

THE (UNOFFICIAL) HISTORY OF CROQUET: PART 2

The game of croquet originated in ancient Egypt and spread to Europe in the Greco-Roman period during the 1st century BC (see *The Unofficial History of Croquet: Croquet Gazette* - April 2023), but it also developed in other civilizations independent of any contact with European culture, notably in Central and South America and parts of Asia.

However, croquet does not appear to have been played by the general populace in these cultures and was instead reserved for the deity or priesthood. This is particularly notable at Hampi, capital of the 14th century Vijayanagara Empire, situated in modern-day central India. The Crocus Temple, named after its carvings depicting crocus flowers, in the south-east corner of the ancient city, is interesting due to the similarity of its layout to a croquet court. This connection is reinforced by descriptions of its religious ceremonies, in which the priests would follow a prescribed route, passing through six pavilions in the sequence numbered on the plan (Fig. 1), before entering the shrine. The location of the pavilions exactly matches the layout of the hoops in a game of croquet, with the shrine occupying the position of the peg. There is also a description of a longer ceremony in which the procession also passed through the pavilions in reverse before approaching the shrine.

The sequence resulted in either six or twelve pavilions being visited before entering the shrine at the end, which resonates with the importance placed by ancient civilizations on mathematics, and in particular the prime numbers seven and thirteen, which were thought to impart magical powers, hence the association with the deity. The pavilion entrances have architraves resembling croquet hoops (Fig. 2), which are also flanked by figures holding mallets. In fact, croquet was considered to be the game of the gods, as depicted in a carving of Shiva playing croquet in the Brihadishvara Temple in Thanjavur, South India (Fig. 3).

The question of whether croquet developed independently in India or was influenced by contact with ancient cultures in Europe is unresolved, but no such ambiguity surrounds civilizations in the Americas prior to the arrival of Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores in the 16th century.

There is evidence of croquet having been played by the Incas, as indicated by the ceramic bottle depicting a croquet player (Fig. 4), one of several discovered at Machu Picchu in Peru. It is now thought that the central terrace in the 15th century citadel may have been a croquet court, as its dimensions exactly replicate the proportions of croquet courts known to have existed elsewhere in the Americas. However, it is the Zapotec civilization of Central America which displays the best preserved examples of croquet courts, notably the great court at Monte Albán in Oaxaca, central Mexico, which until recently was simply described as a ball court, but is now known to have been dedicated to playing croquet.

This was discovered following the analysis of charcoal found just below the surface, which puzzled archaeologists until the pattern was identified as being that of a croquet court (Fig 5). It is now believed that the hoops and peg were burnt at the end of a game in which priests competed against captives of war, possibly with an inbuilt advantage of heavier mallets such as the one depicted in the figurine from Monte Albán of a seated deity with croquet balls and a hoop completing the ensemble (Fig 6). The court has now been set out showing the position of the hoops and peg.

There seems little doubt that croquet was a game associated with the deity in ancient civilizations and may not have been played outside of the priesthood. However, what does seem to be a common theme is that playing croquet will be available in the afterlife.

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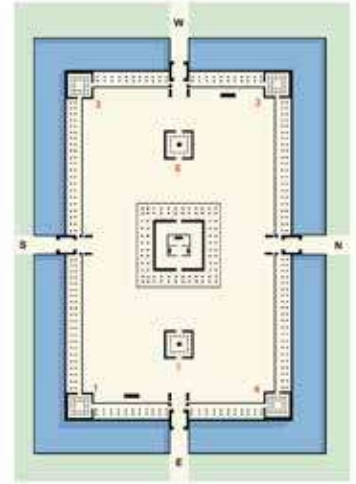


Fig. 1: Crocus Temple Plan - Hampi



Fig 2: Pavilion - Crocus Temple



Fig 3: Shiva - Thanjavur Temple



Fig. 6: Zapotec Figurine



Fig. 5: Croquet Court - Monte Alban



Fig. 4: Inca Figurine