Introduction

Ballcourts have come to represent the pre-Classic Hohokam more than any other architectural or artifactual class. These sizeable basin-shaped structures with earthen embankments were built at most of the large villages throughout southern and central Arizona between AD 750 and 1080. People watching or participating in the ballgame probably came together from several different villages, which would have provided opportunities for exchanging commodities both in the form of raw materials and finished goods.

The Ballcourt

How do we know it’s a Ballcourt?

Early archaeologists believed that these structures were reservoirs. When excavated, though, they showed no evidence of water-deposited sediments—no fine layers of silt and clay that would have settled to the bottom of standing water. Instead, we find smoothed or plastered surfaces (or both) and “centerline markers” similar to those seen in Mesoamerican ballcourts, particularly those in West Mexico, which have been documented in 16th-century Spanish accounts.

A pre-Hispanic ceramic model from Nayarit in West Mexico depicts ballplayers playing a ballgame in a court with stone markers before spectators (below, right). Hohokam anthropomorphophic figures from the ballcourt time-period have been found that are very similar. Figures like this are not found outside of the Hohokam Ballcourt World.

What Did we Learn?

Even though we were limited to a 10-foot-wide excavation area that cut the ballcourt at an oblique angle, we were able to learn quite a bit about it:

- The long axis of the ballcourt was oriented north–south.
- The ballcourt’s surface was unplastered, but probably stone smoothed.
- People probably made the berms of the ballcourt from the same material that had been excavated from the center of the court during its construction.
- It is very likely that the court had centerline markers.
- People probably used the ballcourt during the early to middle Sedentary period (A.D. 950–1080), and later generations filled it with household trash.

Ceramics

A total of 7,717 ceramic sherds were recovered from the 10 cm of fill above the ballcourt floor. Of these sherds, 98% are Plain Ware Ceramics that are terminally-diagnostic date to the late Sedentary to early Classic Period. This reflects the fact that, like most ballcourts, this structure was not used after around A.D. 1080 even though people continued to live in this village until around 1300.

Lithics

Two chert Classic Period projectile points (one Classic flanged point and one Classic side-notched point) were recovered from the ballcourt fill. Agate and crystal isolates along with local quartzite and rhodolite indicate people from the village regularly gathered raw material across their landscape—not having access to the lag gravel deposits associated with riverine Hohokam villages. Eleven tabular tool fragments, and a significant presence of agave in the archaeobotanical record, suggest this happened in the course of accessing other natural resources across the landscape.

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Thank you to the people at ADOT, Logan Simpson, Desert Archaeology, and Archaeology Southwest.