



## Comments on a Carved Bowl by Justin Kerr

The large, carved bowl under discussion is generally referred to as an *olla*; a narrow-necked vessel used for carrying water, an unusual representation for a ceremonial vessel. This bowl however, served another purpose. Its function was to present an image of the supernatural aspect of the Maya ballgame. It has been argued, (see Alexandre Tokovinine's article in Essays in [www.mayavase.com](http://www.mayavase.com)), that the text that appears with ballgame scenes at various places, never mentions a supernatural or mythological theme.

However, here we are confronted with a magnificent carved bowl that presents such a theme. Maya artists were adept at creating visions of the otherworld in extremely abstract form as seen on this vessel. There are four images that circle the center of the bowl. Each image presents the same theme, but with minor changes from panel to panel. The main theme is that of the Vision Serpent, the ubiquitous dragon that represents the otherworld. He is characteristically shown with jaws agape, upper palette and snout thrown back revealing the interior of the mouth. This allows various supernatural individuals and other symbols to emerge from the depths of this being. He is the body of Xibalba, the Maya otherworld, the abode of the gods and is called forth to bring messages from that dark realm. As we see on lintel 25 of Yaxchilán, the vision serpent is summoned to convey a message about war from an ancestor by a lady who has saturated paper with blood from her tongue and burnt that offering .



The carved vessel whose measurements are ht 21.5 cm and 83 cm in circumference, however, tells us that the ball game is a mythological element of Maya thought. The serpent has his mouth open and flames emerge while a ball and conch shell appears at the tip of the lower jaw. Recent studies have shown the ball used in the Maya ballgame may have been wrapped with layers of rubber. This would account for the lines that decorated the sphere dividing it into four parts. The conch shell represents the watery aspect of the otherworld.



(above) A rollout photograph of the *olla*. The four serpents are very similar to each other, the only change is the shape of the conch shell underneath the ball.

(right) Another image where the ball sits in conjunction with the ball court (K5226) as well as the vision serpent, In this image the Maize God stands in the center of the ball court holding the great serpent in his arms. The ball, as on



the *olla* is divided into four parts. The Maize God is resurrected in the ball court, an image of rising from the cleft in the corn flower. The *olla* image is the abstract and condensed version of this part of the ancient Maya religion.



(left) On this codex style vessel (K5064) the image of the serpent contains the ball within its body rather than near the mouth as on the carved vessel. The abstract conch shell directly beneath the ball ikon, again represents the watery otherworld.

Although simple in design, but bold in execution, this *olla* conjures up the religious significance of the ballgame to the ancient Maya. Perhaps in its specific design as a water container, it is suggesting the watery realm that represents the otherworld.