

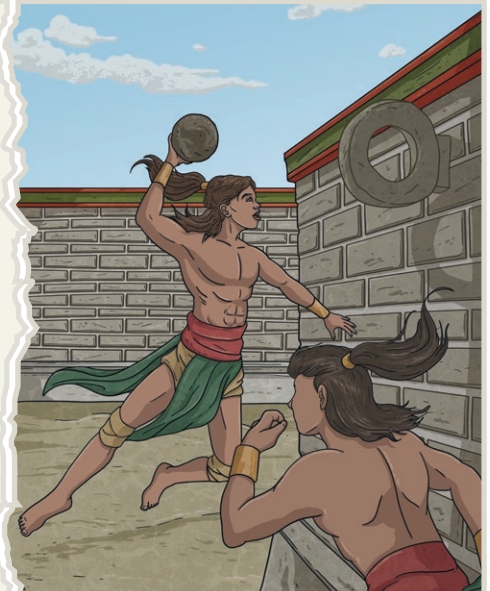
Pok-ta-Pok: Game of the Maya

Pok-ta-pok is a ball game that was first played around 2000 BC by the people of the ancient Maya civilisation. It was played as a celebration or sometimes instead of going to war. The game is still played today and Ek' Balam Poktapok are a team that have won the Pok-ta-Pok World Championship several times.

The Origin of Pok-ta-Pok

The tradition of the pok-ta-pok ball game is described in the Popul Vuh, an important Maya book. It tells many stories of the beliefs of the Maya people, including the story of Maya creation.

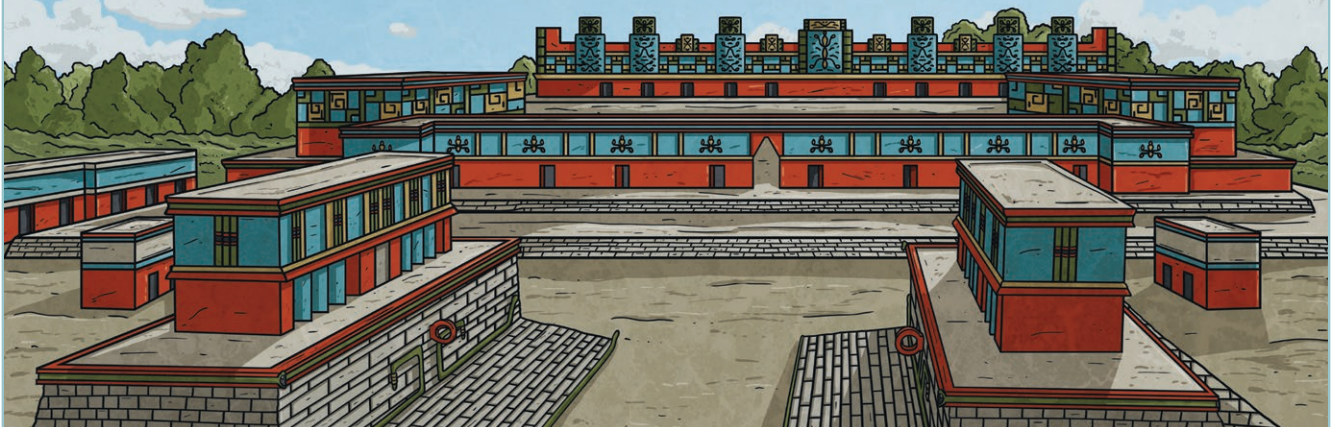
It includes the great myth of the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque. The myth tells us about how, after becoming great ball players, the twins were summoned to a pok-ta-pok game by the Underworld Lords. Maybe you can read the story about the Hero Twins.



Pok-ta-Pok

Pok-ta-pok was played in specially built arenas. At the base of the temple, the ball court was constructed with a sunken shape to represent the underworld. The walls that surrounded the playing area were engraved with figures of Maya gods and demons. Higher up the walls were two stone rings – one on either side of the playing area – that the ball had to pass through.

Priests, governors and other important people would watch the game from the platforms around the arena.



The Pok-ta-Pok Ball

It wasn't just the arena that held special significance for Maya civilisation. The pok-ta-pok ball represented the paths of the Sun, Moon and Venus; these were known as the sacred stars in the sky.

The ball was made of rubber and was quite heavy. It usually measured somewhere between 10 and 30cm in diameter. The weight of the ball ranged from 500 grams to 3.5 kilograms.

To make the ball, Maya people would make a cut in the bark of cau-uchu trees to start the flow of latex. Latex is a form of rubber that comes from some trees. Juice was squeezed from some vines and added to the latex. This would make it tough, strong and very bouncy.



Did You Know...?

Some people believe that the Maya played pok-ta-pok with a skull. This isn't true but it is easy to see why people think this as it is mentioned in the myth of the Hero Twins.

The name pok-ta-pok comes from the rubber ball that the game is played with, as this is the noise that the ball makes as it bounces.

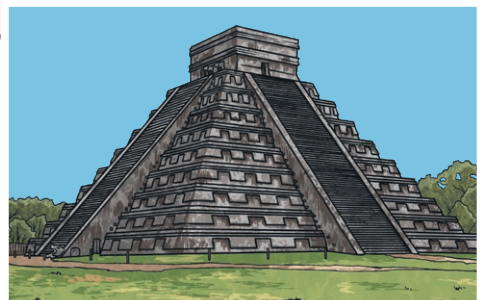
How Was Pok-ta-Pok Played?

Archaeologists can give us some information about how the game might have been played by looking at surviving game courts, clay figurines and paintings of pok-ta-pok ball players that decorate vases.

Pok-ta-pok was played in large courts. The courts had a central flat surface with two large stone walls either side. Each wall had a narrow stone hoop placed on the court wall, often more than 6 metres from the ground. The court was divided into two halves so that each team had a wall and a stone hoop. The teams faced each other across the dividing line.

Did You Know...?

Chichén Itzá in Mexico has the biggest pok-ta-pok court. It is 166m long and 68m wide.



Pok-ta-Pok: Game of the Maya

Many of the Maya ball players wore some kind of body padding and belts to protect them as the ball was hard and heavy. The ball could only be hit with the elbows, hips and knees; the head, hands or feet were never used to hit the ball. In most games, the ball was not allowed to touch the floor. However, in some games the ball would be allowed to bounce only once and a point would be given to the opposing team if the ball bounced twice.

The aim of the game was to get the ball through the stone hoop. It was difficult to get the ball through the hoop so when this happened, that team would be announced the winner and the game would end.

Different trophies were awarded to winning teams. Winning trophies were usually stone carvings.



Myth or Fact?

'The winners or losers of pok-ta-pok were sacrificed.'

Myth: Losing teams were very rarely sacrificed at the end of the Maya game. The only time that this might have happened was when a game of pok-ta-pok was played instead of two cities going to war. When this happened, teams from both cities would play each other instead of fighting. The leader of the losing team might be killed at the end of the game. However, sometimes they were allowed to live if the losing city gave the winning city precious stones or other special goods.

Pok-ta-Pok Game Summary

- The game was played in two teams.
- Each team had between two and six players.
- The ball could only be hit using the knee, hip or elbow.
- The ball must not touch the ground.
- The aim of the game was to make the other team drop the ball and get the ball through your team's stone hoop.
- The game usually ended when a team got their ball through the stone hoop.