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**Veracruz Mural Traditions: Las Higueras, México**



**Research Year:** 2001

**Culture:** Classic Veracruz

**Chronology:** Late Classic

**Location:** Veracruz, México

**Site:** Las Higueras

**Table of Contents**

[Abstract](#)

[Resumen](#)

[Introduction](#)

[The Murals of Mound 1](#)

[Positioning Las Higueras Identity](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

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## **Abstract**

The documents created with the aid of the FAMSI research grant "Veracruz Mural Traditions: Las Higueras" constitute the central iconographic corpus of my dissertation in pre-Columbian art history at the University of Texas at Austin. The main objectives of the dissertation, *The Murals of Las Higueras, Veracruz, México*, are to: (1) document, identify and analyze the iconography used in the narrative programs portrayed on the murals of Mound 1 at Las Higueras (c. 600-900 CE); (2) consider these findings in a regional comparative analysis of Central Veracruz visual art; and (3) develop a methodology that allows a synchronic and diachronic study of the role that this culture region had in influencing the creation of visual art and ideology in Mesoamerica. This report summarizes the activities and initial research undertaken during the documentation of the surviving fragments of these murals currently located at the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology.

## **Resumen**

Los documentos producidos a partir del otorgamiento de la beca FAMSI, titulada "Tradiciones Murales de Veracruz: Las Higueras", constituyen el corpus iconográfico central de mi tesis en historia del arte precolombino para la Universidad de Texas en Austin. Los objetivos principales de la tesis *Los Murales de Las Higueras, Veracruz, México*, son: (1) documentar, identificar y analizar la iconografía utilizada en los programas narrativos representados en los murales de la Estructura 1 de Las Higueras (c. 600-900 d.C.); (2) estudiar estos hallazgos en el marco de un análisis comparativo regional de las artes visuales del área central de Veracruz, y (3) desarrollar una metodología que posibilite estudiar sincrónica y diacrónicamente el papel que jugó esta región cultural en la creación de arte visual y de ideología en Mesoamérica. Este informe resume las actividades y la investigación inicial emprendida durante la documentación de los fragmentos sobrevivientes de estos murales, que actualmente se conservan en el Museo de Antropología de Xalapa.

## **Introduction**

The proposal for the research project, "Veracruz Mural Traditions: Las Higueras," was to document and study the Late Classic murals of Las Higueras, Veracruz, México. The funding provided by this FAMSI research grant allowed for the documentation of 182 fragments removed from the superstructure of Mound 1 that comprise the surviving corpus of possibly nineteen original mural layers. Other than a select few, these mural fragments had been in storage crates inaccessible for research for decades at the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology. During the first part of 2001 the museum built a reconstruction of the Mound 1 superstructure in order to display a portion of the mural fragments, many for the first time. This renewed interest in the murals by the museum has opened up new possibilities for scholars to access and study the fragments first hand.

The site of Las Higueras is loosely dated to the Late Classic period (c. 600-900 CE) and is located on the Gulf coast of Veracruz near the Colipa River. Little is known of the site outside of an assortment of archaeological reports from the late 1960s and early 1970s, one unpublished archaeological thesis at the University of Veracruz by Ramon Arellanos Melgarejo (1985), and the occasional article that includes several out of context mural fragments in a general discussion of Veracruz art. These mostly unpublished mural fragments comprise the largest percentage of the iconographic data available for study from the ancient site.

The documentation of these fragments created with the aid of the FAMSI research grant has become the central iconographic corpus of my dissertation in pre-Columbian art history at the University of Texas at Austin. The main objectives of the dissertation, *The Murals of Las Higueras, Veracruz, México*, are to: (1) document, identify and analyze the iconography used in the narrative programs portrayed on the murals of Mound 1 at Las Higueras; (2) consider these findings in a regional comparative analysis of Central Veracruz visual art; and (3) develop a methodology that allows a synchronic and diachronic study of the role that this culture region had in influencing the creation of visual art and ideology in Mesoamerica.

Over the summer of 2001 I was able to complete photographic documentation of the Las Higueras archaeological site, the mural fragments on the Xalapa Museum's reconstruction of Mound 1, and the fragments remaining in the museum's storage area. Preliminary sketches of the more intricate aspects of the murals that are somewhat diminished in photographs were also created. Using a combination of drawings from direct observation and photographs, which may be enlarged for greater detail and used for later color comparison, greatly enhances the ability to create quality reconstruction drawings.

During this stay in Xalapa I was fortunate enough to consult with Ruben Morante, director of the Xalapa Museum of Anthropology, Gilberto Bermúdez Gorrochotegui, director of the University of Veracruz Institute of Anthropology, and the late Ramón Arellanos Melgarejo, an archaeologist of the original Las Higueras excavation project begun in 1968. These gentlemen were very generous with their time and resources throughout my study. They assisted me with both their personal knowledge and the researching of the resources and archives of the University of Veracruz.

The collecting of documents pertaining to the Las Higueras murals has been lucrative in general. Although I have been successful in acquiring many unpublished reports and archives on aspects of the Las Higueras excavation, the main problem arising is the apparent lack of specific documentation of the excavation of the murals. Juan Sanchez Bonilla, a now retired archaeologist from the University of Veracruz Institute of Anthropology, conducted the final phase of the excavation and removal of the Las Higueras murals from Mound 1. Due to improper recording or actual loss the notes from this portion of the excavation are currently unaccounted for. Sanchez Bonilla has stated that he does not have a copy of these reports in his possession (personal communication, Bermúdez Gorrochotegui 2001). The Institute of Anthropology also does not have these records in its archives. Ramon Arellano informed me that he

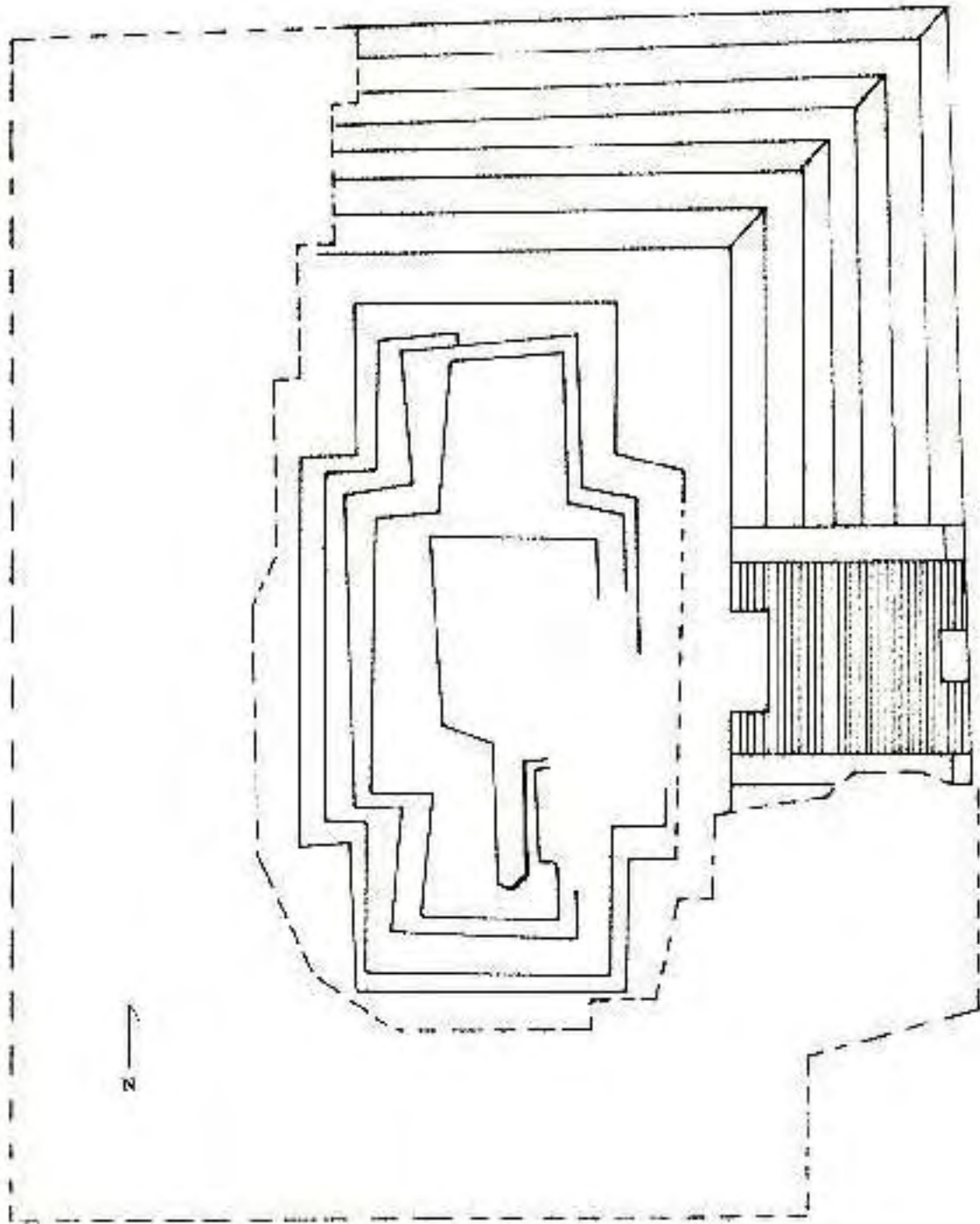
believed the reports were in a box that remained in storage from when the Institute relocated to its current site. I was granted access to this storage room. A student assistant and I opened hundreds of dust-covered boxes in search of the illusive reports. We were unsuccessful in our efforts. During the summer of 2002 I returned to Xalapa once more to follow up on the status of these excavation reports. As of the date of this final report the documents remain unaccounted for.

Due to this situation the original ordering and placement of the fragments is largely unknown. In addition, the numbers used to catalogue the fragments do not seem to have been applied in a systematic manner. Fragments with sequential numbers rarely share physical or stylistic similarities and are often likely from different layers or even portions of the structure. I have found that because of this lacking information the Xalapa Museum's reconstruction should be viewed largely for its didactic applications and not for its historical accuracy. For one reason, their reconstruction depicts murals positioned in southern portions of the structure that had actually been destroyed prior to modern times (personal communication, Arellanos Melgarejo 2001). The reconstruction of the murals is now contingent upon attributes of style, fracture lines, potential chemical analysis, and the memories of the archaeologists.

### **The Murals of Mound 1**

Of the research done on Las Higueras the 1985 thesis, *Las Higueras-Acacalco-Dinamica cultural de un sitio en el Totonacapan Barloventino*, by Ramón Arellanos Melgarejo, provides the most complete surviving account of the original site excavation. The excavation project was instigated when a local farmer uncovered the murals of Mound 1 as he attempted to expand his home atop the ancient structure. In addition to the effects of nature, there was substantial damage and loss of mural remains due to this incident and subsequent looting before the area could be secured.

The pyramidal structure known as Mound 1 ([Figure 1](#)) is one of approximately twenty-eight structures at the site. The structure is built by means of a pounded-earth core covered with smooth, river rocks that are held in place using fired oyster or clam-shell lime as a mortar and final stucco surface. The structure has one set of stairs ascending its east side.



**Figure 1. Las Higueras Mound 1.**

The surviving mural fragments were found on the smooth, stucco-covered outer walls and floor of a two-tiered superstructure. Of the nineteen layers of mural discovered on the most preserved northern corners, seven were found associated with a first stage of construction, while the remaining twelve were on a second stage. From above, the superstructure takes on a decidedly cruciform shape. The lower tier of this structure

rises approximately one meter. The upper tier of equal height forms walls that rest atop the lower base. The walls are recessed from the outer edge. The top of the platform created by the recession is also nearly one meter in width. An opening in the eastern wall allows access to the inner chamber. Other than a portion of mural on the floor between the jambs there were no surviving interior adornments.

The mural iconography includes various narrative themes including images of Mesoamerican ball courts with their associated ballgame accoutrements and sacrifices, processions of musicians, banner and standard-bearers, temple structures, seated and standing figures wearing elaborate plumage, several ritual scenes strongly associated with water and fecundity, "solar" disks, birds, fish, serpents, and fanged figures. A range of figure types, clothing styles, adornments, and colors are used that may distinguish styles over time or in some cases by the individual hand of the artists. When including the iconography of these murals in a regional comparative analysis of Central Veracruz visual art it is important to consider changes occurring contemporaneously elsewhere in Mesoamerica. The cultures of Central Veracruz that developed visual art canons during the Late Classic period witnessed both the final stages of the collapse of the great Central Mexican state of Teotihuacán and the later decline of the Classic Maya. Examples of Maya and Central Mexican ideology, iconography, science, and glyphic writing exist throughout Veracruz material culture.

The murals present connections to both of these regions, but they ultimately retain the style of Veracruz's own unique past. Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1966:16-22) discussion of bricolage provides a model for a more sophisticated understanding of how these complex social institutions and ideologies may have been composed. He suggests that we should view the structuring of ideologies or myths as not necessarily being built from an existing social discourse, either spatially or temporally, but also from the compilation of useful or needed remains of past discourses. The mural iconography highlights this process through the appropriation, blending and transformation of regional and foreign styles and ideologies in the creation of a distinct Gulf Coast culture.

### **Positioning Las Higueras Identity**

Through the use of the mural iconography in conjunction with other artifacts and regional styles my dissertation will also attempt to contextualize Las Higueras. First, through identifying the context for its identity. In other words, how and where is Las Higueras iconography and style, or its visually represented identity, situated within the cultural sphere known as Classic Veracruz. And second, as a part of this region what role might it have had in influencing the creation, transformation, and exchange of visual culture in Epiclassic Mesoamerica.

As outlined above, the murals depict multiple narrative themes. To develop my discussion here I have chosen the mural fragments portraying activities or rituals associated with the Mesoamerican ballgame for a sample case study. In addition to this theme, regional comparative analyses of sculpted stone artifacts known as yokes,

*palmas* and *hachas* and the formal artistic convention commonly referred to as the "Classic Veracruz" style will also be included.

The "Classic Veracruz" style, as defined by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1954), is based on formal attributes of a design motif dominated by a pattern of interlaced scrolls that occur regularly on a variety of artifact types attributed to the Gulf coast region during the Classic period (c. 300-900 CE) (Figure 2). The scroll patterns that are included under this rubric are diverse, having antecedents in the Pre-Classic and extending into the Post-Classic. They are found beyond the borders of Veracruz, and are represented on mediums ranging from monumental architecture to small stone objects and from ceramics of several typologies to ornamental carved bones. Even with this diversity the Classic Veracruz style is still referred to by some as the Tajín style, due to the fact that one later variation of the scroll pattern is found in the relief carvings of El Tajín (Figure 3).

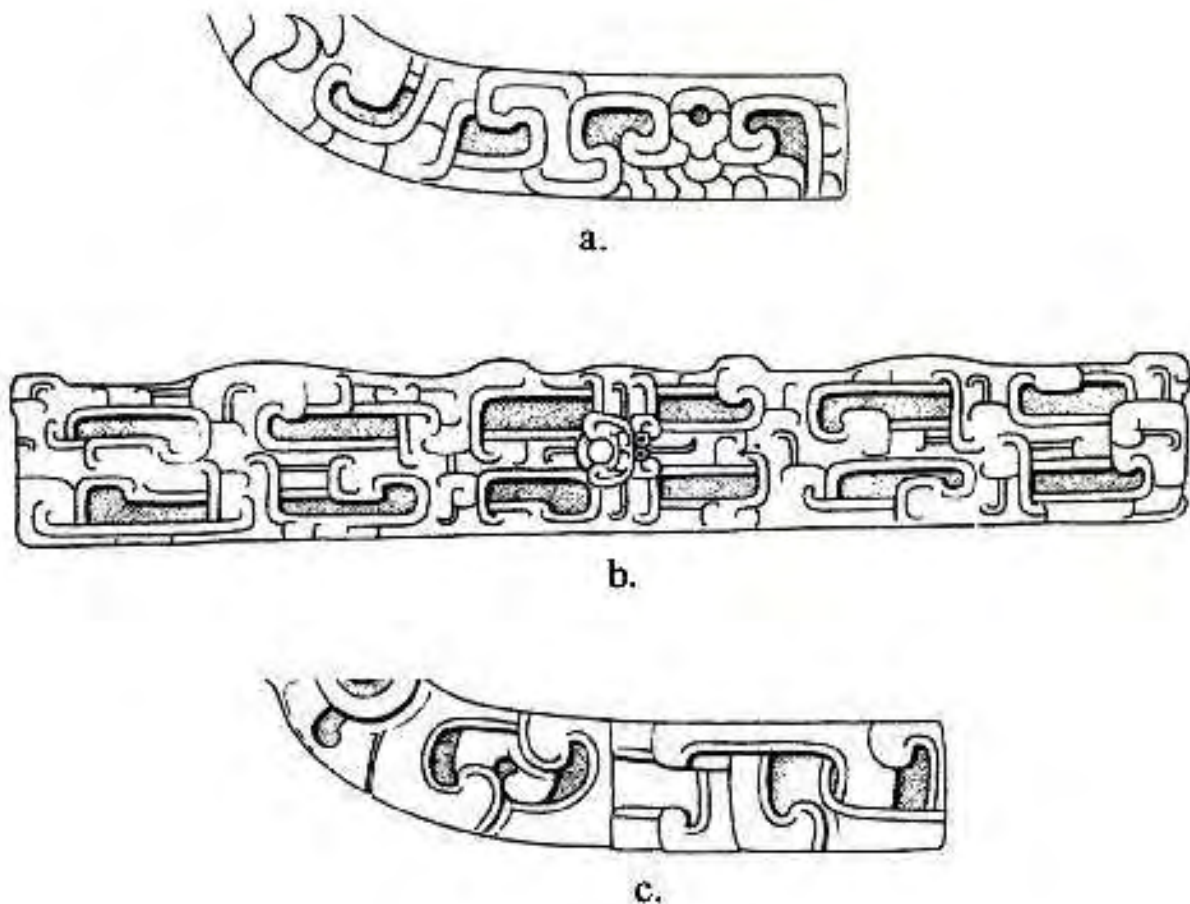


Figure 2. Proskouriakoff interlaced scroll styles (Proskouriakoff 1954).

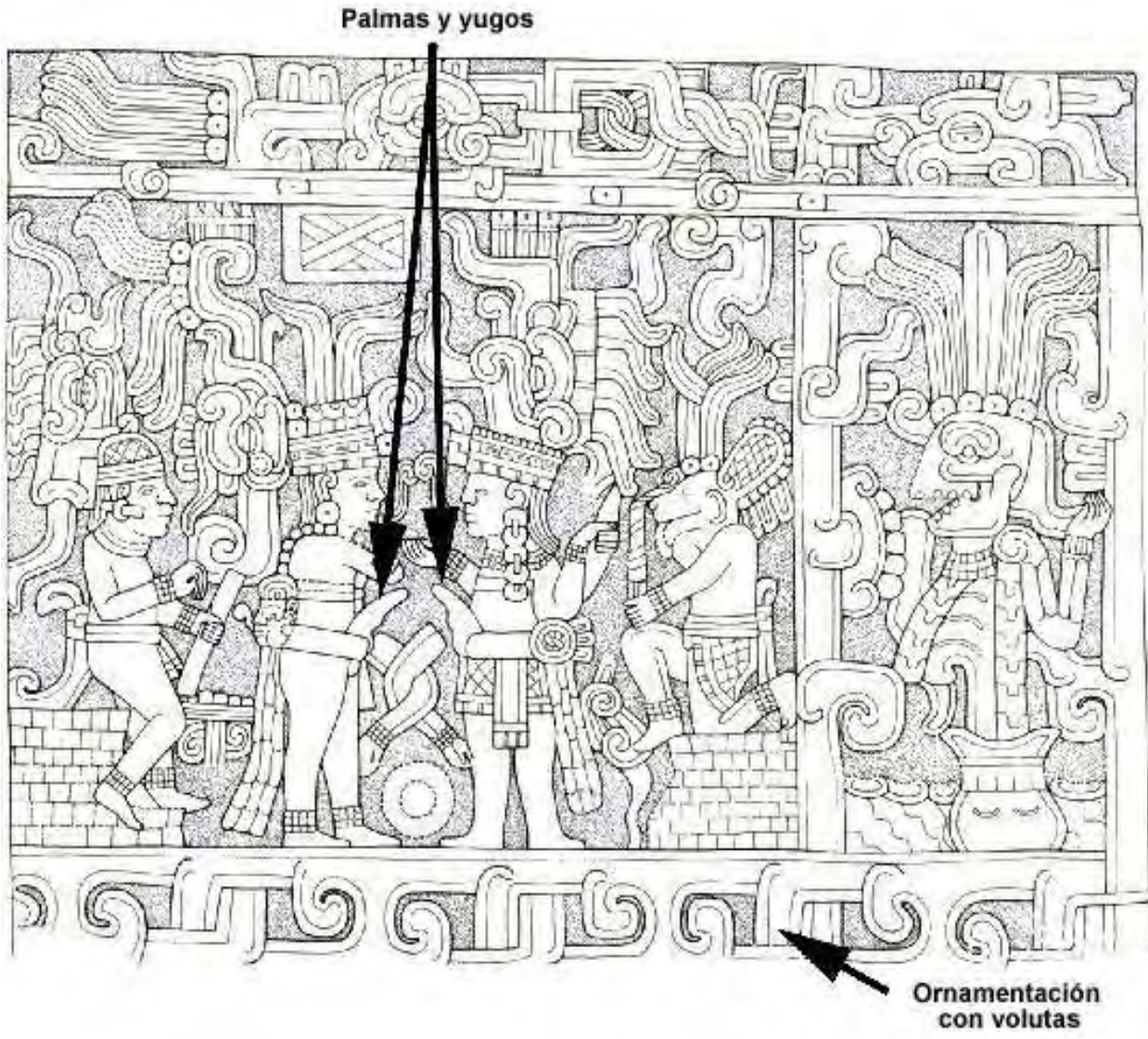


Figure 3. El Tajin South Ballcourt panel 3 (Kampen 1972).





Figure 4. Yoke (Proskouriakoff 1954).

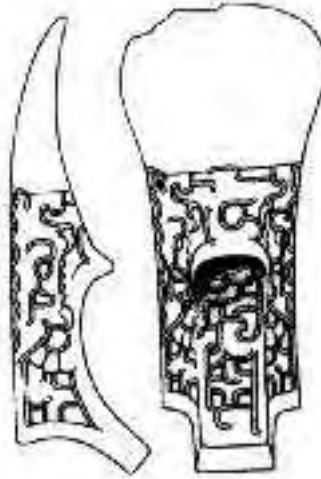


Figure 5. Palma (Proskouriakoff 1954).

These motif classifications have been primarily derived from three types of carved stone objects known by Spanish identifications based on their forms: (1) the *yugo* or yoke, so named for its "U" shape and a belief that it was actually placed on a person's neck like a yoke (Figure 4); (2) the *palma* named for its palm branch appearance, this form with the notched profile is only one type of *palma* found in the region- (Figure 5), and the (3) *hacha* named for its thin axe head appearance, the common types are human heads (Figure 6, below), or bird heads (Figure 7, below). Following identifications set forth by Thompson (1941) and Ekholm (1946, 1949) an association between these three objects and ballgame regalia is now generally accepted. Compelling evidence that the *palma* was used in conjunction with the yoke is depicted in the reliefs of the El Tajín South Ballcourt (Figure 3). Other representations were also found to suggest the *hacha* being worn in a similar manner (Figure 8, below). Although generally accepted, there is still debate over whether these "heavy objects of stone were designed primarily to be worn or carried on the person, or even that lighter articles [of wood or leather] worn by players were reproduced in stone merely for ceremonial purposes" (Proskouriakoff 1954:67).



Figure 6. Human hacha (Proskouriakoff 1954). Figure 7. Bird hacha (Proskouriakoff 1954).

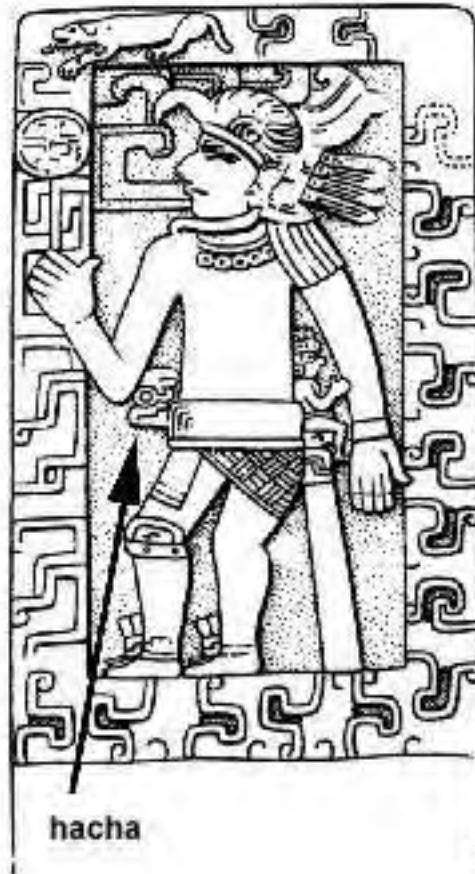


Figure 8. El Tajin relief sculpture (Proskouriakoff 1954).

Proskouriakoff's 1954 and 1971 articles on Veracruz sculpture further delineated the corpus of Classic Veracruz interlaced scroll motifs to those carved on the stone yokes, *palmas*, and *hachas*. In these articles her focus on a purely formal analysis of the motifs provided a stage for developing an understanding of how these carved stone objects may have developed and moved both temporally and spatially.

Barbara Stark's 1998 analysis of the scroll motif outlined several points that have improved understanding of the distribution and movement of the Classic Veracruz style. Her work, like Proskouriakoff's, focuses on the stylistic patterns rather than any potential patterns of economic exchange. Stark's analysis of the motif originates with the styles of Patarata in South-Central Veracruz of the lower Papaloapan basin. The work of the La Mixtequilla Archaeological Project established that the scroll style of Patarata is characteristic of the early Classic La Mixtequilla and is quite distinct from the "interlaced" style described by Proskouriakoff (1954). Stark suggests that Southern Veracruz might have participated in stylistic changes that lead to the increase in the use of scrolls during the late Pre-Classic. These changes appear to have extended to such areas as Izapa, Tres Zapotes, and El Mesón.

Proskouriakoff's corpus is often problematic for the lack of provenance for most of the objects. Since we now know that the Patarata style is located in South-Central Veracruz, and there are no known examples of a motif combining the Patarata and "interlaced" styles, Stark proposes that it is probable that the interlaced style corresponds to an area in North to North-Central Veracruz.



Figure 9. Veracruz palma distribution shown in shaded area (Sánchez Ólvera 1978).

Stark also expanded her corpus to include regional patterns of the scroll style depicted on ceramics, figures, murals, and other artifact categories, though she did not include all of the yoke styles or any of the *palmas*. The *palmas* were not included due to their dating to the Late Classic. In addition, the obvious differences between the *palma* and *hacha* forms may be due to definite differences in geographic distribution and possibly time. The *hacha*, as well as the yoke, is more widely distributed in the region, while the *palma*, outside of a few exceptions, is concentrated in the north-central area of Veracruz, shown here in the shaded area ([Figure 9](#)) (Luis Sanchez Olvera 1978). From this evidence it appears that the two stylistic spheres, those of the Classic Veracruz scroll style and the use of the *palma*, have a very similar.



Figure 10. Las Higueras yoke fragment.

Although fragmentary, yokes and *palmas* diagnostic of this region have been excavated at Las Higueras. Of the 15 yoke fragments documented during the site excavation I was able to locate two in the Xalapa Museum bodega. This fragment is from the center of the yoke's curve ([Figure 10](#)). It appears to be the nose of a creature commonly carved on Veracruz yokes categorized as the "frog" type by Strebel (1890). Of the dozen or more *palmas* found at the site only these three fragments were documented. Fragment "B" most clearly shows the presence of the Classic Veracruz scroll style ([Figure 11](#)). This is the upper corner of a type of *palma* often represented in scenes of ballplayers being sacrificed.

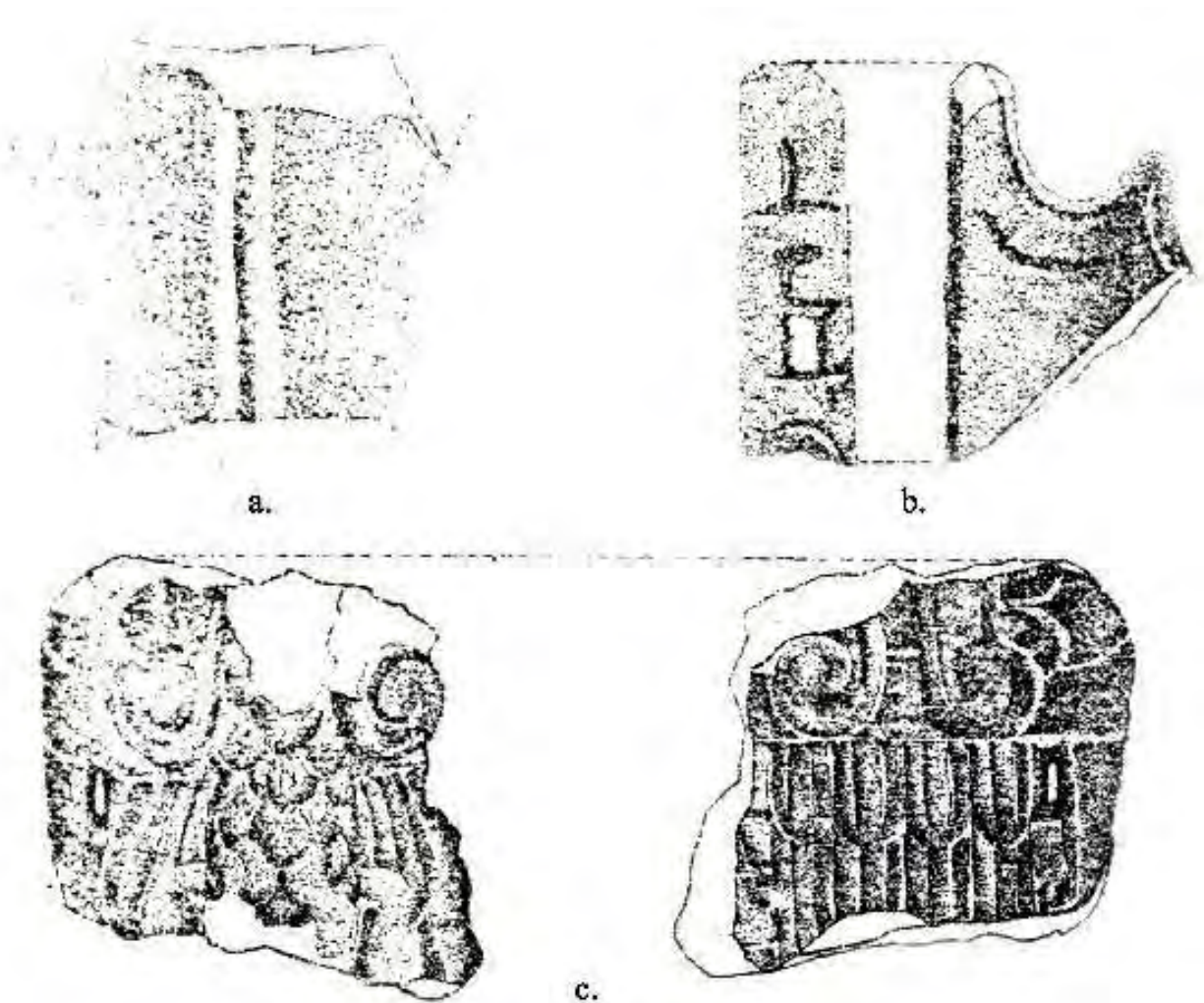


Figure 11. Las Higueras palma fragments (Arellanos 1985).

Scenes of ballcourt activity or ritual that incorporate the use of Proskouriakoff's interlaced scroll style, the yoke, and the *palma* are found at several north-central Veracruz sites. Most prominent are those at El Tajín. The South Ballcourt Panel 4 depicts a ballplayer sacrifice, notice the sacrificial blade held to the victim's neck ([Figure 12](#)). We can see that this event is actually taking place in the ballcourt by the architectural elements portrayed. The ballplayers' accoutrements include a matted skirt, yoke, *palma*, and a circular back piece.

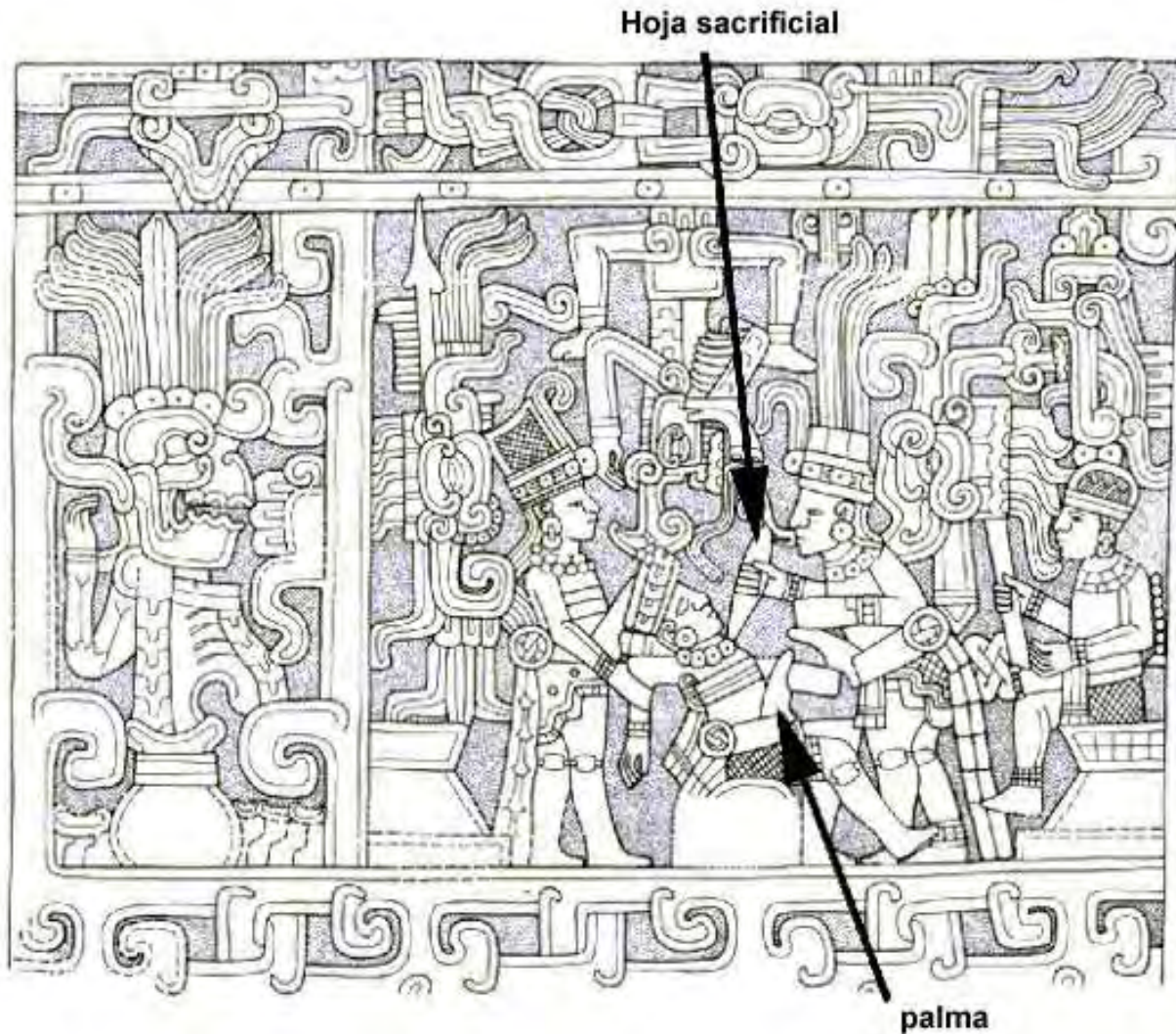


Figure 12. El Tajín South Ballcourt panel 4 (Kampen 1972).

The El Tajín panel associated with Structure 2 illustrates another ballcourt sacrifice ([Figure 13](#)). This is once again evidenced by the cross section view of the court architecture, ballgame items of yoke, *palma*, matted skirt, a skull ball, and the sacrificial blade in the hand of the actor standing on the right. The missing central section of the panel is most probable the depiction of the victim. Let me call your attention to the three serpent heads along the right edge of the missing section. At the site of Aparicio a ballcourt corner stone depicts the probable missing portion of the image ([Figure 14](#)) (Kampen 1972:65-66). A decapitated ballplayer in matted skirt, with a yoke and *palma*, seated on scroll architecture has serpents rising from the neck. The *palma* worn at Aparicio is the type that the aforementioned Las Higueras *palma* fragment comes from, notice the use of interlaced scrolls ([Figure 15](#)).

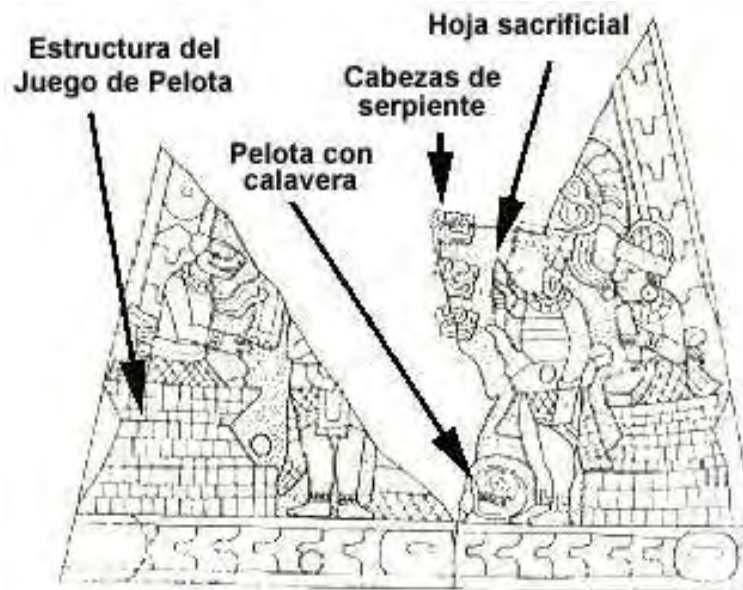


Figure 13. El Tajin Structure 2 Panel (Kampen 1972).



Figure 14. Ballcourt stela from Aparicio, Veracruz.





Figure 15. Palma.

The murals of Las Higueras Mound 1 also include a series of three ballgame related scenes on consecutively painted layers. The latest of the three depicts ballcourt activities focused around a rather large, bound, black ball ([Figure 16](#)). At the far left musicians playing long trumpets, rattles, and a drum accompany the main characters. A comparison can be made with musicians present during one of the stages of ritual depicted on the El Tajín South Ballcourt ([Figure 17](#)). The second Las Higueras scene, shown within stylized ballcourt architecture, depicts a small, headless person bracing himself against a skull ball ([Figure 18](#)). The figure to the right holds the severed head and the sacrificial blade. The earliest Las Higueras ballcourt scene is similar to those we have seen at El Tajín and Aparicio ([Figure 19](#)). Within a ballcourt of scroll architecture a ballplayer wearing a skirt, yoke, *palma*, kneepad, and a circular back piece sits upon a skull ball. The ballplayer has been decapitated and once again serpents rise from his neck. To his right we see his executioner holding the sacrificial blade.

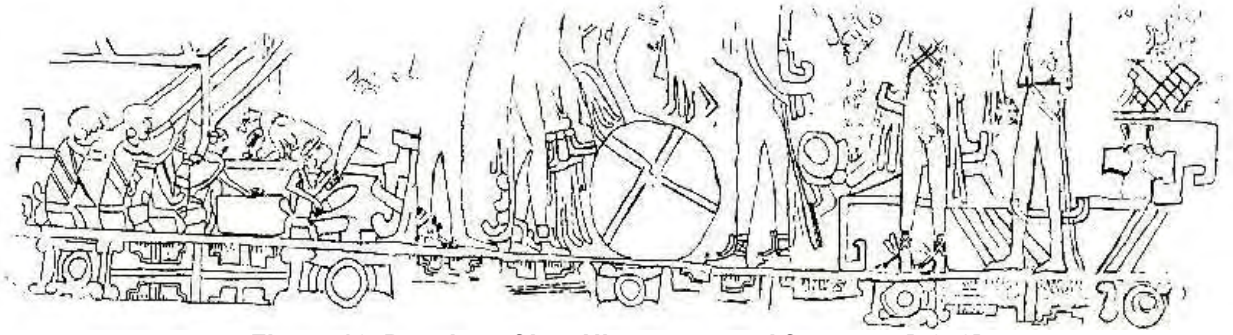
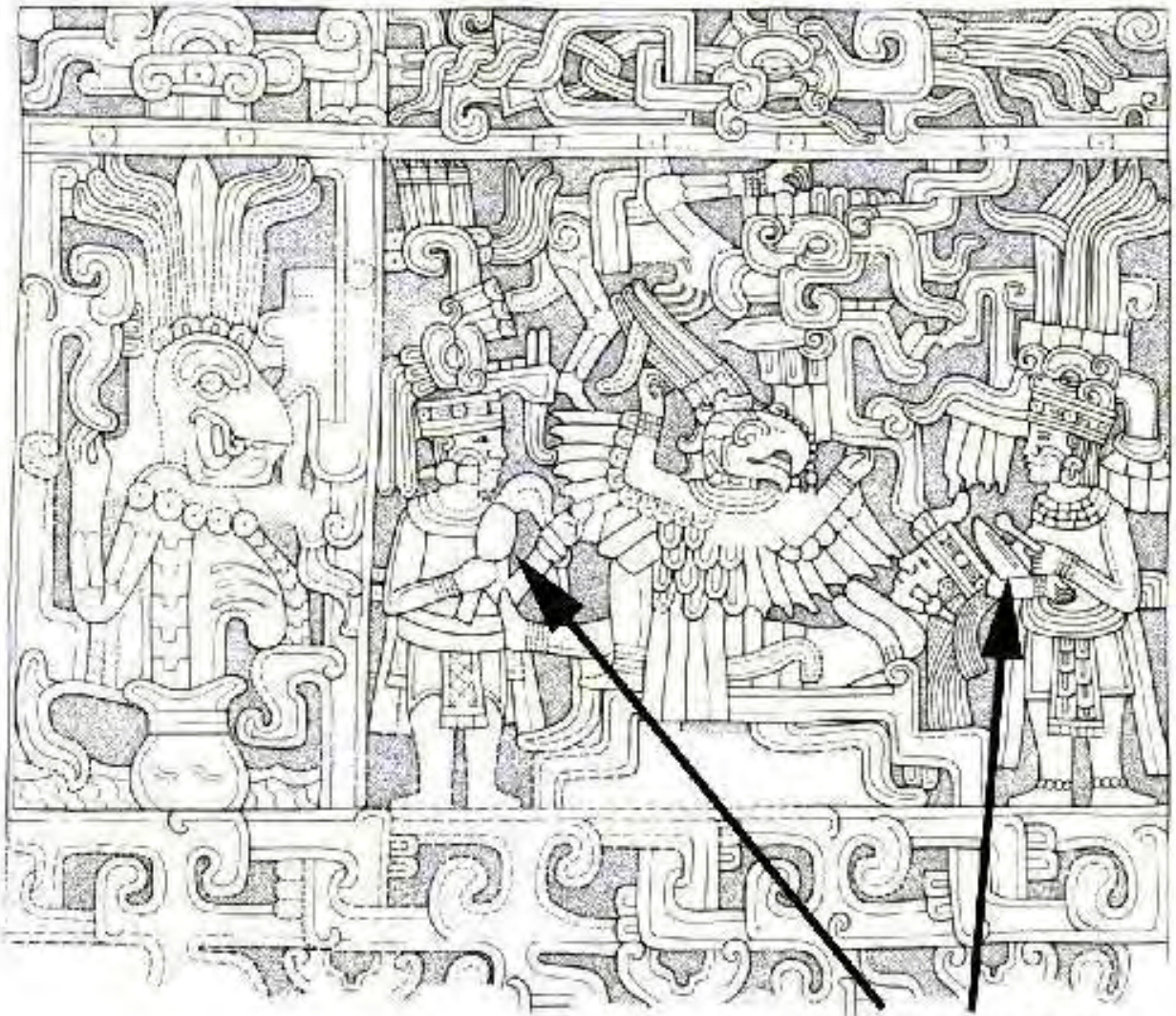


Figure 16. Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4042].



**Instrumentos musicales**

Figure 17. El Tajín South Ballcourt panel 2 (Kampen 1972).

The presence of ballcourt sacrifice scenes, *palmas*, and the Classic Veracruz scroll style can be seen as diagnostic of a North-Central Veracruz culture sphere. The presence of these traits at Las Higueras supplies a context for its regional association and identity.

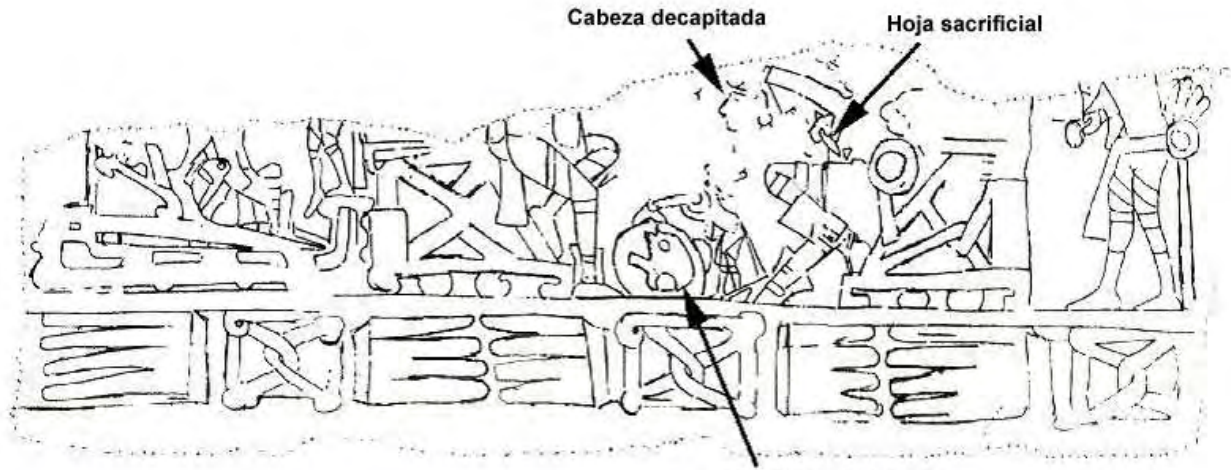


Figure 18. Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4053].

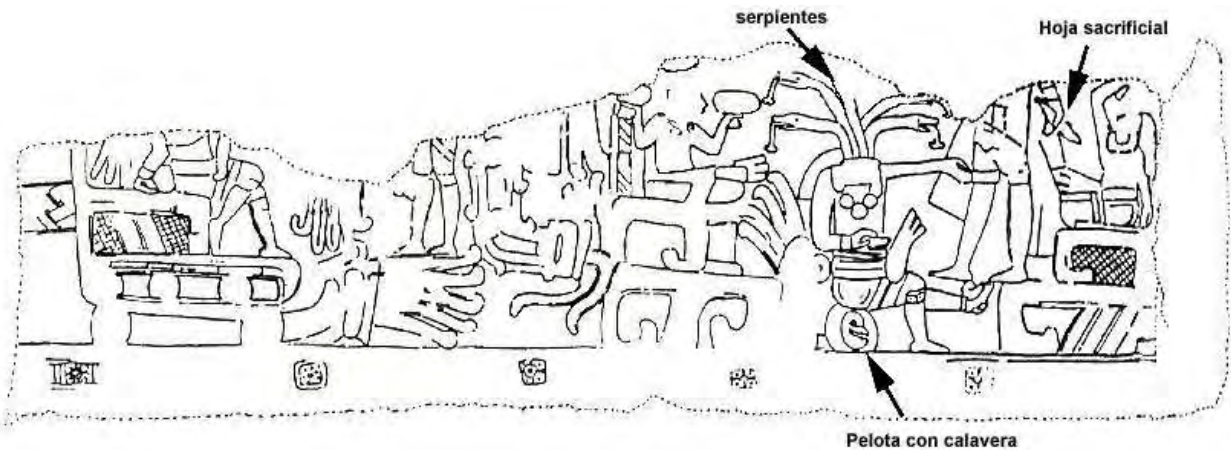
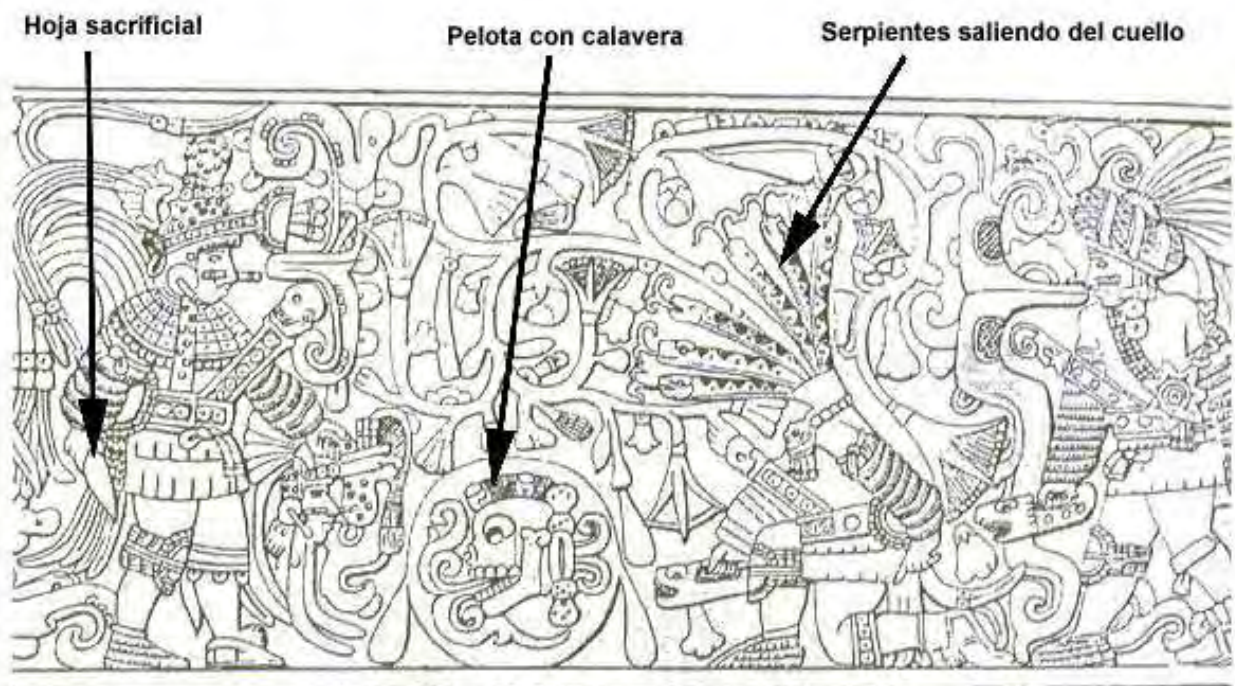


Figure 19. Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4041].

With iconographic and stylistic information gleaned from both Las Higueras and the broader Classic Veracruz region, we might also reconsider what role this region had in influencing the creation, transformation, and exchange of visual culture in Epiclassic Mesoamerica. For example, one of the thorniest problems in Mesoamerican history is our understanding of the connections between Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatán and Tula in Hidalgo. The general consensus in current scholarship that there was a direct relationship between these cities has been based on a model that often excludes evidence of Gulf Coast interaction. By including a mediating category, that of Gulf Coast visual culture, we might affect this debate by drawing attention to the influential

importance of what lay between the two great capitals during the Epiclassic period (c. 800-1100 CE).

Ballgame related iconography is but one type of imagery that demonstrates how features that are traditionally compared between Tula and Chichén Itzá have antecedents in Central Veracruz. For example, Rex Koontz (2000) has shown specific attributes of ballplayer imagery of Ballcourt 1 at Tula to be traceable to El Tajín and Petexbatún sites of the central Maya area, more directly than the usually referenced Chichén Itzá. A more graphic and well-known example is found in a comparison of the ritual ballcourt decapitation scenes depicted on the walls of the Great Ballcourt of Chichén Itzá ([Figure 20](#)). The figure to the left of the skull ball holds a sacrificial blade and the head of a decapitated ballplayer, who at the right kneels with serpents spewing from his severed neck. As we have seen, this imagery has precursors in Late Classic Veracruz at El Tajín, Aparicio, and in the murals of Las Higueras.



**Figure 20. Relief from the Chichén Itzá Great Ballcourt (Ignacio Marquina 1951).**

A comprehensive analysis of the Las Higueras murals and a complete catalogue of my reconstruction drawings will be included in my dissertation. Upon the successful defense and acceptance of the dissertation by the University of Texas at Austin these resources will be supplied in their entirety to the FAMSI archives.

## List of Figures

- [Figure 1](#). Las Higueras Mound 1.
- [Figure 2](#). Proskouriakoff interlaced scroll styles (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 3](#). El Tajín South Ballcourt panel 3 (Kampen 1972).
- [Figure 4](#). Yoke (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 5](#). *Palma* (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 6](#). Human *hacha* (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 7](#). Bird *hacha* (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 8](#). El Tajín relief sculpture (Proskouriakoff 1954).
- [Figure 9](#). Veracruz *palma* distribution shown in shaded area (Sánchez Olvera 1978).
- [Figure 10](#). Las Higueras yoke fragment.
- [Figure 11](#). Las Higueras *palma* fragments (Arellanos 1985).
- [Figure 12](#). El Tajín South Ballcourt panel 4 (Kampen 1972).
- [Figure 13](#). El Tajín Structure 2 Panel (Kampen 1972).
- [Figure 14](#). Ballcourt stela from Aparicio, Veracruz.
- [Figure 15](#). *Palma*.
- [Figure 16](#). Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4042].
- [Figure 17](#). El Tajín South Ballcourt panel 2 (Kampen 1972).
- [Figure 18](#). Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4053].
- [Figure 19](#). Drawing of Las Higueras mural fragment [4041].
- [Figure 20](#). Relief from the Chichén Itzá Great Ballcourt (Ignacio Marquina 1951).

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