

# Guiding Student Investigation of a Miniature Flask for Insight into Mayan Civilization

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Sometime between 1,100 and 1,400 years ago, someone in the Guatemalan lowlands of Central America made a clay flask depicting a ballplayer. A quick observation of the flask shows the player adorned with padding on his hands, torso, and hips. He is also wearing what appears to be a large jaguar headdress. To the left of the player's head are two glyphs (writing) with another glyph appearing on an object that the player is standing over. This object resembles a ball or perhaps some type of animal.

To many students these details might be all they see. Upon closer inspection, however, they offer great insights into Mayan culture. The image of the ballplayer is identical on both sides of the five-and-a-half-inch-tall flask, which indicates that the image was pressed into the clay via a mold or stamp. This may suggest that the flask would have been mass produced rather than a personal, one-of-a-kind, item crafted by a local artisan. The padding shown on the ballplayer would have been worn during the game for protection. If a player had to wear equipment like this, it is reasonable to assume that the game could lead to significant injuries. Such a large headdress may point to the royalty of the player or represent the ruler of the underworld, potentially drawing on the Quiché people's story of creation, as told in the *Popol Vuh*. The meaning of the two glyphs next to the player is currently unknown but could be the player's name or some other identifying marking. The object resembling the ball appears to be a rabbit, again potentially drawing on the *Popol Vuh*. The glyph visible on the object is "9 Naab," which represents the size of the ball, 9 hand spans, used in a game.

An even more in-depth exploration of this primary source can also offer insights into the importance of the image

shown and its potential correlations to the Quiché Mayan creation myth, as recounted in the *Popol Vuh*. A critical scene in the myth describes the Hero Twins being challenged to a ball game by the Lords of Xibalba (the underworld). The quick thinking Twins use a rabbit, instead of the normal rubber ball, to trick and defeat the gods and avenge their father. Having proven themselves in a series of challenges and besting the gods of the underworld in the sacred game, the Twins become the Sun and the Moon. This creation myth was part of an oral tradition passed down through the generations until the mid-1500s when it may have been written down in traditional Mayan hieroglyphic script. Today, the oldest surviving copy was transcribed and translated in the early 1700s by Father Ximénez, a Spanish priest.

Knowing the potential religious correlations between the flask and creation myth can help students understand the importance of the ball game. This "game" was a matter of life and death in Mayan culture and was played by king and commoner alike. Though the exact rules of the ball game are debated and would have varied widely, the number of ancient ball courts discovered throughout Mesoamerica indicates the importance placed on it. Due to the impor-

tance of the ball game and its links to the Hero Twins, it was the subject of various artistic depictions, often on small clay bottles such as the flask featured here, sometimes referred to as "poison bottles."

Many of the flasks like this one are covered in a red pigment—likely being either hematite or cinnabar—and are believed to have contained various substances like medicine, ointments, or a mixture of tobacco and lime snuff. The flasks are generally either medallion shaped or rectangular and have an image or rows of glyphs on them. Although there are more than 174 of these "poison bottles" in the Jay I. Kislak Collection at the Library of Congress, there is still significant mystery around the images, glyphs, and daily use of the flasks.

The mysteries surrounding the flasks are a valuable tool to encourage student engagement and create an interest in Mesoamerican culture. The ballplayer flask can build inquiry on several different levels to facilitate learning at any stage of student understanding based on their prior knowledge and interests. The questions it prompts also provide students the opportunity to seek information through self-guided research instead of a quick Internet-searchable answer. This opportunity for exploration encourages students to form questions based on observations and then to develop and defend their conclusions with evidence found during further research.

Consider starting a unit on Mayan culture by sharing the image of the

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[www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/PreContactWorld/RitualCeremoniesandCelebrations/Assets/object12A\\_t\\_725.jpeg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/PreContactWorld/RitualCeremoniesandCelebrations/Assets/object12A_t_725.jpeg)

Mayan ballplayer flask from the Exploring the Early Americas exhibition of the Library of Congress's Jay I. Kislak Collection.

## Explore the Early Americas with Your Students



*Exploring the Early Americas* is an exhibit at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., that features selections from the more than 3,000 rare maps, documents, paintings, prints, and artifacts that make up the Jay I. Kislak Collection. This ongoing exhibition has a companion website at [www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/), and addresses three major themes:

- “Pre-Contact America”—To learn about the indigenous peoples of the Americas, scholars draw on the rare texts that survived the European encounter, as well as objects used by indigenous peoples. The richest source of pre-Columbian historical information comes from the ancient Maya, who developed the most sophisticated writing system in the Americas. The Maya and other native cultures often embellished their texts with illustrations, recording or carving them on objects of stone, ceramic, wood, and other surfaces. This section of the exhibition draws on select artifacts in the Kislak Collection and presents them as objects that, like books or documents, provide us with information about ceremonies, wars, court life, alliances, astronomy, calendars, and the reigns of kings. Reflecting the strengths of the Kislak Collection, this area deals principally with the pre-contact cultures of Mesoamerica, a territory that includes most of the modern countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, and El Salvador.
- “Explorations and Encounters”—Christopher Columbus’s voyages began a centuries-long series of encounters between peoples of the Americas and Europe. The Kislak Collection includes a selection of dramatic objects and records that reflect this complicated and extraordinary epoch. This section presents materials from the voyages of exploration of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506), Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), and Francisco Pizarro (ca. 1475–1541) and material about the natives of the Americas they encountered. It also features the Conquest of Mexico paintings, created in the seventeenth century, which depict the cataclysmic encounter between Cortés and the conquistadors and Moctezuma and his people.
- “Aftermath of the Encounter”—The encounters between the Americas and Europe altered the civilizations of both deeply and irrevocably. Among the many dramatic changes resulting from the encounters are the three covered in this section. “Language and Religion” documents the efforts of Spanish missionaries to convert natives and to record their languages. “Competition for Empire” reveals how other European powers, and eventually the newly created United States as well, vied for position and control in the Americas. Finally, in “Documenting New Knowledge,” the exhibition examines two disciplines, natural history and geography, in which post-encounter Europe recorded the abundant “New World” information that often challenged the earlier European conceptions and worldview.

Like the Jay I. Kislak Collection itself, the exhibition provides glimpses into the complex and fascinating past of the Americas. It provides insight into indigenous cultures, the drama of the encounters between Native American and European explorers and settlers, and the pivotal changes caused by the meeting of the American and European worlds. The last theme explores the profound growth of knowledge, particularly in natural history and geography, resulting from the encounters. This section includes two extraordinary maps by Martin Waldseemüller created in 1507 and 1516, which depict a world enlarged by the presence of the Western Hemisphere.

If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them, with your students, tell us about your experience! During the last week of February, the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at [blogs.loc.gov/teachers/](https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/) will feature a post tied to this article and we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies.

ballplayer flask with students (see p. 50). It is also available at: [www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/PreContactWorld/RitualCeremoniesandCelebrations/Assets/object12A\\_t\\_725.Jpeg](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/PreContactWorld/RitualCeremoniesandCelebrations/Assets/object12A_t_725.Jpeg)) and invite them to create a list of details they observe using the Library of Congress's Primary Source Analysis Tool available at [www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool/). After a few minutes, encourage students to compare notes with a peer; this will help draw attention to various parts of the flask that may have been missed or overlooked. After students have a chance to talk with a neighbor, open the discussion up further and invite the whole class to speculate about the flask and the game. Invite students to support their speculations with findings directly from the image.

Next, provide the class with a short overview of the Mayan civilization and information about the flask from this article. Then, direct them to the *Exploring the Early Americas* exhibit on the Library of Congress website, [www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/index.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/index.html), for further investigation (see sidebar on p. 51). Consider dividing students into groups to investigate various aspects of the flask and Mayan culture in general. You may wish to:

- Ask students to research the geography of the Mayan Civilization and how such flasks might have been an important item for keeping and maintaining various substances.
- Invite students to investigate what the various religious rituals were and what, if any, role the flasks might have had in the ceremonies.
- Encourage students to find other examples of the Mayan glyphs and attempt to discern their meaning based on contextual clues.

- Look for other examples of the ball game and how it related to society.
- Research the Popol Vuh and other Mayan mythology.

As groups research the Mayan culture, invite students to come back to the original image and attempt to build a narrative around the flask based on their findings. Suggest that students also use other examples from the Kislak collection to further explain the Mayan culture and the role flasks in general might have played in daily life. For a comparison of how the ball game was depicted throughout the Mayan Civilization, consider directing students to the Ballplayer Relief Panel in the Kislak collection, [www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/ritual-ceremonies-and-celebrations.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/ritual-ceremonies-and-celebrations.html).

A possible extension of student research would be to explore the changes in Mesoamerican culture after Europeans arrived in the early 1500s. Using items from the Kislak collection, such as early Spanish maps of various regions, written accounts of both Spanish explorers and native people, and other Library of Congress resources, students will be able to explore the impact of the European arrival to the Americans. With a more complete understanding of the interactions between various groups, students will be able to explain the rapid decline of indigenous civilizations due to the introduction of new diseases, technology, and religious practices. This understanding of rapid changes over a relatively short period of time will also help

students understand why there are so many gaps in knowledge about daily life in Pre-European times in the Americas, and why artifacts like the featured flask are so important.

As students gain a more complete understanding of Mayan civilization, encourage the class to link the flask and their findings to their own daily life. Suggest students consider items that are used in modern society but might mystify archeologists 500 years from now. Direct students to choose an item they use often and write a description of it and its role or impact on society today. Challenge students to fully explain all aspects of the item. For example, if a student chooses to explain the role cell phones play in society, in addition to its use as a communication tool, they would also need to explain electricity, cellular networks, the Internet, and social media. An important component of the activity is understanding that one cannot assume common technology today will be known in the future. Teaching students to critically analyze material and then apply those skills to other aspects of their lives can make them more inquisitive and build an intrinsic motivation to further understand complex topics. 🌐

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