

The Hohokam Ballcourt World

The largest identifiable archaeological culture patterns have been variously called culture areas, regional systems, or archaeological horizons. These regional patterns probably encompassed multiple cultural, ethnic, and linguistic groups. The term “world” is an appropriate alternative to these labels, signifying multicultural participation in a common religion, ideology, or cosmology during periods of greatest inclusivity, such as the Hohokam Ballcourt World.

What is the Hohokam Ballcourt World?

One of the most recognizable attributes of Hohokam culture is a form of public architecture that we call ballcourts. These sizeable basin-shaped structures with earthen embankments were built at most of the large villages throughout the region. People watching or participating in the ballgame probably came together from several different villages. This provided opportunities for visiting and for exchanging commodities in the form of raw materials and finished goods.

Where is the Hohokam Ballcourt World?

At its peak, the Hohokam Ballcourt World covered over 58,000 square kilometers (more than 22,000 square miles). The northernmost courts, which are probably some of the latest, are located near Flagstaff, Arizona, whereas the southernmost Hohokam-style ballcourt site is in northern Mexico along the Santa Cruz River, which eventually flows north through the Tucson Basin. The easternmost courts are found in the Safford area, and the westernmost courts are



A pre-Hispanic ceramic model from Nayarit in West Mexico depicts ballplayers playing a ballgame in a court with stone markers before spectators. COURTESY OF THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

along the lower Gila River, west of Gila Bend. Most of the roughly 250 known ballcourts are found in the major population areas of the time—along the lower Salt and middle Gila Rivers (today, metropolitan Phoenix) and along the Santa Cruz River (metropolitan Tucson).



Above: The widespread ideology many archaeologists associate with the use of ballcourts has also been associated with an expression of group identity that manifests itself in the archaeological record. In addition to ballcourts, the suite of traits marking the Hohokam pre-Classic period includes Red-on-buff or Red-on-brown pottery, stone palettes and censers, distinctive projectile point styles, and Glycymeris shell bracelets/armlets. POTTERY IMAGE: ASM NO. 97-194-2, COURTESY OF THE ARIZONA STATE MUSEUM **Left:** A Hohokam marketplace with people watching or playing ballgames in the background. VISUALIZATION: ROBERT B. CIACCIO



Above: A ballcourt in the Safford area. **Below:** A depiction of a ballcourt game. VISUALIZATION: ROBERT B. CIACCIO



When did the Hohokam Ballcourt World flourish?

Ballcourts began to appear in the Hohokam World around A.D. 750 and, with a few exceptions, were not used past A.D. 1075. Ballcourts in the Flagstaff area were made and used much later than those in the southern Southwest. For example, people used the court at Wupatki from around A.D. 1100 to 1215.

How do we know these structures were ballcourts?

Early archaeologists believed that these structures were reservoirs. When excavated, though, they showed no evidence of water-deposited sediments—no fine layers of silts and clays that would have settled to the bottom of standing water. Instead, archaeologists found smoothed or plastered surfaces (or both) and “centerline markers” similar to those seen in Mesoamerican ballcourts, which

Far right: So far, only eight (non-stone) balls have been found in the Hohokam region. In addition to those made of rubber, two are made from resin and two are composed of a “high-sulfur” material. IMAGE: AARON WRIGHT
Right: Stone paddles that were probably used in a ballgame have been found along the edges of the ballcourt at the Tres Alamos site in the San Pedro valley.



people saw themselves and expressed that relative to others) across the Gila River watershed focuses on the Hohokam Ballcourt World. The “World” concept helps us think about shared identity and behaviors, but we

also want to explore diversity and variability *within* the Hohokam Ballcourt World. Looking at local networks and social boundaries within the Ballcourt World will allow us to investigate group identity at multiple scales—from village identity to multi-village

community to the entire Ballcourt World—to determine when identity was more persistent (when people resisted change and new ideas) and when it was more fluid (when people embraced change and new ideas). It will also allow us to explore patterns at the edges of the Ballcourt World, as in the Lower Gila region. This research provides new information about the Hohokam Ballcourt World, while also compiling and synthesizing old data to offer new insights into the ways that groups of people form social boundaries.

had been documented in 16th-century Spanish accounts.

What new research is underway in the Hohokam Ballcourt World?

Thanks in large part to over 50 years’ worth of legally mandated projects, an enormous amount of archaeological fieldwork has been conducted within the Hohokam Ballcourt World. Aspects such as chronology and settlement patterns are well established, allowing researchers to delve into large anthropological issues at a regional scale.

Part of Archaeology Southwest’s new research on social identity (how



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The Adamsville ballcourt near Casa Grande Ruins National Monument. IMAGE: HENRY D. WALLACE