM 1 shows a rabbit head, which is often symbolic of or associated with the moon in Maya iconography (Taube 1992:64). The Sun God which faces away from the rabbit is associated with east, and the rising sun. Therefore, what appears to be

identifiable on CBM 1 and 2 are representations of the east (rising sun), west (setting sun), the moon, and Venus.



Figure 6 - K2774 © Justin Kerr.

A set of figures on the Sky-Band Bench at Copan (Fig. 7) show this same iconographic theme. The bench, located in an elite residential structure, shows iconographic representations of day, night, the moon, and Venus (H. Bricker and V. Bricker 1999:437).

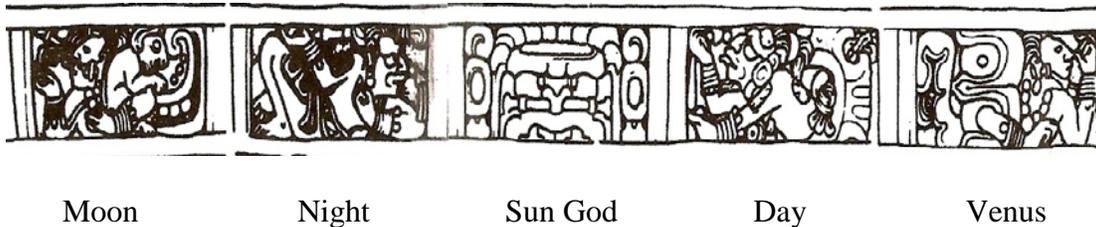


Figure 7 - Skyband bench, Copan.
Copan (H. Bricker and V. Bricker 1999:439).

The iconography on the Sky-band bench is strikingly similar in content not only to CBM 1 and 2, but also to the glyphs in Rio Azul Tomb 12 (Adams 1999:56). In Rio Azul Tomb 12 (Fig. 8), two separate hieroglyphs painted on each of the four walls of the tomb show “the four cardinal directions, each associated with a major celestial body” (Adams 1999:56). The east wall is associated with the *kin* (day) glyph while the west

wall is associated with the *akbal* (night) glyph. The north and south walls in Rio Azul Tomb 12 feature glyphs that represent the moon and Venus, respectively. The associations of the moon and Venus with north and south are less clear than are the associations of the Sun God to east and the jaguar to west, considering that the moon and Venus both rise in the east and set in the west as well. However, some have noted that the directions for ‘north’ and ‘south’ in Maya symbolism are vague, and that glyphs denoting these directions may have actually referred to zenith and nadir (V. Bricker 1983:350-2; V. Bricker 1988; Coggins 1980:728; Levi 1988:611; Mathews and Garber 2004:50; Stross 1991). Wendy Ashmore (1991:201;) suggests that directional glyphs for north and south refer to ‘up’ and ‘down,’ “in which north may be perceived as ‘up,’ with associations to sky and the celestial realm, and south as ‘down,’ with associations to the underworld.”

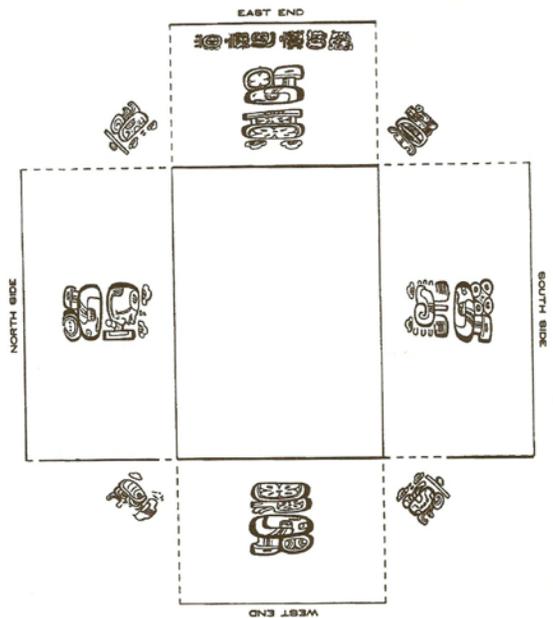


Figure 8 - Rio Azul Tomb 12.
(Adams 1999:56)

The south wall, which contains the glyph for Venus, also contains a shell glyph, which is often associated with God N. Stross (1991:108) makes an argument that “in the ‘Star over Earth’ glyph collocation...the snail shell...can substitute for the ‘earth’ glyph (Caban). This implies strongly that the snail shell can symbolize earth...[and] with an earth reference for ‘snail,’ the meaning of the ‘south’ glyph remains ‘nadir’ (108). Stross (1991:105) also states that “the snail is just as firmly connected with the earth and more specifically to the underworld in Maya thought.” Additionally, God N “is strongly associated in Maya iconography with the spiral snail form of the conch shell” (Stross 1994:7). Finally, Mathews and Garber (2004:54) note that “the glyph for the south is a Venus glyph, which has male associations; and the north glyph is linked to the feminine moon.”

The associations of the rabbit to the moon in Maya iconography are well documented (Cohodas 1991:284; Schele and Freidel 1990:412; Taube 1992:66-67; Wilkerson 1991:65). Thus, the north wall which contains the glyph for the moon can reasonably be associated to the rabbit on CBM 1, while the south wall and its shell glyph can, likewise, be associated with God N on CBM 2. The zenith and nadir conceptualization of the rabbit and God N on CBM 1 and 2 finds support in the research of Andrea Stone (1985:46), as she determined that the heads of the Principle Bird Deity and God N on either side of a zoomorph should instead be visualized in a vertical alignment. Stone notes that “metaphorical variation results when a different visual metaphor is used to fill the same semantic niche” (1985:40). Furthermore, Victoria Bricker (personal communication January 18, 2009) notes that the moon and Venus were in direct opposition on the date painted in the Rio Azul Tomb 12. At 9 PM, as Venus

was setting in the west, the almost full moon was rising on the eastern horizon; later that night the moon would have been directly overhead while Venus traveled through the Underworld. This occasional alignment also occurred thirty days before and after this date as well.

Therefore, it can be reasonably suggested that the iconography on CBM 1 and 2 portrays east, west, zenith, and nadir. This theme can be found at various sites and is demonstrated in various contexts, such as in the Rio Azul Tomb 12, the Copan Skyband Bench, and on CBM 1 and 2, suggesting a pan-Maya belief that is not exclusively ballcourt-related. However, the fact that this iconographic theme is found on ballcourt markers at Caracol invites a deeper understanding of its association, if any, to the ballcourt and any contribution to the ballcourt's symbolic meaning. This deeper understanding can be found in the iconography on certain painted ceramics, which are discussed in the following section.

CHAPTER 3 - EAST, WEST, ZENITH, AND NADIR

The iconographic symbolism of east, west, zenith, and nadir can be found demonstrated on many ceramics. For example, on a Late Classic bowl, Taube (1988:195-6) identifies the Tonsured Maize God, the prototype of Hunahpu, as a youthful male rising from a cracked turtle carapace (Fig 9), with the Hero Twins appearing on either side of him, and a turtle head and Cauac Monster emerging from either end of the carapace shell.



Figure 9 - K1892 © Justin Kerr.

The imagery of the Maize God rising from a cracked turtle shell while being flanked on both sides by minor deities is comparable to other ceramics that are similar in theme but vary in artistic rendition. For example on Kerr image 731 (Fig.10), the Maize God is being paddled into the Underworld as he appears to emerge from a cracked carapace, while two deities emerge from both ends near his feet.

If we next look at the iconographic imagery on a cache vessel found under the west stairs of Toh-Chak-Ich'aks Palace in Tikal (Schele and Mathews 1998:77-8), we

again see this same theme (Fig. 11). This time the ruler is dressed as the Maize God and emerges from the center of the scene holding two serpents that represent the ecliptic snake (Schele and Mathews 1998:78). At the ends of both serpent heads emerge two



Figure 10 - K731 © Justin Kerr

paddler gods. The one on the right, or to the ruler's left, (west) shows jaguar attributes. The Quadripartite God, "who is the personified offering plate that opens a portal to the Otherworld," (Schele and Mathews 1998:78) is located next to the scene. When this scene is wrapped around the vessel, the Quadripartite God is situated opposite of the Maize God and would therefore be directly behind (symbolically underneath) the ruler, thus creating the source from which he is emerging (often referred to as a portal) in the same manner as the cracked turtle carapace in Figures 9 and 10.

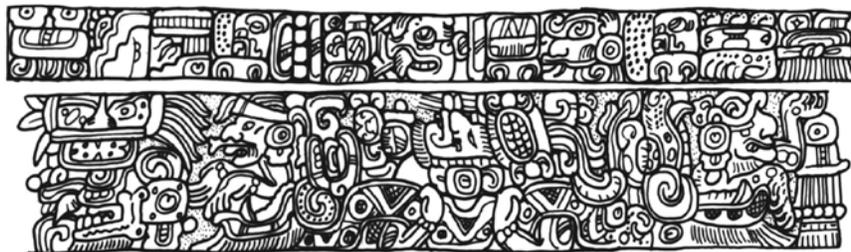


Figure 11 - Tikal cache.

(Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org).

And finally, the Maize God on Kerr image 5226 (Fig. 12) is again holding two serpents, again with deities emerging from either side. However, in this particular scene, the Maize God is emerging from center of the profile of a ballcourt. Based on the variation of all four of these examples, it can be argued that the theme of the Maize God emerging from a central point and rising vertically along the *axis mundi*, while having minor deities on either side, is a fairly common.



Figure 12 - K5226 © Justin Kerr

In this iconographic theme of opposing heads flanking either side of a figure rising through the center, artistic interpretations are different from one ceramic piece to another, but the opposing directionality represented most likely remains the same; they symbolize east and west, or day and night. In fact, similar to the east and west walls of Rio Azul Tomb 12, the Tikal cache vessel (see Fig. 10) shows the Old Jaguar God opposite the Old Stingray God (Cohodas 1991:272; Schele and Mathews 1998:78). According to Michael D. Coe and Mark Van Stone (2005:118), the logograms on the foreheads of these two deities, which are found on many monuments concerned with the Creation, “may be replaced with *ak’bal* and *k’in* glyphs, symbolizing night and day, respectively.”

Additionally, zenith (moon) and nadir (Venus) are implied on these ceramics through the rising action of the central figure, most often a Maize God or ruler, as he

emerges in a vertical direction from a central position. The symbolism of a vertical line, or *axis mundi*, along with an east-west horizontal line is not only suggested in the iconography on ceramics, as just shown, but it is also found in caching practices throughout Mesoamerica where it is often combined with the *quincunx* pattern (five corners and a center) or with layering, or both.

CHAPTER 4 - SYMBOLISM IN CACHES

Coe's (1959:77) definition of a cache is "one or more objects found together, but apart from burials, whose grouping and situation point to intentional interment as an offering." Caches may be found either as intrusive into earlier structures or buried directly within the fill during a building's construction (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998:300). Caches are often contained within pottery vessels and typically have contents that had ritual and symbolic significance; alternatively, the objects may be placed without the benefit of a specialized container and can be "extremely variable in their specific combinations" (D. Chase 1988:85). When human remains are present in caches, they may be difficult to distinguish from burials, but typically caches contain only partial human remains, if they contain human remains at all (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998:300).

Caches are esoteric in nature and represent thoughts, beliefs, and other types of ritual activities, and "may provide physical representations of the Maya worldview. A number of the Caracol caches evince an ordered layout that appears to reflect the Maya view of the Cosmos" (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998:303). The objects may be layered, representing the three layers of the universe (upper, middle, and underworld), or they may represent a quadripartite division of the landscape (Mathews and Garber 2004:52). Some caches may contain more than one type of symbolism, such as both layering and the *quincunx* pattern. Objects in the cache may also indicate specific veneration to the east and the rising sun, or west and to the setting sun, or both. It is within the inspection of the symbolism of caching practices that date from the Preclassic to the Postclassic, and which are found abundantly throughout the entire Mesoamerican region, that we find

additional clues as to what the Sun God, jaguar, rabbit, and God N on CBM 1 and 2 represented.

During excavations in 2003 and 2004, a Preclassic cache was found at the site of Cival, located in the northeastern Peten of Guatemala (Bauer 2005:28-9; Estrada-Belli 2006:59). This cache, interred sometime before 350 B.C. was an incredible example of the Maya conceptualization of the cosmos, displaying not only layering and a recognition of east, west, and an *axis mundi*, but also quadripartite division utilizing the *quincunx* pattern as well (Fig. 13).

Estrada-Belli (2006:59-61) describes the contents of this cache as containing an upper level of shelves branching into four directions and a middle level of four matching shelves, each containing a black jar (olla). Underneath the eastern olla was a crushed red vessel. On a lower central shelf rested a single black olla with four jade celts at its base; the western celt was a blue-green shade and different from the others. At the very base of this entire arrangement was a large, single piece of finely crafted jade and numerous jade pebbles. After the entire pit was filled and leveled, a post was erected in the center at the pit surface. This post would have represented the *axis mundi*.

There are three symbolic elements utilized in the Cival cache, and other caches, that are important to this study. First, the eastern red crushed vessel and the western blue-green jade celt venerate east and west, respectively. When combined with zenith and nadir (post erected at the top and the centralized large jade celt at the base of the pit), or the *axis mundi*, we see the same four spatial points represented in CBM 1 and 2. Second, the three vertical layers of shelves indicate a layered effect similar to that of layered caches, representing the three layers of the cosmos. Third, the *quincunx* pattern,

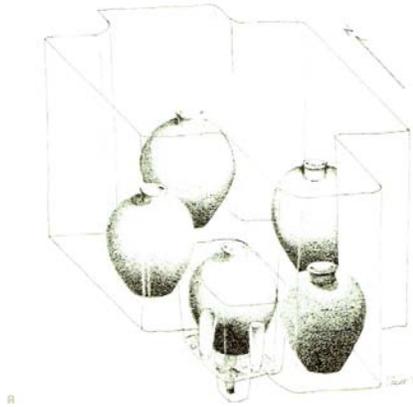


Figure 13 - Cival cache.
Drawing by Joel Zovar. (Estrada-Belli 2006:60).

or quadripartite division of the landscape, was demonstrated by the five ollas, as well as the five jade celts. By the Late Preclassic, the *quincunx* had become associated with the title of *ahaw*, as “the new ruler identified himself with the axis mundi, the reborn Maize God” (Estrada-Belli 2006:63).

These three symbolic elements were tangible representations of the esoteric concepts of the Maya cosmos. They can be observed in many caches, tombs, iconography, and architecture of the Maya, as well as across Mesoamerica. Some caches may represent layering, or east-west veneration, while others show quadripartite divisions (Mathews and Garber 2004:52). For example, a cache containing multiple jars and that was similar in shape and form to the Cival cache was found at Seibal (Estrada-Belli 2006:59; Smith 1982:245). Five whole vessels placed in the shape of the quadripartite form and oriented to the four cardinal directions was found at Blackman Eddy (Garber et al. 1992:9; Garber et al. 1998:129-130; Mathews and Garber 2004:52). The north, south, and west positions contained bowls while the east position contained a plate. An inverted plate covered the southern bowl. Freidel and Schele (1988:555-6) discuss a Late

Preclassic cache found at Cerros, which contained four small carved jade heads positioned on four sides of a larger carved jade Jester God, in the *quincunx* pattern.

It is suggested that Olmec iconography carved on celts demonstrates the *quincunx*. The celt shows the Maize God at the center of the *quincunx* pattern, (Fig. 14) which symbolically represented political and religious power and authority (Mathews and Garber 2004:50; Reilly 1990:38, 1994:83-84). By the Late Preclassic, the title of *ahaw* had associations with the Maize God, and rulers often associated themselves with the center of the *quincunx* in iconography and in burial practices (Freidel and Schele 1988: 548), a practice that would continue for centuries. An example of this is the ruler in Rio Azul Tomb 12, who had originally been placed in the center of the *quincunx* shape of the tomb's hieroglyphs (Mathews and Garber 2004:54).

Layered caches are also frequently found, for example a cache located on the east-west axis of an eastern mound at Blackman Eddy consisting of “two lip-to-lip Early Classic bowls. The lower bowl contained a layer of white marl, nine large crude brown chert flakes, carbonized twigs, and a rodent skeleton” (Garber et al. 1998:127; Mathews and Garber 2004:53). In an example which incorporates both layering and quadripartite symbolism, an urn cache from Caracol contained the remains of a beehive in its uppermost layer, a layer of malachite pebbles at its base, and a jadeite earflare surrounded by four sets of marine bivalves at its center (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998:316).

This same set of symbolic elements are echoed by Ashmore (1991:201) in reference to the use of directionality for epicenter site-planning. In this study, Ashmore identifies four criteria used for architectural arrangement by “drawing on data and interpretive arguments from various sources” (Ashmore 1991:200). These criteria

resemble the three symbolic elements found in caching practices discussed in this paper; a layered universe, four horizontal directions plus a central position, and cycles of the sun, moon, and Venus. Additionally, Vogt (1998:20-27), demonstrates contemporary Zinacanteco house dedication rituals which include an east-west seating arrangement along with a rooster buried at the center of the house, or the *axis mundi*, as well as offerings of chicken broth and liquor at all four corners of the house and at three sets of joists in the roof which represent layering.



Figure 14 - Olmec quincunx showing Maize God at center.
(Mathews and Garber 2004:50).

The combined use of these symbolic elements created a space that was sacred and charged with religious energy. Where these elements joined at the center was considered a location for ritual and power, the center of the universe. It was the location for the resurrection of the Maize god. By applying these elements to the Lowland Classic ballcourt, it can be surmised that the construction of the ballcourt utilized these same elements to create this sacred space in the center of the playing field.

CHAPTER 5 - BALLCOURT AS A COSMOGRAM

The Maya ballcourt is an obvious symbol of pan-Maya religion and beliefs (Kowalski 1989:13). Ancient ballcourts extend from northern Honduras well into the Southeastern US, date as far back as 1400 B.C. (Schuster 1998; Flannery and Marcus 2000) and were still being used when the Spanish arrived in the fifteenth century (Barrois 2001:370; Santley et al 1991:3). The first ballcourt built by a Maya group is dated to the Middle Preclassic; by the Late Preclassic several ballcourts were being used at various sites in Belize (Marcus 2003:80).

To date, at least twelve types of ballcourts have been established in the entire Mesoamerican region with types ten and eleven located in American Southwest and type twelve located only in the Caribbean (Whittington 2001:106). Olko (2000:8-9) defines fourteen types with variations of each type. Considerable variation in ballcourt topology occurs in the Maya Lowlands (Scarborough 1991:137). Although most Lowland ballcourts are aligned north-south, they display variations in their angles and structural features. However, the basic principle of the ballcourt remains constant throughout Mesoamerica; a long and narrow field flanked by two parallel structures on either side (Fox et. al 1996:484). Kubler (1962:12) writes, “human products always incorporate both utility and art in varying mixtures.” Contemporary Mesoamerican ballgame players do not utilize a ballcourt and have not since the Spanish Conquest. What was architecturally or symbolically important about the ancient ballcourt that is now irrelevant to the game?

It is suggested by many that the Maya incorporated cosmological symbolism into the construction of the epicenters of their cities (Ashmore 1991:199-200) that ““served as

microcosms of the supernatural order’ and as ‘material embodiments of political order’” (Fox et al. 1996:484 citing Geertz 1980:11-13). Ballcourts were no exception. Mesoamerican ballcourts were designed to create sacred space, with architectural symbolism that demarcated a “special, and often magic location” (Tokovinine 2002:6). From the study of “iconographic representations in murals, stucco friezes, architectural embellishments, and archaeologically excavated materials” (D. Chase and A. Chase 2009), it has been well established that Maya religious beliefs hinged on the access to the underworld. The Maize god is often shown rising from portals, and Figure 12, as well as other evidence demonstrated in this paper, shows that this portal (*axis mundi*) can be located at the center of the ballcourt. Therefore, while caves were natural entrances to Xibalba, the Lowland ballcourts were specifically designed to be man-made portals into the underworld (Freidel et al. 1993:139, 350-355; Mathews and Garber 2004:55).

Evidence of the sacredness of the ballcourt can be demonstrated by the fact that ballcourts were typically kept in the same location within site epicenters and used for centuries with few changes made to their exteriors. While most Maya sites have “complex historical histories involving destruction, superimposition, and renovation (Fox et al. 1996:484), ballcourts remained intact and without renovation for generations (Scarborough 1991:130). Fash (2002:11) writes that once the ballcourt at Temple II was built at Copan, the ballcourt “forever thereafter occupied the same spot, and fulfilled the same religious needs.” Sacred objects and spaces typically grow more potent with time as ancestry accumulates in the memory of the living. Additionally, the actual ritual of establishing the ballcourt may have also been associated with the creation of community to the Classic Maya. For example, Fox et al. (1996:485) notes that “Mexica migration

legends...identify the construction of the ballcourt as an event linked symbolically to the creation of a social and sacred space.”

The suggested theory of the Classic Lowland Maya ballcourts as cosmograms rests on evidence already presented, combined with new theories pertaining to the north-south alignment of many of these ballcourts. When compared to layered caches, the consistent north (zenith) and south (nadir) alignment presents a tantalizing piece of evidence in which to explain the purpose of the three ballcourt markers. Most Lowland Classic Maya ballcourts are aligned in a north-south direction (Scarborough 1991:138). Previous to the Classic Period, and where they actually existed, ballcourts tended to not have any particular directional consistency, showing considerable regional variation in the directionality of ballcourts within epicenters. Fox et al (1996:489) suggests that “freedom from centrally dictated or administered expectations about the construction and use of the facilities” may explain the lack of consistency in the directionality of earlier ballcourt construction.

Many have attempted to ascertain the reason for the high percentage of Lowland Classic Period north-south ballcourt alignments, but it has been challenging to prove any actual astronomical alignment that might have been relevant to the ballcourt. However, the consistency of the north-south aligned ballcourts does indicate a commonly shared practice. Ballcourts which were aligned in a north-south direction and which contained three ballcourt markers are of particular interest. The central marker on these ballcourts designated the center of the playing field, while the other two appear to demarcate both ‘end-zones.’ Presumably, the purpose of the markers was to divide the playing field into two halves. However, as Kubler (1962:23) states, “existence without meaning seems

terrible in the same degree as meaning without existence.” To assume that these markers simply divided the field into two halves, or that they demarcated actual end-zones, may only provide a utilitarian explanation that does not delve into their deeper cosmological meanings. Many ballcourt markers have iconography carved on their upper surfaces. However, some do not, such as those at the sites of Lamanai and Nim Li Punit (Barrois 2006:433,443). Iconography, typically esoteric or mythological in nature (Schele and Mathews 1998:38), was, therefore, not necessary to have on ballcourt markers. Consequently, when iconography is removed from the surface of the ballcourt markers, they then appear to function more as a part of the ballcourt structure itself. These observations question the purpose of ballcourt markers and what, if any, cosmological function they might have symbolized in relation to north and south. Additionally, that some ballcourts only had one central marker further questions the actual necessity for an official end-zone.

If we were to apply the same theoretical applications of north equating to zenith and south equating to nadir to the CBM 1 and CBM 2, it is entirely possible that the north and south ballcourt markers were actually meant to be visualized in a vertical relationship to each other, above and underneath the central marker, thus creating the three layers of the upper, middle, and underworlds along the *axis mundi* of the ballcourt. This theory is supported by the work of Barrois and Tokovinine on ballcourt iconography, (2005:1) in which players on each side of the central marker donned costumes representing either the underworld or celestial world. The vertical visualization of the three ballcourt markers would not only combine the layering effect with east, west, zenith, and nadir on a ballcourt, as seen in many caches, but it would also finally elucidate the north-south

alignment of Classic Lowland ballcourts. Future study may be able to pinpoint the exact moment in time that the north-south alignment on Maya ballcourts became linked with Preclassic cosmology.

The third symbolic element found in caches, but is lacking in the archaeological record for Classic Period ballcourts, is the horizontal quadripartite division of the playing field into four sections or directions, which would essentially be the *quincunx* pattern when combined with the *axis mundi* of the central marker. Ironically, images from the Postclassic Maya and Mexican codices demonstrate that Postclassic Mesoamericans did indeed divide the ballcourt playing field into four sections. These images merit an investigation into the possibility of quadripartitioning of Classic Period ballcourts. If it can be shown that Classic Maya ballcourts (especially those which were aligned north-south and contained three ballcourt markers) were also divided into four horizontal parts, as those of ballcourts in the Codex Borgia (Fig. 15), a very strong case for a public architectural cosmogram could be made.

Most Classic Period Lowland Maya sites contained an E-group, which “was perhaps the first architectural device created by the Maya to celebrate the four divisions of the calendar year using the shifting positions of the sunrise on the eastern horizon” (Estrada-Belli 2006:62). Caracol’s E-Group is located in the Group A Plaza and suggests that they did recognize these four divisions. The partitioning of the landscape “is evocative of the universe in reference to solar cycles” (McAnany 1995:85) and the E-Group at Caracol would have been used to divide the solar year into four parts.

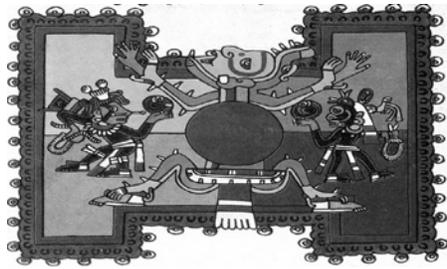
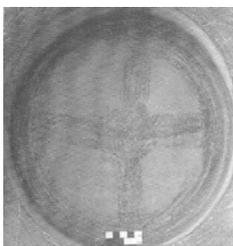


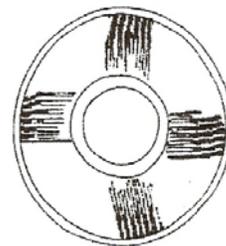
Figure 15 - Aztec ballcourt image, Codex Borgia.

As noted previously, caches at Caracol are not only layered, but also have quadripartite divisions (D. Chase and A. Chase 1998; D. Chase 1988). Other evidence that Caracol also recognized quadripartite divisions is shown when comparisons are made with an Early Classic ceramic vessel from Caracol to a Preclassic vessel excavated elsewhere. Figure 16A shows a painting of the cross-motif on the bottom of a Preclassic ceramic vessel deposited in K'axob, Belize. Figure 16B shows the same motif on a vessel found at Caracol that dates to the cusp of the Early Classic (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005:22). These combined data suggest that Classic Caracol recognized quadripartitioning.



A

(McAnany 1995:86)



B

(A.Chase and D. Chase 2005:22)

Figure 16 - Cross-motif.

CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION

Curiously, both markers show the same water-plant or water-lily rising from the center of the marker, indicating a possible reference to the surface of the water. CBM 2 (Figure 4B) shows what appears to be a fish nibbling underneath the plant. This underwater iconography implies the concept of liminality on the surface of the ballcourt. The idea of “liminality,” a space in between, is an idea that is suggested in many cache and burial practices throughout the Maya world, particularly in regard to iconography relating to the surface of the water at Caracol (D. Chase and A. Chase 2009). This concept of liminality is also demonstrated on the three ballcourt marker scenes at Copan (Gutierrez 1993:2, Freidel et al. 1993:352), which are all contained within a quatrefoil shape (Fig. 17). The surface of the ballcourt being visualized as the plane between the middle and underworld is a logical interpretation for the presence of this iconography on CBM 1 and 2.



Figure 17 - Copan ballcourt markers.
(Schele and Miller 1986:252). Drawings by Barbara Fash

Ballcourt markers often come in sets of three, while some ballcourts only have one central marker. Unfortunately, the third marker which would complete the Caracol set is yet to be found. However, Altar 21, which was found in the center of Ballcourt A, contains an *ahaw* in the center of the altar, which would provide an appropriate symbol to represent the center of this configuration of elements. As previously stated, the *ahaw* is the center of the *quincunx* pattern that the rulers of the Preclassic associated themselves with, and the location of the emerging Maize God through the *axis mundi*.

Another possibility is a small altar similar in shape and size to CBM 1 and 2. This monument was found in the plaza east of Caana (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001: figure 17), and although badly eroded, a moon glyph with a figure in the middle is detectable (Fig. 18). Early Classic images of the Tonsured Maize God shown with the moon sign (Taube 1992:67) give this altar a certain degree of validity as the original central marker. The Maize God emerging from the center of a ballcourt can be recalled on images such as the Maize God emerging from the center of the ballcourt in Figure 12. If the central image on this monument contained the Maize god inside a moon glyph, and if this is a ballcourt marker, then it most likely would have been originally placed in the center of the ballcourt.



Figure 18 - Moon glyph altar.
(A. Chase and D. Chase 2001:figure 17).

CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION

The Lowland Classic Maya built their ballcourts as cosmograms in order to create a special and sacred space for ritual, political and social events. For these events to actually have religious meaning, the space had to be charged with cosmological symbolism which would create access to the underworld. Three individual symbolic elements which were used to create this sacred space date as early as the Middle Preclassic period and include; 1) an east, west, zenith, and nadir; 2) a vertical 3-layered tripartite division representing three layers of the universe; and 3) horizontal quadripartite divisions, including the center, or *axis mundi*. This pattern is also known as the *quincunx* and is associated with the title of *ahaw*. These three symbolic elements can be identified in Classic Lowland Maya ballcourt construction, giving reasonable evidence that ballcourts represented the Maya cosmos.

Numerous caches have been found at the site of Caracol, as well as most other Maya and Mesoamerican sites, that demonstrate these same concepts. These caches include layered objects, objects placed in a quincunx pattern, or special recognition to east and/or west, or a combination of two or more of these patterns. Paintings and carvings found on ceramics can be used to link the Maize God, as he emerges vertically along the *axis mundi* along with the concept of the opposing directions of east and west, to the center of ballcourt. This same theme is seen in the symbolism of the iconography carved on Caracol ballcourt Markers 1 and 2; that is, the east and west, (the Sun God and his nighttime aspect, the jaguar) combined with zenith and nadir (the rabbit as a celestial moon directly overhead along with God N, who is associated with Venus and the underworld).

The interpretations of the directions of north and south being associated with ‘up’ and ‘down’ enable a vertical visualization of the ballcourt markers on ballcourts which are aligned north and south. This would represent the three layers of the universe. Iconography carved on ballcourt markers would not necessarily be linked to this vertical visualization.

The partitioning of the ballcourt into four horizontal parts is common in Postclassic codice scenes, but has yet to be demonstrated in the archaeological record of the Classic Period. Archaeological proof that the Classic Lowland ballcourt playing fields were, in fact, once divided into quadrants would greatly support the theory of ballcourts built to represent the cosmos.

Finally, while the *Popul Vuh* Hero Twin myth may have astronomical undertones in which the moon and Venus play a part, the iconography on the Caracol ballcourt markers do not appear to have any references to the Hero Twins. The iconography carved on CBM 1 and 2 suggest cosmological and esoteric symbolism which would have created sacred space, as apposed to having reference to any Hero Twin myth. Whether or not the Classic Maya at Caracol were even aware of any such Hero Twin myth is purely speculative, especially considering that no artifacts that have been found at Caracol to date demonstrate the Hero Twins. It is therefore suggested that the Hero Twin myth is not relevant in the interpretation of the iconography of Caracol Ballcourt Markers 1 and 2, which would imply that it may also not be relevant to other Lowland Classic Period ballcourt iconography.

Therefore, with this new interpretation of the iconography of Caracol Ballcourt Markers 1 and 2, and in the investigation of the symbolism of the ballcourt structure

itself, evidence can be marshaled that suggests that the Classic Lowland ballcourts which were aligned north and south, and which contained three ballcourt markers, may have physically represented the Classic Maya cosmos. This large cosmogram created sacred space and demarcated the ballcourt as a location for political and religious ceremony.

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