

“THE DEAD ARE FED WITH FRAGRANCE.”†

A study of Maya censers from the Guatemala highlands



by

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ABSTRACT

This study will analyze a collection of Maya ceramic censers collected by Robert Burkitt from the Guatemala highlands during the 1920s. Six censers and one censer lid come from the site of Chipál and one censer comes from the site of Chama. All of these artifacts are currently housed at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The Burkitt censers have never before been analyzed systematically or written about in detail, and only two have been exhibited at the museum. This study will describe the censers and compare them to censers excavated at other Mesoamerican sites. It will explain how the Burkitt censers may have been produced, suggest how they may have been used, and offer an interpretation of their iconography. This study argues that the Burkitt censers – in their use and in their iconography – relate to themes of sacrifice, the underworld, and the crossing of boundaries. A study of these censers thus provides information about concerns common not only to the Maya, but to many other groups – the afterlife and the relationship between the living, the dead, and the divine.

† Title taken from Houston and Taube 2000: 271

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	2
List of Figures and Tables	4
Acknowledgements	5
Chapter One: Introduction	
Censers, incensarios, braziers, braseros, sahumadores, etc	6
Mesoamerican Censers	7
The Guatemala Highlands	8
Robert Burkitt and the Burkitt Collection	10
Previous Work	12
Chapter Two: Descriptions of the Burkitt Censers	
“It is the usual shape of a cheese”	15
NA 11370	16
NA 11442	18
NA 11443	19
NA 11444	21
NA 11537	23
NA 11540	25
NA 11541	27
NA 11235	28
Chapter Three: Censer Production	
Slabs and coils, paint and appliqué	31
Dating the Burkitt Censers	31
Method of Manufacture	32
Manufacture by Specialized Artisans	35
Local Manufacture	38
Chapter Four: Censer Use	
“The old occupant had to make room”	39
The Provenience of Mesoamerican Censers	39
Possible Uses of Mesoamerican Censers	42
The Provenience of the Burkitt Censers	44
Possible Uses of the Burkitt Censers	46

Chapter Five: Censer Iconography	
Sacrifice, the underworld, and the crossing of boundaries	50
Conventions of Censer Iconography.	50
Common Iconographic Themes of Mesoamerican Censers	52
Interpretation of the Burkitt Censers' Iconography	54
Conclusion	60
Bibliography	62

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

- 1.1 Map of Mesoamerica, showing the sites mentioned in the text 9

- 2.1 Front and back view of NA 11370 17
- 2.2 Front and back view of NA 11442 19
- 2.3 Front and back view of NA 11443 20
- 2.4 Front and back view of NA 11444 22
- 2.5 Front and back view of NA 11537 24
- 2.6 Front and back view of NA 11540 26
- 2.7 Front and back view of NA 11541 27
- 2.8 Front and back view of NA 11235 29

- 3.1 Side view of NA 11235, showing the large crack that now runs
down its side 33

- 4.1 Map of the Guatemala highlands, showing the site of Chipál 44
- 4.2 Diagram depicting group F at Chipál 45
- 4.3 Back views of NA 11537 and NA 11235, showing the extent of their
fragmentation. 48

- 5.1 Photograph of the trunk of a young ceiba tree 54
- 5.2 Close-up view of the appliqué ellipses on NA 11537 56

Tables

- 3.1 Measurements of the Burkitt censers 37

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Censers, incensarios, braziers, braseros, sahumadores, etc.

The Maya universe contains three realms – the earth, the sky, and the underworld. The Thirteen Gods of the Upper World rule the thirteen layers of the sky, and the Nine Gods of the Lower World rule the nine layers of the underworld. The sacred tree of life lies at the center of the universe. This tree, a manifestation of the resurrected maize god, supports the sky. The Maya have frequently depicted it as a giant ceiba tree, and have symbolized it as a cross (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 730-731).

Rather than forming three separate, distinct domains, the earth, sky, and underworld form a continuum. The boundaries between the realms are neither fixed nor rigid; rather, they are fluid (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 730-731). The sacred tree of life, for example, connects the three realms. It is the *axis mundi* of the universe– a “life-giving force at the center of the earth that penetrates and unifies all the layers of the world” (Mulryan 2003: 33). The tree thus unites and serves as a passage between the different domains of the universe. In addition, some deities, such as the sun god, regularly traverse the boundaries between these three realms. During the day, the sun god travels from east to west across the sky. At night, however, he merges with one of the principle deities of the underworld, the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and travels from west to east under the earth (Goldstein 1977: 416). The sun thus migrates daily between the earth, sky, and underworld.

The sense of smell was closely related to notions of the afterlife. Both the deities who ruled over the various regions of the universe and the deceased humans inhabiting the

underworld nourished themselves by consuming smells. In the Maya region, and in Mesoamerica in general, the deceased were “fed with fragrance, whether it be in the form of incense, flowers, or the aroma of cooked food” (Houston and Taube 2000: 271). Thus, for both the ancient and modern Maya, censers functioned as receptacles for offering nourishment to deities and to the deceased. They were, in other words, the “kitchen hearths of the gods and ancestors” (Houston and Taube 2000: 271).

Mesoamerican Censers

Ancient societies throughout Mesoamerica used stone or ceramic vessels known variously as censers, incensarios, braziers, braseros, or sahumadores to burn incense and other organic materials. The smoke from burning incense served as a conduit of communication between humans and supernatural forces (Goldstein 1977: 405). Among the Maya, incense was frequently burned as an homage to deities. Many rituals and ceremonies, such as New Year rituals, architectural renewal rituals for temples and pyramids, and offerings to sacred bodies of water, included incense burning (Berlo 1984: 27). The Maya commonly burned copal, the resin of the copal tree, but also the resin, bark, and gum of other plants. They occasionally burned other materials, including corn and blood (Rice 1999: 25-26).

Censers have been found throughout Mesoamerica. They were used not only by the Maya, but by nearly all Mesoamerican societies. They have been found at sites ranging from the Yucatan in the east to the Pacific coast of Guatemala in the west, and from Chiapas in the north to El Salvador and Honduras in the south (Ferree 1972: 1). They date to as early as the Early Preclassic period, and are still used among some groups of modern-day Maya, including the Lacandon in the Chiapas region of Mexico (Berlo 1984: 27; Benyo 1979: 1; Rice 1999: 25). The

surviving Maya codices depict censers; Spanish chronicles from the time of conquest describe their use; and ethnographers have noted their presence among groups of modern-day Maya (Benyo 1979: 1). Prior to the Spanish Conquest, however, the burning of incense is evidenced primarily by excavated censers.

Censers vary in size and shape. Ladle censers can be held in one hand, and the tips of their handles are often shaped into the face of a deity. Pedestal-based censers have two chambers, vents around the bottom of the vessel, and a rim that is wider than its base. They are often more than a foot tall. Cylindrical censers are the largest, heaviest, and most ornate type of censer. They are hollow, with wide flanges on the side and, more often than not, several tiers of elaborate decoration. They frequently reach several feet in height. Other types of censers include three-pronged censers, rim-headed censers, and symmetrical hour-glass shaped censers. Some censers show signs of use, including blackening on their interior, while others appear to have been solely decorative (Benyo 1979: 3-6; Rands and Rands 1959: 225-230).

The Guatemala Highlands

The Burkitt censers were excavated at the sites of Chipál and Chama, located in the northern Guatemala highlands [Fig. 1.1]. The region, which by definition has an elevation of over 800 meters, is ecologically diverse, geologically active, and replete with a variety of natural resources. The climate is temperate – mean annual temperatures range between 59°F and 77°F – and rainfall averages approximately 3,000 millimeters annually. The northern highlands are drained by several rivers flowing south to the Pacific Ocean, northeast to the Gulf of Honduras, and northwest to the Gulf of Campeche. The Chixoy, the main tributary of the Usumacinta River, drains much of the central portion of the northern highlands. The region includes the Alta

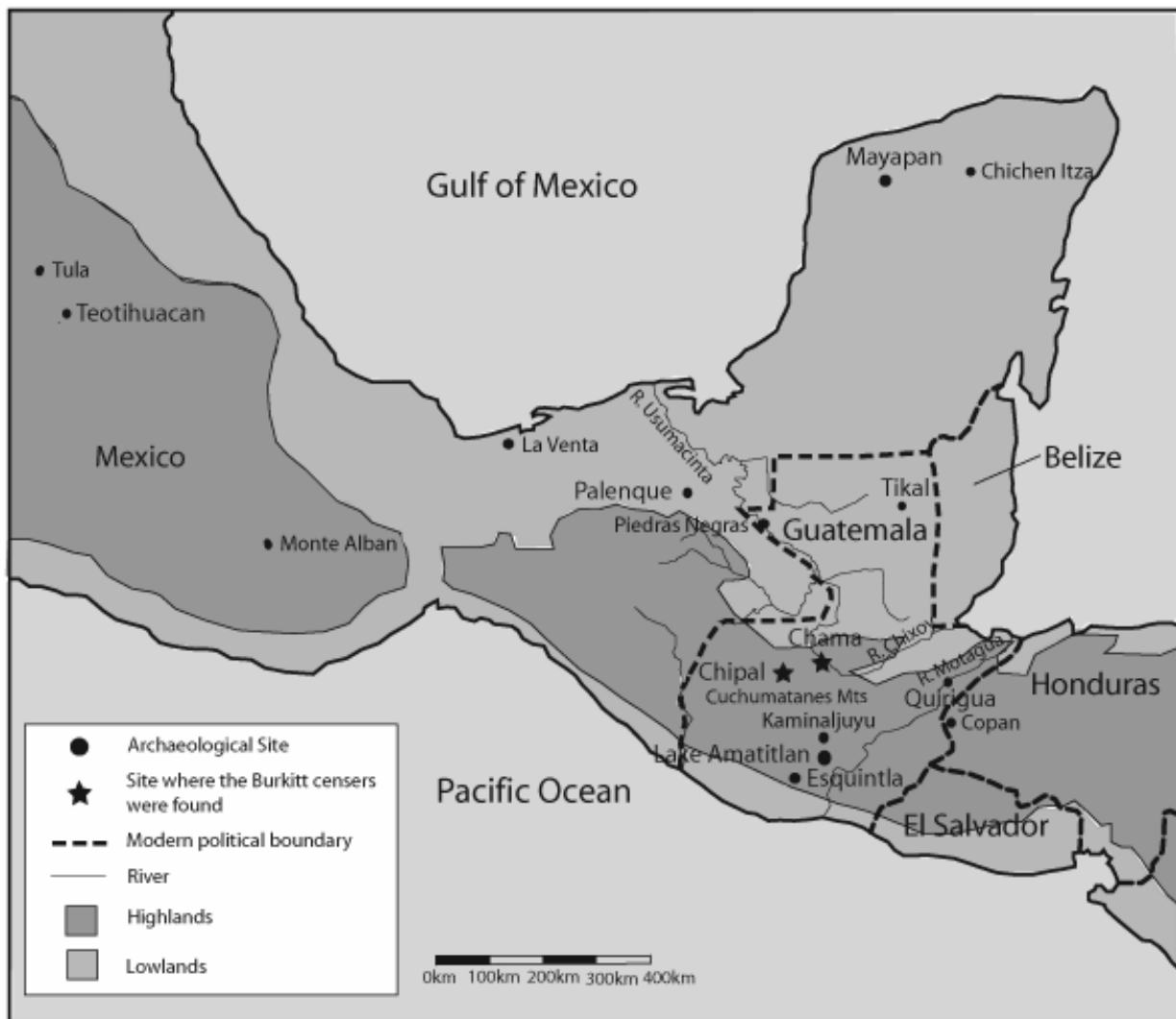


Figure 1.1 Map of Mesoamerica showing the archaeological sites and geographic features mentioned in the text

Verapaz rain forest, which is home to the quetzal, a rare bird with striking blue-green plumage. Quetzal feathers were incorporated into Maya royal headdresses and were a highly valued trade item. Other animals that inhabit the northern highlands include howler monkeys, spider monkeys, coati mundis, bats, owls, and hawks. (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 34-41; Danien 1998: 8-11).

Traditionally, the Maya highlands have received less attention from archaeologists than the lowlands, and much of the region has yet to be explored archaeologically. Prior to World

War II, some amateurs, including Erwin Dieseldorff, did explore the region. They excavated sites and occasionally wrote and published articles describing and analyzing the artifacts they excavated. The number of individuals working the highlands, however, remained low. There were only two major excavations prior to the end of the Second World War – one at Tajumulco in the western part of the Cuchumatanes Mountains, and another at San Agustin Acasaguastlan, on the Motagua River. During this time, Robert Burkitt conducted a series of small excavations at sites throughout the highlands (Danien 1998: 18-24).

After World War II, the Carnegie Institute of Washington began a major excavation of Kaminaljuyu, the largest known site in the southern highlands. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, Pennsylvania State University excavated at Kaminaljuyu, A.L. Smith surveyed the central highlands, Robert Sharer and David Sedat surveyed and excavated Preclassic Period sites in the northern highlands and in the Salama Valley, and the French Archaeological Mission in Guatemala surveyed several sites in the Chixoy Valley. Because of the unstable political situation, however, there have not been any recent long-range, intensive excavations in the highlands (Danien 1998: 18-24).

Robert Burkitt and the Burkitt Collection

The oldest son of a poor Irish cleric, Robert Burkitt was born in Athenry County, Galway, Ireland in 1869. After he turned 14 years old, he moved to Nova Scotia to live with relatives. He attended Dalhousie and Harvard Universities and received a BA in engineering in 1891. Four years later he moved to Guatemala, becoming part of a small group of expatriates, where he engaged in ranching and mining to generate an income. While living in Guatemala, Burkitt devoted his time to learning and cataloguing Maya languages. In 1912, at the behest of

George Byron Gordon, Burkitt began collecting for the University Museum. He received a monthly salary of \$100 plus expenses. Although his primary interest remained linguistics, Burkitt continued collecting for the museum until 1937 (Danien 1985: 26-33; Danien 1998: 29-37).

Prior to beginning his excavations, Burkitt purchased objects from the private collections of his friends in Guatemala, primarily from the Cuchumatanes Mountains in northwestern Guatemala. He recorded a detailed history of each piece he acquired, getting as much information as possible from the donors. After purchasing what he could, Burkitt began to excavate. He worked at over a dozen sites along the Chixoy River in the northern highlands, including Xultun, Chocola, Koopom, Chiwatal, Chama, Chipál, and others. Burkitt died of a stroke in 1945 and was buried in the British Cemetery in Guatemala City. The papers on which he was working were burned, as were his clothing, books and furniture. The letters and fieldnotes that he sent to the University Museum, however, still remain in the institution's archives (Danien 1985: 26-33; Danien 1998: 29-37).

During the twenty-five years that he was employed by the museum, Burkitt purchased and collected over 1,000 archaeological objects, ethnographic artifacts, and skeletal materials, ranging from the Preclassic to the Postclassic periods. Archaeological artifacts include polychrome vessels, ceramic figurines, figurine molds, jade beads, shell beads, carved bones and shell, metates, small stone tools, pyrite mirrors, copper bells, and obsidian knives. Ethnographic objects include textiles, clumps of copal, a model of a Maya house with explicit instructions as to how a full size house would have been built, and a loom with instructions explaining its use (Danien 1985: 26-33; Danien 1998: 29-37). The censers thus form only a small part of the collection.

The Burkitt Collection has remained at the University Museum since it arrived from Guatemala in the 1930s, but has not been well-studied. Few artifacts have been included in museum displays and most have remained unexamined and in storage. The collection has produced only three publications. From his fieldnotes, Burkitt published two articles in the *Museum Journal* in 1930. In the only major study based on the collection, Mary Butler (1935) used the ceramic vessels and figurines Burkitt had collected to establish the pottery sequence for the northern Guatemala highlands. Butler's paper is still referenced by archaeologists working in the Maya highlands. In addition, Elin Danien, a research associate at the University Museum, wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on the polychrome cylinders in the Burkitt collection (Danien 1998).

Previous Work

Many researchers have completed articles, books, and dissertations about Mesoamerican censers. Ferree (1972), Benyo (1979), Berlo (1984), Rands and Rands (1959), and Thompson (1957) have described in detail collections of censers from a single site. These descriptions include information about the size, shape, composition, date, context of discovery, and decoration of the censers, and provide comparative models for the Burkitt censers. Others, including Goldstein (1977) and Rice (1999) have published articles that synthesize information about censers from various places and various time periods.

Three researchers describe censers found at sites in Guatemala. Ferree (1972) discusses the ceramic censers from Tikal. She describes the context in which the censers were found, the circumstance of their use, and the ways in which they were manufactured, including whether they were made by specialists. She also summarizes which aspects of censer production at Tikal changed or remained constant over time. Benyo (1979) provides a similar description of the

censers from Quiriguá. She describes the different typological forms of censers from the site, and analyzes their temporal and spatial distribution. She also discusses the use of incense and incense burners among the Maya.

Berlo (1984) describes censers excavated from the sites of Escuintla and Lake Amatitlan in Guatemala, as well as those from Teotihuacan, a site in central Mexico. Her work includes a detailed description of the censers from the three sites, including information about the contexts in which they were found and the manners in which they were manufactured. Among other subjects, she – like Ferree (1972) – discusses whether the censers were made by specialists, and includes a description of the censers' iconography.

Rands and Rands (1959) describe in detail the censers excavated from the site of Palenque, in the Chiapas region of Mexico. They note the size, shape, and decoration of cylindrical censers. They compare the Palenque censers to those censers excavated from the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala, the region in which the Burkitt censers were found. Similarly, Thomson (1957) presents a description of censers from Mayapan, a site in the Yucatan peninsula, and describes the deities depicted on them.

In addition to these descriptions of collections of censers from specific sites, some researchers, including Goldstein (1977) and Rice (1999) have published articles that synthesize information about censers from different geographic regions and different time periods. These articles provide general information about censers and describe the questions researchers have asked and the conclusions they have reached. In her study, Goldstein (1977) summarizes the historical sequence of development of cylindrical censers in the Maya region. She provides descriptions and interpretations of common iconographic features of Late Classic censers. Similarly, Rice (1999) provides a synthesis of general information about censers and the

substances burned in them, and describes and analyzes Classic Period censers from the Maya lowlands. She describes the major changes in the form and use of lowland censers, the contexts of their discovery, and their symbolism.

CHAPTER TWO: DESCRIPTIONS OF THE BURKITT CENSERS

It is “the usual shape of a cheese.”

The Burkitt collection includes eight complete or nearly complete censers. Although found in fragments, they have been mended and reassembled. Seven censers and one censer lid come from the site of Chipál and one censer comes from the site of Chama [Fig. 1.1]. One of the censers was excavated from the interior of a ruined stone building and three were excavated from burials and graveyards. All but one show evidence of use and several were found with objects in or associated with them, including a burnt corn cob, stone beads, and a human skull.

Although two of the censers are cylindrical in shape, the majority are shape like hyperbolas – cylinders with constricted middles and flaring rims and bases. The censers vary in size. Their height ranges from 15.8 cm to 39.3 cm and their rim diameters from 22.3 cm to 29.2 cm [Table 3.1]. All of the censers were made from different shades of red clay. Seven were made by coiling and one was made from a slab. The most common methods of decoration include attaching pieces of appliqué and incising lines. About half have traces of red, yellow, white, or blue paint.

Each of the censers is unique. There are, however, some common iconographic elements. Four of the eight Burkitt censers have spike-like protrusions on their bodies. Six have vertical flanges and four have horizontal bands. None of the figures depicted on the censers have visible torsos, but each has an open, protruding mouth, and many have thin, contorted limbs. Finally, several of the figures have a mixture of human and non-human features. A single face

may have, for example, a human nose, human ears, and human eyebrows, and non-human eyes, a non-human mouth, and non-human teeth.

NA 11370

Burkitt excavated this censer from a small chamber in the interior of a ruined stone building at the site of Chipál [Fig. 2.1]. Burkitt writes that “the neighbouring [*sic*] Indians used to burn incense” on top of the structure – a structure that had “stairs going up it on all four sides.”¹ The interior “was mainly a mere mass ov [*sic*] stone and earth: but in the middle ov [*sic*] the mass there waz [*sic*] a small masonry chamber.” According to Burkitt, “the jar waz [*sic*] upright, and with its contents, waz [*sic*] the only thing in the chamber.” Those contents included a burnt corn cob, burnt grains of corn, four gray stones, one green stone, and one black stone with white inset eyes. The stones range in size from 2.5 cm to 7 cm.

The censer measures 39.3 cm in height. It has a rim diameter of 26 cm, a base diameter of 22.4 cm, and a minimum diameter of 16.3 cm. Its walls are 2.0 cm thick. The censer is dark red – 2.5 YR 3/6² – and was made by coiling. It is decorated with pieces of appliqué and does not show any evidence of paint or of a slip. The censer exhibits signs of use; its interior is completely blackened and its exterior is partially blackened.

A hyperboloidal vase, the censer is shaped like a cylinder that flares outward at its rim and base, and its height is greater than its maximum diameter. Three raised bands encircle the circumference of the censer – one along the rim, one along the base, and one approximately 13

¹ All quotations in this chapter are from Robert Burkitt’s fieldnotes. According to Danien (1985: 30) “Burkitt’s spelling, always slightly individual, had taken on the idiosyncratic style that would plague typesetters for twenty years.”

² All colors were determined using the Munsell Color Chart.



Figure 2.1 Front and back view of NA 11370

cm from the base, at the point of minimum diameter. The raised bands – each of which has a series of circular indentations – visually divide the censer into two sections. Two vertical, rectangular flanges project from opposite sides of the body of the censer. The most prominent design element, a star-shaped piece of appliqué, is located equidistant from the flanges. Eight points extend from a circular disk; each point is slit down the middle. There are rows of spike-like protrusions between the flanges and the disk. On one side, thirteen protrusions are arranged in one row of six and one row of seven. On the other side, fourteen protrusions are arranged in two rows of seven. One of the protrusions has broken off from the body of the censer. The

bands, flanges, disk, and spike-like protrusions are all pieces of appliqué. There is no decoration on the opposite side of the censer, nor is there decoration anywhere below the raised band at the point of minimum diameter.

NA 11442

Burkitt also excavated this censer at the site of Chipál [Fig. 2.2]. He found it fragmented in six pieces, and part of the base is still missing. The censer has a height of 28 cm, a rim diameter of 28.8 cm, a base diameter of 23.9 cm, and a minimum diameter of 19.9 cm. Its walls are 1.0 cm thick. The censer is red – 2.5 YR 3/6 – and was made by coiling. It is decorated with pieces of appliqué and with incised lines. The censer also has traces of red and yellow paint. The interior of the censer is almost completely blackened, and the exterior is partially blackened.

The censer's body, a hyperboloidal bowl, is shaped like a cylinder that flares outward at its rim and its base, and its height is approximately equal to its maximum diameter. About 7.5 cm from the base, a raised coil encircles the circumference of the censer. Two narrow, vertical flanges project from opposite sides of the bowl. The flanges are not rectangular; rather, each follows the contour of the censer.

Centered between the flanges, the main decorative element includes a complex image composed of several pieces of appliqué. The image includes a face, a headdress, two arms, and two legs. There is no visible torso. The face has exclusively human features – a pair of human eyes with defined irises and pupils; a human nose; an open, human mouth with slightly projecting lips; and human ears that are shaped much like the flanges. Both ears have circular ear spoons. The headdress, which rests directly on top of the face, is composed of a band with



Figure 2.2 Front and back view of NA 11442

seven incised circles and five extensions. Each extension includes two horizontal incised lines and between four and six vertical incised lines. The arms extend horizontally from either side of the face and turn at ninety-degree angles toward the base of the censer. Incised lines represent fingers, and two circles are incised on the left wrist. The legs begin below the flanges and extend upward toward the front of the censer at approximately forty-five degree angles. The legs then curve and extend towards the base of the censer. Incised lines represent toes, and the hands rest on the legs. The legs do not extend beyond the two flanges; the image is thus confined between them. There is no decoration on the opposite side of the censer or below the raise band.

NA 11443

Burkitt found this censer, also from Chipál, split into two pieces [Fig. 2.3]. It has a height of 30.4 cm, a rim diameter of 22.5 cm, a base diameter of 32.6 cm, and a minimum

diameter of 20.5 cm. It is 1 cm thick. The censer is covered with a recently applied black slip. The clay beneath the slip is yellowish red, 5 YR 5/6. The censer is decorated with incised lines and pieces of appliqué. Because of the black slip, it is difficult to determine whether the censer exhibits evidence of use.

A hyperboloidal vase, both the body and the base of the censer are shaped like cylinders that flare outwards at their rim and base, and its height is greater than its maximum diameter. Two pairs of narrow, vertical flanges protrude from opposite sides of the censer. Each extends from just below the rim to just above the top of the base. There are sixty-five spike-like protrusions, many of which are arranged in rows. There is one row of six protrusions between each pair of flanges; eight protrusions behind one of the pairs of flanges; and forty-five



Figure 2.3 Front and back view of NA11443

protrusions between the two pairs of flanges. One has broken off from the body of the censer. There are no protrusions on the lower portion of the vase.

The most prominent design element is a complex appliqué figure with a face, two arms, and two legs. The face includes a round, open mouth, a nose with two round nostrils, and two open eyes. There are small bulges above each eye, and the area around the nose and eyes is elevated. There are four ears. The lower ears are round and have incised, circular ear spoons. The higher ears are rectangular rather than circular, and do not have ear spoons. An incised line runs across the forehead and a small triangular shape protrudes from the top of the head. A hole runs through the side of the head where it joins the body of the censer. Curved arms project from the side of the face, and incised lines represent fingers. The figure does not have a visible torso. Like the arms, the legs – located below the face and between the arms – curve as if the figure is in a seated position, and incised lines represent toes. One of the legs has broken off from the body of the censer.

NA 11444

Also found at Chipál, this censer measures 20.9 cm in height, has a rim diameter of 22.3 cm, a base diameter of 25.6 cm, and a minimum diameter of 14.5 cm [Fig. 2.4]. It is 0.8 cm thick. The censer is yellowish red – 5 YR 4/6 – was made by coiling, and was decorated with pieces of appliqué. There is no evidence of a slip, but traces of white and blue paint remain. The interior of the censer is completely blackened.

A hyperboloidal bowl, the censer has a body and base shaped like cylinders that flare outwards at their rim. Its rim diameter is greater than its height. The censer has one flange that protrudes from the side opposite the main design element. There is one column of three spike-



Figure 2.4 Front and back view of NA 11444

like protrusions on either side of the flange. There are fourteen spike-like protrusions on the opposite side of the censer. These protrusions surround the main design element – an appliqué figure with a head and two arms. The head has an open mouth with slightly protruding lips, a protruding nose, and two human eyes with eyelids. The eyes appear to be only partially open. Two non-human ears sit on the top of the head. The ears are shaped like curved triangles, and each has an incised circle in the center. A series of globular protrusions line the top half of the outside of the face. Three flat ellipses extend at varying angles from the bottom of the head. Long, slender arms – which connect to either side of the head – curve, extending outward and then inward. At the end of each arms, a series of incised lines represent fingers. The figure has neither visible legs nor a visible torso.

NA 11537

Burkitt excavated this censer from a grave yard at Chipál [Fig. 2.5]. The grave yard, about 12 square meters, was separated by “an almost imperceptible line of stones.” It “had the remains of a thin plaster floor, a couple of decimeters below the present surfaces: the things I send you were associated with disturbed bones.” Burkitt writes that “nearly everything is from known diggings, either my own, or made at my direction. Those diggings were nearly all in burial grounds: and whether the ancient burial ground spreads into a yard . . . or rises into a mound, the burials are nearly always much disturbed.” He continues. “The consequence of all that disturbance, is that bones and pottery, and everything breakable, is usually found broken.” In fact, Burkitt did not find a single undisturbed burial at the site. Rather, “derelict graves were the Chipál rule.”

Burkitt suggests that representative re-burials may explain the abundant empty and disturbed graves. He writes that,

Its possible there is a hint of the truth in an other Chipál curiosity. There would seem plainly to have been such a thing as merely representative burial. Here and there you find a diminutive burial pot, containing, if it contains any thing, a handful of bones or a skull, with perhaps a bead or two . . . And the representative burial might sometimes seem to be re-burial: re-burial in a collapst [*sic*] form, and in a new place: – which would perhaps be an explanation of some original graves being empty.

This censer may have contained such a re-burial. It appears to have been used as a reduced burial pot. Although it was found in 27 pieces, the associated skull and other human bones were probably contained in the censer. Burkitt writes that, “possibly they were the relics (I amused myself by fancying) of a victim tormented according to the torment signified by the figure on the jar.”

The censer measures 37.0 cm tall and its walls are 1.0 cm thick. It has a rim diameter of 29.2 cm, a base diameter of 23.9 cm, and a minimum diameter of 19.6 cm. It is red – 2.5 YR 5/8 – and was made by coiling. It was decorated with pieces of appliqué, and was neither painted nor slipped. It has evidence of use; both the interior and the exterior are partially blackened.



Figure 2.5 Front and back view of NA 11537

A hyperboloidal vase, the censer is shaped like a cylinder that flares outward at its rim and its base, and its height is greater than its maximum diameter. Two flanges protrude from opposite sides of the censer. One row of five spike-like protrusions is located in front of each flange. An appliqué figure dominates the censer. It includes a head, two arms, two legs, and a circular disk. The head includes an open mouth with protruding lips; a human nose; a pair of large, round, ears, a pair of only partially open human eyes, and a pair of human eyebrows. On

either side of the face, a thick line extends from the bridge of the nose to the cheek, where it curves to form a circle, and a ridge runs vertically down the center of the forehead. A headdress rests directly on top of the forehead. It consists of a fifteen identical elements shaped like the panels of a picket fence. Three long, slender pieces of clay with depressed centers extend from either ear. The arms originate below the head. They curve outward and then inward before the hands come to rest on the knees. One hand is open; the other is balled into a fist. Circles are incised around both of the figure's wrists. A series of appliqué ellipses cover both arms and the hand formed into a fist. There are two rows on ellipses each arm. Although the figure has no torso, there is a circular disk between the arms and the legs. The legs, bent at the knees as if the figure is in a sitting position, protrude from the censer, and incised lines represent toes.

NA 11540

Burkitt excavated this censer from mound I of group F at Chipál [Fig. 2.6]. According to his field notes, "that hill of F, is a round steep rocky hill, that you have to use your hands in climbing. But it has a little flat top: which is the place of the ruins, and barely holds them." At group F, he found three square mounds, two of which contained burial chambers. Mound I was between 2m and 3m high. Burkitt found this censer upright with "its lid [NA 11541] still visibly on the pot, but both much broken." The censer was found in at least 56 pieces. It measures 15.8 cm high. It has a rim diameter of 24.1 cm and a base diameter of 21.8 cm. Its walls are 2.0 cm thick. It is red – 2.5 YR 4/6 – was made by coiling, and decorated with pieces of appliqué and incised lines. There is no evidence of a slip, but traces of red, yellow, and white paint remain. The censer exhibits evidence of use. Its interior is completely blackened and its exterior is partially blacked. Three objects were found inside of the censer: a small, poorly made stone



Figure 2.6 Front and back view of NA 11540

bead, a small, poorly made stone ax head measuring 5.5 cm long, and a 14 cm long flint spear head.

A cylindrical bowl, the censer has a body shaped like a cylinder and a maximum diameter that is slightly greater than its height. Burkitt described the shape of the censer as “the usual shape of a cheese.” Two raised bands with a series of elliptical indentations encircle the circumference of the bowl – one at the base and one approximately 4.5 cm from the base. The bowl has three small, thick “c” shaped handles spaced equidistantly around the rim. The main design element is a face with a mixture of human and nonhuman features. The bottom of the face rests on top of the higher raised band. There is a human nose, a pair of human ears with large, circular pendants, and a pair of large, thick, human eyebrows. Neither the mouth nor the eyes are human. The mouth is open and has slightly protruding lips. Four teeth are visible in the mouth, including two large upper canines. An “s” shaped piece of appliqué extends from either corner of the mouth. The area between the top of the mouth and the bottom of the face is slightly raised. The eyes – which are depicted by incised lines rather than appliqué – are large, almost

perfectly round, and have incised, non-human pupils. There is no decoration between the raised bands or on the opposite side of the censer.

NA 11541

Although fragmented, this lid was found resting on top of NA 11540 [Fig. 2.7]. The lid is 19.2 cm high and has a base diameter of 24.3 cm. It is 2.5 cm thick. The censer is red – 2.5 YR 5/6 – was made by coiling, and traces of red, yellow, and white paint remain. One side of the lid is blackened. It is unlikely that this lid was used with NA 11540. They are stylistically different and were made from slightly different colors of clay. In addition, because one side of the lid is blackened, it was probably used on top of a censer that had openings in its base to allow smoke to rise up and blacken the outside of the vessel.



Figure 2.7 Front and side view of NA 11541

Near its base, the lid has two “c” shaped handles. A raised band with circular indentations encircles the circumference of the lid. The lid depicts a double-headed feline. The heads are nearly identical. Both have a nose and a pair of ears shaped like rounded triangles, which sit on top of the head. The oval shaped eyes have hollow pupils and well-defined sockets and irises. The rectangular shaped open mouth reveals a row of upper and lower teeth. A pair of upper and lower canines protrudes prominently from either side of the mouth. A necklace or collar runs below both faces. It is composed of one repeating element – a rectangle with a small, upside-down triangle removed from the bottom. On one side of the lid, a globular pendant protrudes from the center of the necklace. This pendant is the only substantial difference between the two feline heads.

NA 11235

Burkitt excavated this censer from the site of Chama [Fig 2.8]. He found it broken and scattered in many pieces. It measures 36.5 cm high, has a diameter of 26.3 cm, and is 1.1 cm thick. The clay is light red – 2.5 YR 6/6. Unlike the other censers in this study, NA 11235 was not made by coiling. Rather, it was made from a slab. There is a large, visible crack down one side of the censer where the slab was joined. It was decorated using appliqué and incised lines. It is also unique in that it does not exhibit evidence of use. It is not blackened on either the interior or the exterior. It may thus have been decorative rather than functional, or it may have served as a pedestal for a receptacle in which incense was burned.

NA 11235 is an open, flanged cylinder, and its height is greater than its maximum diameter. The flanges, located on opposite side of the body, are symmetrical. Each has six vertically arranged components. The two closest to the base are undecorated rectangles of

different sizes. The next component consists of a large circle with four small, spherically-shaped protrusions, and a small circle incised in its center. Another undecorated rectangle sits above the circle, and a spiral-shaped element sits on top of the rectangle. On both flanges, the top part of the highest element has broken off. That element, however, appears to have been a circle with spherically shaped protrusions and another circle incised near its edge.



Figure 2.8 Front and back view of NA11235

The body of the censer has two tiers of decoration. The lower – and larger – tier depicts a non-human face. Burkitt writes that, “Az [*sic*] for the face, the eaziest [*sic*] thing to say about it, iz [*sic*] that it iz [*sic*] ugly.” The face includes two round, incised eyes with clearly defined, incised pupils. A line slit down the middle runs below one eye, loops at the bridge of the nose, and runs below the other eye. The nose itself has broken off from the censer. Below the nose, two “s” shaped elements extend from the corners of an open mouth. A piece of appliqué extends from the open, protruding lips. Small, globular ovals run vertically along either side of the face.

At the top of the censer, centered between the two flanges, small, spherical protrusions form an oval. A piece of appliqué projects from the center of the oval. To one side of that oval there is a similar design – an oval outlined by small spherical projection with a piece of appliqué protruding from its center. Two pieces of appliqué project outward and attach to each other. There are incised spirals on either side of these projections. The spirals mimic the shape of the eyes. A horizontal band runs between the bottom of the spirals and the top of the loop that runs above the main figure's nose. Rectangular shaped elements run the length of the band, and there are two, spiral-shaped elements near its center.

CHAPTER THREE: CENSER PRODUCTION

Slabs and coils, paint and appliqué

A close examination of the Burkitt censers reveals information about their production and manufacture. By measuring the censers, observing their physical properties, and comparing them with censers excavated from other sites, one can hypothesize when the censers were made, how they were made, whether they were made by specialists, and whether they were made locally. This study concludes that, although there appears to have been a standardized method of manufacturing censers at the site of Chipál, it is unlikely that those censers were manufactured by specialists in a workshop dedicated solely to the production of censers.

Dating the Burkitt Censers

Goldstein (1979: 407-412) traces the general change in form of Maya censers through time, from the early Preclassic Period to the present. In the Preclassic Period (900 BCE to 300 CE), the most abundant type of censer was the pronged cylindrical censer – “tall, open cylinders crowned with three prongs” (Goldstein 1979: 409). In the Early Classic Period (300 CE to 600 CE), censers lost their prongs and became less complex in shape and in decoration. Both the artifacts and the rituals in which they were used may have become less popular during this period. In the Late Classic Period (600 CE to 900 CE), however, censers again became more complex, “reaching the high point of an artistic and ritualistic tradition” (Goldstein 1979: 412). Although they still lacked prongs, the bodies became taller, the flanges wider, and the decoration more complex. “The number of tiered figures increased from the Preclassic maximum of two to

a maximum of seven, and the flanges were enriched with additional symbols” (Goldstein 1979: 409). In the Postclassic Period (900 CE to 1521 CE), Maya potters continued to make relatively tall censers. The decoration, however, became less complex, and the flanges narrower. In addition, “the tiered mythological figures telescoped into a single image” (Goldstein 1979: 409). Finally, in the Postconquest period, from 1521 to the present, censers decreased in size. The flanges disappeared and the decorative figures were less detailed and less deeply modeled.

This typology provides a general – although admittedly problematic – means by which to date the Burkitt censers. A typology created to describe the change in form of a category of artifacts over broad region may not accurately reflect that change at a specific site. Nevertheless, it does provide some clues as to the possible time periods in which the censers may have been manufactured and used.

Based on Goldstein’s typology, the censer from Chama, NA 11235, probably dates to the Late Classic Period, and the censers from Chipál most likely date to the Postclassic Period. NA 11235 is relatively tall – 36.5 cm – has wide flanges, and a complex decorative motif. Both the body and the flanges have several tiers of decoration. The other censers, by contrast, correspond more closely to Goldstein’s description of censers dating to the Postclassic Period (1979: 407-412). They vary in height – some are taller than NA 11235 and others are significantly shorter – the flanges are narrow and lack decoration, and the overall decoration is less complex. None of the censers from Chipál has tiers of decoration. Rather, each depicts only one figure.

Method of Manufacture

The potters who created the Burkitt censers formed the bodies of the vessels either from a slab or by coiling. In slab building, also called slab modeling or segmental modeling, the potter

constructs a vessel by shaping a flat piece of clay. The vessel "is constructed from one or more slabs of clay that are rolled or patted flat and then joined into the desired shape" (Rice 1987: 125). This method is most frequently used for creating rectangular, cylindrical, or extremely large vessels (Rice 1987: 124-125). The one censer from Chama, NA 11235, was made from a slab. A rectangular piece of clay was shaped to form an open cylinder. A large crack now runs down the length of one side of the censer where the edges of the slab were joined [Fig. 3.1].



Figure 3.1 Side view of NA 11235 showing the large crack that now runs down the length of one side of the censer. This crack suggests that the censer was formed by slab modeling

Coiling is the other method by which the potters formed the bodies of the Burkitt censers. There are three variants of coiling: ring building, segmental coiling, and spiral coiling. In each, the potter first forms coils of clay by "squeezing or rolling the clay into long ropes or fillets whose diameter is usually two to three times the intended thickness of the vessel. Successive coils are applied to the exposed edge of the vessel wall . . . and pinched to make a firm join" (Rice 1987: 127). In ring building, coils of clay – each measuring

the circumference of the vessel – are laid on top of each other. Segmental coiling is similar to ring building, except that each coil is composed of several segments. In spiral coiling, rather than using a series of coils, the potter constructs the vessel from one continuous coil. Regardless

of which variant is used, the coils are usually smoothed together to create a flat surface (Rice 1987: 124-128). All of the censers from Chipál were made by coiling, and were probably made by ring building. On each of the censers, one can see sections – often on their interiors – in which the coils were not completely smoothed. The coils used to form the vessel are thus still visible.

To decorate the censers, the potters displaced clay from, painted, and added clay to, their surfaces. Incising, defined as "cutting lines into the surface of a vessel with a pointed implement," was a common decorative technique (Rice 1987: 146). Potters also decorated the censers by painting them; five of the Burkitt censers have traces of red, yellow, white, or blue paint. By far the most prominent technique used to decorate the Burkitt censers, however, was attaching pieces of appliqué. Appliqués – shaped pieces of clay attached to the surface of a vessel – can be small or large, simple or complex, decorative or functional. Common types of appliqué include fillets, pellets, spike-like protrusions, flanges, legs, and handles (Rice 1987: 148). The Burkitt censers were decorated with many different types of appliqué, including spike-like protrusions, flanges, handles, horizontal bands, complex geometric designs, figures with animal and human features, and representations of deities.³

Berlo (1984: 33-35) describes two different ways in which potters at Teotihuacan attached appliqués to the body of the censers. In one, the appliqué was attached to the body before firing, and the entire censer was fired simultaneously. In the other, an adhesive substance was used to attach already fired pieces of appliqué to an already fired body. In other words, "the incensario skeleton was assembled and fired, individual mold-made adornos were fired, and then the adornos were affixed to the incensario framework by means of a lime-stucco 'glue'" (Berlo

³ See chapter two for a detailed description of each censer

1984: 33-34). Some censers from Teotihuacan still have remnants of that glue. On several of the Burkitt censers, pieces of appliqué have fallen off of the body. Because neither the detached pieces nor the bodies of the censers contain evidence of adhesive substances, it is unlikely that the pieces of appliqué were applied after the body of the censer had been fired. Rather, the censers were likely assembled and fired in one piece.

It appears that all of the censers from Chipál were made in a similar manner. Each was made by coiling; each was decorated with pieces of appliqué; and most were painted. In addition, each censer was assembled and fired in one piece. There may thus have been a relatively standardized method of manufacturing censers at Chipál.

Manufacture by Specialized Artisans

Although, at Chipál, a standardized method of manufacturing censers may have existed, it is unlikely that those censers were made by specialized artisans in a workshop dedicated specifically to the production of censers. Ferree (1972: 11-13) argues that the Late Classic period censers excavated from Tikal were made by specialists. According to Ferree,

the design and workmanship evident in censers of the Late Classic Effigy Group was beyond the skill of most potters . . . The manufacture of Late Classic censers required potters who were trained in the construction and assembly of their complex shapes, who were fully conversant with the requisite iconography, and . . . who were practiced in the ceremonies that accompanied the work . . . such potters must have been relatively few (1972: 11-12).

The potters who created the Burkitt censers may have been knowledgeable about censer iconography and may have participated in ceremonies involving censers. Those potters, however, do not appear to have possessed exceptional skill. Unlike the Late Classic Period

censers from Tikal, the Burkitt censers vary in their quality of construction, and some were poorly made. Several of the bodies are unevenly shaped and many of the designs are crudely formed. NA 11537, for example, is 36.7 cm high on one side, and 37.3 cm high on the other, and the rim diameter of NA 11442 varies between 29.7 cm and 28.5 cm. Although some of the appliqué figures are well-formed, others are quite crude. On NA 11537, for example, the limbs on the right side of the figure are shorter than those on the left side. On several figures, including NA 11442, fingers and toes are suggested by roughly incised lines at the ends of arms and legs. And, horizontal bands, including those on NA 11370 and NA 11442, are neither straight nor completely parallel with the rim or base of the body. In addition, pieces of appliqué have fallen off the bodies of several censers, including NA 11370 and NA 11443, implying that they may not have been securely attached. These imperfections suggest that the Burkitt censers are unlikely to have been made by highly trained artisans.

One would expect that ceramics created in a specialized workshop – like those created at Teotihuacan – would have had standard sizes or standard proportions. It is reasonable to assume that they would have been made from the same type and color of clay, and that they would have similar if not uniform designs. The Burkitt censers, however, have none of these characteristics. No two censers have similar dimensions. Rather, all vary in both size and proportion [See Table 3.1]. Heights range from 15.8 cm to 39.3 cm, and base diameters from 21.8 cm to 32.6 cm. Nor is there a common height to base diameter ratio; rather, that ratio varies from 0.73 to 1.75. In addition, although each of the censers was made from reddish colored clay, each is a slightly different shade of red. Only two of the eight censers – NA 11442 and NA 11540 – were made from clay of exactly the same color.

Catalogue Number	Height (cm)	Rim Diameter (cm)	Base Diameter (cm)	Ratio of Height to Base Diameter
NA 11235	36.5	26.3	26.3	1.386
NA 11370	39.3	26.0	22.4	1.753
NA 11442	28.0	28.8	23.9	1.171
NA 11443	30.4	22.5	32.6	0.931
NA 11444	20.9	22.3	25.6	0.819
NA 11537	37.0	29.2	23.9	1.549
NA 11540	15.8	24.1	21.8	0.726

Table 3.1 Measurements of the Burkitt censers. NA 11541 is excluded because it is a censer lid.

Not only do the Burkitt censers vary in size, shape, and color, but they also vary in decoration. Some iconographic elements – such as vertical flanges and spike-like protrusions – appear on most of the Burkitt censers. Those elements, however, characterize Mesoamerican censers in general. More importantly, although some of the Burkitt censers resemble each other, none are identical. Even the two censers that arguably are the most similar – NA 11443 and NA 11444 – have substantial differences. Both depict figures with similar faces and similar curved arms. One figure, however, includes a set of legs, and the other does not. One censer includes two sets of vertical flanges on opposite sides of its body, and the other has a single flange in the back. Even the arms of the two figures differ from each other. One pair is realistic, and the other unnaturally long.

Berlo (1984: 52-56) argues that the censers excavated from Teotihuacan were manufactured in a workshop dedicated solely to the production of censers. According to Berlo (1984: 52), "it probably was in the manufacture of censers that Teotihuacan artists first applied principles of mass-production to art objects." Those principles included "(1) assembly line

production, (2) use of interchangeable component parts, (3) use of molds for repeating details, and (4) specialization of both routine and skilled jobs for greater volume of production” (Berlo 1984: 52-53). Unlike the censers from Teotihuacan, the Burkitt censers do not evidence the principles of mass-production. Because of their variation, they were unlikely to have been made on an assembly line. They do not have interchangeable parts. And, as argued above, the potters who created the censers were probably not specialized artisans.

Local Manufacture

Although it is possible to hypothesize how the censers were produced and whether they were manufactured by specialists, it is difficult to determine where the censers were made. Were they made locally at the sites of Chama and Chipál, or were they were made elsewhere and later imported to those sites? Ferree (1972: 12) describes a possible censer workshop at Tikal. At Chama and Chipál, however, no evidence exists for the presence or for the absence of ceramic workshops. It would not be surprising, however, if the Burkitt censers were manufactured at sites in or near the Guatemala highlands. Their form and iconography are similar to those of censers excavated at other highland sites, such as Lake Amatitlan and Escuintla, and are different from those of censers excavated at sites further away, such as Teotihuacan (Berlo 1984: 56-71, 93-120, 154-166).⁴

⁴ See chapter five for an in-depth discussion of censer iconography.

CHAPTER FOUR: CENSER USE

“The old occupant had to make room.”

Members of all classes of Maya society participated in a variety of rituals as part of their daily lives. Many of those rituals included burning offerings – such as food, flowers, and incense – as a means to petition deities and to nourish the deceased (Sharer and Traxler 2006: 745). It is difficult to determine precisely how members of Mesoamerican societies used censers in these rituals. Which members of the community, for example, used them? Was their use gender specific? When were they used? Were they used at particular times of the year or at particular times of the day? And, how frequently were they used? Were they used regularly or only sporadically?

It is possible, however, to glean some information about the use of the Burkitt censers by observing them, by analyzing their provenience, and by comparing them to censers excavated from other sites. This chapter will describe the provenience of censers excavated from various sites in Mesoamerica and consider how those censers may have been used. It will describe the provenience of the Burkitt censers, and will examine any evidence of use. Finally, it will suggest ways in which the Burkitt censers may have been used.

The Provenience of Mesoamerican Censers

At sites throughout Mesoamerica, censers have been found in association with public religious architecture, such as temples, in domestic contexts, including the patios of apartment compounds, and in burials and caches. The censers excavated at Mayapan, for example, were

found almost exclusively in association with buildings identified as pyramids or at the bases of altars or shrines. In fact, “one, though not the only, reason for classifying such structures as shrines is precisely that huge quantities of sherds of incense burners are often found in their vicinity” (Thompson 1957: 600). Similarly, at Palenque, the use of censers appears to have been restricted to areas near temples. According to Rands and Rands (1959: 233), censers were “generally associated with temple architecture – pyramid platforms and superstructures – to their near exclusion in . . . general digging.” In other words, “incensario fragments of any sort were rarely found away from the ceremonial structures.” Censers were found within the pyramid of the Foliated Cross, in the area directly behind the pyramid of the Foliated Cross, and in the area directly behind the pyramid of Inscriptions (Rands and Rands 1959: 223).

At Teotihuacan, censers were most frequently found in burials, in caches, and on stone altars. Those censers excavated from burials were found in association with both whole and cremated human bones, as well as with the bones of deer, eagle, coyote, and pelican. Some of the burials were quite elaborate. One such burial contained “over 200 ceramic vessels, about 1,000 other small objects of clay, obsidians, mica, pyrite, bones, shells, and more than 30 fragments of an incensario” (Berlo 1984: 31). Teotihuacan censers were also found in domestic contexts, including both the central patios of apartment compounds located near the center of the site, and in the household refuse of rural communities far removed from the center of the site (Berlo 1984: 30-32).

At Tikal, censers were found in similar archaeological contexts. In the Late Preclassic Period, censers were excavated primarily from the areas in the front or at the base of temples. In the Early Classic Period, censers were also found in chultun deposits. These chultuns contained either the redeposition of an earlier burial or the deposition (or redeposition) of ceremonial

materials, including censers. Although censers were frequently found in redeposited burials, they were never found in undisturbed ones. As Ferree (1972: 15) states, “censers were never grave furniture in an undisturbed Tikal burial, nor, normally, were they part of caches.” It is unknown whether censers from Tikal were used in domestic contexts. No evidence exists either for or against the domestic use of censers at the site (Ferree 1972: 13-17).

Benyo (1979: 44-66) describes the provenience of censers excavated at Quiriguá. Although few were found *in situ*, almost all were found in or near the Acropolis or the Great Plaza, or were found near the site’s periphery. She argues that different types of censers were found in different archaeological contexts, suggesting that they were used for different purposes. The area near the Acropolis – an area that was probably residential – contained primarily three pronged censers, censer lids, and spiked-censers. The area near the Great Plaza, by contrast, an area that probably had a public function, contained primarily effigy-modeled censers – censers with appliqué depicting deities or other supernatural beings. Thus, the more simple censers were used in private contexts and the more elaborate were used in public contexts. Benyo (1997: 53, 55) uses this pattern to introduce the concept of public versus private censer use. She writes that,

one hypothesis for this difference in the distribution of the various censer forms may have to do with the concept of public versus private . . . Three-pronged censers, censer lids and spiked censers may have served more common functions. That is to say their use probably was not directed towards special public ceremonies . . . Because of the very elaborate nature of the effigy censer forms [on the other hand,] and the obvious time and care their manufacture required, use of this class may not have been an every day affair. It seems likely that these effigy censers functioned in a more public setting.

The different archaeological contexts in which the censers were found may thus suggest different uses of censers.

Possible uses of Mesoamerican Censers

Censers were ceremonial objects used for ritual functions. In general, they served as receptacles in which the Maya burned incense and other materials as offerings to petition and nourish deities and deceased ancestors (Houston and Taube 2000: 271). According to Orellana (1981: 161) “there was a pact between humans and the gods. The gods would help people, but they expected payment for this help in the form of sacrifice.” Because they functioned as receptacles for offerings, censers were an important component of ritual sacrifices (Rice 1999: 28). The smoke from the burning incense provided a means of communication between humans and supernatural forces, and its smell created an aroma that would perfume the space in which the offerings were made (Goldstein 1977: 405; Rice 1999: 26). New Year rituals, architectural renewal rituals, and offerings to sacred bodies of water frequently included the use of censers (Berlo 1984: 27).

Despite these generalizations, the specific uses of censers – and the circumstances under which they were used – varied considerably. At some sites, such as Tikal, censers may have been permanently enshrined, or transported for temporary use, in temples (Ferree 1972: 13-18). At other sites, such as Teotihuacan, censers were used not only in public spaces, such as temples, but also in private spaces, particularly the patios of apartment compounds. According to Berlo (1984: 32), “within the confines of their extended family group, the Teotihuacanos [we]re enacting on a lesser scale the religious rituals that t[ook] place in the ceremonial heart of the city.” The Teotihuacan censers may have been used in personal or household religious practices, or in larger ceremonies involving a common lineage, clan, or other familial group (Berlo 1984: 32).

At sites throughout Mesoamerica, censers were ritually broken. At Tikal, for example, purposefully fragmented censers were commonly found in redeposited burials and caches. Because broken censers were never found in undisturbed graves, Ferree (1972: 15) argues that they were probably introduced into the grave at the time of reburial. She concludes that “the censers were added at the time of re-deposit, in the chultun, having been used in whatever ceremony surrounded the act of re-deposition” (Ferree 1972: 15).

Similarly, at Teotihuacan, “it was standard . . . practice either to break or carefully disassemble an incensario before placing it in a burial or cache” (Berlo 1984: 31). Censers were thus not only used to make offerings, but were themselves offerings. In one cache at the site, excavators found

an incensario composed of two bowls, one inverted upon the other. Within the bowls were the remaining pieces of the incensario which had been taken apart but not destroyed. Arranged in a circle around the incensario offering were two tripod vessels, four bowls, an obsidian ring, a bone needle and tube, and various shells (Berlo 1984: 31).

The ritual objects were thus ritually disposed of. Berlo (1984: 32) argues that, because censers were deliberately broken before being placed in caches, they were probably “used for a specific occasion, or a specific period of time, and then dismantled and interred.” Interring and dismantling ritual objects was in fact a practice common throughout Mesoamerica – one that occurred frequently at the end of a calendar period (Berlo 1984: 32).

Ritually broken censers were also found in other contexts. Purposefully fragmented censers were frequently associated with the destruction and rebuilding of temples. According to Ferree (1972: 13-14), at Tikal, “incense burning, censer breakage, and temple destruction may have been parts of the same activity” – an activity that “was followed by the burial of the remains with the construction of a new plaza floor.” This ritual – burning incense in the temple’s

censers and then breaking those censers – may have accompanied the ceremony marking the end of the use of a temple, and may have been followed by the construction of a new temple (Ferree 1972: 14). Ferree (1972: 15) thus concludes that the use of censers was “an accompaniment to a form of ultimate, and apparently ritual, disposal of objects sanctified by their previous use.”

The Provenience of the Burkitt Censers

Burkitt did not include information about the provenience of all the censers he excavated. He did, however, describe the archaeological contexts of three of the censers and the censer lid excavated from Chipál [Fig. 4.1]. Two of those censers, NA 11537 and NA 11540, and the censer lid, NA 11541, were deposited in, and excavated from, burials in graveyards. None of the

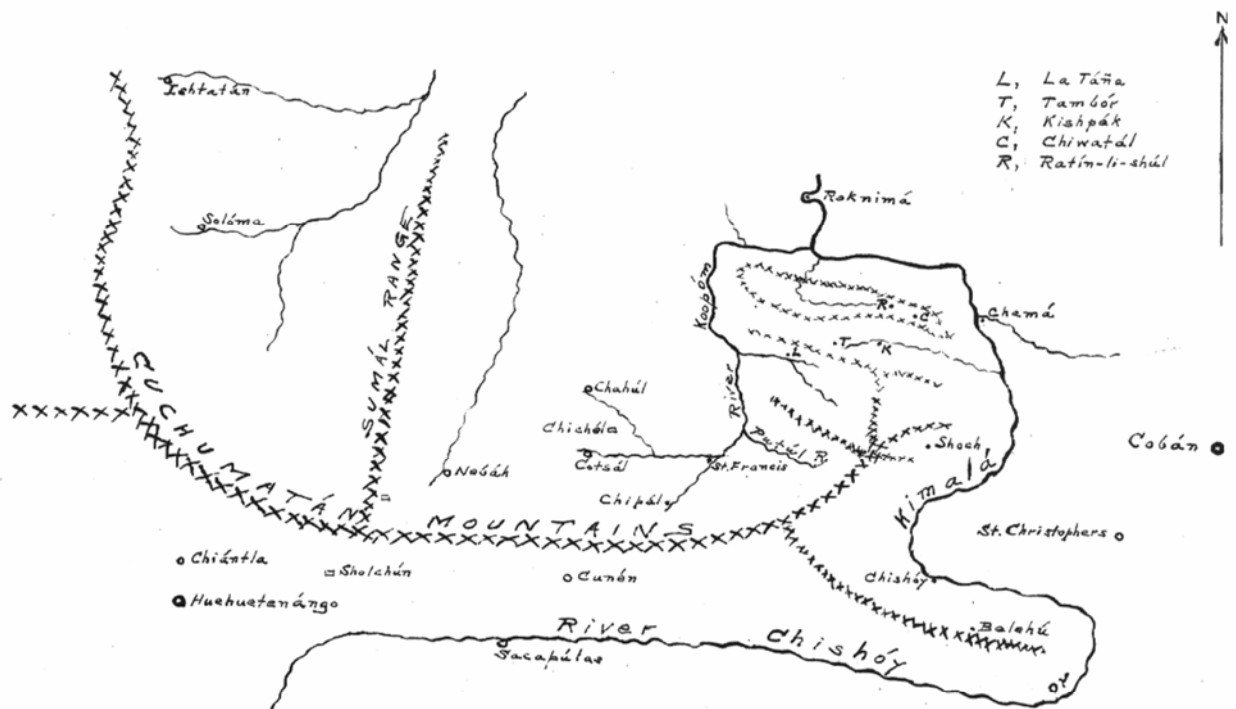


Figure 4.1 This map of the Guatemala highlands, taken from Burkitt’s fieldnotes, shows the site of Chipál and its location in relation to geographic features and to other archaeological sites.

burials were found *in situ*; rather, each had been altered by one of “the many variations and mixtures of artificial and natural disturbance.” Burkitt describes these disturbances in detail. He writes that “part of the disturbance comes about in the course of nature: for example . . . by the falling in of the roof, and the consequent filling of the chamber with stones and earth.” Nevertheless, “much disturbance is artificial,” and “much artificial disturbance is deliberat [*sic*].” He describes the deliberate disturbance, stating that “there was frequent robbery of the stone work of graves . . . And there was also frequent stealing – so to call it – of entire graves.” It was “evidently quite ordinary to open a grave, and put in a new occupant. The old occupant had to make room.” In short, “no burial is undisturbed.”

Burkitt excavated NA 11537 from a graveyard in group E at Chipál. According to his fieldnotes,

those ruins . . . are a very small affair, as I’ve said, and were so overlaid with sod, that you might easily pass them without noticing them. At the foot of the slope, there was a little terrace, and in front of the terrace was a little yard, about twelve metres square. The yard was separated from the adjoining flat by an almost imperceptible line of stones. I guest [*sic*], and it turned out, that the yard was a grave yard: and these things are the result of a little digging along the middle line.

Like the other artifacts excavated from that group, the censer was associated with disturbed human bones. According to Burkitt’s fieldnotes, those bones, including a skull, were probably contained in the censer.

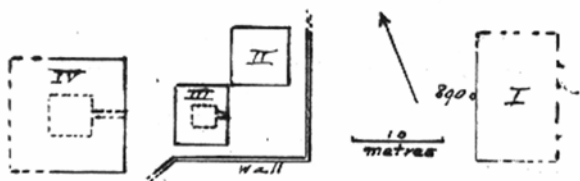


Figure 4.2 Taken from Burkitt’s fieldnotes, this diagram depicts group F at Chipál. Burkitt excavated NA11540 and NA11541 from mound I.

Burkitt excavated NA 11540 and NA 11541 from mound I at group F at Chipál [Fig 4.2]. Group F consisted of four mounds on a small plateau on top of a steep hill. Burkitt writes that “at one

end of the place . . . was the oblong mound number I: Then about half way along the length of the place, came a low plastered wall: and then, huddled together in the yard, or space beyond the wall, were the three square mounds, II, III, and IV.” Two of the square mounds – mound III and mound IV – contained empty burial chambers. NA 11540 was found upright with NA 11541 resting on top of it.

Burkitt also described the provenience of NA 11370. Unlike the other censers and censer lid for which he provided provenience information, NA 11370 was not found in a graveyard. Rather, it was found in a small stone chamber in the interior of building XIV at Chipál. Burkitt’s description of the building suggests that it was a public space and that it may have functioned as a temple. He writes that,

When the Chipal man first came to Chipal, and before he turned the ruins ov [sic] the drawing tin a cattle pen, the neibouring [sic] Indians used to burn incense on top ov [sic] XIV . . . And XIV originally, the man says, waz [sic] not a plain square block ov [sic] masonry, az [sic] it waz [sic] when I first new [sic] it and put it in my drawing, but had stairs going up it on all four sides. He demolisht [sic] the stairs for the sake ov [sic] the squared stone in them.

Unfortunately, Burkitt did not include the dimensions of the building.

Possible Uses of the Burkitt Censers

The Burkitt censers were functional objects. Six of the eight censers show evidence of use. Several have smoke-blackened interiors and/or exteriors, suggesting that they did indeed function as receptacles in which objects were burned. There is evidence that at least one censer was used to burn corn. NA 11370, which was found *in situ*, still contained a burnt corn cob and several burnt grains of corn.

Although there is no other direct evidence of how the Burkitt censers were used, it is still possible to infer how they may have been used based on the archaeological contexts in which they were found. Like many of the censers excavated from Teotihuacan and Tikal, two of the Burkitt censers – NA 11537 and NA 11540 – and the one censer lid – NA 11541 – were excavated from disturbed burials. Each was found fragmented into many pieces and, although each was associated with human bones, it is unclear whether they were also associated with other objects. Their deposition in a burial suggests that the censers were in fact ritual objects; objects with no ceremonial value are unlikely to be disposed of ceremonially. That they were found in graveyards also suggests that Ferree's (1972: 15) conclusion about the use of censers from Tikal may hold true for the Burkitt censers: Their use may have been associated with the final, ritual disposal of sacred objects or of human remains. In addition, although the graves were disturbed, it is not clear whether they were “naturally” or “artificially” disturbed, or whether they contained original or redeposited burials. If the graves did contain redeposited burials, it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that the censers were used in the rituals that accompanied the redeposition ceremony, and that they were purposefully broken and interred at the conclusion of those rituals.

Two of the Burkitt censers do show signs of having been ritually broken. Both NA 11537 and NA 11235 were found fragmented in many pieces [Fig. 4.3]. Burkitt states that NA 11235 was mended from at least 75 different pieces, NA 11537 from 27 pieces, and NA 11540 from 56 pieces. By contrast, other censers, such as NA 11443, were found in only two pieces. Although Burkitt writes that, because of both natural and artificial disturbances, “everything breakable is usually found broken,” the extensive fragmentation of NA 11537, NA 11235, and NA 11540 suggests that those censers may have been purposefully smashed to pieces. Burkitt



Figure 4.3 Back views of NA 11537 (left) and NA 11235. NA 11537 was reconstructed from 27 pieces and NA 11235 from over 75 pieces. The extent of the fragmentation suggests that these two censers may have been purposefully -- and ritually -- broken.

does not give specific provenience information for NA 11235. One is left to wonder, however, whether NA 11537 and NA 11540 were ritually broken when they were deposited in the Chipál burials.

Like many of the censers excavated at Mayapan, Palenque, and Tikal, one of the Burkitt censers – NA 11370 – was found in the ruins of a temple. Because it was found in association with public religious architecture, it is logical to assume that the censer was used during public ceremonies. The censer does not neatly fit into the dichotomy of public versus private use of censers suggested by Benyo (1979: 53-55). Although in form it is most similar to the simple spiked censers found near patio groups, the censer was found in a public context. It may be that

Benyo's distinction between public and private censer use is either specific to Quiriguá, or is inapplicable to Chipál.

Because it was found associated with the ruins of a temple, it is tempting to argue that the censer may have been part of an architectural renewal ceremony. Unlike NA 11235, NA 11537, and NA 11540, however, the censer does not exhibit evidence of having been ritually broken. Rather, like many of the censers from Tikal, it may have been either enshrined in or transported to the temple. The inhabitants of Chipál may have used this censer much like individuals throughout Mesoamerica used temple censers – to make offerings to supernatural forces, petitioning them for financial success, protection on long journeys, or victory in war, or to burn incense during ceremonies commemorating births, marriages, or deaths (Orellana 1981: 163).

CHAPTER FIVE: CENSER ICONOGRAPHY

Sacrifice, the underworld, and the crossing of boundaries

Mesoamerican censers exhibit a rich iconographic repertoire. Although most censers follow certain iconographic conventions, they nevertheless display a wide variety of iconographic images, including deities, anthropomorphic figures, warriors, plants, and animals. Much of the decoration found on censers is difficult to decipher. Nevertheless, some researchers, including Berlo (1984), have offered interpretations of censer iconography. Common images frequently relate to themes of sacrifice, transformation, and, at some sites, militarism. This chapter will describe the iconographic conventions followed and iconographic themes exhibited by censers from sites throughout Mesoamerica. It will then offer an interpretation of the iconography of the Burkitt censers. Not every image on every censer is easily explainable. Nonetheless, this chapter argues that much of the imagery – including deities such as the Jaguar God of the Underworld, plants such as cacao, and animals, such as monkeys – relates to themes of sacrifice, the underworld, and the relationship and boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Conventions of Censer Iconography

Mesoamerican censers tend to follow several iconographic principles. Three principles, in particular, appear to be nearly ubiquitous – an emphasis on frontality, a preference for symmetry, and a strict division of space. Although censers are three dimensional objects, they were not intended to be viewed in the round. Rather, their potters show an “aesthetic preference

for two-dimensionality of composition” (Berlo 1984: 28). Censers, in other words, are intended to be viewed from only one vantage point – the front. This emphasis on frontality can produce either elements that are “resolutely frontal” or, as is the case with many of the Burkitt censers, “elements [that are] distributed around a convex surface” (Berlo 1984: 28). Regardless, the sides and backs of censers rarely include iconographic elements, making their fronts clearly distinguishable from their backs.

Censer iconography always shows balance, and almost always demonstrates bilateral symmetry. According to Berlo (1984: 29), “an element affixed to one side will be balanced by a corresponding element on the other side. Mirror-image symmetry is not required, though it often occurs.” Figures that appear on censers have symmetrical bodies that appear in symmetrical poses. A figure’s left arm, for example, will be positioned symmetrically to its right arm. Any decoration that appears on one side of the figure will likewise appear on the other. The left side of a headdress, for example, will be a mirror image of the right side. In addition, flanges tend to be paired. A flange on one side of the censer will undoubtedly have a matching flange on the opposite side.

Finally, almost all censers exhibit a strict division of space. Vertical flanges create divisions that separate the front of the censer from the back, and horizontal bands create divisions that separate the censer into segments. The decoration usually does not extend beyond the flanges or the bands. Rather, it is confined by them. In addition, the division of some censers – particularly the Classic Period cylindrical censers – into registers mimics the division of the universe into vertical realms. Rice (1999: 28) argues that the use of censers and the burning of incense “define[s] boundaries of ritual space and practice, [and] mediate[s] transitions between sacred and profane.” It is thus not surprising that the space on a censer is itself bounded.

Common Iconographic Themes of Mesoamerican Censers

Censers excavated at different sites have different elements that relate to different iconographic themes. Those censers excavated at Mayapan, for example, almost exclusively portray images of deities. Thompson (1957: 4-16) argues that “inasmuch as certain personages on the censers are readily recognizable as specific deities, their identification encourages the assumption that the figure on each of these effigy censers represents a definite member of the Mayapan pantheon.” He then goes on to identify those deities represented on censers. They include Itzamna, the high god of the Maya, associated with writing, curing, and darkness; Chac, the god of rain and lightning; God L, the patron of merchants; Xipe Totec, the flayed god; Tlazolteotl, a goddess associated with purification; and many others (Thompson 1957: 4-16; Miller and Taube 1993: 99-100, 59, 112, 188, 168).

Censers excavated at Teotihuacan, by contrast, do not depict images of recognizable deities. Although they do portray anthropomorphic figures as their central decorative element, those figures cannot be easily identified as specific deities. “Although the faces do vary in contour, shape, and detail, they are . . . relatively inexpressive. Individuality and identity are found in the surrounding attributes” (Berlo 1984: 59). Those attributes include feathers and flowers, mantas with abstract designs, butterflies, shields and spear ends, and aquatic plants and animals. Their iconography suggests that the censers were associated with themes of ritual sacrifice and transformation. For both the Maya and the Aztec, flowers, for example, symbolized sacrificial blood. “In the Aztec writing system, the flower was an ideograph for sacrificial blood . . . [and other researchers have] found similar associations of flowers with blood and sacrifice among modern Tzotzil Maya” (Berlo 1984: 60).

Butterflies, on the other hand, symbolize transformative processes, and may symbolize the human soul. Butterflies themselves are the product of several transformations. Caterpillars emerge from eggs, form pupas, and then morph into adult butterflies – “a process of birth, apparent death, and resurrection” (Berlo 1984: 65). The life cycle of a butterfly thus mimics that of a human soul. Like a butterfly, a soul is born, appears to die, but is resurrected in a different form, able to rise into the air. In addition, it is not entirely surprising that butterflies are associated with fire. Fire is a catalyst of transformation; it burns materials, chemically altering them into smoke and ash. Because both butterflies and fire are associated with transformative processes, Berlo (1984: 65) argues that “butterfly symbolism on incensarios relates directly to the fire offering within the censer.” She continues, stating that, “the burning of offerings is a concrete manifestation of natural powers of transformation, the butterfly symbolism a metaphorical one.”

Censers excavated at Escuintla also commonly depict butterflies. Unlike their Teotihuacan counterparts, however, the Escuintla butterflies assume strong militaristic connotations. Berlo (1984: 95) writes that “without question, in Escuintla, the censer becomes a military icon.” Explicit military imagery is common, and warriors are depicted frequently. Many of those warriors wear butterfly headgear, butterfly noseplaques, and butterfly wings (Berlo 1984: 93-112). The censers from Lake Amatitlan, by contrast, have no coherent iconographic focus. This lack of a decorative theme may relate to the fact that many different groups made offerings at the lake (Berlo 1984: 154). According to Berlo (1984: 154-162), the iconographic repertoire – which included warriors, flowers, shells, jaguars, the Jaguar God of the Underworld, bats, coatimudis, scorpions, monkeys, and cacao pods – likely relates to many different mythic traditions.

Interpretation of the Burkitt Censors' Iconography

The Burkitt censors have a complex iconography. Not all iconographic elements can easily be deciphered, and not all symbolic meanings can easily be explained. The symbolism of certain figures, of certain accoutrements, and of certain decorations remains elusive. It is possible, however, to offer an interpretation of some of the aspects of the Burkitt censors' iconography, including the spike-like protrusions, the representations of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and some of the depictions of plants and animals.

Four of the Burkitt censors have spike-like protrusions. These iconographic elements likely represent the protrusions on the trunk of young ceiba trees – trees that the Maya considered sacred [Fig. 5.1]. The ceiba is one of the tallest trees in Mesoamerica, reaching



Figure 5.1 The protrusions on the trunk of a young ceiba tree. Taken from http://www.belizephonecard.com/Belize/pictures/belize_flora_pictures.htm

heights of up to 30 meters (Schlesinger 2001: 111). For the Maya, it is associated both with the underworld and with crossing the boundary between the underworld and the world of the living. According to Sharer and Traxler (2006: 733), the Maya believed that, in the afterlife, the deceased rested in the shade of the ceiba tree.

“Departed ‘souls’ went to a place where there was no pain or suffering and enjoyed an abundance of food and drink. There grew the *yaxche*, sacred tree of the Maya (the ceiba), in the shade of which the departed could rest forever from labor.” The Maya associated the ceiba with not only the world of the dead, but also with the boundaries between the different realms of the

universe. The tree is located at the universe's center and connects its three realms. It is, in other words, the *axis mundi* of the cosmos, reaching from the underworld through the world of the living to the upper world (Sharer and Traxler 731-733; Rice 1999: 36; Miller and Taube 1993: 57). It is thus appropriate that a censer – a receptacle in which materials were burned as petitions to, and nourishment for, deities and the deceased – would be decorated with images invoking the connection between the world of the living, the world of the divine, and the world of the dead.

Other iconographic symbols that appear on the Burkitt censers have similar associations. NA 11235, for example, portrays an image of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. This deity has several distinguishing features, including a 'crueller' that twists over the bridge of its nose (so named for the pastry that it resembles), a large 'tau' shaped front tooth, a pair of jaguar ears above a pair of human ones, and a hank of twisted hair over its forehead (Miller and Taube 1993: 103-104; Goldstein 1977: 412-415; Rice 1999: 36). Like the ceiba tree, the Jaguar God of the Underworld is associated with both the underworld and with traveling between the underworld and the other realms of the universe. As his name suggests, the deity is one of the principle lords of the underworld. In addition, he regularly crosses the boundaries between the world of the dead and that of the living. During the day he merges with the sun god, traveling from east to west across the sky. At night, he returns to the underworld, traveling from west to east under the earth. He thus "migrate[s] daily between the world of the living and the world of the dead" (Goldstein 1977: 416).

Because he represents both the day and the night sun, the Jaguar God of the Underworld is frequently portrayed with solar attributes (Goldstein 1977: 415-417; Rice 1999: 36). The image on NA 11370 – which resembles a sun – may thus be a reference to the solar nature of this deity. Regardless of whether the image refers specifically to the Jaguar God of the Underworld,

it nevertheless likely relates to the ability to cross the boundary between the underworld and the world of the living. It both portrays an image that resembles the sun and has spike-like protrusions that probably symbolize the ceiba tree. As noted above, both the sun and the ceiba tree connect the various realms of the Maya universe.

The iconography of the Burkitt censors also relates to themes of sacrifice. The arms of the figure on NA 11537, for example, are covered by a series of small appliqué ovals [Fig. 5.2]. These ovals most likely represent cacao pods. The cacao tree – a tree native to the tropical



Figure 5.2 Close-up view of the appliqué ellipses that likely represent cacao pods

forests of Mesoamerica – may have been domesticated by the Olmec as early as 1500 BCE (Schlesinger 2001: 107; Lopez 2002: 14). The tree produces “football-shaped fruit” that grows directly from its trunk and branches (Lopez 2002: 12). The

fruit, however, does not naturally fall to the forest floor when ripe. Rather, “the tree must rely on monkeys, bats, and other animals . . . to gnaw through the tough pod coverings and release the bitter seeds” (Lopez 2002: 13). Each cacao pod – which can grow up to twelve inches long and five inches wide – contains about forty smaller seeds encased in a thick pulp (Lopez 2002: 12).

The Maya drank cacao during ritual occasions and presented it as an offering to deities and to the deceased (Berlo 1984: 160-162). Perhaps because it was itself a sacrificial offering,

cacao was associated with human sacrifice and with human blood. For the Maya, the fruit appears to have been a metaphor for the heart. Both cacao pods and human hearts contain precious liquids – chocolate and blood – that were offered to the gods (Berlo 1984: 108). Berlo (1984: 161) describes in detail the association between cacao and human hearts, and between chocolate and human blood. “One of the riddles for a chief, in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel” the sacred books of the Maya of the Yucatan, “involves the use of the term chocolate as a metaphor for blood.” In addition, “similar double-entendres occur in Cotzumalhuapa art, where personified cacao pods take the place of human hearts in sacrificial rituals” (Berlo 1984: 161).

The Burkitt censers depict not only plants and deities, but animals as well. As noted, two of the censers portray the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and the censer lid – NA 11541 – depicts a double-headed jaguar. One of the largest mammals in the western hemisphere, the Jaguar, which inhabits various regions of Mesoamerica from Mexico to South America, is nocturnal, but can also be active during the day (Schlesinger 2001: 163-166). For members of Mesoamerican cultures, including the Maya, jaguars had a plethora of symbolic meanings. They were a symbol of power, a symbol of protection, and a symbol of destruction. Perhaps more importantly in terms of the Burkitt censers, jaguars were associated with sacrifice and with traversing boundaries.

Human sacrifices were offered to jaguars, and jaguars, in turn, were sacrificed (Benson 1997: 46). Often, jaguar sacrifices accompanied important ritual occasions. At Copán, for example, “16 jaguars were sacrificed in conjunction with the installation of the 16th ruler of the dynasty” (Miller and Taube 1993: 102). Not surprisingly, representations of jaguars often appear in sacrificial contexts. Ceramic vessels painted by the Maya frequently depict scenes of sacrifice that include jaguars. In some instances, human hearts were ritually presented or fed to them.

One vessels “shows a horizontal jaguar springing through the air above two figures with bloody scarves in a scene in which figures hold sacrificial knives and decapitated heads” (Benson 1998: 62). Another vessel shows “an anthropomorphic jaguar before a throne with a hand/paw on the head of a captive or sacrificial victim” (Benson 1998: 62). Perhaps because they are known to suck some of the blood from their victims before eating them, jaguars may have been associated with ritual bloodletting. Benson (1988: 62) describes in detail this association. According to her, “jaguar clothing seems to be, to some extent, interchangeable with bloodletting-associated clothing . . . Maya sacred bundles, which presumably held blood-letting equipment . . . are often wrapped in jaguar skin.” And, “on a Maya cylinder vase, a figure, enthroned on a jaguar, is offered a container of blood-stained papers as he faces a jaguar-garbed dancer” (Benson 1988: 62).

Jaguars also symbolized the crossing of spiritual boundaries. It is thus not surprising that Maya shamans frequently associated themselves with jaguars. In Mesoamerica, humans have ritually transformed themselves into jaguars since the Formative Period (Miller and Taube 1993: 102). In fact, “the words for ‘jaguar’ and ‘shaman’ . . . are the same in a number of languages” (Benson 1997: 47). Both shamans and jaguars shared a number of characteristics. They both, for example, “cross[ed] boundaries between worlds, between sky, earth, and water, between life and death, the natural and the supernatural” (Benson 1997: 47). Just as the smoke from burning incense served as a means of communication between the world of the living and that the dead, so too did shamans communicate between the realms of the universe. According to Saunders (1998: 30), “shamans [we]re not simple mystics, ‘empty vessels’ waiting to be filled by passing spirits, but ritual experts who specialize[d] in communication between the early and spirit

realms.” In short, both shamans and jaguars – like smoke rising from a censer – traversed the boundaries between the different spheres of the Maya universe.

The Burkitt censers also depict other animals. Both NA 11443 and NA 11444, for example, depict figures that have faces resembling those of monkeys. In nature, monkeys eat the fruit of the cacao tree, and Maya vessels frequently depict them with cacao (Lopez 2002: 13; Benson 1977: 66). The monkeys on the Burkitt censers likely suggest themes of sacrifice. Just as fruit, such as cacao, is associated with the human heart, fruit eaters, such as monkeys, are associated with sacrifice. For the Maya, eating fruit was a common metaphor for human sacrifice (Berlo 1984: 159-160).

The Burkitt censers thus depict images of deities, plants, and animals. These figures relate to themes of sacrifice, the underworld, and crossing the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. Both the provenience of the censers and hypotheses about how they may have been used support this interpretation of their iconography. Two of the Burkitt censers – NA 11537 and NA 11540 – and the censer lid – NA 11541 – were excavated from burials in graveyards. Each was associated with disturbed human bones, and NA 11537 appears to have contained a human skull and several other human bones. In addition, if, as Goldstein (1977: 405) and Rice (1999: 28-29) suggest, censers and the smoke that rises from them serve as a means of transformation and communication between the realms of the living, the divine, and the deceased, then it would be fitting for the censers to display an iconographic repertoire that emphasized the ability to travel between the boundaries separating those different realms.

CONCLUSION

This study has reached several conclusions and made several claims about the Burkitt censers – censers that have never before been studied or analyzed in detail. It has presented in depth descriptions of the censers themselves, of their provenience, and of their iconography. It has argued that, at Chipál, there may have been a standardized method of manufacturing censers, but that the censers were not made by specialists in a workshop dedicated solely to their production. It has suggested that the censers were indeed functional objects used to burn organic materials, and that they may have been associated with the ritual disposal of sacred objects or human remains. Finally, this study has offered an interpretation of some aspects of the censers' iconography. It has concluded that the images depicted by the Burkitt censers relate to the afterlife and to the relationship between the living, the dead, and the divine.

There are relatively few studies focusing on Mesoamerican censers, and even fewer that attempt to decipher and understand their iconography. Studies of other censers would provide additional information about the production, use, and iconography of censers in general. Moreover, additional avenues exist for further study of the Burkitt censers. Laboratory work would be especially fruitful. Thermoluminescence dating, for example, may help to accurately date the censers. Residue analysis may determine exactly what types of materials were burned in the censers. And, neutron activation analysis – a technique that determines the chemical signature of the clay used to make a ceramic vessel, thereby allowing the clay in the vessel to be matched with its natural source – may show where the censers were manufactured. This information would in turn provide clues as to whether the censers were made locally or whether they were traded over long distances. These insights would provide more information about a

class of artifacts that have yet to receive much scholarly attention, and that have yet fully to be understood.

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