

# What can we Learn by Digging a Trench through a Hohokam Ballcourt?

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## 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.



Above: An artist's visualization of a Hohokam marketplace with spectators watching a ballgame in the background (Graphic: Robert B. Ciaccio)

While they are one of the most recognizable forms of public architecture in the southern Southwest, there have been relatively few opportunities to excavate them. Our recent excavations at a Hohokam village north of Tucson provided a unique opportunity to excavate a portion of a ballcourt.

Although the project area was incredibly narrow—only 10-ft wide—and in a road right-of-way that had been leveled at the surface, excavations revealed more intact deposits than had been anticipated.



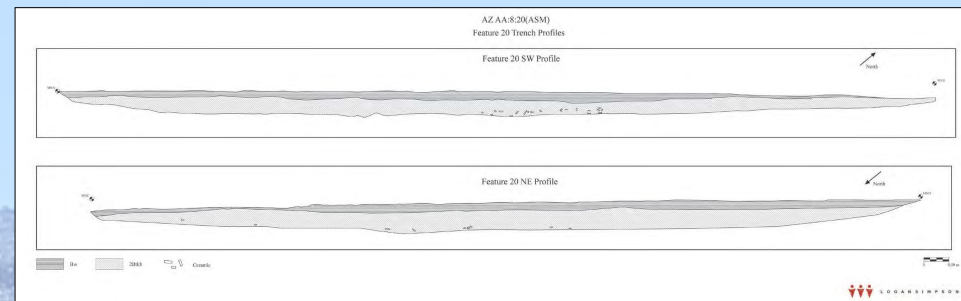
Left: The partially excavated ballcourt with a deep trench through the center.

Below: A Gila Bend area ballcourt that is still visible at the ground surface (Photo by H. Wallace).

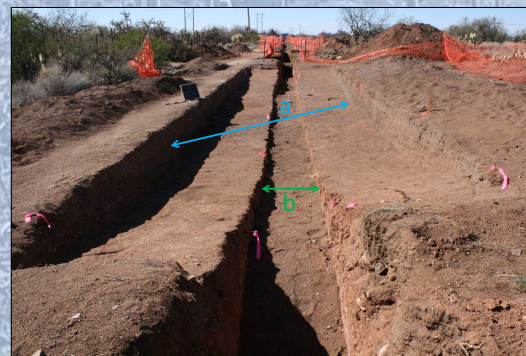
Given that the tops of the berms had been cut off and the project area was so narrow, we weren't sure how much we would be able to tell about the construction and orientation of the court. The western berm had been hit harder with heavy equipment than the eastern one. The floor was unplastered and the berms were made from the same material the court was dug into, so it was difficult to determine where the surface of the ballcourt ended and the disturbed berm area began.



## The Ballcourt



Above: The soil profile from the trench through the excavated ballcourt. Bw indicates a weathered soil horizon characterized by a brown loam with moderate fine sub-angular blocky structure; soft, very friable, slightly sticky and slightly plastic; many fine roots; common fine irregular pores; with around 20% calcium carbonate. 2Btkb is described as a light reddish brown clay loam with moderate fine prismatic parting to strong medium angular blocky structure; hard, firm, very sticky and very plastic; few fine roots; few fine tubular pores, and a lower density of calcium carbonate than the Bw horizon. It also indicates that the parent material is different than that of the Bw horizon.



Above: The fully excavated portion of ballcourt that fell within our project area.

Right: Two examples of Hohokam figurine heads from the La Villa site in central Phoenix. Similar figurines (both broken and complete) have been found at Hohokam ballcourt sites across the Hohokam Ballcourt World.

- a) Centerline of the ballcourt
- b) The utility line trench where the ballcourt was originally identified
- c) Centerline Marker



## How do we know it's a Ballcourt?

Early archaeologists believed that these structures were reservoirs. When excavated, though, they show no evidence of water-deposited sediments—no fine layers of silts and clays 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 16<sup>th</sup>-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 anthropomorphic figurines from the ballcourt time-period have been found that are very similar. Figurines like this are not found outside of the Hohokam Ballcourt World



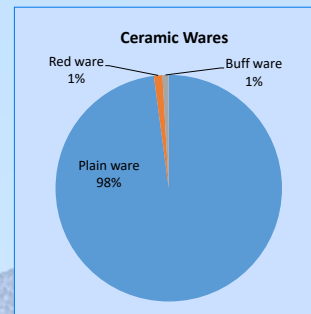
Left: Our excavations revealed a centerline marker (b) and a shallow post hole in the floor of the ballcourt. No other sub-features were found within our excavation area.

Right: A West Mexican figurine tableau depicting people playing a ball game and spectators along the berms of the court. A similar game was probably played in Hohokam ballcourts.



## 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 temporally 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.

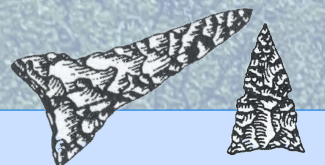


Above: An artist's visualization of a Hohokam ballgame taking place (Graphic: Robert B. Ciaccio)

## 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 rhyolite 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.

Right: An artist's rendering of a Classic flanged point (left) and a Classic side-notched point (right). (Many thanks to Jane Silva for providing illustrative examples.)



## 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.

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