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Contributions

The Ballcourt at El Palmillo: Implications for Late Classic Oaxaca, Mexico

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In this paper we document, describe, and define the history of a small, previously unreported ballcourt at the site of El Palmillo in the eastern arm of the Valley of Oaxaca. Of the more than 45 known ballcourts in the Valley of Oaxaca, few have been excavated (Fig. 1). The ballcourt at El Palmillo was discovered during broad horizontal excavations in a high-status precinct at the apex of the site. When placed in the context of the ballgame's association with boundaries, factions, political competition, and the acquisition of power (Fox 1996; Gillespie 1991; Kowalewski et al. 1991; Montmollin 1997; Santley et al. 1991), the placement of the ballcourt at El Palmillo and its history of use allows us to reflect on the declining fortunes of Monte Albán and the political fragmentation of the Valley of Oaxaca during the last centuries of the Classic period.

History of work at El Palmillo

El Palmillo is a large, hilltop terraced site located near the modern community of Santiago Matatlán in the dry eastern, or Tlacolula, arm of the Valley of Oaxaca (see Fig. 1). The site was first recorded during the regional survey of the Valley of Oaxaca in 1980 (Kowalewski et al. 1989). In spite of dense, spiny vegetation that limited access in many parts of the site, the survey crew mapped hundreds of residential terraces on the slopes of the steep rocky hill and identified a series of public buildings and plazas on the site's highest ridge. El Palmillo clearly was the largest Classic period site in the eastern part of the Tlacolula arm of the valley.

We returned to El Palmillo in 1997 to complete a more intensive mapping and surface study of the site. This was the first stage of what we intended to be a long-term project of household excavations at the site. With a crew that included several local workmen wielding machetes to clear some of the vegetation, we were able to see and record twice as many terraces as the regional survey crew, over 1400 terraces, most of which were densely arranged on the top and western face of the hill (Fig. 2; Feinman and Nicholas 2004). Not far from the principal mound group at the apex of the hill was a feature that we suspected might be a ballcourt. A small, flattened area that

would have been the center of the court was defined on the west by a low linear mound and on the east by a much higher and larger platform built on what appeared to be a natural rise. There were no end mounds, and through the dense thorny vegetation the flat space between the two side mounds appeared to be narrower than the equivalent space for the main ballcourt at Monte Albán. We discussed the evidence and ultimately decided it was too equivocal to define this area as a ballcourt. Given the significance of ballcourts and their presence in only a small percentage of sites in the valley, we preferred to be conservative in our assessment. We called it a small plaza instead.

In 1999 we began excavations in several residential terraces near the base of the hill (Feinman et al. 2002). Because our main goal was to explore households and their associated economic activities, access to goods, and variation in residential and mortuary architecture, we eventually excavated a series of residential spaces dispersed across the main western face of the hill, working our way up to the highest residential precinct at the site, where we spent six field seasons (2003–2008) excavating three elite residences (see Fig. 2).

We began excavations in this high-status precinct on Terrace 335 and then moved to the adjacent residence on Structure 35 (Fig. 3). These elite residences were larger and much more elaborate than the lower-status houses on the slopes below. These elaborate residences, or palaces, also contained features not found in lower-status contexts, such as subfloor masonry tombs, sweatbaths, multiple patios, and L-shaped corner rooms (Feinman and Nicholas 2007; Feinman et al. 2008; Haller et al. 2006). Structure 35 also was adjacent to the feature that we had earlier thought might be a ballcourt, so in 2007, before we began excavations in the third elite residence (the large Platform 11 on the east side of the possible ballcourt), we tested the area between these two raised areas (Feinman and Nicholas 2009).

After clearing the brush we exposed the top of a cut-stone wall that was constructed less than a meter to the east of Structure 35. This wall forms the western base of the low rocky

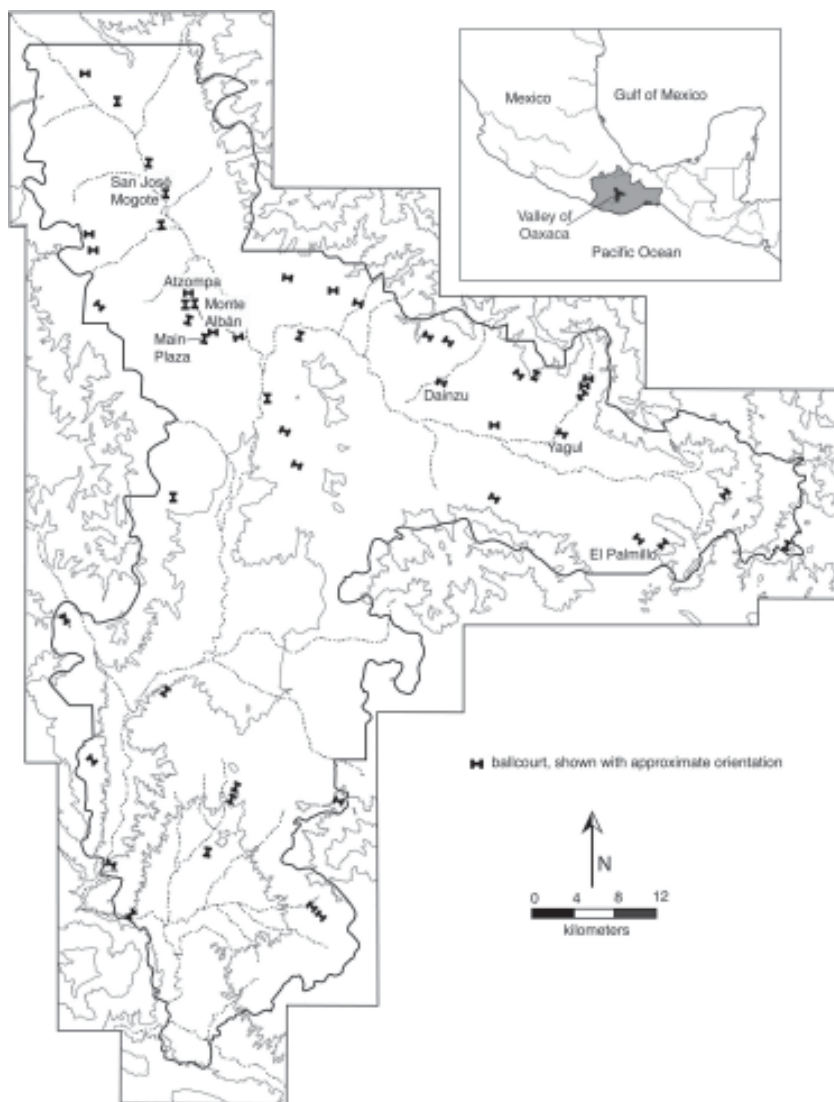


Fig. 1. Map of Oaxaca, showing the location of known ballcourts. Named sites have ballcourts that have been excavated.

mound that we called Structure 33 in 1997. We followed out the top of this wall and discovered that it ran for more than 30 m before turning and continuing to the east on both its northern and southern ends.

We next placed several 2 m by 2 m units in the flat space immediately east of this north-south wall, and below a thick layer of disturbed fill we came down on a poorly preserved plaster floor. We followed this plaster floor into a few adjacent units and ascertained that the plaster surface was not the floor of a room but rather the corner of an I-shaped ballcourt.

Once we were reasonably certain that Structure 33 was part of a small ballcourt, we adjusted our field methodology accordingly. We set out to determine the dimensions, size, and shape of the court and to learn about its dating and history of use. We chose not to completely expose the western mound nor the entire plaster floor of the court. In general, the floor of the court was not well preserved and the fill level above the floor was thick and largely composed of dark brown colluvial fill.

To define the ballcourt we followed its exterior walls and exposed the corners to ensure accurate measurement and mapping of the court dimensions. Once we had those dimensions, we projected the exact center of the court, where we located the stone marker. We also excavated one 2 m by 2 m unit in the north edge of the west mound to check its construction and to determine what this mound might overlay. We also defined several access routes to and from the court from adjacent structures. In addition to documenting the ballcourt, these field strategies were geared to provide information on the court's relationship to adjacent features in this upper sector of El Palmillo. Those data, in turn, provide the opportunity to compare the El Palmillo ballcourt to others in the Valley of Oaxaca.

The El Palmillo ballcourt

Once we defined the ballcourt at El Palmillo (see Fig. 3), we considered the factors, in addition to the obscuring vegetation, that had kept us from identifying this space as a ballcourt in 1997 (Feinman and Nicholas 2004). During the excavations, we discovered that the surface configuration of this space was altered after its use as a ballcourt and prior to site abandonment. Stones were piled on the west mound of the ballcourt, after its use as a court, turning this mound into a prehispanic wall (likely for defense) at the end of El Palmillo's occupation. The slightly raised south room of Terrace 335 also was turned into a wall late in the site's occupation and

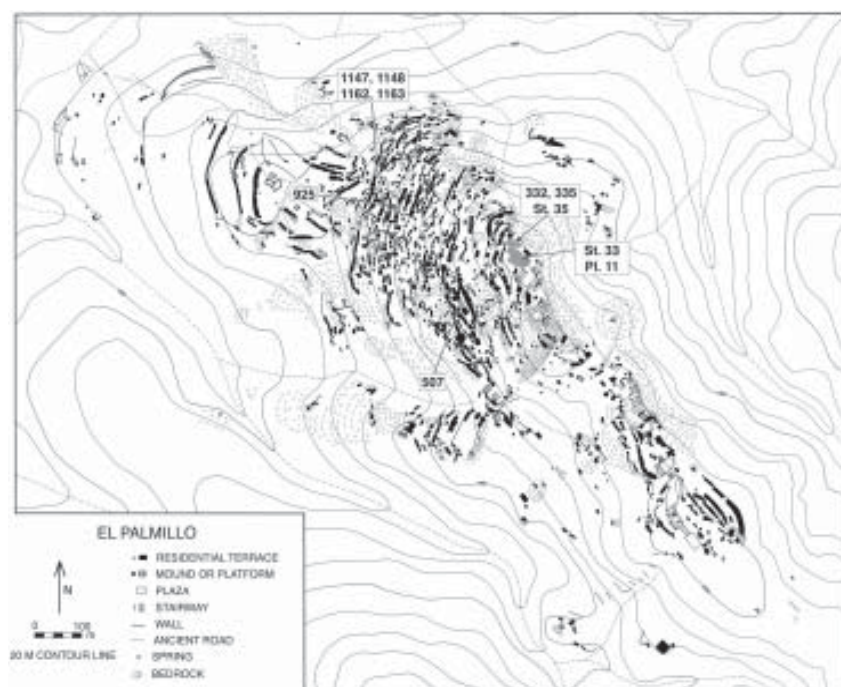


Fig. 2. Map of El Palmillo, showing the location of excavated contexts.

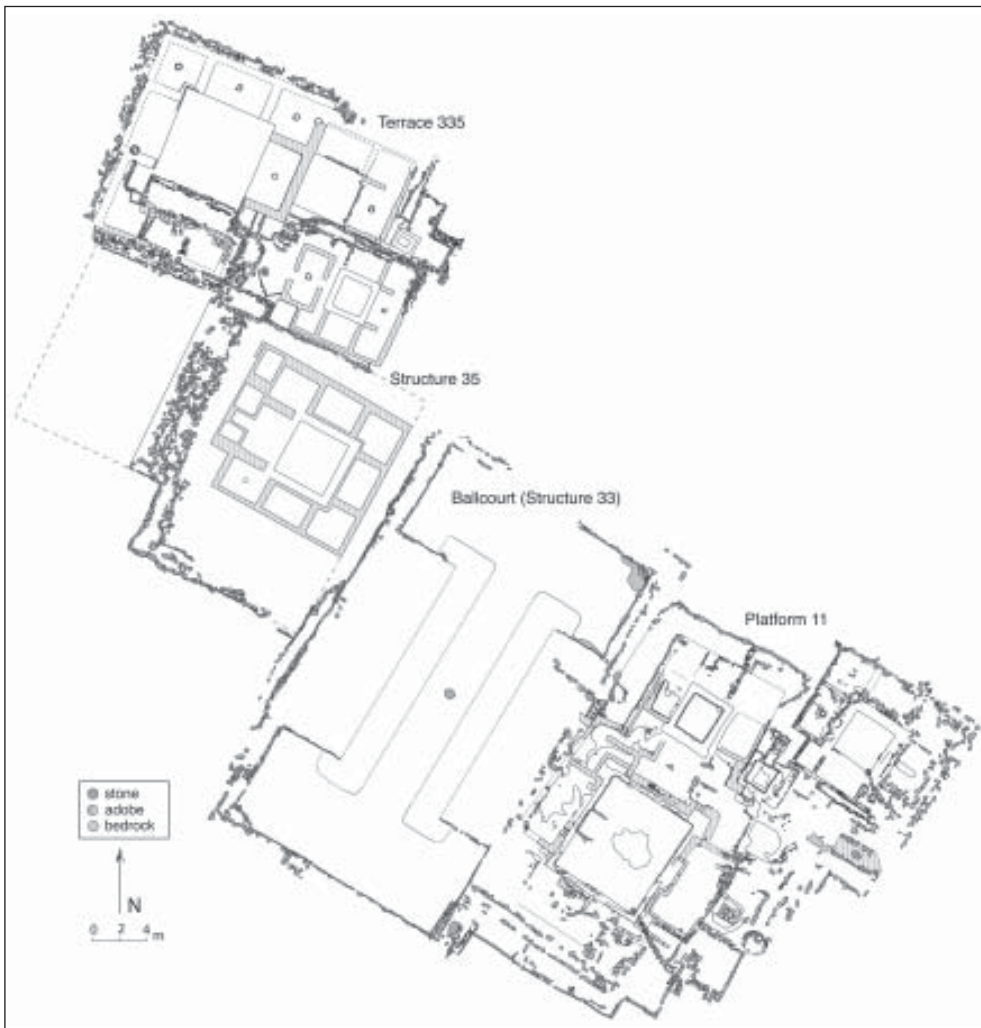


Fig. 3. The penultimate (Surface 2) plan of residential architecture in the upper precinct at El Palmillo.

after the room was no longer used as part of the residence. At the same time, the flat area between the court's mounds was intentionally filled with sediment, partially obscuring the court.

The ballcourt at El Palmillo is a small I-shaped ballcourt, measuring 35 m by 17 m (see Fig. 3). The west side was formed by a high stone wall that separated it from Structure 35. The floor of the court was plastered, as were the banquettes. The banquettes were constructed largely of adobe. The interior



Fig. 4. The northeast corner of the ballcourt at El Palmillo, showing the plaster floor and walls constructed on top of undulating bedrock.

walls of the court were made with cut stones; in the northeast corner, the stones were placed right on top of bedrock (Fig. 4). The marker stone in the center of the court was a round, thick slab of cut and faced slate, 75 x 70 cm, which was embedded in the court's plaster floor. The white plaster around the marker was painted red (Fig. 5). In the southeast corner were stairs made of cut stone that led to a plaza on the south end of Platform 11 (Fig. 6). There was another set of stairs on the side of Platform 11 so the residents of the palace could directly enter the ballcourt.

Our excavation in the north edge of the west mound of the ballcourt revealed that the mound was constructed of perpendicular rows of adobe bricks filled with large unfaced boulders and was built above what likely was previously residential space. In the excavated unit, a plaster floor and a small segment of an associated adobe wall were exposed (Fig. 7). Based on the elevations of this floor and wall and

their orientation and location, these residential features appear to have been associated with Surface 3 on Structure 35 to the west (c. early/middle IIIb-IV, Middle to Late Classic). It is possible that this space was part of a second small patio-room group that was part of the Structure 35 residence (Fig. 8). At the end of Surface 3 a new small patio-room group was built north of the larger Structure 35 patio-room complex (see Fig. 3). This newly built small patio was constructed above what had been the south room of the small patio of the Terrace 335 residence, decreasing the size of and space available to that

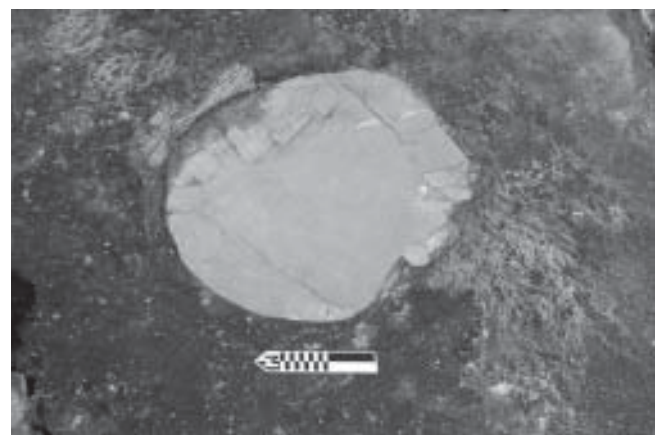


Fig. 5. The central marker stone in the ballcourt at El Palmillo, with traces of red paint on the surrounding plaster surface.

latter residence in Surface 2. We suspect that these changes were made so that the ballcourt could be built at the end of Surface 3 (start of Surface 2) east of the main patio complex of the Structure 35 residence. This court essentially was squeezed between two existing residences (Structure 35 and Platform 11), hence its narrow width. A carbon date of cal. A.D. 656–777 was obtained from ashy deposits sitting on the exposed plaster floor under the western mound of the ballcourt. The dating of this episode of burning just prior to the construction of the ballcourt supports the ceramic evidence from these occupational episodes.

The ballcourt was defined on the east by Platform 11, which predates the ballcourt (see Fig. 7). The Platform 11 palace was built above a masonry tomb that was initially constructed during Surface 4 (late IIIa/early IIIb-IV, or Middle Classic). This residential space appears to have constrained and so later formed the east side of the ballcourt. Prior to the construction of the ballcourt, this residence (in Surface 3) had the largest and most elaborate patio in the upper precinct (see Fig. 8). Plastered stairs led up from the deeply sunken patio to rooms on three sides of the patio; there were large niches in all four corners, one of which had a small plastered feature that might have been a "throne"; and there was a small adoratorio in the patio that faced the entrance of the subterranean tomb. Coincident with the construction of the ballcourt at the beginning of Surface 2, the Platform 11 residence was enlarged to comprise a third patio-room group (see Fig. 3).

Based on this architectural information, the carbon date, and the associated ceramics, the ballcourt was built later in Monte Alban IIIb-IV and was not utilized for an extensive period. In a few places, we were able to determine that the floor of the court was plastered twice, but few other renovations or structural modifications were made. The ballcourt appears to have been in use for a period equivalent to the length of the Surface 2 occupation of the upper precinct. When the ballcourt was abandoned and filled in, Platform 11 and Structure 35 were rebuilt in more modest form. In Surface 1 (the last occupational surface), both residences were smaller than they had been earlier and each had only one patio.

For the most part, the artifacts collected in the ballcourt were temporally mixed and water damaged due to erosion. But we did recover in the fill a broken carved stone (ignimbrite) sculpture in the round (Fig. 9). The sculpture, which was found face down in fill deposits above the floor in the northeast



Fig. 6. The stairs in the southeast corner of the ballcourt at El Palmillo.

corner of the court, depicts an individual (man) seated in a manner similar to Classic-period Zapotec funerary urns. The stone sculpture is about the size of a medium-sized urn. The depicted figure has long straight hair, represented in a manner similar to that found on many Zapotec ceramic urns. The individual also wears a loincloth, a cloth shirt with a patterned trim, and a beaded necklace. Unfortunately, the head of this sculpture was broken off (defacing the sculpture) a long time ago, prior to its placement in the fill of the court. Given its recovery in colluvial fill, we cannot be sure if this sculpture was originally associated with the court. Yet there is a good chance that it may have been (possibly the ruler of the adjacent palace), in a manner similar to the carved stone with jaguar imagery associated with the ballcourt on the Main Plaza at Monte Albán (Caso 1935:13). The sculpture may have originally been placed in a small niche that we exposed in the wall of the northeast corner of the court.

Ballcourts in the Valley of Oaxaca

The El Palmillo ballcourt is just one of 49 known ballcourts in the study region, but because of its dating and context, it provides new perspectives on ballcourt variation and change. To understand the significance of the ballcourt at El Palmillo, we consider briefly the wider corpus of courts in the region.

Oaxacan ballcourts were built from late in the Formative period until the Postclassic. Many are located at large, multicomponent sites. Only a few have been excavated (Bernal and Gamio 1974; Caso 1935; Flannery and Nicholas 2009; Flannery and Marcus 1983; Oliveros 1997), so for most of them we do not know with certainty when they were initially constructed or how their form might have changed over time. But we know from surface studies that they varied in size and in their spatial context. Although all are I-shaped, they also vary slightly in form (Taladoire 2001), with some having discrete end mounds and others not.

The two earliest ballcourts that have been excavated are located at Monte Albán (Caso 1935) and San José Mogote (Flannery and Marcus 1983; Marcus and Flannery 1996:190). Both are large I-shaped ballcourts that were constructed during Monte Albán II (Terminal Formative), although the court at Monte Albán continued to be used into the Classic period. The court at Monte Albán is on the Main Plaza and is ensconced within the largest concentration of civic-ceremonial architecture in Oaxaca at that time. The ballcourt at San José Mogote is similarly located as part of that site's main architectural complex.

The few later ballcourts that have been excavated are more variable in size and form. The smaller ballcourt adjacent to the Tomb 105 palace at Monte Albán lacks end mounds and dates to the Late Classic. In dating, plan, and associated architecture, the El Palmillo ballcourt is more similar to the ballcourt associated with the Tomb 105 residence. Three ballcourts at Atzompa (the northern hill of Monte Albán) also are considered to be Late Classic. The largest one is part of the main architectural complex, but the two smaller ones are adjacent to elite residences and have plans more similar to the El Palmillo court (Blanton 1978).

Because unexcavated ballcourts are difficult to date securely (Marcus 1996), we do not know how many of the 49 Oaxacan ballcourts were constructed in times or contexts similar to the one at El Palmillo. Still, based on findings of



Fig. 7. Cross section of the ballcourt at El Palmillo, showing the plaster floor under the west mound and the sequence of floors on Platform 11.

regional survey, many ballcourts were built in defensive settings near regional boundaries (Kowalewski et al. 1991), like the one at El Palmillo. For example, at the margins of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, we found at least four ballcourts in the Ejutla region that all seem to have been built at the end of the Classic period or later. There may be others in Oaxaca that have similar histories of construction and use.

The Late Classic period in Oaxaca

During the Middle Classic (c. A.D. 500), Monte Albán was the political and demographic center of the Valley of Oaxaca. The scale of the public architecture at Monte Albán far surpassed that found at any other settlement in the region, and the city monopolized the incorporation of writing in civic-ceremonial settings (Marcus 1989, 1992, 2006).

By late IIIb-IV, Monte Albán no longer maintained a monopoly on carved stones with writing, as new kinds of text depicting powerful individuals began to be displayed at more than a dozen sites across the region, including Monte Albán. In these carved stones, or genealogical registers, the focus was on personal biography and the bilateral ancestry of high-status individuals (Marcus 1992; 2002; 2006; Masson and Orr

1998; Urcid 1992; Urcid et al. 1994). Each site glorified its own conjugal pair, most likely rulers. In most cases, this information was presented near tombs in a manner where only individuals situated close to the registers, perhaps involved in associated rituals, would see them. Communication was aimed at others of status and likely had much to do with legitimizing power and position. Through time, local rulers and settlements began to

assert greater autonomy, and by the end of the Late Classic, the reins of political power had partly diffused from Monte Albán (Winter 2001:297).

With greater emphasis on personal biography and legitimacy, palaces, which had been present in the valley since the end of the Formative period (Spencer and Redmond 2004), became a more important form of public architecture. In eastern Tlacolula, the construction of palaces with two or three patios—different from the one-patio plan at Monte Albán—was undertaken at both Lambityeco (Lind 2001; 2003; Lind and Urcid 1983; 2010) and El Palmillo (Feinman 2007; Feinman and Nicholas 2009). The largest patios and associated rooms likely served civic-ceremonial functions (Barber and Joyce 2006; González Licón 2004:97), whereas the smaller patios were more residential.

The ballcourt at El Palmillo was built during the Late Classic between two palaces. This ballcourt was smaller and less massive than the ballcourt on the Main Plaza at Monte Albán and it lacked end mounds. The discovery of a ballcourt at El Palmillo is significant in that it supports the suspected importance of the site at that time, when it was the largest Late Classic site in eastern Tlacolula. The location of the ballcourt, adjacent to elaborate residences (and not part of the site's main architectural complex), may signify the increasing importance of specific high-status families (residential groups). Given the dating of the palaces, it is likely that a genealogical register that is today embedded in a house lot wall in nearby Santiago Matatlán originally came from El Palmillo (Paddock 1966; Urcid 2003:67, fig. 1). All three palaces at El Palmillo had been damaged by looting that occurred earlier in the 20th century, coincident with the timing of the placement of the carved stone in the Matatlán wall (Caso 1928), so that stone may have originated from one of the palaces. The late Monte Albán IIIb-IV construction of the El Palmillo ballcourt may indicate an effort by the site's palace dwellers to enhance their political role at a time when the power and hegemony of Monte Albán was in decline.

Interpretation and implications

The placement of the ballcourt at El Palmillo and its reasonably short history of use has implications for how we interpret the declining fortunes of Monte Albán and the political fragmentation of the Valley of Oaxaca during the last centuries of the Classic period. The El Palmillo ballcourt was positioned between two palaces at a time when this upper sector of the site was the most architecturally elaborate and the hegemony of Monte Albán was beginning to wane. In this context, the construction of relatively small courts adjacent to palaces may be part of an emerging contest for power that culminated in a fundamental political and demographic reorganization of the Valley of Oaxaca late in the Classic period.

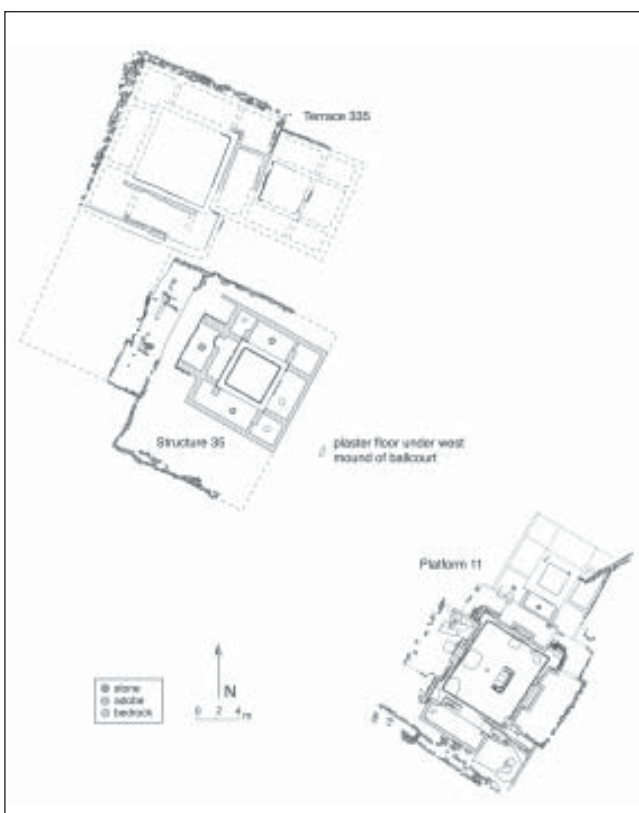


Fig. 8. The Surface 3 plan of residential architecture in the upper precinct at El Palmillo, immediately prior to the construction of the ballcourt.



Fig. 9. Back of the carved stone figure recovered from fill in the ballcourt at El Palmillo.

The Mesoamerican ballgame has long been linked to political or factional rivalry, competitions for power, and the accession of rule (Fox 1996; Gillespie 1991; Montmollin 1997; Santley et al. 1991), with ballcourts serving as "strategic settings for the negotiation of power relations" (Fox 1996:483). As regional political ties frayed in the Valley of Oaxaca, a new form of small ballcourts was built adjacent to the palaces of emerging local lords, who appear to have been concerned with legitimizing their rights to rule. For a short period, the construction of the El Palmillo ballcourt and the rituals of the ballgame marked and negotiated the fragmentation of power in the Valley of Oaxaca, possibly helping legitimize the local rulership of the Platform 11 palace dwellers. But this episode was short-lived, soon followed by the gradual abandonment of El Palmillo, the diminished access to labor for the El Palmillo palace dwellers, the continued decline of Monte Albán, and the political and demographic reorganization of the Valley of Oaxaca.

The excavation, contextualized definition, and chronological placement of the Late Classic El Palmillo ballcourt strengthens our understanding of the functions and roles of one set of Valley of Oaxaca courts. Nevertheless, to extend this interpretation more broadly or to contrast it with alternative hypotheses regarding the roles that ballcourts had in the region will require the careful study and dating of more such architectural features as well as detailed efforts to place these buildings in broader horizontal/architectural contexts.

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- RESUMEN: Se excavó recientemente una cancha de pelota que no hubo sido conocida anteriormente en el sitio de El Palmillo en el valle de Oaxaca. Esta cancha pequeña fue construida entre dos palacios existentes en un recinto de alto estatus durante el periodo Clásico Tardío, cerca del fin de la ocupación del sitio. Después de un episodio de uso corto, se abandonó la cancha. Cuando se sitúa el descubrimiento de este elemento arqueológico en el contexto de la asociación del juego de pelota mesoamericano con linderos, facciones y la adquisición de poder política, tiene implicaciones para nuestro entendimiento de las fortunas disminuyentes de Monte Albán y la fragmentación política del valle de Oaxaca en el fin del periodo Clásico.
- ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: In der archäologischen Stätte El Palmillo im Tal von Oaxaca wurde ein bislang unbekannter Ballspielplatz ausgegraben. Der kleine Ballspielplatz wurde erst in der Späten Klassik und damit spät in Bezug auf die Besiedlung der Stätte zwischen zwei bereits existierenden Palästen konstruiert. Nach einer kurzen Zeit der Nutzung wurde der Ballspielplatz aufgegeben. Vor dem Hintergrund der Assoziation von Ballspielplätzen in Mesoamerika mit Grenzen, Gruppenbildungen, und der Legitimation politischer Macht ist der Ballspielplatz von El Palmillo ein Indikator für die abnehmende Macht von Monte Alban und für die politische Fragmentierung des Tals von Oaxaca gegen Ende der Klassischen Periode.