

then develop the appropriate means to answer those questions.

JOHN H. BLITZ

*Department of Anthropology, Queens College, CUNY,
65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.*

14 XII 95

Fox implores archaeologists to contribute to "the study of 'place' as a politicized social construct" and provides us with an excellent example of how one might do so. His study is informative and, for the most part, convincing. Through systematic examination of the long-neglected artifact and feature associations of Mesoamerican ballcourts, Fox demonstrates that these sacred places were consecrated with dedicatory caches and were the scene of frequent feasts. He identifies two complementary components of ballcourt ritual; the game and the feast. Social and cosmological conflicts, he argues, were expressed through a ballgame and then resolved with a feast. He proposes a political scenario in which ballgames and competitive feasts were sponsored by "aggrandizers" engaged in self-promoting machinations. He contends that successful elite control of ballcourts and the associated ritual cycle is indicated, over a period of time, by the concentration of large ballcourts at major centers and the disappearance of small ballcourts at lesser centers.

Fox does not address two common characteristics of ethnographically known Native American ballgames: (1) their use as a device for dispute resolution or a substitute for war and (2) gambling on their outcomes as a form of exchange (Santley, Berman, and Alexander 1991, Stern 1950, Vennum 1994). Although he does call our attention to the ballgame feast as a symbolic form of conflict resolution, he does not emphasize the political efficacy of this aspect of the ballgame. Because factionalism is a constant threat to the growth and consolidation of regional political formations, elites may have attempted to prevent potential internal strife by routinizing and amplifying the ballgame as a peaceful surrogate of war. Kin-group and community rivalries may have been redirected, made predictable, and controlled at low cost through the ballgame, thereby reducing the risk of violent confrontation and fission.

The potential relationship between gambling sports and political organization has received little attention from archaeologists (DeBoer 1993). As an integral social component of Native American ballgames, gambling generates and disperses wealth, making it an attractive target for elite control. Elites may have regulated gambling as a form of exchange at Mesoamerican ballcourts by scheduling the game cycle, restricting the game location, and restructuring ballcourt activities.

Fox presents us with some insightful research. I wish, however, that he had been more explicit about the long-term political implications of the ballgame ritual. He implies that the ballgame, with demonstrated links to wealth displays, status competition, sanctity, and politi-

cal legitimacy, was an institution through which aggrandizers or emergent elites might develop and extend their political authority. If so, he does not specify how such a process occurred. While I think Fox has made his case that the ballcourt was the focus of intense political activity, I doubt that efforts by local aggrandizers to extend an authority based on ballgame competitive feasting into other social or economic realms would have met with much success. If aggrandizers were also partisan participants mired in the interfactional rivalries of ballgame competition, then their attempts at controlling the ballgame ritual would have been easily checked by others of similar status. Alternatively, if sponsorship of ballgames and feasts was transferred from local kin-group partisans to an elite person with chiefly authority or power beyond the local level, then the ballgame ritual might have been reconfigured to serve the goal of political centralization. Intercommunity competition, localized at ballcourts, may have created an ideal opening for leaders or their functionaries to regulate the events by proclaiming the nonpartisan benevolence of a regional, not local, authority. Since it has been established that the ballgame ritual was formalized as an element of state religion by the Classic period (Cohodas 1975, Pasztory 1978), appropriation through political hegemony would seem to be the most likely mechanism for the political transformation of the game. Chiefly co-optation or appropriation of community-level ballgames would provide yet another opportunity for paramount leaders or their representatives to exercise the role of legitimate mediator at the local level.

SUSAN D. GILLESPIE

*Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Ill. 61801, U.S.A.*

(sgillesp@uxl.cso.uiuc.edu) 11 XII 95

Fox is to be commended for attempting to separate the Mesoamerican rubber ballgame from its architectural counterpart, the masonry ballcourt, in order to allow prehistorians to understand both of these phenomena better. The ballgame is properly viewed here within a context of public action, as part of a sequence of ritual events whose purposes were located in the social and political domains as much as if not more than in the cosmological (as I have argued on other grounds [Gillespie 1991]). Fox has undertaken pioneering work in investigating preexisting archaeological data pertaining to ballcourt excavations. He then adds important archaeological evidence from his own work to the ethnohistoric and ethnographic record in order to detail more completely the kinds of activities associated with this setting, of which the ballgame was only one. The ballcourt is thus recognized as a multipurpose venue with a highly charged role in maintaining the dynamics of both social and cosmic relationships.

The logical trajectory of his analysis should be carried farther. In proposing that "ballcourts, as facilities for social integration, housed a variety of related community

rituals," it seems unwarranted to state, from the archaeological evidence for food consumption associated with a ballcourt, that this feasting was therefore a major component of a *ballgame* ritual. Similarly, having shown that no one template is sufficient for determining the purposes and contexts of ballgames and ballcourts for every region and time period in which they occurred, it seems unwarranted to apply information on ballgame practices from other areas and temporal periods to the Cuyumapa Drainage without first considering other possible explanations. The archaeological evidence is sound, but the interpretations are still only loosely tied to that evidence, based on a chain of hypotheses that await further testing.

The Cuyumapa Drainage ballcourts are located along the southeastern "border" of Mesoamerica, among neighbors of Maya peoples. Fox's explanation for the early presence of these ballcourts as resulting from individual efforts of competitive local "aggrandizers" and the related notion of "competitive feasting" on the part of the elites form a provocative proposal. These ideas are based on data from outside of southeastern Mesoamerica and need to be more firmly placed within a larger model of the construction and negotiation of social relationships among both elites and commoners within this particular region.

The evidence for competitive feasting in association with games comes from lowland South American tribal-level societies, and a sizable leap is required to adjust that scenario to the level of competition not among villages but among "individual local aggrandizers" in chiefdom-level societies who sponsored competitive ballgames to enhance their own prestige but then afterwards offered feasts to "attempt to transform competition and conflict into coordination and allegiance." The notion of competition among these aggrandizers is based on a model of ballcourt distribution developed for Central Mexican data by Santley, Berman, and Alexander (1991) in which the density of ballcourts serves as a "proxy measure" for the scale of centralization (1991:17)—more ballcourts indicating less centralization. This model is actually more complex than is presented by Fox, in order to account for, for example, the huge number of ballcourts described for the highly centralized Aztec state. Fox takes the large number of Cuyumapa Drainage ballcourts as indicating a lack of centralization and, by default, identifies the presumed presence of competition among these sites as the motive for the construction of so many ballcourts. However, the more significant variable correlated with their distribution, according to the Central Mexican model, was the "politicization" of the ballgame—the degree to which it was played as "an alternative means of acquiring additional revenue or territory at minimum expense" (1991:17). This variable must first be identified for the Cuyumapa Drainage, along with the degree to which individuals, elite groups, or communities were involved in ballcourt-associated rituals (including ballgames).

Fox appropriately generalizes his approach to ballcourts by indicating that the reconstruction of the ball-

court as "a 'lived' landscape . . . actively used and interpreted in ritual to create and manipulate perceptions of social difference" should be extended to other forms of public architecture. None of these structures should be viewed in isolation from others. Ballcourts are rarely isolated architecturally, and the activities that took place within and adjacent to them need to be viewed within the larger architectural setting of which the ballcourt is one component. Fox has therefore pointed a way to highly productive new research and analysis that will move studies of the Mesoamerican ballgame out of the narrow categories of cult and sport and into the broader sociopolitical spectrum to delineate more clearly how ballcourts—with or without the ballgame—served as "facilities for social integration."

STEPHEN D. HOUSTON

Department of Anthropology, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602, U.S.A. 6 II 95

Fox deserves credit for an ingenious and nuanced vision of public architecture in southern Mesoamerica. Ballcourts are his target. He blends theory and data to confront static typologies of these buildings, and, implicitly, other kinds of structure as well. By sifting through ethnography, archaeology, and comparative anthropology he shows that architectural function and meaning are not as simple or unidimensional as some have supposed. Yet he does not dismiss typology. The formal regularity of ballcourts, their playing alleys with axial markers, and their parallel, sloping walls are precisely the features that allow him to focus on this problem. A corresponding regularity in pottery points to the serving and consumption of food and, less certainly, of intoxicating beverages.

We can imagine a Bourdieu or Giddens smiling benevolently on this study. Somewhat more distant hover Fox's phenomenological godfathers, Husserl and Heidegger. Spaces are "lived" or "negotiated." They emerge, physically embodied or defined by buildings, only to shift in response to changed political and ritual circumstances. The built form follows function; function influences built form. The hermeneutic approach, which sees Mesoamerican landscapes as fixed texts, is banished to the dunce's corner—rightly, I think. (Fox might put this less acerbically.) Landscapes do not have only one story to tell. To view them as single, coherent "narratives" is a questionable conceit. A patron's wishes, channeled through his designers and workforce and mediated by available materials and building technology, may be expressed more directly in a single building, but later changes to that building, the emplacement of new rituals or modifications of old, and the construction of other structures nearby will make our grasp of those wishes muddy at best and perhaps irrelevant to an understanding of long-term changes in the built environment.

Fox makes us acutely aware of what we, as archaeologists and students of ancient architecture, are up against,