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## ORIGINAL

### CULTURE OF PASO DE LA AMADA, CREATOR OF THE 'MESOAMERICAN BALLGAME'

### CULTURA DE PASO DE LA AMADA, CREADORA DEL 'JUEGO DE PELOTA' MESOAMERICANO

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#### ABSTRACT

We study here the origin of the Mesoamerican ballgame during the early formative period (ca. 1700 B.C.). We select as candidates for the creators of the Mesoamerican ballgame the cultures of Paso de la Amada, pre-Olmec at San Lorenzo, and El Opeño, as they have the oldest vestiges of the ballgame. These vestiges are, to be exact, a ball court at Paso de la Amada, some rubber balls at Manati, and ceramic figurines at El Opeño.

We conclude that the great ball court at Paso de la Amada, the biggest building of Mesoamerica at that time, appears as the oldest vestige of the game and it is in relation with the emergence of ranked societies in Mesoamerica. We suggest

that the people of Paso de la Amada, around 1650 BC, were the creators of the game, and not the Olmecs, as generally defended.

**KEY WORDS:** Mesoamerican ballgame, Early Preclassic, Paso de la Amada ballcourt, Olmecs from San Lorenzo, El Opeño figurines.

## RESUMEN

Se realiza una revisión sobre el origen del juego de pelota mesoamericano en el preclásico temprano (ca.1.700-1.000 a.C.). Por la antigüedad propuesta para sus vestigios sobre el juego de pelota, son candidatos a ser los 'creadores del juego' las culturas de Paso de la Amada, los pre-olmecas de San Lorenzo y El Opeño. Los vestigios referidos son fundamentalmente, la cancha de Paso de la Amada, las pelotas de hule de El Manatí y las figurillas de El Opeño. Se concluye que la gran cancha de Paso de la Amada, la mayor construcción de Mesoamérica de su tiempo, aparece como el vestigio más antiguo del juego, y se le relaciona con la aparición de la primera sociedad no igualitaria en Mesoamérica. Se sugiere que los pobladores de Paso de la Amada, hacia 1650 a.C., fueron los creadores del juego y no los olmecas como generalmente se ha defendido.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Juego de pelota mesoamericano, preclásico temprano, cancha de Paso de la Amada, olmecas de San Lorenzo, figurillas de El Opeño

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The so-called 'ball-game' of the Mesoamericans is an important chapter in the history of Physical Activity, due to the interest it has aroused in scholars as well as in the general public. Mystery shrouds the history of this activity, since we know little about its evolution, its origin being its most obscure facet for us. It is commonly agreed that it first appeared during the Early Preclassic Period (before 1000 BC). Thus, we focus our attention on that period. Besides, we also wish to note at this point that to apply the term 'game' to that activity may be considered rather inaccurate by some scholars. Yet, in any case, since the aim of this article is not to discuss terminology, we will use this term here, as it is the most widely accepted among experts in the field.

In 1992 (on the occasion of the Fifth Centenary of the Discovery of America) one of the most relevant works that have ever analysed –in depth– all the existing data and theories about the game was published. The title of the work was *El juego de pelota en el México precolombino*, and the many authors that penned it stated in its pages that the Olmecs were the creators of the game:

“The recent archaeological findings at San Lorenzo and La Venta suggest that the Olmecs were the creators of this ritual, which they imbued with a complex religious meaning ... In La Venta there existed –

probably— a ball court, South-east of the Stirling Group. A coal sample taken from the Central Courtyard was dated to ca. 760 BC. This evidence, beside other data taken from the archaeological site, places that ball court as the oldest one of all Mesoamerica” (Serra, 1992, 22).

However, the discovery in 1995 of a large earth court in Paso de la Amada (Hill and Clark 2001; Uriarte, 2006, 22), astonishingly ancient —ca. 1650 BC—, shook those previous theories about the origin of the game.

Thus, in this article we aim to find out the real origin of the ball game and, in order to do it, we are going to analyse (chronologically and culturally) the oldest known vestiges of the game, which belong to three cultures, namely:

- a) Paso de la Amada culture.
- b) San Lorenzo's Pre-Olmec culture.
- c) El Opeño culture.

The antiquity and importance of the vestiges (related to the game) of these three cultures are similarly important, hence the difficulty in determining which one of those cultures was the creator of the game.

The time frame of our discussion stretches from ca. 1750 BC —when the first Pre-Olmec settlements took place at San Lorenzo— until the year 1000 BC — when that first Olmec city entered into its period of decadence, which marks the end of the Early Preclassic Period and the beginning of the Middle Preclassic (Clark, 2007; Grove, 1997, 54).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This research has been conducted with the application of a historical-critical methodology consisting of the study and analysis of the most relevant documentary sources.

Initially, we have considered as probable 'first vestiges' of the Mesoamerican ballgame the following ones: the balls from El Manatí (ca. 1700 BC), the court at Paso de la Amada (ca. 1650 BC) and the figurines of players from El Opeño (ca. 1700 BC, according to Blomster, 2012).

We have undertaken a systematic search on the subject of these three vestiges in the data bases of publications about History and Anthropology. Moreover, due to the temporal, cultural, and geographical relations of those three vestiges, we have also located relevant information about the Olmec courts at Macayal (ca. 1400-1200 BC), and about the Early Preclassic Olmec figurines (the oldest Olmec vestiges of the game after the balls from El Manatí, and older than the player figurines from El Opeño). We exclude from this study later Olmec figurines (those from the Middle Preclassic), typical of La Venta.

Since the liability of radiocarbon dating is low if it is not coherent with the archaeological context, we question the excessive antiquity proposed by Blomster for the figurines from el Opeño, as well as that proposed for other Olmec (or Olmec-style) figurines found at Tlatilco-Tlapacoya, in the Central Mexican plateau (see below).

### 3. PASO DE LA AMADA

#### 3.1. Public architecture is not an 'inert container'

Much has been written about the external and internal factors that have an influence on the emergence of social inequality and political authority within societies. Competition among factions (understanding faction as 'group that shares some interest for acting together') is usually at the base of the great majority of explanations (Rosenswig, 2000, 417-9; Brumfiel, 1994, 3; Spencer, 1993). According to Fox (1996, 483-4) game and facilities for game are decisive.

Fox says that public architecture in Mesoamerica, as in any other place, provides settings for power relations, and that for a long period of time public architecture has been viewed as an 'inert container'. Thanks to the ritual performed in ball courts, those people replicated (or tried to replicate) social order, though they could also manipulate and change that order, or even create a new one. Ball courts were facilities that gave the leader (or cacique) a means of communication, and the possibility of socially integrating the whole community by their participation in the ceremonies and games held there. The sacred dedication of ballcourts, through the interment of foundation caches and burials, strengthened the powers of those facilities and of the activities of social integration that took place there:

*"I argue that ballcourts, as facilities for social integration, housed a variety of related community rituals. In addition to ballgames these rituals centered on competitive feasts sponsored by elites and emerging elites. As tightly interwoven components of a ritual cycle, interfactional ballgames and feasts were sequenced by sponsors in deliberate dramas of self-promotion focusing on the competitive display and distribution of food." (Fox, 1996, 484).*

In the same line about the social consequences of the game, Clark (2007, 30) suggests that the Mesoamerican ballgame was an archaic institution for promoting social unity among the tribal groups, and that after the invention of the game by the Paso de la Amada culture, the Olmecs of San Lorenzo developed a more aggressive version of it that included human sacrifices. For his part, writing about the Olmec culture, Smith (2003) notes that ceremonial buildings and their location were instruments for creating conducts, attitudes, and emotions, aimed at legitimising the established power. The fact that there existed several courts within the same settlement, independently of the

settlement being big or small, seems to prove that those communities were divided into different (political) groups.

### **3.2 Paso de la Amada, the oldest court and the only one from Phase A of the Early Preclassic period**

In the archaeological site at Paso de la Amada, in the region of Matuzán, a huge court (80 m long) was discovered, the oldest of all Mesoamerica. It was built in ca. 1650-1600 BC, during Phase A of the Early Preclassic Period (corresponding to the ceramic phases Barra-Locona [Blake y Clark, 1999; Rosenswig, 2000, 441]), atop an elongated, compacted surface that may have served as an open playing field prior to construction of the formal playing court (Hill and Clark, 2001, 333). This court is the largest architectural structure of its time in Mesoamerica, and consists of the 80 m long and 7 m wide alley that stretches between two mounds that face each other, each being 80 m long, 1.5 m high and 30 m wide. Experts have estimated that the construction of such an earthen structure would have required (at least) 1,375 person-days of labour (Hill y Clark, 2001, 333).

### **3.3 The court at Paso de la Amada and the emergence of non-egalitarian societies**

Hill and Clark (2001, 331) note that "both the ballcourt's location and date constitute strong circumstantial evidence that its construction and/or use was important in and for the development of hereditary inequality and formal ascribed leadership" (a new social phase in Paso de la Amada and in all Mesoamerica). It was the birth of chiefdom societies, that is, of hereditary rule and social inequality. Competitive team sports and games played a significant role in the emergence of this new phase, since it coalesced community leadership around the individual leaders.

Thus, ca. 1600 BC Paso de la Amada would have been the first Mesoamerican society that underwent that change:

“Archaeologically, we place the transition to simple chiefdoms at about 1600 BC. (see Blake et al. 1995 for details of chronology). The best evidence for its emergence is the coordinated construction history of special house platforms at the large village of Paso de la Amada. There is good evidence that prior to 1600 BC each ward of this extensive village had at least one big house, ... But only one of these houses (Mound 6 ) was subsequently rebuilt and expanded over the course of many generations; the others were abandoned” (Hill and Clark, 2001, 332).

That chief's residence at Mound 6 was rebuilt and elevated at least seven times over the next three centuries, and appears to have been the principal residence in the community during all that time of the history of Paso de la Amada. The authors consider as rather significant the fact that the first big reform of Mound

6 house (construction of a platform to elevate it) did take place only after the ballcourt was built (Hill and Clark, 2001, 333).

The great architectural structures at Paso de la Amada, unthinkable for the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lead Lesure (2001, 122) to state that that city is "the first Mesoamerican ceremonial center", as already suggested by Clark (2004, 45). Paso de la Amada thus predated by several centuries the most important Mesoamerican communities, that –in general– did not become ceremonial centres until ca. 900 BC. Paso de la Amada was planned and built on an impressive scale, so that it justly deserves to be called a ceremonial centre.

Lesure (2011, 141-4) establishes three stages in the history of Paso de la Amada.

-The first stage would start in the 17<sup>th</sup> century BC, during the first half of the Locona phase. At this stage, the ballcourt is the most important non-residential structure at Paso de la Amada. Moreover, public structures (public buildings, squares) and private ones are seen as different (there exists architectural differentiation between them). Strikingly, there exists no temple; Paso de la Amada is a ceremonial centre without a temple!

-The second stage coincides with the Bajío phase (16<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), characterized by a leadership concentrated on fewer individuals, by the intergenerational transfer of authority, and by the continued absence of a temple. The ballcourt continues in use, but signs of neglected maintenance are already noticeable.

-The third stage coincides with the Cherla phase (14<sup>th</sup> century BC), when the ballcourt had already been abandoned and erosional infilling covered the alley (Hill 1998, 878). Likewise, by that stage, the south square had ceased to be a centre for public life, and there existed greater social differentiation. For the first time it is possible to document the existence of temples and residences in a differentiated way (i.e. it is possible to distinguish both buildings).

Thus, the big ballcourt seems to have played a more important role during the early history of Paso de la Amada.

#### **4. THE DISCOVERY OF OLMEC COURTS AND PLAYER FIGURINES FROM PHASE B OF THE EARLY PRECLASSIC**

##### **4.1 The existence of Olmec courts during phase B of the Early Preclassic; the courts at Macayal**

It is important to point out that radiocarbon dating of the Olmec historical phases on the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico entails difficulties and may lead to confusion, due to the atmospheric fluctuations of C14 which occurred between

the years 800 and 400 BC (650-400 BC in uncalibrated radiocarbon years [Pool, 2009, 241-2]). Hence, the San Lorenzo phase would stretch from 1400 to 1000 BC, that is the real time when those peoples lived.

About the Olmec game, for a long time scholars have tended to think that the data relating to courts in that culture were not reliable enough, and that they probably played the game without courts. The archaeological site at Macayal – located 17 km from San Lorenzo and 1 km from El Manatí– has provided evidence against that idea. The site consists of five mounds (6 m high each), four courts and twenty five residential platforms (0.3-1 m high [Rodríguez y Ortiz 1997, 71]). These findings from Macayal, the courts included, have been dated (by radiocarbon dating) to ca. 1040 BC, and are therefore contemporary with those of the Olmecs from San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (Rodríguez y Ortiz 1997, 72).

According to Clark (2007, 28), due to the importance of the ball game among the Olmecs, it is possible that other courts may exist that have not been discovered yet. Macayal was a centre that depended on San Lorenzo –it had squares and courts at the time of San Lorenzo's cultural phase– so that it is possible that San Lorenzo also had those facilities.

#### **4.2 The oldest Olmec figurines, contemporary with the Olmec courts at Macayal**

Coe (1981, 130) and Clark (2007, 30) think that the earliest player figurines date from the San Lorenzo phase, that is, not prior to 1400 BC. According to Taube (2004, 7), the first player figurines –that wear wide belts– were made in the Chicharras phase (1400 BC [1250-1150 BC in radiocarbon years]). From that phase to the fall of San Lorenzo, Olmec rulers were represented as ballgame players and warriors. Several authors (Taube, 1992; Cyphers and Di Castro, 2004, 40-41), when considering these player figurines from San Lorenzo, distinguish two types: one type wears masks with human and animal features, whereas the other type does not. This could represent two types of game or two teams of players. All of them wear circular breast plates, iron mirrors, and wide protective belts, and are dated at ca. 1150 BC (Cheetham, 2006; Coe and Diehl, 1980, 269-70; Taube, 1995, 100; Cyphers, 2004, 176).

Some authors date the figurines to still older dates, which seems less feasible. For example, Bradley (2001) states that towards 1500 BC Olmec rulers were already in the habit of representing themselves as players; by that time the outfit of the ruler included, beside the ruler's insignia and some religious fertility symbols, the team used in the ballgame. This author dates Olmec (or Olmec-style) figurines found at Tlatilco and Tlapacoya (in the Central Mexican plateau) to 1500-1300 BC (in Whittington, 2001, 142, 143, 152).

#### **4.3 Posteriority of the Pre-Olmec rubber balls offerings in El Manatí with regard to the court at Paso de la Amada**

Among the oldest vestiges that may be related to the game, the rubber balls from El Manatí (ca. 1700 BC, Ojochi phase of San Lorenzo) deserve special attention, because they formed part of offerings (Tarkanian y Hosler, 2000; Grove, 1997, 70). Nonetheless, there is an author who gives a more recent date for those balls, which, according to him, would have been made after the court at Paso de la Amada (Uriarte, 2006, 22).

Grove (1997, 77) and Clark (2007, 31) agree in dating those balls to 1700 BC, and propound that those offerings of rubber balls at El Manatí document the existence of the game among the Olmecs by that time, despite the lack of any other evidence in that sense (there are no courts, figurines or any similar vestige of the game among the Olmecs before 1400 BC). Those balls were part of a massive offering called by Neff (2011, 111-2) "the great ritual event", that also included "the massive burial of anthropomorphic wood busts along with polished jadeite and serpentine axes, hematite balls, wood scepters, pectorals, and disarticulated human infants". According to the author, the aim was to flaunt wealth, something always sought by man, a form of "wasteful advertising". The Olmecs would have been staging those displays of wealth and power in El Manatí since ca. 1850 BC, becoming specially relevant in San Lorenzo since 1500 BC due to the monumental sculptures there used (Neff, 2011, 107-8). We think that, although those balls date to 1700 BC, they cannot be considered as a first evidence of the game, since those Pre-Olmec cultures do not show any reliable vestige of the ballgame until ca. 1400 BC. Those balls did not necessarily have to be used for the ballgame, the sources show us other uses for that kind of ball (Stone, 2002; Ochoa, 1992, 28).

Around one century after Paso de la Amada, towards 1550 BC, we find in San Lorenzo clear signs of communal labour, which implies ranked social order (chiefdom); construction of islotes and platforms for residences, levelling the ground, etc. (Clark, 2007, 40). If the connection between facilities for competitive games and the emergence of social ranks propounded by Fox really existed, courts should also have existed in San Lorenzo since 1550 BC and, therefore, they would have predated those at Macayal by many years.

#### **5. THE FIGURINES FROM EL OPEÑO, CONTEMPORARY WITH THE FIRST OLMEC FIGURINES**

Blomster (2012) defends that the player figurines from El Opeño date to 1700 BC: "The earliest excavated ballplayer figurines formed an arranged scene of eight objects, dating to 1700 BC, from a shaft tomb at El Opeño, Michoacan". That date makes those figurines the oldest ones ever found, and also the oldest vestiges of the game, predating even the big court at Paso de la Amada (dating to 1650-1600 BC). Yet, Oliveros (2004, 17, 19) studied the dating of the figurines from El Opeño and gave a different opinion: "the charcoal samples

made it possible to get more exact dates. They gave an antiquity between 1500 and 1000 BC ... The first date I got through radiocarbon dating was 1280 BC". Therefore, based on the dates by Oliveros, those player figurines from El Opeño are not as old as Blomster asserts, but contemporary with the first Olmec figurines (that is, they belong to phase A of San Lorenzo, within phase B of the Early Preclassic [Clark, 2007, 14]).

According to Oliveros (2004, 56-7), the figurines do not represent the form of the game that involved hip hit, but special forms of it that still continue to be played today, with the names 'pelota forro' in Oaxaca and 'pasiri a kuri' and 'uárukua', where the ball is hit with a stick. He also suggests that these forms of the game are represented in the Tepantitla mural, from the Classic Period, and that the culture of El Opeño did not have continuity in the later local Tarasca culture, but that its elements were instead taken to the Valley of Mexico, where they mixed with those of the peoples who lived there.

Hill and Clark (2001, 334), far from the dates given by Blomster and closer to those by Oliveros, state that those figurines represent the elites of the "Mexican highlands", contemporary with the Olmecs from San Lorenzo and, therefore, dating to ca. 1400 -1000 BC. In the same line, Dolores Flores Villatoro (1992, 107) also dates the group of figurines from El Opeño (a little stone yoke and a curved stone macana included) to 1200-800 BC, which essentially agrees with Clark's above-mentioned opinion. Hence, according to Hill and Clark (2001), those elites represented themselves as ball players, in a similar way to what the Olmecs had done in figurines and in monumental representations from San Lorenzo.

Yet, we think that the Olmecs exerted some kind of influence on the ballgame practised in El Opeño, since there are two hints in that sense:

- a green stone figurine with mouth of the type 'tiger mask' (Olmec feature) from Tomb 1 at El Opeño (Oliveros 2004, 78).

- a little Olmec-style yoke complementing the group of figurines.

All this could be, hence, the result of the general Olmec influence on El Opeño during the so-called "Early Olmec Horizon" (Cheetham, 2006, 1), that is, the diffusion of Olmec-style symbols throughout all Mesoamerica, that started towards 1350 BC (Blomster et al. 2005; Grove, 1997, 88).

During the "Early Olmec Horizon", Olmec (or Olmec-style) player figurines appear on the coast of the State of Chiapas, in the central Mexican plateau (Niederberger, 1987, 701-2; Bradley y Joralemon, 1993) and in Oaxaca (where one of these figurines was found [Blomster, 2012,1]). Yet, the discovery of the figurine from Oaxaca –instead of proving the practice of the game there– seems

more likely to simply suggest that in that area the iconography and ideology of the game had already been introduced by phase B of the Early Preclassic. All this leads us to think that the dating of El Opeño figurines is contemporary with San Lorenzo's Olmec phase (or Preclassic B), although it is also possible that those figurines from El Opeño –where funeral architecture first appeared in Mesoamerica– are older than the Olmec figurines (somewhat closer to the dates proposed by Blomster), since there exists other study (using archaeomagnetic dating, still infrequent in Mesoamerican studies) that dates them to 1500 BC (Pineda Durán et al., 2010, 576).

## **6. SUPERIORITY OF PASO DE LA AMADA DURING ITS INTERACTIONS WITH THE OLMECS BEFORE CA. 1400 BC**

As we have shown up to this point, the data provided by archaeology seem to suggest that the construction of the big court at Paso de la Amada towards 1650-1600 BC was not an Olmec cultural influence, since Paso de la Amada – before 1400 BC– was a culture superior to that of the Olmecs of San Lorenzo (at that time Paso de la Amada had a higher population and a more advanced political system [Taladoire, 2000; Love, 1992, 323; Rosenswig, 2000, 441]).

There exists evidence proving that both peoples had traded directly between each other since 1400 BC, which could have benefited the elites of both peoples; the Olmecs took religion, symbolism, clothing and manners to Soconusco, whereas they imported from Soconusco exotic products. This trade strengthened the superiority of the elites of Soconusco (Rosenswig, 2000, 419). However, according to Clark (2007, 29), the first contacts between the two communities would have occurred at an earlier date, towards 1600 BC, because it was at that date that the Olmecs started to import obsidian and jade from the Guatemala highlands, imports that came across the Mazatán region. Clark suggests that since those first contacts, the Pre-Olmecs from San Lorenzo copied the chiefdoms of Paso de la Amada and, even imagined that they had ties of kindred with the chiefs of Paso de la Amada as a justification for their own chiefdoms in San Lorenzo. Thus, the transition from tribal societies to chiefdom societies would have occurred before in Paso de la Amada, towards 1650 BC, showing therefore a higher level of political development than the Pre-Olmecs of San Lorenzo. Shortly after, towards 1550 BC, the Pre-Olmecs of San Lorenzo would have also completed that transition, as evidenced by the communal works from that date.

Paso de la Amada's larger population and greater geographical extension also evidence its superiority over San Lorenzo; this latter community, since their beginnings in ca. 1750 BC until 1400 BC, always had a reduced population (their population growth always being low). Clark calculates an extension of 25 hectares and a population of 500 people by 1550 BC. On its part, Paso de la Amada, towards 1700-1500 BC (during the Locona phase), would have had ca. 980 inhabitants, plus 2,290 more living in small villages dependent on the metropolis (Clark, 1994: 208-14; Lesure y Blake, 2002, 8).

Only after 1400 BC did the Olmecs from San Lorenzo show demographic, political and cultural superiority over Mazatán (Adams 1997, 30-5), and relationships underwent a deep change; towards 1300 BC there was an episode of Olmec political control over Mazatán (Clark, 1990), which resulted in the abandonment of Paso de la Amada (which puts an end to its history), with another settlement emerging instead, the Olmec-dependent city of Cantón Corralito. In the excavations of this latter city there have been discovered "over 6,000 Olmec style figurine and pottery fragments" (Cheetham, 2006, 2). Olmec political control ends towards 1200 BC, but the cultural influence of Olmec art continues until ca. 1000 BC (although the art of the city of Tlapacoya, in the highlands of the Mexican Plateau, became a great rival). Around the year 1000 BC the fall of San Lorenzo starts (Clark, 2007, 24).

It is not important for the aim of this study whether San Lorenzo did ever reach the status of state, or if it always remained as a mere chiefdom, as defended by some authors (Spencer and Redmon, 2004, Redmon and Spencer, 2012), since in this article we have focused on the transition from egalitarian societies to chiefdom societies, a transition that seems to be connected to the origin of the game.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The invention of the so-called 'ballgame' of the Mesoamericans has been traditionally ascribed to the Olmecs, but this study suggests that the real creators of the game were the inhabitants of Paso de la Amada. We reach this conclusion because the court at Paso de la Amada (built ca. 1650 BC) is the indisputed oldest vestige of the game, and because the comparative study of the cultures of Paso de la Amada and that of the Pre-Olmecs is in line with it; the superiority of the culture of Paso de la Amada over that of the Pre-Olmecs makes it unlikely that the ballgame was a cultural borrowing taken by the people of Paso de la Amada from the Pre-Olmecs.

As we have seen, between ca.1700 and 1500 BC, Paso de la Amada had a larger population and a higher level of political development than San Lorenzo. In this sense, Clark (1994; 2007) calculates that Paso de la Amada had a population of 980 inhabitants, plus 2,290 others living in small villages dependent on the metropolis, whereas San Lorenzo had a population of some 500 inhabitants, plus 1,500 others living in dependent nearby villages. Although the Pre-Olmecs of San Lorenzo lived under the chiefdom system since ca. 1550 BC (according to Clark), the oldest Olmec courts are those of Macayal, in the area dependent on San Lorenzo, dating from 1400-1200 BC. These Olmec courts are, hence, more modern than the court at Paso de la Amada.

The court at Paso de la Amada is the largest architectural structure of its time in all Mesoamerica, and (according to Fox, 1996) caused the emergence of the first Mesoamerican chiefdom.

About the player figurines from El Opeño, most scholars do not accept the date of 1700 BC propounded by Blomster (2012), preferring instead that offered by Oliveros (2004) of 1500-1000 BC. Thus, those figurines would have an antiquity similar to that of the player-ruler figurines of the San Lorenzo phase (ca. 1400-1200 BC). Apart from those mud figurines, those player-rulers were also represented in stone monuments like the colossal heads from San Lorenzo (Taube, 2004, 9; Clark, 2007). It is suggested that the figurines from El Opeño do also represent player-rulers.

Other vestiges that are more modern than the court at Paso de la Amada (and that hence cannot be included in this discussion about the origin of the game) are the Olmec (or Olmec-style) figurines found outside the territory of San Lorenzo (specifically in Tlatilco and Tlapacoya [in the Mexican plateau], in the Mazatán region [on the coast of Chiapas], and in Oaxaca). Although the antiquity of these figurines has been occasionally exaggerated in the literature, they cannot be dated before the year 1400 BC because they belong to the Olmec Horizon (Cheetham, 2006).

Finally, we stress that the game, in the academic debate, is considered by some authors as a factor essential for social change, specifically in the emergence of ranked societies with hereditary leadership. Thus, we support the idea that the creation of the ballgame by the culture of Paso de la Amada favoured the emergence of the first Mesoamerican ranked societies.

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