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ABBREVIATIONS
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
To stand in a Mesoamerican ballcourt is to imagine a rush of sensory input: the heavy thud of a rubber ball hitting the court, the thunderous applause of cheering spectators, the scent of sweat and sun on stone. For ancient Mesoamericans in Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala, the ballgame was both a recreational sport and a sacrosanct ritual activity associated with warfare, sacrifice, and the cycles of time, the natural world, and the supernatural. Ballcourts were also used for important rites, from the investiture of kings to the sacrifice of captives. Sculptures associated with the ballgame provide information about those rites. This article examines a Hacha in the shape of bound hands, a stone carving in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and what it reveals about ballgame-associated rituals in Classic Veracruz,
a culture that flourished on the Gulf Coast of Mexico between A.D. 300 and 900 (figs. 1, 2). Close analysis of the sculpture reveals that it is best understood as a costume element that was used in rituals and performances to impersonate captives. Interpreting sculptures of this type as costume elements offers a new perspective on the range of performative actions that took place in Veracruz centers and enables a better understanding of the people who took part in those actions, portraying captives, deities, and identities in between.

The ballgame was played in cultures throughout Mesoamerica. One of the most remarkable and enduring Mesoamerican traditions in portable stone sculpture is linked to the ballgame. Well represented in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, images of the game and its associated ceremonies show players wearing a variety of apparel. On the Museum’s Yoke-form vessel, for example, two pairs of players prepare to strike the ball with their hips, each competitor leaning on one arm for support (fig. 3a, b). The players wear feathered headdresses and padded belts. Padding was necessary to cushion the impact of the solid rubber balls, which flew through the court at high speed. The ballgame complex, as the related sculptures are collectively known, is associated most closely with Classic Veracruz culture. The sculptures’ three basic forms derive from accoutrements worn in the game: yokes, hachas, and palmas. Yokes—U-shaped objects named for their resemblance to agricultural yokes—are thought to be the earliest sculptures in the ballgame complex; they have been excavated from contexts dating as far back as the Proto-Classic period (ca. 100 B.C.–A.D. 100). The Yoke-form vessel (fig. 3a, b), for example, has the form of a yoke with a cylindrical vessel rising from the center. Depictions of ballplayers and the ballgame indicate that yokes were worn around the hips. A figure from the Veracruz site of Nopiloa represents a ballplayer wearing a thick yoke around his midsection (fig. 4).

Hachas and palmas are sculptural objects that could be fitted onto the yoke. The tapered, wedgelike
forms of certain hachas resemble ax blades—hence the name hacha, Spanish for ax (fig. 5). Archaeological excavation in Veracruz suggests that bladelike hachas appeared relatively late in the Classic period. Early hachas, like the Hacha in the shape of bound hands, are compact and bulky rather than tall and thin. The earliest hacha recovered from a secure archaeological context is from El Viejón, in Veracruz, and dates to A.D. 450–550. Buried in a tomb together with an intentionally broken yoke, this hacha depicts the head of a man with eyes closed, a detail signifying death. Such images are widely understood to represent trophy heads or the heads of defeated opponents. Because many early hachas take the form of trophy heads, scholars have connected this sculptural type to sacrificial rituals involving decapitation. Palmas, the third type of object in the ballgame complex, appeared late in the Classic period. They have been found mainly in northern Veracruz and are seen frequently in the iconography of that region. Like hachas, palmas are notched to fit over a yoke, but palmas extend upward and outward more dramatically than hachas (fig. 6, and see fig. 9). Hachas and palmas may have been secured to the yoke with rope or a cloth binding.

The archaeological contexts as well as the materials and workmanship of sculptures in the ballgame complex suggest that they were elite objects. Most yokes, hachas, and palmas are made of greenstone or volcanic stone, both high-value materials that would have been imported to Veracruz from mountainous regions. Archaeologists have discovered these sculptures in elite tombs and dedicatory caches. A burial from Cerro de las Mesas, for instance, included an elite adult male adorned with rich jade and shell jewelry. The body was accompanied by a stone yoke and a variety of grave goods as well as two secondary burials, one headless and the other with a severed head. At El Zapotal, two burials were each accompanied by a sculpted yoke and hacha, the workmanship of which may denote a difference in the status of the deceased: one individual was buried with a finely made yoke, the other with a yoke and hacha of coarser quality. In both burials, the hachas were found with their notched sides facing the yokes, suggesting that the hachas were attached to the yokes at the time of deposition. In burials at El Carrizal and El Viejón, the yokes placed inside tombs were intentionally broken beforehand, indicating that their funerary context represented a change in function. Yokes and hachas have also been discovered in caches in Veracruz and, less commonly, in the Maya area, further evidence of their role as high-value ritual objects. Unfortunately, the vast
majority of yokes, hachas, and palmas now in museum collections—including the Hacha in the shape of bound hands—lack archaeological provenance, and substances that may once have adhered to these objects, such as stucco, fibers, inlays, and residues, have not survived. As a result, many questions remain concerning their contexts.

Visual representations provide information about how yokes, hachas, and palmas were used. One of the clearest images of the ballgame complex appears on a stone relief from the Maya site of Toniná. Known as Monument 171, the work depicts two ballplayers, one on either side of an enormous ball (fig. 7). The figure on the right wears the traditional gear of Maya ballplayers, including knee pads and a heavily padded belt that extends to mid-chest. The figure on the left wears ballgame regalia associated with Veracruz: a yoke around the waist and a hacha projecting from the front of the yoke. The hacha, which bears a low-relief carving of the face of a deity wearing a serpent headdress, makes contact with the ball, suggesting that the player dressed in the Veracruz style has the upper hand in the game.

A ceramic effigy vessel and a stone hacha in the American Museum of Natural History illustrate how hachas were fitted onto yokes (fig. 8a, b). Both objects were reportedly recovered from the same Classic-period tomb at Cerro de las Mesas. The ceramic vessel has the form of a yoke with a hacha attached on one side; the attached hacha represents the head of a dead man wearing a large septum ring. The stone hacha found with the effigy vessel matches the ceramic hacha almost exactly. The ceramic vessel, then, seems
to refer directly to the stone hacha that accompanied it and illustrates the manner in which hachas were worn on top of yokes. It corroborates the evidence provided by figures of ballplayers wearing yokes with hachas attached.13

The stone yokes, hachas, and palmas found in museum collections today are too heavy to have been worn in the actual ballgame. Veracruz artists most likely employed lighter, perishable materials such as wood, leather, paper, and cloth to fabricate the objects that were worn in the game itself. The stone palma shown in figure 6 seems to hint at these original versions. The sculpture’s surface is covered with knot symbols, which were traditionally used in Mesoamerican art to indicate woven material. The Yoke-form vessel, too, depicts textiles or other pliable materials: the yokes worn by the ballplayers display rounded contours, with a narrow central band encircling the waist. This suggests that ballplayers wore cloth accoutrements in the actual ballgame.

If the stone yokes, hachas, and palmas discovered in the Veracruz region were not worn in the ballgame, how were they used by ancient Mesoamericans? Although direct evidence for the usage of objects in the ballgame complex is limited to funerary contexts, depictions of the objects, together with their iconography and human scale, have led scholars to conclude that the stone sculptures were ceremonial items worn or carried in processions and rituals related to the ballgame.14 Such rituals, held in civic centers and on ballcourts, are particularly well recorded at the site of El Tajín, a large center in northern Veracruz. In the ballcourt at El Tajín, low-relief panels depict figures wearing yokes, hachas, and palmas (fig. 9). Rather than playing the ballgame, the figures are shown participating in rituals related to royal investiture and human sacrifice.

As part of the ballgame complex, the Museum’s hacha represents a ceremonial version of ballgame gear. The sculpture’s form, however, is unique in the corpus of hachas from Veracruz. Carved from volcanic stone, the object portrays two hands curled into fists. Like most hachas, it does not show obvious signs of wear.15

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**fig. 9** Drawing of a low-relief carving on a stone panel, showing yokes, hachas, and palmas worn by figures participating in rituals. El Tajín, Mexico. Late Classic Veracruz, ca. A.D. 700–1000
The fists—larger than life, symmetrical, and stylized—are placed back to back and terminate at the wrists. The rubbery joints of the thumbs create a smooth U shape, and the fingers are uniform as they fold to meet the palm. The artist emphasized the hands’ solidity and weight, incising anatomical details and leaving no negative space between the bent thumb and the rest of the hand.

The hands’ unusual position—the backs touch and the fingers face outward—indicates that they are bound together, either behind the back or in front of the body, with wrists crossed. Most likely worn in processions and rituals related to the ballgame, the Museum’s hacha offers insights into the nature and content of those rituals and the beliefs that underlay them.

**THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM’S HACHA**

The Hacha in the shape of bound hands suggests that participants in rituals in Classic Veracruz may have assumed the identity of captives. In the art of Veracruz, and in Mesoamerican art in general, bound hands are the primary attribute of captives; no other type of figure is represented with hands tied. Usually understood as prisoners of war, captives are portrayed naked, or nearly so, often without jewelry or headdresses. Their captors, by contrast, wear fine regalia, including trophy heads, femurs, and other body parts.

The composition and scale of the Museum’s hacha offer compelling evidence that its wearer was meant to be recognized as a captive. The tightly clenched hands convey tension and vitality, suggesting they belong to a living person. In art from Classic Veracruz, artists took pains to distinguish trophy hands from hands of the living. Trophy hands carved in low relief are found on a stone palma in the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa and on Stela 15 from the site of Cerro de las Mesas (fig. 10a, b). The palma shows a row of hands suspended from a rope; the images on the stela include a figure wearing a cloak decorated with limp, dangling hands. Although these carvings are in low relief rather than in the round, they suggest that trophy hands, when worn, were arranged separately rather than in pairs and were hung upside down, with either the palm or the back of the hand flat, so that all fingers were entirely visible. In contrast, the hands of the Museum’s hacha are clenched, indicating that they belong to a living person.

The exaggerated scale of the hands of the Museum’s hacha would have made them legible from a distance and would have matched the scale of other costume elements. Depictions from the Maya area indicate that costumes could be quite large. On some Maya vases, costumed performers are portrayed as if with X-ray vision, their human profiles clearly visible inside huge masks (fig. 11). On one vessel, Maya Vase K8719, explicitly connects oversize costumes with sacrifice. On it, a king is depicted seated on a throne, with a sacrificial victim at his feet. Behind the sacrificed individual stand two costumed figures wearing red scarves. They are dressed as wahy beings, or physical manifestations of destructive power, and may represent executioners.

The elaborate wahy costumes—especially the enormous, otherworldly masks—are larger than human scale. This vase indicates that performers would have worn large-scale costume elements and suggests that the Museum’s hacha may have been worn in performances linked to sacrifice, where it would have been seen from multiple angles as its wearer moved. Indeed, the hacha must be viewed from varying angles for its form to be fully understood. This suggests that artists created the sculpture to be seen in a dynamic, action-oriented setting, perhaps much like the performance settings depicted on Maya vases.

The Museum’s hacha would have been worn attached to a yoke, as the notch on its back makes clear, further attesting to its role as a costume element. Like most hachas and palmas, it would have fit over a yoke in the manner illustrated by the hacha on the ceramic effigy vessel seen in figure 8a. To secure the hacha to the yoke, Mesoamericans may have used cloth or rope. Although no trace of rope has been found on the hacha, this is an evocative possibility: a rope binding the
Museum’s hacha to a yoke would have called to mind the ropes that bound captives’ hands, as seen on a carving from Tikal (fig. 12). Worn by a performer, this stone hacha, bound to a yoke with rope, would have been perceived as the wearer’s own hands.

Certain iconographic details support the idea that the hacha was a costume element used in ritual performances: notably, the hands’ lack of fingernails. The areas where fingernails would be represented are hollowed out. This effect may be significant, because iconography in the neighboring Maya area attests to the removal of fingernails as a form of torture inflicted on war captives. At Bonampak, the murals of Structure 1 depict captives whose fingernails have been or are being removed. The victims stare at their fingers, dripping with blood; on the left side of the composition, the process begins anew as a standing figure grips the hand of a seated captive. The Museum’s hacha may represent the hands of a captive whose fingernails have been removed.

It is possible that the hacha once had fingernails that were fashioned from a contrasting material. Some hachas included inlays of shell and stone and were covered in layers of stucco and paint. An example is the Metropolitan Museum’s Fish hacha, another work from Classic Veracruz. Carved in the form of a fish, it still bears traces of stucco on its scales. Thus, the Museum’s hacha may have had inlaid fingernails, perhaps of shell. These detachable elements could have functioned as accessories in performances reenacting the removal of fingernails over and over again.

The structure, scale, composition, and iconography of the Museum’s hacha suggest that it was used as a costume element in ritual performances related to the ballgame in Veracruz and that it was worn by a participant impersonating a captive. The types of performances attested to in Classic Veracruz art and the role of captives in public rituals and processions are examined in the following section.
suggests that rituals involving elaborate costumes, music, dance, and human sacrifice were probably held in monumental centers throughout the region.25

A key to the interpretation of such rituals is the concept of impersonation. Evidence from throughout ancient Mesoamerica suggests that many of the performances commemorated on monumental artworks involved rulers or other elites assuming the identity of other beings, including animals, deities, and humans. Impersonation is recorded in works produced by Olmec, Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec artists, among others. As Andrea Stone has noted, impersonation served multiple purposes: “It was an adaptive strategy for the consolidation of power in the political arena and at the same time held a profound philosophical meaning for those who practiced and watched these performances. Impersonation signaled the presence of the sacred to such an extent that as an act, by itself, it held sacred meaning.”26

Visual and textual evidence from neighboring areas supports the central role of impersonation in Mesoamerican ritual. Although culturally distinct, many groups in Mesoamerica shared important practices, traditions, systems, and beliefs, including the cultivation of maize, architectural styles, the ballgame, a common calendar, and theories about time, cosmology, and the role of humans in ordering the universe. For this reason, archaeologists and art historians have long recognized the value of cross-cultural comparison in illuminating aspects of ritual and ideological practice among ancient Mesoamerican peoples.27

Particularly strong evidence for the importance of impersonation comes from the Maya and Aztec areas. In Maya art, rulers often appear in the guise of deities on monumental stone sculptures. Maya rulers impersonated a variety of gods and supernaturals, including the Maize God and the Jaguar God of the Underworld. On Naranjo Stela 30, for instance, a ruler is shown in the guise of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, a god associated with war, fire, and the night sun (fig. 13). The figure displays the specific attributes of this deity: a curved element under the eye, a smoking jaguar ear in the headdress, and a fire-drilling implement held in the right hand. The hieroglyphic text supports iconographic evidence of impersonation: it names and describes the ruler as impersonating the god during a fire-drilling ritual, an action probably related to fire-making or dedicatory actions, perhaps performed at night.28

When Maya rulers took on the guise of gods and supernaturals, they were not perceived as actors but were considered direct manifestations of divine presence. Such impersonation is sometimes referred to as concurrence because it represents a layering of identities rather than a displacement: hieroglyphic inscriptions accompanying images of impersonation identify both the performer and the deity being impersonated. According to one source, “There is no evident ‘fiction,’ but there is, apparently, a belief in godly immanence and transubstantiation, of specific people who become, in special moments, figures from sacred legend and the Maya pantheon.”29 Impersonation of this sort would have provided powerful moments in which deities participated in rituals.30

The subjects of ritual impersonation were not always deities, as is revealed by painted ceramics from the Maya area that depict reenactments of historical events with human protagonists.31 A vessel now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, shows elite individuals...
costumed in human dress (fig. 14a). The figures wear masks through which their own profiles are clearly seen. Another vessel, this one from Tikal, shows a lord dressing for a performance (fig. 14b). A courtier on the right holds a mirror for him while two women on the left wait to hand him his shield and mask. The mask clearly represents a human face, as does an actual ceramic mask that was excavated from a Classic-period royal residential complex at the site of Aguateca.32

Among the Aztec, too, religious rituals involved impersonation. The Aztec called an impersonator an ixiptla, or “living image,” and while many impersonators in Aztec culture were war captives destined for sacrifice, others were not.33 For example, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, during the period of two-person rule, the name of the female deity Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman) was given to the Aztec coregent who served as “high priest and chief adviser.”34 This male ruler impersonated the female deity at religious festivals. Aztec artists, like their Maya counterparts, used specific attributes to convey impersonation.

Drawings in two sixteenth-century codices, the Codex Borbonicus and Bernardino de Sahagún’s Florentine Codex, show a regent costumed in skirt and blouse carrying a round shield and weaving implement—Cihuacoatl’s attributes.35 In the Aztec world as in the Maya world, living images of gods were viewed not as theatrical illusions but as physical manifestations of divine energy.36

Imagery representing costume elements indicates that impersonation was included in rituals and processions throughout Classic Veracruz. A palma from Coatepec shows a human dressed as a bird, his face visible in the bird’s mouth (fig. 15a). On one side of the palma, the human figure holds a severed human head, suggesting a link between impersonation and sacrifice. Humans also appear in the guise of bats in Veracruz art, as seen on a palma carved on one side with a human figure wearing a bat mask (fig. 15b).37 A figure in the iconography of El Tajín seems to be impersonating a deity: this individual wears a duck-billed mask often associated with the Central Mexican deity Ehecatl, but here...
the deity’s eyes appear human rather than supernatural (fig. 15c). Images of humans in the role of Ehecatl are common on sculpture and ceramics from all parts of Veracruz.39 Other figures are costumed to resemble coyotes: a figure wears a coyote head and hide draped over his head and shoulders in the murals of El Zapotal, and terracotta figures from El Zapotal and Dicha Tuerte wear coyote headdresses.39

Works of art from Veracruz and elsewhere in Mesoamerica clearly attest to impersonation as an important component of ritual actions. The Museum’s hacha, understood as a costume element in such proceedings, calls for an expansion of the catalogue of impersonators in such rituals—and the roles they assumed. It suggests that some of these performers took the stage as captives.

**CAPTIVES AND PERFORMANCE IN MESOAMERICA**

At the site of El Tajín, captives would have been characters in ritual dramas enacted for audiences at the civic center. In the Mound of the Building Columns, a number of rites are depicted on carved stone columns. Among the rites that appear to be related to the accession of a new king, those involving captive procession and sacrifice are held in closest proximity to the king himself (fig. 16). On the north column, the seated king observes a procession of captives approaching him on both sides. The captives are scantily clad, and each one is gripped by a warrior. A captive to the left of the king has one hand tied behind his back, calling to mind the bound hands of the Museum’s hacha. The captive in front of the king has been decapitated in a ritual probably related to scaffold sacrifice, a rite found elsewhere in Mesoamerican art.40 This scene highlights the central role of captives in accession ceremonies and the transfer of political power in Veracruz.

A Late Classic Veracruz palma in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City points to connections between captives with bound hands and sacrifice in ballgame-associated sculpture and rituals (fig. 17). The palma portrays a captive whose hands are positioned similarly to those of the Museum’s hacha. He wears a loincloth and ankle bands, and his hair twists and turns in a wild tumble above his head. A deep gash across his chest indicates that he has been sacrificed and his heart extracted. The close iconographic relation between this palma and the Museum’s hacha links the hacha to the sacrifice of captives and to rituals involving human sacrifice in ancient Veracruz.
Captives and performances by captives played a significant role in Maya art as well. Classic Maya kings regularly recorded their capture of individuals in stone carvings—but captives, despite their portrayals as disempowered prisoners, were rhetorically powerful. Their names were even added to the royal titles of rulers. The hieroglyphic inscription on Lintel 33 from Yaxchilán refers to Bird Jaguar IV, the ruler of the site, with a lengthy royal title: Bird Jaguar IV, the 3-katun lord, Captor of Ah Cauac, Captor of Jeweled Skull, He of 20 captives, Holy Lord of Yaxchilán, Holy Lord of the Split Sky place.41 The royal title not only invokes the king’s captives as a measure of his power but also mentions two of them by name, signaling their importance as individuals. Represented in art commissioned by kings and incorporated into the public identity of the ruler, captives helped endow Maya kings with the authority to rule.

Other Maya sculptures suggest that captives played important roles in public performances. At Yaxchilán, Dos Pilas, and other sites, sculptors carved images of captives on steps, engaging those who walked on the steps in symbolic acts of degradation and torture—in public reenactments of ritual violence inflicted on captives. Written sources from after the arrival of the Spanish attest to such performances involving living captives. In Yucatán, Bishop Diego de Landa described a ceremony in which a captive was held in place while people danced around him, shooting him with arrows.42

Traditionally, scholars have interpreted captives in Mesoamerican art as representations of actual war prisoners. However, if the Museum’s hacha is considered as a costume element that was worn in ritual performances like those documented in Mesoamerican site centers, it suggests a different interpretation: captive identity may have been assumed in these rituals by participants who were not captives themselves. Mesoamerican literature from the Late Postclassic period (ca. a.d. 1200–1520) provides examples of actors performing the roles of captives. For instance, a captive is a principal character in the Rabinal Achi, a highland Maya dance drama with origins in the fifteenth century. Although this work is far removed in time from Classic Veracruz, studies of other late Mesoamerican literary works, like the Popol Vuh, reveal themes and episodes dating from as far back as the Preclassic period.43 This suggests that some of the themes recorded in plays like the Rabinal Achi are of considerable antiquity. Today, the Rabinal Achi is performed annually in Rabinal, in the highlands of Guatemala. The plot centers on the trial of a captive warrior from the K’iche’ Maya kingdom. As the play begins, the Warrior of K’iche’ has been captured by the
The Rabinal Achi is a drama about warfare and politics but also about morality—about what it means to serve one’s king and how to die an honorable death. The moral character of a captive was important to the symbolism of his sacrifice. Performing the identity of a noble captive would have offered the opportunity to model honorable behavior and connect the actions of the captive with the glorious deeds of the ideal warrior.

Evidence from diverse Mesoamerican groups indicates that captives also featured in mythical narratives, particularly in the form of captive deities. Classic-period sculptures and ceramic vessels from the Maya area
depict a scene from Maya mythology in which the Jaguar God of the Underworld—the deity impersonated by a ruler on Naranjo Stela 30 (see fig. 13)—is held captive and eventually sacrificed. On both ceramic vessels and carved stone sculptures, the deity is clearly depicted as a captive, with arms bound behind his back. At the Maya site of Toniná, a series of three carved sculptures refers to this myth. They portray individuals impersonating the captive Jaguar God. Ropes bind their arms, and they wear attributes associated with the god, including the undereye element and smoking jaguar ear seen on Naranjo Stela 30. Hieroglyphs on the impersonators’ thighs and chests reveal their individual human identities. On Toniná Monument 155, for example, hieroglyphs on the thigh of the captive name him as Yax Ahk, an ajaw, or leader, of a site called Anayte (fig. 18). Hieroglyphs on Toniná Monument 180 relate that the captive, Muwaan Bahlam, was taken in A.D. 695 by the Toniná ruler K’inich Baaknal Chaahk. These sculptures, then, represent historic captives performing the role of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Analysis suggests that the works commemorate an event in which captives were forced to ritually reenact the myth of the sacrifice of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Placed on the fifth terrace of the acropolis at Toniná, the sculptures represent public commemoration of ritual events that took place at the site, and they attest to the participation of captives as protagonists in ritual performances.

Captives impersonated deities in Aztec rituals as well. In the ritual of Toxcatl, one of the best-known examples of this type of impersonation, a captive warrior was chosen for his beauty to live for one year as the ixiptla of the god Tezcatlipoca. Ritual practitioners and attendants instructed the captive in proper comportment—from smoking and holding flowers in the correct fashion to performing important rites and displaying proper manners as he moved through the city with his entourage. At year’s end, the ixiptla would climb the steps of a temple in the ceremonial center of Chalco, where he would be sacrificed and beheaded. In the ceremony of Toxcatl, impersonation served to present the “perfect life and ideal death of the elite warrior,” who was, for a time, both wretched captive and exalted deity.

In Veracruz, low-relief panels from El Tajín suggest that both captives and deities could be sacrificed, hinting that captives may have reenacted mythical narratives in public settings. In the Mound of the Building Columns, a scene on the north column depicts a seated ruler gazing at a beheaded captive (fig. 19a). The head of the victim is placed between the ruler’s feet and is clearly rendered as human. In a scene from the south column, another seated individual is flanked by two severed heads. These heads, however, are supernatural, as indicated by the supraorbital plate above the eye, a marker in the art of El Tajín that distinguishes deities from humans (fig. 19b). The severed supernatural heads suggest that rituals at El Tajín included the sacrifice of deities, perhaps envisioned as captives, as in the Maya and Aztec areas.

Captives, then, were important participants in performances throughout Mesoamerica, included not only as bit characters but also as models of proper behavior and impersonators of deities in mythical narratives. The Museum’s hacha hints at these performances and suggests that Classic Veracruz centers may have been home to the impersonation of both deities and captives. While the biography of the Museum’s hacha is not known, the sculpture may once have been deposited in a tomb. As a funerary offering, it would have reflected the status of the deceased and suggested connections between the deceased and the sacrifice of prisoners, either in earthly life or the afterlife. The contradiction inherent in the object—a durable stone representation of ephemeral human hands—would doubtless have been part of its meaning.
22 STONE SCULPTURE AND RITUAL IMPERSONATION IN CLASSIC VERACRUZ

It is important to note that sculptures in the ballgame complex have been recovered from a wide area, extending from the Gulf Coast of Mexico to El Salvador, in the southern Maya region. The range of subjects depicted in hachas and palmas is extensive, and the functions and meanings of these objects were likely diverse. While certain sculptures from the ballgame complex appear to have been used in performances, the purpose of others is more difficult to ascertain. Future excavation will help to clarify questions of context and use.

Sculptures in the ballgame complex can be productively understood as costume elements worn in public rituals and processions. Extending beyond focused analysis of individual objects to examine how these objects would have been used and perceived in context, this article complements existing studies of the ballgame sculptures. Analysis of these works as performative objects provides a new perspective on the communicative potential of sculptures in the ballgame complex and on the meanings of rites and rituals that may have been held in ancient Veracruz centers.

The Hacha in the shape of bound hands suggests that participants in certain rites—perhaps those related to royal investiture and human sacrifice—assumed the identity of captives. In light of this possibility, it would be productive to broaden current interpretation of ritual performance in Classic Veracruz to include the impersonation of both deities and captives. This hacha also meaningfully complicates our understanding of captive identity in Mesoamerican art, which until now has remained fairly narrow. As a remnant of captive impersonation, the Museum’s hacha indicates that captive identity could be put on and taken off, and that it intersected with the divine in complex and fluid ways.

The Metropolitan Museum’s collection of Classic-period Veracruz sculpture offers a new perspective on ritual life on Mexico’s Gulf Coast between the seventh and tenth centuries. Allowing viewers a glimpse into the pageantry and performances of ancient Veracruz, the works hint at the reenactment of foundational myths and the range of human actors who participated in those reenactments. They also testify to the ability of sculpture to present complex narratives, from the sacrifice of captives to the creation and maintenance of world order, and to evoke the sights and sounds that would have enlivened the cityscapes of ancient Veracruz.

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Hachas from the Maya area are generally more bladelike in shape. For information about the context of excavated ballgame com-

This idea builds on Ekholm’s observation that a palma depicting wearm, as does the fact that sculptures in the ballgame complex are usually made of greenstone or volcanic stone, two exceptionally hard materials. That there is little sign of wear on exca-

Burials in Mesoamerica often include objects that were intention-

Ekholm (1949, p. 4) was the first to suggest that palmas may have been costume elements. Lee Parsons (1991, p. 205) reports that “the surviving stone objects do fit surprisingly comfort-


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NOS

1 For more on the ballgame, see Miller 1989; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991; Whittington 2001; and Earley 2017.

2 These are modern names; we do not know what the objects were called in Classic period Veracruz. The elements in this group were first related to the ballgame in Lothrop 1923, where they are linked to figurines wearing yokes, hachas, and palmas. Samuel Lothrop’s argument was expanded upon by Gordon Ekholm in 1946 and 1949. For more on the ballgame complex, see Proskouriakoff 1954; Proskouriakoff 1971; Shook and Marquis 1996; and Scott 2001.

3 See Lothrop 1923, Ekholm 1949, and Whittington 2001 for more on the characteristics of Maya-area hachas.

4 For more on the ballgame, see Miller 1989; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991; Whittington 2001; and Earley 2017.

5 Burials in Mesoamerica often include objects that were intention-

6 Scott 1991, pp. 208–9, fig. 3.


8 Proskouriakoff 1954.

9 Ekholm 1949, p. 4.

10 Hachas from the Maya area are generally more bladelike in shape and may lack the notch at the back. See Shook and Marquis 1996 for more on the characteristics of Maya-area hachas.

11 For information about the context of excavated ballgame complex sculptures from Veracruz, see Scott 1991 and 2001. Edwin Shook and Elayne Marquis (1996) discuss the context of yokes, hachas, and palmas discovered in southern Mesoamerica, including caches of hachas covered with cinnabar, suggesting their ritual importance. E. Wyllys Andrews (1976) reports a cache from Quelapa, El Salvador, that consisted of yokes and a hacha placed in an interlacing pattern. Yokes, hachas, and palmas were considered high-value objects among the Late Classic Maya also, as evidenced by a yoke found with two hachas in an elite residential structure in Copan. See Webster and Abrams 1983.


13 See Lothrop 1923, Ekholm 1949, and Whittington 2001 for examples of figurines wearing yokes and hachas.


15 Lack of archaeological provenance complicates analysis of use-

16 See, for example, Looper 2009, fig. 4.24.

17 Stuart 2014. For more on wahi beings, see Stone and Zender 2011.

18 Ekholm 1949, p. 4.

19 This idea builds on Ekholm’s observation that a palma depicting human arms was designed to resemble the actual arms of a person who wore it attached to a ballgame belt or yoke. See ibid.
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