

FACTS AND COMMENTS

THE BALL GAME PLAYED BY THE ABORIGINES OF THE ANTILLES

The study of the so-called *juegos o corrales de los indios* comprises one of the most interesting aspects of West Indian archaeology. The Archaeological Research Center of the University of Puerto Rico has devoted special attention to their study in the belief that these *juegos* stand in intimate relation with a number of problems of Caribbean archaeology, the solution of which cannot but lead to a clearer and more exact view of the aboriginal culture.

The earliest historical notices of these sites are to be found in the chronicles of the conquest and colonization. We learn that one or more courts, in which games of ball were played and ceremonies with a socio-religious significance were celebrated, were to be found in each village. Bartolomé de las Casas (1909) describes the courts in these words:

. . . tenían una plaza, comunmente ante la puerta de la casa del señor, muy barrida, tres veces más luenga que ancha, cercada de unos lomillos de un palmo o dos de alto . . .

The aboriginal name for the court and the game was *batey* (Casas, 1909). The same word is used by the country people of the Antilles today to refer to the small open areas in front of their houses. The chronicler Oviedo (1851) describes the balls which were used in the game:

E las pelotas son de unas rayces de árboles e de hiervas e zumos e mezcla de cosas, que toda junta esta mixtura parece algo cerapez negra. Juntas estas y otras materias, cuencenlo todo y hacen una pasta; e rodeanla y hacen la pelota, tamaño como una de las de viento en España, e mayores e menores; la cual mixtura hace una rez negra, e no pega a las manos; e después que esta exura tornase algo esponjosa, no por que tenga agujero ni vacuo alguno, como la esponja, pero aligerescesce; y es como fofa y algo pesada.

This description of Oviedo's of the balls which were used in the game leads us to the conclusion that they were made of rubber or of some resin with similar properties. We see here, therefore, the first allusion in history to rubber and to its use by the Indians of the Antilles.

The game was played by two teams or sides, each of which was made up of from ten to thirty players. As a rule the teams were composed of men exclusively, but on some occasions women as well participated in the game (Casas, 1909). Oviedo (1851) notes a certain resemblance between the game played in the Antilles and the game of football which he had seen played in Italy. Bartolomé de las Casas (1909) describes the game itself as follows:

Echaba uno de los de un puesto la pelota a los del otro y rebatíala el que se hallaba mas a mano, si la pelota venía por alto con el hombro, que la hacia volver como un rayo, y cuando venía junto al suelo, de presto, poniendo la mano derecha en tierra, dabale con la punta de la nalga, que volvía mas que de paso, los del puesto contrario, de la misma manera la tornaban con las nalgas, hasta que, segun las reglas de aquel juego, el uno o el otro puesto cometían falta.

Faltas or errors in the game consisted in allowing the ball to come halt on the ground, or throwing it beyond the limits of the court. The ball could only be struck with the shoulder, the elbow, the head, the hips or the knees and never with the hands. Oviedo (1851) explains very clearly why the ball could not be struck with the hand:

Estas pelotas saltan mucho . . . mas como son macizas son algo pesadas; e si le diesen con la mano abierta, o con el puño cerrado, en pocos golpes abrirían la mano o lo desconcertarian.

Bartolomé de las Casas (1909) tells us that when women played the game among themselves they did not use their hips or their shoulders, but rather struck back the ball with their knees.

The historical sources make it clear that the game was of great importance among the aborigines and served as a social bond among the different communities of indigenous population. Matches were held between town and town at which wagers were made and the caciques offered prizes. In the history of the conquest of Puerto Rico there is an interesting incident connected with the game. The chroniclers relate that at the commencement of the native rebellion the cacique Aymamon laid hold of a young Spaniard and offered him as a prize or trophy to winner of a match. But for the prompt intervention of Diego de Salazar, a Spanish captain, Oviedo (1851, libro 16, cap. 4) says the life of the young man would indeed have been the prize of the winner. Oviedo (1851, libro 16, cap. 5) also tells us that the fate of Don Cristobal de Sotomayor was decided by a game of ball. These allusions, and the archaeological discoveries associated with the courts where the game was played, lead us to believe that the game was more than a diversion and had a ceremonial and religious significance. This ceremonial and religious significance, taken together with the other features of the game which have been referred to, appears to indicate a certain connection with the Mexican *tlachtli* and the *pok ta pok* of the Mayas. Although it is true that in the game as played in the Antilles there is no reference to rings through which the ball was passed, it is known that in the Mexican game the passing of the ball through the stone ring occurred very seldom, there being another method of scoring. We are of the opinion that the *batey* of the Antilles is a simplified version, adapted to the cultural level of the *taínos* of the Mayan *pok ta pok*. It is certain that a simplified version of the Mexican *tlachtli* was played by the Indians of the Hohokam culture, in the Southwest of North America. It is possible that the route of diffusion of the game of *pok ta pok* and of other elements of Mayan culture was not a direct one from Yucatan to the Antilles, but an indirect one by way of South America, for we know that in South America a similar game was played by the Otomacos (Gumilla, 1944).

At the time of the disintegration of the aboriginal culture of the Antilles the game of *batey* ceased to be played. In Puerto Rico at the present time there re-

mains only a vague recollection in the oral tradition of the country people of the center of the island, where the courts in which it was played are still recognized and are referred to as *juegos o corrales de los indios*. Almost all the courts are found in the interior of the island. This pattern of distribution presents us with a difficult problem, for we know that during the historical period it was in the coastal belt that the most important Indian settlements were situated. The explanation may lie in the fact that on the coast the system of agriculture practiced, especially the cultivation of sugar cane, has been so intense as to destroy all traces of the courts, which were simple structures, while in the interior of the island, owing to the character of the terrain, the soil has not been as intensively cultivated as to lead to such result. The courts which have been discovered in Puerto Rico lie in the environs of Utuado, Lares, Adjuntas, Barranquitas, Orocovis, and Jayuya. All of the aforementioned townships are situated in the mountainous region in the center of the island. The courts are as a rule encountered close to rivers and in narrow valleys.

The Center of Archaeological Research of the University of Puerto Rico established a field-base in the region of Utuado for the purpose of studying the remains of those courts of which all traces have not been obliterated by the continuous cultivation of the soil. In this region it was possible to verify the existence of twenty-four courts. Size and state of preservation vary considerably. All were carefully studied and excavations were carried out at the sites of the most important of them, in the course of which a quantity of fragments of earthenware and several stone utensils were found. The artifacts discovered belong to the *taino* phase of the Arawak culture and were found for the most part in the environs of the courts, but, in a few cases, in the courts themselves. In only one case were graves (three) encountered in the environs of a court.

Of all the courts which were studied the most important are to be found on the property of Sr. Manuel Díaz-Mas, in the Barrio Caguana of Utuado. To all appearances on this property was situated the most important center of the aboriginal religion yet discovered in the whole area of the Antilles. Here, besides a great central court, are eight other rectangular courts of various sizes and one circular court. The importance of the remains on this property was pointed out more than thirty years ago by the American archaeologist J. A. Mason, who initiated the excavation of the site (Mason, 1940).

The Center of Archaeological Research devoted four weeks to the excavation of the central court and the ground adjacent to it. This court is a rectangle 160 feet long and 120 feet wide. The longer sides, which run from north to south are marked by lines of great stone blocks or monoliths, some of which are more than six feet high and must weigh more than a ton. The manner in which these great stones have been planted vertically in the earth to form an enclosure of such a size

is remarkable. If we consider their weight and the fact that it was necessary to bring them to their present position from a river-bed several hundred meters away, we may appreciate the importance and significance of this work of primitive engineering. The two shorter sides of the rectangle consist of two paths formed of smaller stones set in regular order. Many of the great stones of the two longer sides still show faint traces of the carvings which they once bore. Stone artifacts and fragments of ceramic ware were encountered in the ground adjacent to the court, where once stood the *bohios* or dwellings of the aborigines. In the same area were discovered a number of wooden posts which doubtless once formed part of the *bohios*. These posts are of a wood known to the country people of the island as *ortegón* (*Coccoloba rugosa*); some are of considerable size and appear to have been used in the construction of important wooden structures, possibly watchtowers or residences pertaining to the caciques. Their preservation is due to the nature of the soil, which is a clay, and to the durable quality of the wood.

The data and material obtained in the field are still under study; nevertheless, we feel justified in advancing certain general observations with regard to the importance and significance of the playing courts in the archaeology of the Antilles. We believe that we have discovered sufficient evidence to establish a connection between the courts and the so-called "stone collars" which are so characteristic a feature of Puerto Rican archaeology. These stone collars have hitherto constituted an enigma; a number of conflicting theories have been put forward to explain their significance or use. In the course of our excavations a number of fragments of collars were encountered, and according to the inhabitants of the district several complete specimens had previously been found in the environs of the courts and either destroyed in the belief that they might contain objects of value or sold to collectors. It appears to be significant that by far the majority of the collars the provenance of which is known, were found in the region in which the playing courts are situated. More than half of the specimens in the archaeological collections of Puerto Rico were found in the townships of Utuado and Orocovis, which comprise the region in which the playing courts are most common. What function these collars could have had in the game of ball is not immediately evident. However, the clear connection between the *batey* of the Antilles and the Mexican game calls to mind the interesting discovery made by Ekholm (1946) with regard to the possible use of the stone yokes of Central America in the ball game as there played. According to Ekholm the stone yokes were worn by the players as ceremonial belts. His thesis seems more probable since the discovery of terra cotta figurines representing players of the game wearing belts, which resemble the yokes. The enigmatical stone collars of Puerto Rico, whose resemblance to the yokes of Central America has been repeatedly pointed out (Fewkes, 1907), may have had a similar function.

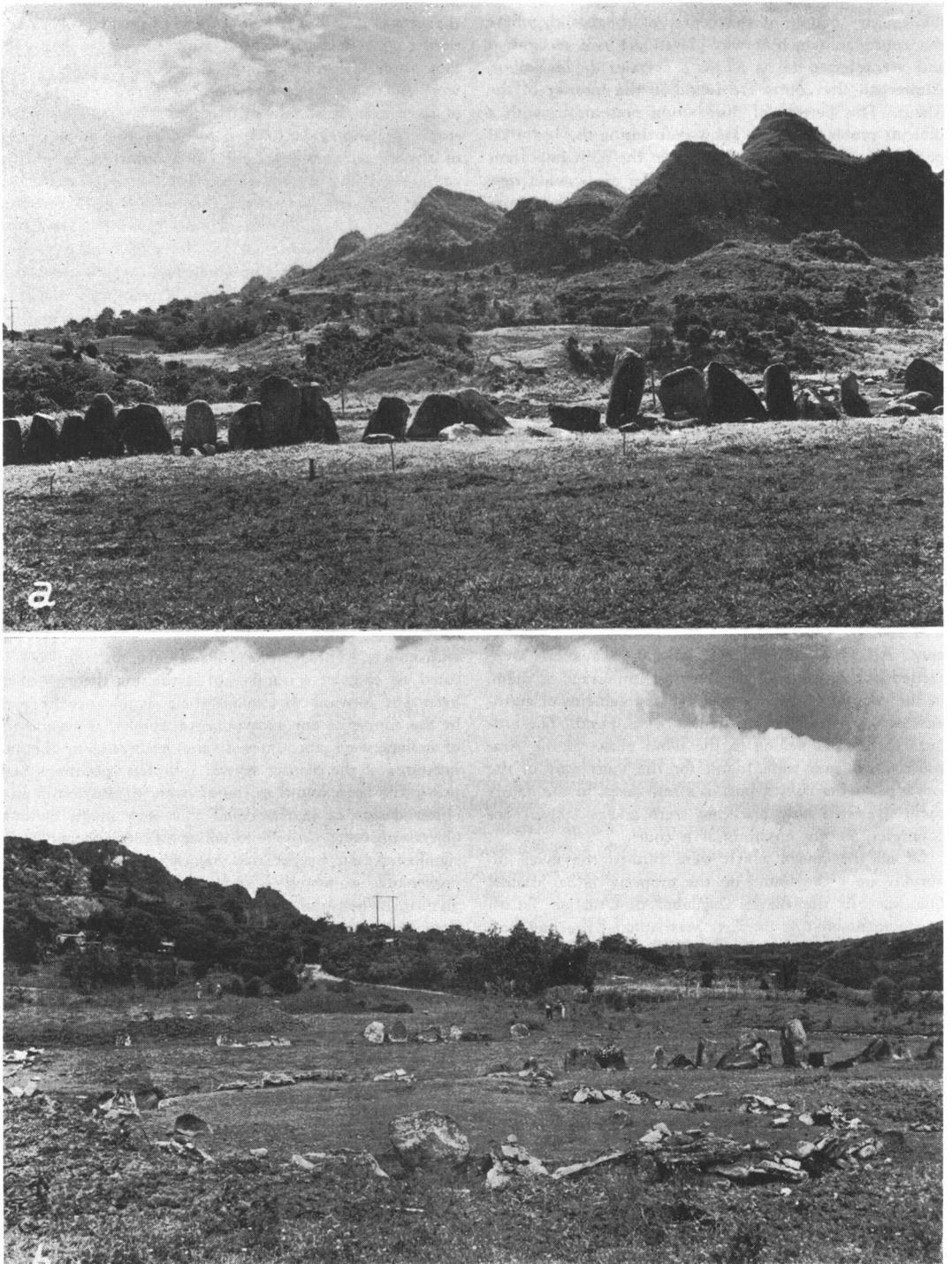


FIG. 113. *a.* The longer sides of the plaza are marked by lines of great stone blocks or monoliths.
b. The central and the circular plaza.

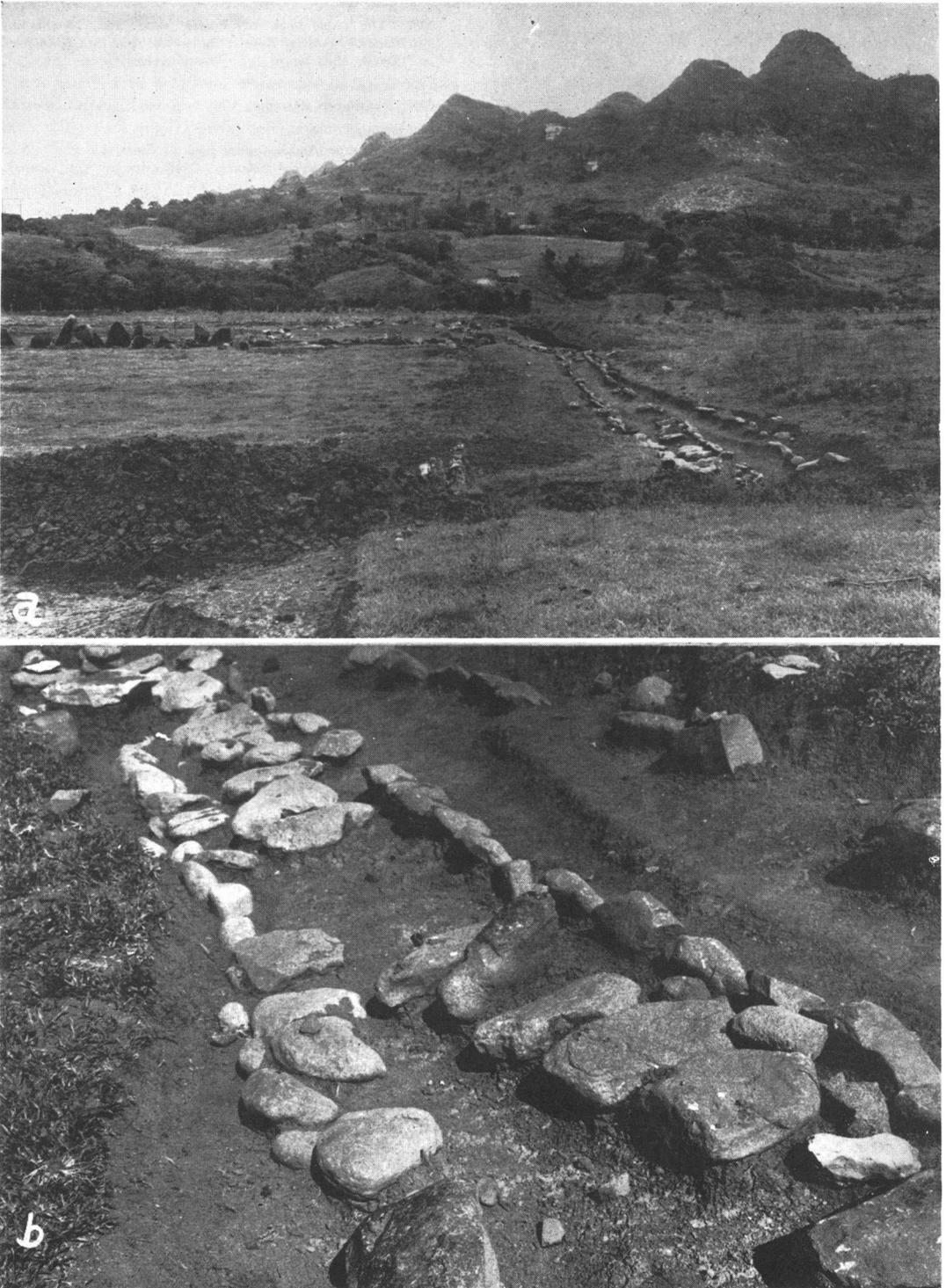


FIG. 114. *a.* Partial view of the central plaza. *b.* The shorter sides of the plaza consist of paths formed of smaller stones set in a regular order.



FIG. 115. In the ground adjacent to the court were discovered a number of wooden posts which doubtless once formed part of the *bohios* or dwellings.

The association of courts in the Barrio Caguanas of Utuado appears to indicate that the district was a religious center. Nowhere else have we discovered a grouping of courts of different sizes and shapes. This association of such a number of courts on one side can only be explained by the existence of elaborate socio-religious ceremonies in which the ball game played an important part. Although fragments of ceramic ware and some utensils were found in the environs of the courts, these finds were so scanty that they do not appear to indicate the existence on the site of a village of any great size.

The study of the playing courts has cast a new light on the subject of the archaeology of the Antilles and has shown beyond question that the cultural connections between the Antilles and Central America deserve further consideration and investigation.

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A SHELL SNAKE EFFIGY FROM BRITISH HONDURAS

During a field trip to British Honduras in the summer of 1950, the carved representation of a serpent sketched in Figure 116 was seen in the private collection of Mr. Eustace Evans of Belize. Esthetically, the piece is designed and executed with a skill that makes it an outstanding example of aboriginal art. The specimen is also deserving of description because it is stylistically unusual for the Maya area, being quite different from the traditional Maya artifacts.

The artifact, now in the possession of Mr. Evans, was found by workers digging a pit on the Evans plantation (Last Chance Plantation) which is on the west bank of the Salt Creek Lagoon, some twenty miles up the coast from Belize. The present writers visited the site of the find, which was a large area of aboriginal occupation. There are a number of low constructed mounds, with no discernible plan of arrangement. The whole area is covered with a midden deposit, including areas six feet or more in depth.

Lack of time prevented an adequate investigation of this site. Surface sherds show numerous local peculiarities but appear to be most similar to Thompson's San Jose V period (Thompson, 1939, pp. 138-51). Preliminary indications are that the occupation of the site extended into terminal Tepeu or later times. The position of the snake effigy within the site is not known, but the naturalistic treatment contrasts sharply with the highly conventionalized serpent form usually found in Maya art.

The shell snake is 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length and about an inch in diameter. It is made from the columella of a large conch shell, and the surface of the specimen is smooth and ivory-like in color and texture. By using the natural twist of the shell the native artist has created an impression of writhing movement. The design is made by shallow incised lines; the eyes are shallow drilled pits (the ventral groove is natural). The workmanship varies in quality, more care being evidenced at the head end than at the tail.