

Implications of Houston's Piece on Maya Ballcourt Alignments

July 31, 2014 (an email sent to four scholars)

John Major Jenkins

I'm sure you've seen the recent post ("[Deathy Sport](#)") by Houston on the Maya Decipherment blog. Exciting stuff, with some simple and clear implications. One is that the lengthwise axes of ballcourts could apparently line up with distant targets. Two is that the tomb-notion in the alignments is congruent with the king's after-death road/entrance to Xibalba, aka, the Dark Rift. Three, the Izapa ballcourt alignment I discovered (Jenkins 1996, 1998, etc) lines up to the December solstice sunrise *below the Dark Rift* during Izapa's heyday 2,000 years ago. Four, some of Houston's examples, such as Chichen Itza and Dos Pilas, point southward to a tomb. And over that southward (or southwestward) horizon the Milky Way with its Dark Rift goes vertical at night in the summer time (during the Classic Period).

I also note Houston's odd belief that the Chichen ballcourt was constructed in the post-Classic 1000s or 1100s; my observations on this are below, in a Facebook post I made to Carl de Borhegyi.

Finally, I note Houston's emphasis (and his belief) in asserting that Wendy Ashmore's 1992 paper that posited a "cosmic template" for ballcourts is not correct. This is probably an anti-astronomy reflex, if not an anti-JMJ reflex. I noted in [my 1995 review of the Placenames paper by Houston and Stuart](#) that they interpreted the mythological placenames and mythological topography in Maya inscriptions (such as the "Black Hole" glyph) as being purely in the religious imaginations of the Maya — and they could not or would not entertain the evidence that the "mythological" placenames alluded to astronomical locations.

So, we see preserved in Houston's recent essay an anti-astronomy (or anti-"cosmic") bias. In actual evident fact (regarding the alignments), it seems more likely that ballcourts could be oriented to both architectural tomb assemblages and a more distant "cosmic template" of congruent meaning — that of the celestial road to the after-death place, aka the Dark Rift. In any case, this is excellent potential progress for the astronomical component of Maya Studies.

My post to Carl de Borhegyi (see the link to my relevant essay at the end):

Carl, I'm so glad you are on to this with Stephen Houston's interesting recent essay on ballcourt alignments. It was odd that he sided with the 11th-century dating of the ballcourt — certainly incorrect. Your Dad clearly had the truth, which many later scholars also agree with — that the Great Ballcourt and the Pyramid of Kukulcan were built after the influx of of Nahuatl people from the west, during the 8th century fall of Teotihuacan. Chichen Itza integrates the two worlds, as we see in the

many portrayals of Captain Sun Disk and Captain Serpent. Also, as I pointed out in my 1998 book *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012*, the Osario (High Priest's Grave, that Houston notes is pointed to by the Great Ballcourt) contains a Long Count date of 10.0.12.8.0 (a June solstice date in 842 AD; Schele & Freidel 1990: 356). That's mid-9th-century, the late Classic Period.

But apart from that, Houston's findings are pretty interesting, not least of which is in regard to my 2012 alignment reconstruction work, which is largely based on the pre-Classic Izapa ballcourt lining up to the December solstice sunrise azimuth, with the Dark Rift (road to the underworld) looming directly over the sunrise. Two thousand years ago, at Izapa, they were separated by 30 degrees, but in 2012 they aligned, aka, the galactic alignment. The ballcourt tomb alignments that Houston lists involve the notion that the king's tomb is his entry road to the Otherworld. And there, at Izapa, we have the ballcourt alignment to the celestial after-death road. Also, most of his ballcourt alignment examples to distance tombs are generally to the south, and during the Classic Period the Dark Rift prominently passed through the southern meridian at midnight right around late May — when the sun was aligned to the opposite Crossroads in Gemini. For more on the tomb-Dark Rift connection, see my essay here: <http://www.thecenterfor2012studies.com/2012center-note16.pdf>