The Decapitation Ritual and the Ancient Maya Ballgame. From Archaeological Evidences to Sacred Stories

Dora Maritza García Patzán

Department of Comparative Religion, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava

Maria Felicia Rega
Sapienza University of Rome and Department of Comparative Religion, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava

Mezoamerická loptová hra bola pre svoj jedinečný charakter a prítomnosť v predhispánskom urbanizme vždy dlhodobým zdrojom výskumov. Dôležité texty z koloniálneho obdobia ako Popol Vuh, sa odvolávajú na mytologický a symbolický obsah tejto hry. V jednej zo scén príbehu sa popisuje moment, v ktorom Junajpu a Xbalanque hrajú loptovú hru s pánmi podsvetia. Táto aktivita končí sťatím Junajpua a po rôznych peripetiách, jeho konečným triumfom. V archeologických a ikonografických záznamoch sú scény v súvislosti so sťatím hlavy vnímané v kontexte loptovej hry, čo dokazuje nielen veľkú dôležitosť tejto hry v mayskej spoločnosti, ale aj ďalšie mytologické a rituálne konotácie, ktorým sa venujeme v našom texte.

Keywords: ballgame, offerings, sacrifices, decapitation, underworld

Sacrifices and offerings in the ballgame

Apparently, the ballgame recreates a mythical space related to the struggle of forces of the day and night that confront each other in the underworld seeking the resurgence of life (López 2013). In any case, the human sacrifice *per se* is a practice that has been part of religious beliefs of different cultures of the world, a practice that for Mesoamerican cultures results in a link between men and gods through live offerings, a mean maintains the cosmic order, fertility and the continuity of life (Graulich 2016). This broad context also includes a sacrifice related to the ballgame, on the basis of it we will present evidence of a specific practice of decapitation (Figure 1).

The excavations in different ballgame areas have revealed the practice of human sacrifices, decapitation and other types of offerings, that points to the ritual and symbolic character of the game.

The presence of markers (circular stones similar to a small altar with carved decoration) on the axis of the playing alley of the yard is documented in many parts of Mesoamerica. These monuments probably had the function of marking different areas where the game took place. Usually a ballcourt had just one marker on its centre or three, marking the north, centre and south part of the court. In some cases, caches containing offerings of various materials, consisting of ceramic vessels, jade or obsidian objects and parts of sacrified victims, especially their heads, accompanied the

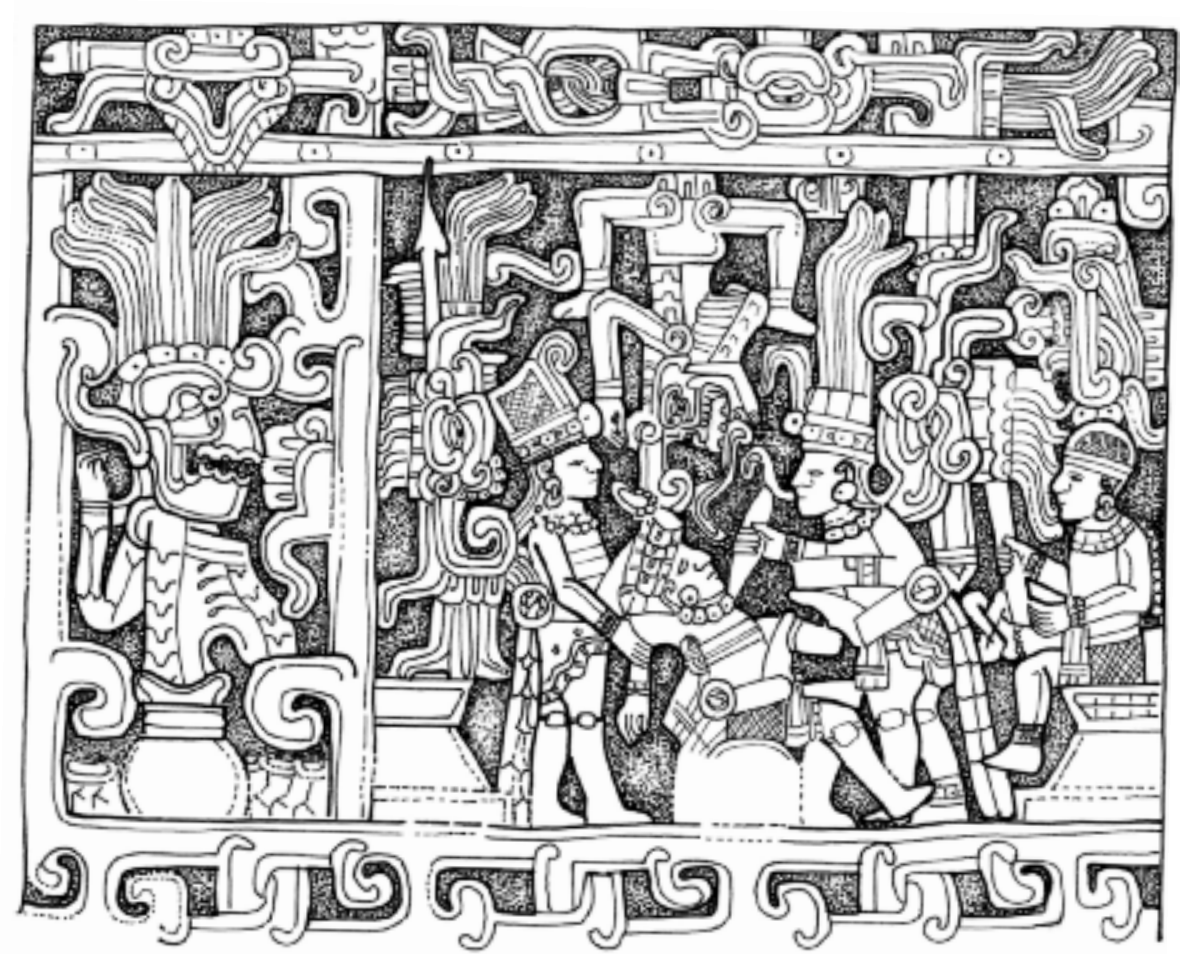

Figure 1. Sacrifice by decapitation, south ball game, El Tajín (Ladrón 2006: 83).

markers. It is important to highlight the presence of human sacrifices, especially the severed heads, not only in the field record but also in iconography and epigraphy.

One recent example we will refer to, is a finding from Quen Santo, located in the municipality of Nentón, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, on a plateau surrounded by ravines and deep caves. Eduard Seler (1901) carried out the first investigations in the site; later other publications and investigations in the caves proved the ritual and ceremonial character of this place (Navarrete 1979; Brady 2009).

The ballcourt is located in the Group B (Structures B-55 and B-21) and is part of the main palace of the site, with a north-south orientation. The main finding in this ballgame is the central score on the ground level, a marker with a diameter of 70 cm (Figure 2); below this in the filling level it was found the offering of a deep bowl of 7 cm high of the type Tasajo Red Printed, dated to the Late Classic (García 2016) (Figure 3). Inside the jug, it was possible to identify fragments of a skull in bad condition of conservation, an exhausted obsidian core, circular bead of bone with a diameter of 1 cm, and beautiful nine obsidian blades, between 9 and 6 cm long, that originated from the source of the Chayal (García 2016; Wölfel et. al. 2018: 677) (Figure 4). Analysing the chronology of the finding, the offering could have been part of a ritual of founding of the same ballcourt. Another important aspect to consider is the association of the site with the natural caves, probably used as sacred spaces with ritual connotation (Brady - Rodas 1994; Guerra Ruiz 2011; Burgos 2012).

The finding of obsidian blades as an offering is not uncommon, for example in Late Classic Uaxactun´s ballcourt a cache was found containing around 600 obsidian fragments (Barrois - Cruz 2009) (Figure 5). We can speculate at this point that both, black colour of obsidian associated with the underworld and sharp obsidian fragments as a characteristic environment of Xibalba, we can compare with Chayin-ha from Popol Vuh with significance of "House of Obsidian Blades" (Recinos 1992: 56, 170).

Figure 2. Marker of the ballcourt, Quen Santo (photo: Dora García).

Figure 3. Cache with the offering below the ballcourt marker (photo: Dora García).

In Cancuen, there were found several obsidian and flint deposits associated with rituals performed in ballcourts (Torres 2011: 104), showing the constant presence of obsidian. The number of obsidian blades discovered in Quen Santo ballcourt is even more symbolic, number nine - *bolon* despite the doubts of some scholars (Nielsen - Sellner 2015: 25), apparently evoked levels or parts of the underworld as we can see in symbolical expressions of various Maya funeral contexts. From the Classic Period is more notorious Tikal's Temple I, constructed as a nine-step mortuary pyramid for Jasaw Chan K´awiil (Martin - Grube 2008: 54-67).

In the Ballcourt 2 of Nakum, archaeologists found an offering in the filling of the East structure, probably deposited before tracing the floor. The offering consists of two deep bowls lip-to-lip (of the *Sierra Rojo* type) containing the skull of a young adult male (Calderón et. al. 2009: 1394-1405). According to Rodrigo Liendo Stuardo, during the excavation in El Lacandon, a site located 23 km east of Palenque, in Chiapas, archaeologists found two markers, the central and the south ones, while the north marker was probably missing. The two markers had a diameter of 38 cm and 55 cm height; both were made of limestone. Very interesting is the presence of offerings below them: the central marker had jade ear ornaments as offering while under the south marker the remains of a human skull were found (Liendo Stuardo 2015: 150).

Other kind of offerings related to the ballcourt marker were found still in Chiapas, Mexico, in the site of Chapatengo, where a Late Classic cache was found with ceramic, shell and beads under the marker (Agrinier 1991: 192). In the site of Laguna Francesa, in similar context, archaeologists found an offering of three vases and two obsidian blades (Con Uribe 1981: 42). Finally, another example of ballcourt marker with sign of offering is in Lamanai, Belize. The ballcourt had a small open-ended playing area and a huge marker disc, which occupied almost the entire floor surface in the centre of the court. Excavations in 1980 revealed an offering consisting of a lidded vessel containing miniature vessels and small jade and shell objects resting atop a pool of mercury, a material previously reported only from the Maya Highlands. These materials fix the date of the deposit near the end of the 9th century (Pendergast 1981: 40-41).

A very interesting kind of offering was in the north ballcourt of Cancuen, in Petén, Guatemala, where seven burials were found in the centre of the court, perhaps as part of a ritual that marks the beginning of the construction and the use of the complex. This finding can be dated to the Late Classic (Torres 2011: 114) being an evidence of acts of sacrifice linked to the ballgame in the housing sector. By comparing all these offerings, it is possible to talk about some kind of sacrifices connected to the ballgame, especially through decapitation, which can remind the episodes of decapitation of Junajpu in the Popol Vuh (López 2013;

Figure 4. Nine obsidian blades, offering of the ballcourt, Quen Santo (photo: Dora García).

Sodi - Aceves 2004), topic that we will be approach from the iconographic evidence.

Evidence of connection between decapitation and ballgame

Many iconographic representations, coming from different part of the Maya area and Mesoamerica in general, prove a connection with ballgame and decapitation, showing headless bodies, usually depicted with blood coming out of the neck in the shape of snakes. In Central Veracruz, for example, we can find scenes of decapitation rite on relieves, mural painting, *palmas* and ceramics, which date mostly for the Late Classic Period (Daneels 2008: 198) (Figure 6-7). Archaeological proof of this kind of rite comes for example from a dedicatory cache from Cerro de las Mesas, containing the body of an adult male, with his head separated from the body, wearing jade earspools and a lavish shell collar. Various offerings were associated with this body, including a stone yoke that seems to link this burial to the ballgame. On the other side of the burials, other two bodies were found, one of them headless too. The associated ceramic can be dated to the Proto-Classic Period (100 BC – 100 AD) (Daneels 2008: 198-199).

Figure 5. Obsidian fragments from the cache of the ballcourt of Uaxactún (photo: A. Godoy).

Figure 6. Detail of the mural from Las Higueras, Veracruz, Mexico (Daneels 2008: 199; redraw from Uriarte 1998).

Figure 7. Other detail of the mural from Las Higueras, Veracruz, Mexico (Daneels 2008: 199; redraw from Uriarte 1998).

A whole decapitation scene was carved on the lateral walls of the Chichen Itza Great Ballcourt, which dates to the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic (800 – 1200 AD) (Figure 8). In this scene, two characters are standing at the sides of a huge ball decorated with a skull. One of them is apparently holding the head of the opponent, who is kneeling without his head and with snakes coming out of his neck. The headless man shows a similar iconography of the so-called Aparicio Stela, interpreted as a ball court marker (Figure 9).

In the Guatemalan Highlands and adjacent Pacific coast, this kind of scenes started to appear from the Late Pre-classic (400 BC – 100 AD). Even the connection between decapitation and ballgame is well documented in this area: representations of skulls are known in various ballcourts in the Pacific area during the Middle and Late Classic (Braswell 1986; Parson 1991). As well as on the monumental sculpture, there are interesting examples of sacrifice scenes in some looted vessels coming from Tiquisate, in the Escuintla Department, Guatemala, dating between 400 and 700 AD, some of them connected to the ballgame and decapitation (Miller 2003: 388). On one of these vessels, one of the characters is sitting in the centre with his head missing and snake coming out of his neck; the same iconography we found in Chichen Itza and central Veracruz (Figure 10). Another vessels coming from the same area and now exposed in the Denver Art Museum show the motif of the skull inside of the ball. The ball is on the top of a ballcourt on the centre, flanked by two ballplayers, in a position similar to those depicted in other vessels of the same region (Figure 11). In other Classic vase from Guatemalan Lowlands we can observe figures described by Guido Krempel (2016: 203) as Lords of the Underworld with obsidian knifes in hands, holding Junajpu´s scraped head (Figure 12). These motifs since these ceramics were used mainly as offerings in graves, show the pivotal role of Junajpu or Jun 'Ajaw (his classic predecessor) and the decapitation event as a mythological pattern.

The existence of acts of decapitation connected to the ballgame is proved by a written source of the 16th century: Popol Vuh. A very important part of this mythology of the K'iche' Maya is the tale of the Hero Twins Junajpu and Xb'alanke who were able to defeat the Lords of the Underworld after having faced them in the ballgame. As well as their father and uncle before them, Hero Twins descend to Xibalba, the Maya underworld, after they were challenged by the lords of death who instigated them to play the ballgame.

The two brothers must have faced many hard challenges in Xibalba and during one of these tests, Junajpu ended up decapitated by a huge bat in the House of Bats. The lords of Xibalba took the head and used it as a ball to play the game. Xb'alanke temporarily restored his brother's head using a pumpkin. The twins returned to the ball court and tricked the lords of Xibalba, turning a rabbit into the ball. While the lords were distracted by this trick, Xb'alanke retrieved his brother's true head and fixed it on his body. The end of the game and the victory of the Hero Twins is sanctioned by the stroke of Xb'alanke to the pumpkin-ball, which bouncing against the wall of the ball court, broke into pieces, while the seeds scattered

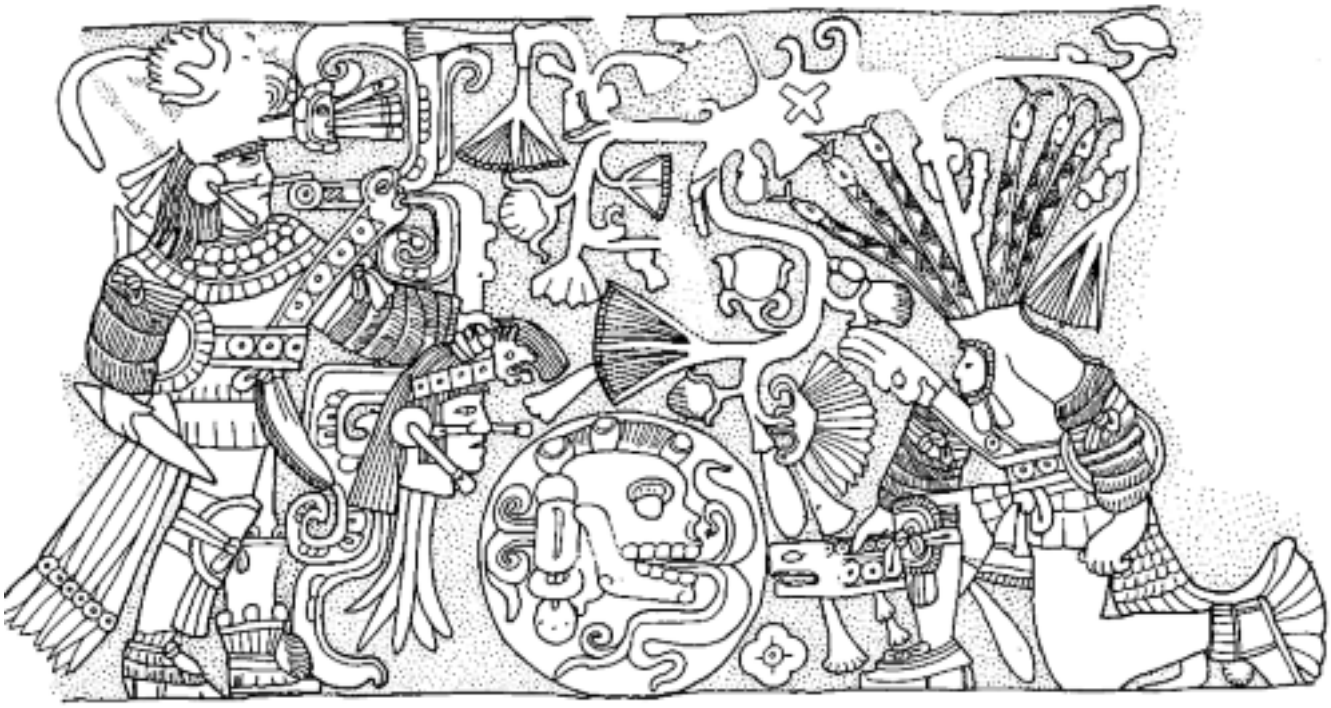

Figure 8. Reliefs on the Chichen Itza Great Ballcourt, dating between Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic (800 – 1200 AD) (Schele - Miller 1986: 244).

everywhere, symbolizing the victory of life over death (Recinos 1992: 75-79).

The seeds of the pumpkin used to be a symbol of a vital force also in some representations that date back to the Late Classic Period. Usually in this period, the ballplayers were represented with very elaborated headdresses, even if it seems improbable that players have practiced this kind of activity. Some iconographic representations could be idealized images of what should have represented a ballplayer (Barrois - Tokovinine 2005: 3). The headdress could contain feathers, animal heads or vegetal attributes, so that the ballplayers could personify some supernatural entities or gods. An interesting element within the headdress appears on a panel in the Museum of American Indian, in New York, probably from the site La Corona, where the headdress of one of the ballplayers has in its top a foliated version of the glyph T533 (Figure 13). According to David Stuart it can be spelled as *sak saak (?)*, "seed of a white pumpkin" (Velásquez García 2015: 287). In various studies Erik Velásquez García (2009, 2011) affirms that the pumpkin seeds should symbolize a divine breath or soul force that enters in the human body from the top of the head. The same force that in Nahuatl language is called *tonalli*, the vital energy that enter inside of the human body through the fontanelle on the top of the head.

Figure 9. The so-called Aparicio Stela, a possible ballcourt marker (Daneels 2008: 199; redraw from Gendrop 1970).

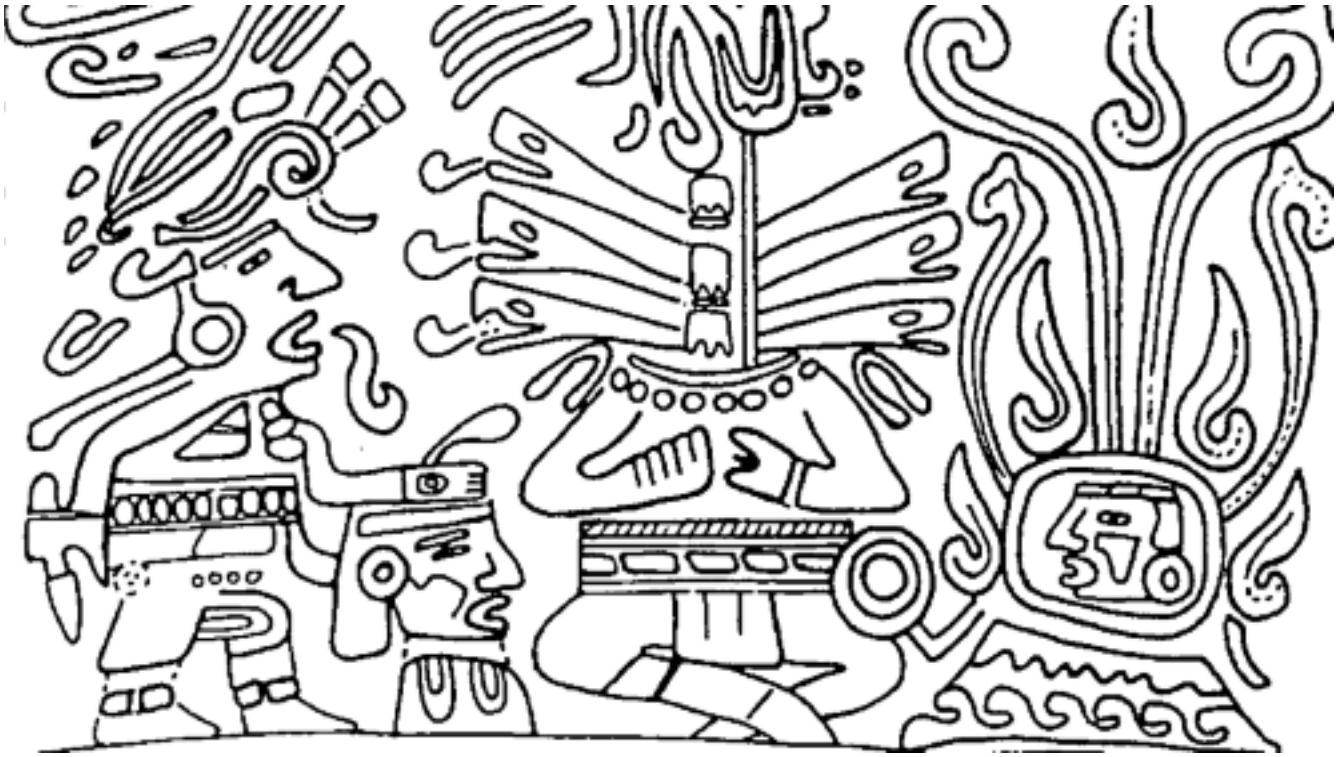

Figure 10. Drawing of a vessel from Tiquisate, in the Escuintla Department, Guatemala, dating between 400 and 700 AD (Miller 2003: 389).

Figure 11. Detail from the another vessel from Tiquisate, in the Escuintla Department, Guatemala, dating between 400 and 700 AD. (Object ID: 1971.417, Denver Art Museum).

Figure 12. Classic vessel with a scene of decapitation of Jun ´Ajaw, (Fundación La Ruta Maya, Guatemala; Krempel 2016, in Grube 2017).

Figure 13. Reconstruction of a panel in the National Museum of the American Indian, New York, probably from the site La Corona. The headdress of one of the ballplayers has in its top a foliated version of the glyph T533 (Velásquez García 2015: 287).

The presence of a head inside of the ball, which reminds the mythological episode of the Popol Vuh, was carved on a monument from the Classic Period coming from La Esperanza (Chinkultic) in Chiapas, Mexico (Figure 14). According to some scholars, the ballplayer shows death attributes, representing the episode of the Popol Vuh where Junajpu's head was used as a ball (Aguilar 2003: 5). The interpretation given by Jeff Karl Kowalski about the character represented on the marker is based on the cloth wrap on his forehead, which marks him as one of the "Headband Gods" or "Headband Twins" (Coe 1973: 13), believed to be the Classic representation of Junajpu and Xb'alanke. In this case, the figure should represent Xb'alanke (Kowalski 1989: 10).

Thanks to hieroglyphic analysis by Alexandre Tokovinine, the protagonist on the monument can be interpreted as a local lord and not a mythological character. The texts consist of a Long Count date (9.7.17.12.14), a Calendar Round date (11 Ix 7 Zotz), and a verb *t'ab* "to ascend", referring to the dedication of the ballcourt or of this particular monument. The second inscription consists of two columns, accompanying the central figure, which seems to refer to the same dedication act. K'ihnich Chan Ajaw can be the name of the lord, the place name followed by the title "sky lord" or an emblem glyph (Tokovinine 2002: 2). Whatever is the right interpretation, it is clear that the presence of the Jun 'Ajaw's head was inscribed in the ball, which once again proves the connection between the ball and the head in the ballgame.

An important example is the step VII of the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Temple 33 of Yaxchilan, whose dates refer to a mythical time. On the seventh stair, the ruler is shown as playing the ballgame while a huge ball is bouncing of the steps, carrying inside the body of a sacrificial victim (Figure 15). This is common kind of sacrifice represented in the Maya art during the Classic Period and probably was used to symbolized the fallen of celestial bodies from the sky or the seeds thrown in the field (Velásquez García 2015: 291). The hieroglyphic inscriptions on this step of the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Yaxchilán talks about the decapitations of three gods, connected with three "awakening" or "creations" (Stuart 2003: 27). The glyph G5 of this step (Figure 16) is read as IK-WAY? -Ya-nal = ik waynal "in the place of the

Figure 15. Drawing of the Step 7 of the Hieroglyphic Stairway of the Temple 33 of Yaxchilán (Drawn by Linda Schele; Freidel, Schele - Parker 1993: 356, fig. 8:13, panel 2).

Figure 14. Marker from La Esperanza, Chinkultic, Chiapas. Mexico (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico)

black hole", however according to the Montgomery dictionary (2002) WAY is translated, except the hole, also as "entry, portal, quarter or water". This reading would correspond even better to the interpretations that indicate that the ballgame is an entrance and a space related to the underworld. This underworld symbolism of the ballcourt has a remarkable parallel in Aztec mythology: "Coyolxauhqui was sacrificed on an open hole in the terrain of the ballcourt, her brothers were persecuted and massacred. The next day, at dawn, the water in the lagoon disappeared into the ballcourt hole and everything dried up" (Graulich 1999: 36).

This kind of sacrifice and the ballgame itself seems to be connected to the actualization of primordial events and rites of fertility, as we saw also for the representation of decapitation rites in Central Veracruz. The interpretations of Eric Taladoire mention the close relationship of the ballgame with the fertility of the

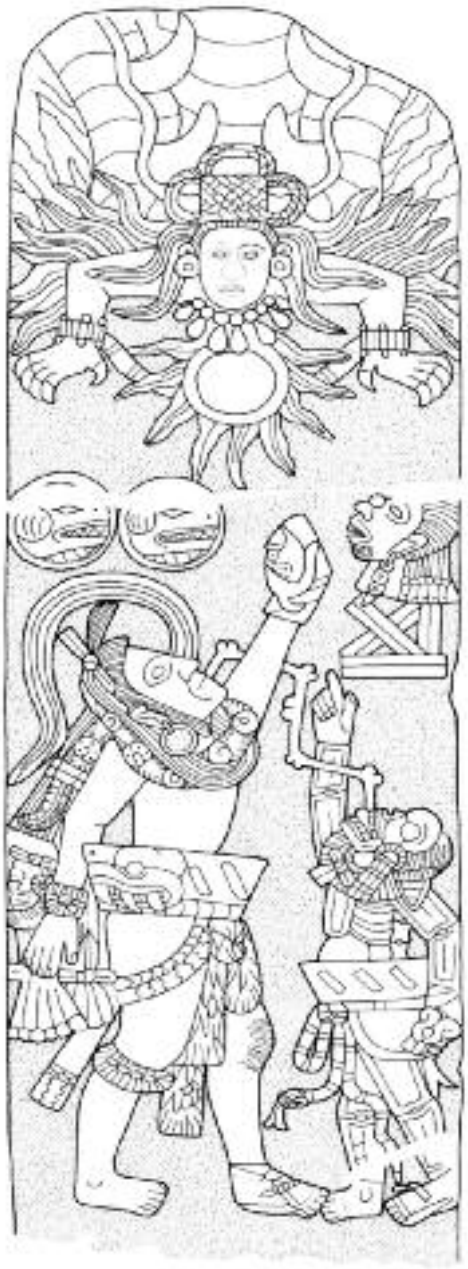

Figure 17. Stela 3 of Bilbao (Chinchilla 2013).

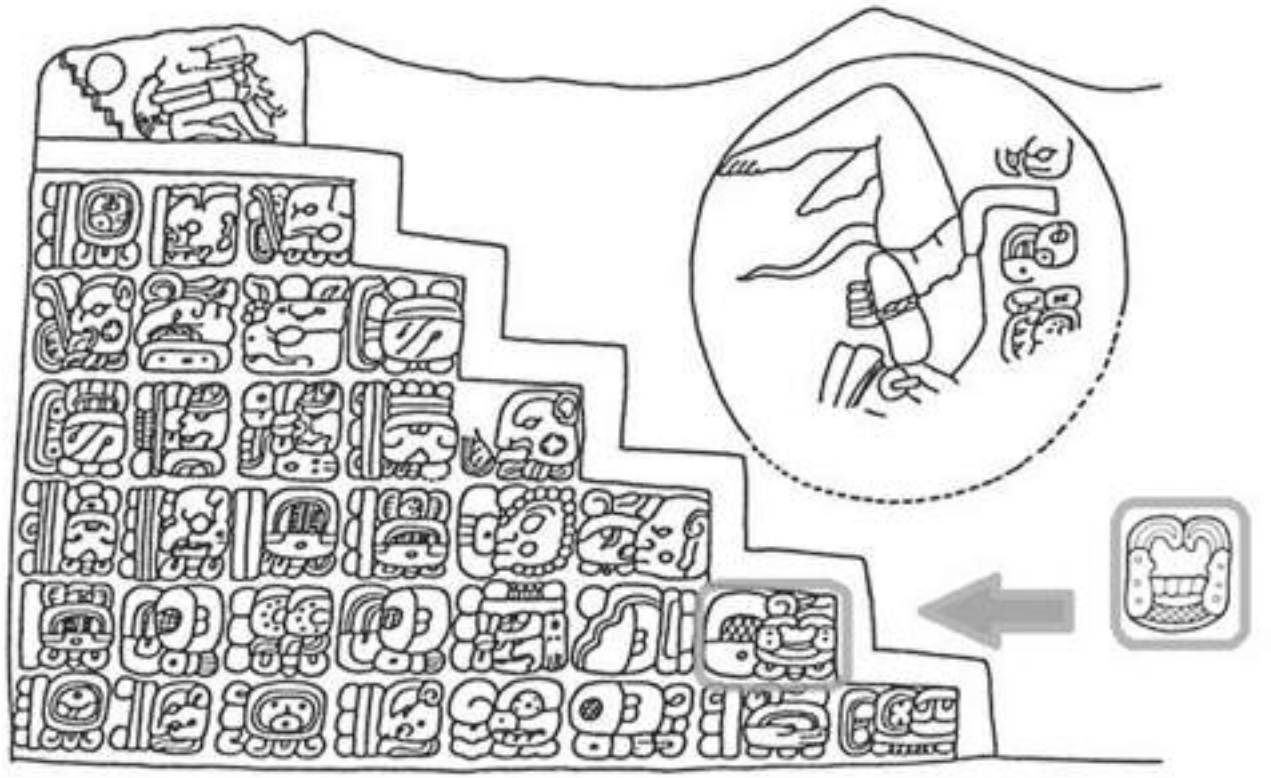

Figure 16. Detail of hieroglyphic inscription from the stairway of Building 33 of Yaxchilán, glyph G5 (Drawing by Ian Graham, in Stuart 2003: fig. 7; modified by authors).

earth, as a place that symbolizes the underworld where the seeds are reborn; specifically the decapitation sacrifices with a rite associated with the corn harvest (Taladoire 2017: 32). On the other hand, we can't overlook the very clear cosmological symbolism. On the southern coast of Guatemala, at Bilbao the Stela 3 from the Late Classic period shows a scene where a ballplayer offers a chopped head for the sun deity (Chinchilla 2013) (Figure 17). It seems to be a clear cosmological message.

Conclusions

Decapitation scenes and hieroglyphic texts, often associated with the ballgame, are documented in the Guatemalan Highlands and the Pacific Coast starting from the Late Pre-classic Period, in the Maya Lowlands, this kind of sacrifice probably started to develop during the Classic Period. Anyway, the close connection between the ball and the sacrificial victim seems to be reinforced by the word used by many Maya languages to name the rubber (the material from which the ball was made): *quic, k´ik´* etc. On the one hand it can be translated as a resin or as blood on the other (Craveri 2013: 58; Kaufmann 2003: 322-324). Various scholars conclude that the ball could be a substitution of the head, decapitation or more general – of the human sacrifice (Miller 2003: 390).

The importance of decapitation rites in association with the ballgame can also be proved by iconographic evidence on various monuments and vessels, starting from the vessels coming from Tiquisate, in the Escuintla Department, Guatemala, until the decapitation scene carved on the lateral walls of the Chichen Itza Great Ball Court.

We can consider as important evidence also the existence of some mythological narrations connecting sacrifices through decapitation to the ballgame, as we can see partially on the Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway and in full at a later date Popol Vuh. We have a strongly documented relationship between sacred narration, iconography and archaeological findings, but we don´t have a clear picture of the occasions on which rituals of decapitation on the ballcourts occurred. Evidences of head offerings from Quen Santo, Nakum and El Lacandon probably represent the foundation of the ballcourt rather than the ritual of decapitations at the time of use of the ballcourt. This, of course, does not exclude the fact that they happened, as the heads were buried in the playground. Taking into account only direct evidence, we can conclude that the ritual of the foundation of the ballcourt by beheading, points to his strong association with the story of Jun ´Ajaw / Junajpu

and hence his association with the underground landscape. This was also accomplished by offering sharp obsidian blades.

Apart from linking archaeological and iconographic sources with sacred narratives, the connection to the cosmological and agrarian rites is very important. A ballplayer from Bilbao is offering a chopped head to the Sun god. Junajpu, after the victory in Xibalba, appears in the sky as the Sun, but his temporary pumpkin head has been previously broken apart in the underworld and has released a number of seeds – perhaps the symbols of vital energy, soul or germs of life. That is why we can assume that the decapitating ritual and perhaps the entire ballgame had both cosmological and agrarian meaning. While the first one was probably closer to the ideology of elites, the other one was close to the needs of the commoners.

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