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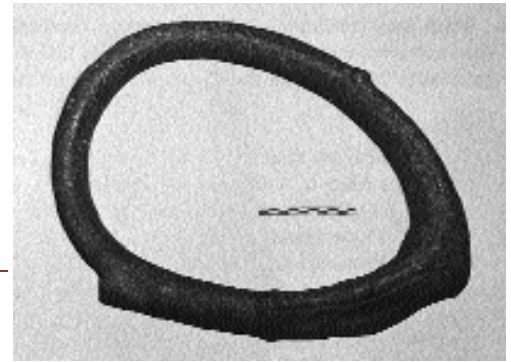
A Cooperative Ball Court Study in Puerto Rico

Stone collar apparently worn around the wrist by ball players in order to enhance their ability to strike the rubber ball. Found near the Salt River ball court in the 19th century. Courtesy Birgit Faber-Morse.

View of ball court at Caguana Site, near Utuado, Puerto Rico. Caguana is the largest ceremonial complex in the West Indies. Photo by Mark Barnes, 1992.



View of one of the stone lined ball courts at the Tibes Site, north of Ponce, Puerto Rico. Photo by Mark Barnes.



Since 1993, the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office (PR SHPO) and the National Park Service's National Register Programs Division in Atlanta, Georgia (Atlanta NPS office) have cooperated in the preparation of a National Register Multiple Property nomination of prehistoric and contact period ball court (batey) sites in Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands. Though not as well known as the ball courts found in Mesoamerica or the American Southwest, the Caribbean ball courts and associated ball game was the first evidence of this activity encountered by the Spanish, in the 1490s.

Early 16th-century chroniclers, including Bartolomé de Las Casas and Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, provided first hand descriptions of the game which consisted of two opposing teams trying to advance a solid rubber ball through the air using any part of the bodies save their hands or feet. It appears to be similar to our modern day

soccer game. Wagers were placed on the outcome of the batey games, and the chronicles note slaves were sometimes sacrificed by the losers. The game appears to have been introduced to the Caribbean islands from Mesoamerica as suggested by the archeological discovery of stone "collars" and "elbow stones" common to both areas. However, it is interesting to note that conclusive evidence of ball courts in the intervening areas, such as western Cuba, Jamaica, and, for that matter, the lesser Antilles (with the exception of the U.S. Virgin Islands) have yet to be found.

Current archeological evidence in the Antilles limits the range of bateys to eastern Cuba, Hispaniola (current day Haiti and Dominican Republic), the Turks and Caicos Islands of the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and St. Croix, in the U.S. Virgin Islands—with the majority of the ball courts being located in the last two island areas—both United States possessions. In general, ball courts are rectangular in shape with two long sides usually lined with stones, some of these containing petroglyphs. Dr. Mark Barnes, Senior Archeologist with the National Park Service, suggested and developed a National Register Multiple Property nomination which will be submitted to the Keeper of the National Register this fall incorporating recommendations suggested by the Puerto Rico SHPO staff and Dr. Irving Rouse of Yale University.

Though ball courts are found in most of the Greater Antilles islands and the Virgin Islands, its greatest manifestation, in terms of quantity and complexity, is found in the western mountainous interior of Puerto during the late prehistoric (A.D. 1200 to 1500) period (locally known as the Ostionoid). The two largest known ball court complexes in the Antilles are located in Puerto Rico—the Caguana and Tibes Sites—are already included in the National Register of Historic Places, with the former designated as a National Historic Landmark (NHL). It is believed that Tibes was occupied prior



Photo of the 1920s excavations of the ball court site at Salt River Bay, St. Croix, USVI. Note boundary stones with petroglyphs in foreground. Courtesy Birgit Faber-Morse.

to the development of Caguana. Both sites are currently managed as publically interpreted parks, receiving thousands of visitors a year.

Recently, the PR SHPO and the Atlanta NPS office completed a National Register nomination for Mona Island, which was listed in the Register in 1994. This 15,000-acre nature preserve, located in the Mona Passage between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, contains detailed archeological evidence of the last 5,000 years of human occupation and at least two known prehistoric ball court sites, located by Irving Rouse in the 1930s.

Additionally, an important ball court site located within the Columbus Landing Site NHL at the entrance to Salt River Bay, on the northern coast of St. Croix Island, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, is owned by the Territorial government. This late prehistoric ball court site and its associated sites around Salt River Bay represents the eastern most Taino chiefdom complex in the West Indies. The National Park Service is currently working with the Territorial government on the preservation and interpretation of this ball court site, while the Atlanta NPS office has revised the NHL nomination to note the national significance of this ball court.

Finally, the U.S. Navy, which owns the western and eastern thirds of Vieques Island, located off the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico, is resurveying its landholdings for cultural resources. It appears the consultants hired by the Navy have located at least one definite ball court site which may prove to be eligible for the National Register and could later be included in the National Register Multiple Property nomination being developed by the Atlanta NPS office and the PR SHPO.

Over 70 ball court sites have been identified in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands to date. The earliest scientific studies of these sites was conducted in the 19th century by Agustín Stahl of

Puerto Rico. Subsequent investigations were carried out by J.W. Fewkes, Samuel K. Lothrop, J. Alden Mason, Irving Rouse, and Ricardo Alegría, among others. The most comprehensive publication on this topic is Ricardo Alegría's *Ball Courts and Ceremonial Plazas in the West Indies* (1983). Though an indispensable monograph for anyone interested in the ball game in the Antilles, the field data information contained in this publication was obtained primarily from field investigations undertaken in the beginning of the 20th century (ca. 1915) by J. Alden Mason and Robert T. Aiken, and in the 1930s by Irving Rouse. As such, the present condition of the majority of the known ball court sites in Puerto Rico is unknown.

Throughout the 20th century, Puerto Rico experienced a large population increase and industrialization with the consequent by-products of urban sprawl and an increase in the island's infrastructure, such as roads, reservoirs, and utilities. This dramatic growth has probably destroyed some of these sites, so the PR SHPO considers it a high priority to re-identify these ball court sites, assess their eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places, and initiate formal listing to provide them with a level of recognition that will assist in protecting them from the negative consequences of progress.

The future preservation of these ball courts is fundamental for addressing important research questions on prehistoric settlement patterns. How do these ball court sites compare to sites without bateys? Why do ball courts appear to be more heavily concentrated in the western mountainous interior of Puerto Rico? Research can answer questions concerning chronology. Archeological evidence of ball courts does not appear until the Early Ostionoid (ca. A.D. 600), during which evidence of social stratification and population increase in the mountainous interior begins to appear in the archeological record. Finally, questions concerning social and political organization. What roles did the ball game play in the rise of cultural complexity, political organization, and trade networks?

In conjunction with Dr. Mark Barnes of the Atlanta NPS office, Geraldine Toste, Grisel Rosa, and this author—all of the PR SHPO—have conducted site visits to relocate known ball courts and evaluate their integrity and eligibility for the National Register. The initial results are encouraging and, overall, the landowners so far contacted have been receptive in having their properties included in the National Register.

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