

## YOKE



Artist Unknown (Veracruz)

600-900 CE

Mexico

Acc: 41.72

G260

### LABEL

Deflection off a player's midsection was one of the primary techniques of the Mesoamerican ballgame, during which the player's hands were used only at the beginning to put the ball into play. Because the rubber ball itself could injure or kill, significant resources were invested in equipment to protect against broken bones and damaged internal organs. Yokes made of perishable materials such as quilted cotton and wood would have been preserved only in their depictions of paintings and sculptures. Stone yokes like this one were probably ceremonial representations, worn at opening and closing ceremonies, awarded as trophies, and placed in tombs. The imagery on this particularly finely carved example hints at the complex, multi-layered symbolism and religious beliefs embodied by the ballgame. At the closed end of the yoke is a human face peering out through the jaws of a supernatural creature that combines reptile, amphibian, and feline characteristics and lives at the entrance to the underworld. At the open ends of the yoke are carved human heads that may represent the Hero Twins, ballplayers central to the creation story of the Maya and other

Mesoamerican cultures.

### QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. This is a carved stone yoke representing part of the “uniform” worn by the Mesoamerican ball players. Why do you think it is called a yoke?
2. If it is too heavy to be worn during the game, what do you think its purpose might be?
3. What figures do you see carved on the surface?

### KEY POINTS

1. The Mesoamerican ballgame has been played in some form from 1400 BCE to present times. The game—probably the first team sport in human history—originated in low-lying tropical zones in southern Mexico and Central America which are home to the rubber tree which supported the development of the ball used in the game. The ballgame was a ritual deeply ingrained all Mesoamerican cultures and served purposes that went well beyond those of a simple sporting event.



2. The games were played between two teams of 2-4 players each. Throughout the centuries the rules varied, but in the sixteenth century Spaniards observing the Aztec games reported that points were scored if your opponent used his hands, feet or head or if the ball went into your opponent’s end zone. In some games a stone ring was placed on the center line (see above) of the court for the ball to be passed through—although the height and diameter of the ring made this a very rare event.
3. The ball could only be advanced by striking it with hip, buttocks, arms or chest. For this reason, the players wore a loincloth augmented by leather hip guards. Players sometimes wore a thick girdle made of leather or wood. These girdles or yokes would help propel the ball with more force. Chest protectors called *palmas* and helmets were also worn.



Ballgame player



Striking the ball with the hip

Even with yokes, *palmas*, and helmets, injuries were common given the speed, size and weight of the ball.



Ancient ball recovered from a sacrificial site

4. Ceremonial stone yokes have been found, sometimes *in situ* in grave sites. Weighing 45 pounds or more these were too heavy to be worn in the game but may have been worn ceremonially or presented as gifts to victors. The carved stone yokes many also have been used to mold the leather girdles worn by the players. Stone *palmas* and *hachas* have also been found (*hachas* attached to the front of the yoke much like a belt buckle). These carved, stylized stone yokes and their attachments have become icons of Mesoamerican culture and the ballgame.



Frog Yoke, Chicago Art Inst.



Deer Hacha



Palmas

5. Over 1300 ball courts have been found. Ball courts also served as public plazas for festivals, banquets, musical/cultural events, and other sports such as wrestling. However, emphasizing their importance, the most prominent ball courts were located within the sacred precincts of cities and town. Ball courts varied in size. For example, one of the smallest courts at the Veracruz site of Tikal is only one sixth the size of the great Ball Court at Chichen Itza shown below.



Most ball courts were built with a length-to-width ratio of 4 to 1 with enclosed end zones giving them a shape much like a capital I. The walls were either sloping or vertical surfaces to facilitate play. Sculpture, stelae, and stonework reliefs were also important in ball court design.

6. During the Classical Veracruz period (CE150-900) of the ballgame society was decentralized into city-states surrounded by villages and tribes. Social classes were stratified and ruled by kings. Priest, military advisors, and artisans supported their rule over the farmer class. The farmers—practicing slash and burn agriculture, grew maize and cotton. The society also supplemented its diet with deer, dog, fish and shellfish. The lives of Mesoamericans in the Classic Period were centered on the traditional themes of the life cycle (birth, life, death, rebirth), human sacrifice to please the gods, and the ritual ball game.



7. Little is known with certainty about the games symbolic contexts. It has been speculated that the bouncing ball represented the sun and that the game was seen as a struggle between day and night (or a battle between life and the underworld). This speculation is reinforced by the Mayan Myth of the Hero Twins, Hanahpu and Xbalanque, who journeyed to the underworld to play the game with the Lords of Xibalba, rulers of the underworld to avenge the deaths of their ball playing father and uncle. Ultimately they were victorious and, in their victory, became the sun and the moon. The ball courts were seen as portals to the underworld and so were built in key locations with the central ceremonial districts. Symbolically, too, the game represents war and the ball can also be seen as the vanquished enemy. The losers in the ritual ball game (often enemies captured in battle) would be sacrificed as an offering to the gods after the predetermined end of the game.



Shown above is drawing illustrating the ritual sacrifice of ball game players inscribed on a relief at the Chichen Itza ball court. Some Aztec courts had skull racks to display the skulls of sacrificial offerings and some experts speculate that their heads were also used as balls in the game.