

Research on ancient ballgame reveals more about early Mesoamerican society

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George Washington University Professor Jeffrey P. Blomster's latest research explores the importance of the ballgame to ancient Mesoamerican societies. Dr. Blomster's findings show how the discovery of a ballplayer figurine in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca demonstrates the early participation of the region in the iconography and ideology of the game, a point that had not been previously documented by other researchers. Dr. Blomster's paper, Early evidence of the ballgame in Oaxaca, Mexico, is featured in the latest issue of *Proceedings in the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*.

Dr. Blomster, GW associate professor of anthropology, has spent 20 years researching the origin of complex societies in Mesoamerica. The participation of early Mixtec societies in ballgame imagery is a new aspect of his research. For the journal publication, Dr. Blomster worked with undergraduate students Izack Nacheman and Joseph DiVirgilio to create artistic renditions of the figurine artifacts found in Mexico.

While early games used a hard rubber ball, the ballgames Dr. Blomster researches bear little resemblance to today's Major League Baseball. The games and the costumes or uniforms participants wore were tied to themes of life and death, mortals and underworld deities or symbolizing the sun and the moon. In some instances, the ballcourt itself represented a portal to the underworld.

According to Dr. Blomster, "Because the ballgame is associated with the rise of complex societies, understanding its origins also illuminates the

evolution of socio-politically complex societies."

During the Early Horizon period, or roughly between 1400 BCE (Before the Common Era) and 1700 BCE, there was little evidence of ballgame activity in the way of artifacts in the Oaxaca region of Mexico. Dr. Blomster's findings of a clay figurine garbed in distinctive ballgame costume, similar to both Olmec figurines and monumental sculptures from the Gulf Coast, indicate such engagement did take place in the area.

"Exploring the origins and spread of the ballgame is central to understanding the development of the Mesoamerican civilization," he said. "We know there were earlier versions of a ballgame prior to the Early Horizon with both a ballcourt and rubber balls found in coastal Chiapas and the Gulf Coast, but the institutionalized version of the ballgame, a hallmark of Mesoamerican civilizations, developed during the Early Horizon. While there has been some limited evidence about the participation of the nearby Valley of Oaxaca in the ballgame, the Mixteca has largely been written off in terms of involvement in the origins of complex society in ancient Mexico. This discovery reemphasizes how the ancient Mixtecs were active participants in larger Mesoamerican phenomenon."

Provided by George Washington University

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