# CROSSING Boundaries

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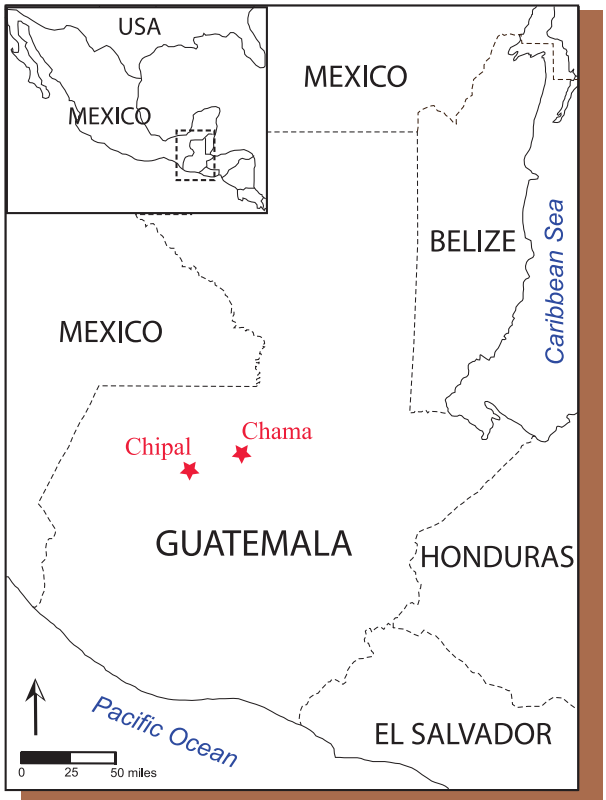
## *Maya Censers from the Guatemala Highlands*

BY SARAH KURNICK

The ancient Maya universe consists of three realms—the earth, the sky, and the Underworld. Rather than three distinct domains, these realms form a continuum; their boundaries are fluid rather than fixed, permeable rather than rigid. The sacred Tree of Life, a manifestation of the resurrected Maize God, stands at the center of the universe, supporting the sky. Frequently depicted as a ceiba tree and symbolized as a cross, this sacred tree of life is the *axis-mundi* of the Maya universe, uniting and serving as a passage between its different domains.

For the ancient Maya, the sense of smell was closely related to notions of the afterlife and connected those who inhabited the earth to those who inhabited the other realms of the universe. Both deities and the deceased nourished themselves by consuming smells; they consumed the aromas of burning incense, cooked food, and other organic materials. Censers—the vessels in which these objects were burned—thus served as receptacles that allowed the living to communicate with, and offer nourishment to, deities and the deceased.

The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology currently houses a collection of Maya ceramic censers excavated by Robert Burkitt in the Guatemala highlands during the 1920s. This article offers a brief look at the Burkitt censers; it explains how they may have been produced, suggests how they may have been used, and offers an interpretation of their iconography. Like censers throughout the Maya area, the Burkitt censers—in their use and in their iconography—suggest that living individuals could use the smell of burning incense to communicate with and nourish the dead and the divine.




During the 1920s, Robert Burkitt excavated several Maya incense burners, or censers, from the sites of Chama and Chipal in the Guatemala highlands.

## MESOAMERICAN CENSERS

Throughout Mesoamerica, individuals used ceramic vessels known as censers or *incensarios* to burn organic materials. These materials included copal—the resin of the copal tree—but also other important substances, including corn and human blood. Censers vary in shape and size. Ladle censers can be held in one hand and the tips of their handles are often sculpted into the face of a deity; many ladle censer handles are phallic-shaped. Cylindrical censers, by contrast, are the largest, heaviest, and most ornate type of censer. Frequently

Censers vary in shape. This phallic-shaped, hand-held ladle censer differs drastically from the other, cylindrical censers in the Burkitt collection. UPM # NA 10956; 35.6 cm long.

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reaching several feet in height, they are hollow and typically display wide flanges on their sides and feature several tiers of elaborate decoration.

The surviving Maya codices depict these vessels; Spanish chronicles from the time of conquest describe their use; and ethnographers note their presence among groups of modern-day Maya. Excavated censers, however, provide the primary evidence for the burning of incense prior to the Spanish Conquest. Archaeologists have unearthed censers from sites throughout the Maya area, from Yucatan in the north to the Pacific coast of Guatemala in the south, from Chiapas in the west to El Salvador and Honduras in the east. Maya censers date to as early as the Early Preclassic period (2000–1000 BCE), and are still in use today.

## THE BURKITT CENSERS

Robert Burkitt collected objects for the Penn Museum from 1912 until 1937. He both purchased objects from private collections and excavated at over a dozen sites along the Chixoy River in the northern Guatemala highlands. During the 25 years that he worked for the Museum, Burkitt acquired over 1,000 archaeological objects, ethnographic artifacts, and human remains, ranging in date from the Preclassic to the Postclassic periods (2000 BCE–1500 CE). Archaeological artifacts included polychrome vessels, ceramic figurines, jade and shell beads, carved bones and shell, metates (grinding stones), small stone tools, pyrite mirrors, copper bells, and obsidian knives. Ethnographic objects included textiles, a model of a Maya house, and a loom with instructions explaining its use.

This collection includes eight complete or nearly complete censers and one censer lid. Although found in fragments, they have been mended and reassembled. Seven censers and the censer lid come from the site of Chipal and one censer comes from the site of Chama. One of the Chipal censers was excavated from the interior of a ruined masonry building and three were excavated from burials and cemeteries; Burkitt did not record the provenience of the other censers. All but one show evidence of use and several were found with objects in or associated with them: One included a burnt corn cob, another a stone ax head and a flint spear head, and a third a human skull.

Although two of the censers are cylindrical in shape, most are shaped like hyperbolas—cylinders with constricted middles and flaring rims and bases. The potters who created these censers formed the bodies of the vessels either by slab building or by coiling. In slab building, the potter constructs a vessel by joining the edges of a rectangular piece of clay to form an open cylinder. The single censer from Chama, which was made by slab building, now has a large crack running down its side where the edges of the slab were joined. The bodies of the other Burkitt censers were formed by coiling. For each censer, the potter first formed coils of clay, then connected those coils together to form a flat surface. On each of the censers from Chipal, the coils used to form the vessel are still visible.

The censers vary in size, with heights ranging from 15.8 cm to 39.3 cm and rim diameters from 22.3 cm to 29.2 cm. All of the censers were made

The most prominent decorative technique among the Burkitt censers is the attachment of appliqué—shaped pieces of clay attached to the surface of the vessel. Notice that one of the pieces of appliqué—the figure's right leg—has fallen off. UPM # NA11443; 30.4 cm tall.

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from different shades of red clay, and the most common methods of decoration included incising lines and attaching pieces of appliqué—shaped pieces of clay attached to the surface of a vessel. About half have traces of red, yellow, white, or blue paint.

Each of the censers is unique, both in its dimensions and in its decoration. They do, however, share some common iconographic elements. These include spiky protrusions; vertical flanges; horizontal bands; and anthropomorphic figures. Interestingly, 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 mixtures of human and nonhuman features. A single face may have, for example, a human nose, ears, and eyebrows, but nonhuman eyes, mouth, and teeth.

## CENSER PRODUCTION

How were the Burkitt censers produced? Were they made by highly trained, specialized artisans? Were they manufactured in a workshop? Or, were they created by non-specialists outside of a workshop setting?

All of the censers from Chipal were made in a generally similar manner. Each was made by coiling; each was decorated with pieces of appliqué; and most were painted. There may thus have been a somewhat standardized method of manufacturing censers at Chipal. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that specialists manufactured those vessels in a workshop dedicated solely to the production of censers. One would expect that ceramics created by potters in a workshop would have standardized sizes or standardized proportions; that they would have been made from the same type and color of clay; or that they would have similar, if not identical, designs. And, it would be reasonable to assume that the potters working at such workshops would be highly skilled, specialized artisans.

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Top, the anthropomorphic figures represented on the Burkitt censers frequently lack visible torsos. These figures tend to have thin, contorted limbs and open, protruding mouths. UPM # NA 11441; 28 cm tall. Middle, many of the faces portrayed on Maya censers exhibit a mixture of human and nonhuman features. This particular face has a human nose, ears, and eyebrows, but nonhuman eyes, mouth, and teeth. This censer contained a stone ax head and a flint spear head. UPM # NA 11540; 15.8 cm tall. Bottom, some of the Burkitt censers were hastily made. The potter who formed this vessel appears to have spent little time on the figure's arms and hands. UPM # NA 11444; 20.9 cm tall.

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The Burkitt censers, however, exhibit none of these characteristics. They vary in size and proportion and exhibit distinct types of decoration. And, the potters who made these censers do not appear to have been highly trained. The censers are imperfect. Several of their bodies are unevenly shaped and many of their designs appear hastily-formed. They are thus unlikely to have been made by specialists in a workshop.

Furthermore, these imperfections suggest that some censers may have been intended for immediate or one-time use. The shorter an object's intended period of use, the less time and effort an individual would have invested in its manufacture. Thus, objects intended for short-term use may be hastily-made, while objects intended to be used for longer periods of time may demonstrate more elaborate, careful, or time-consuming manufacture.

## CENSER USE

Censers functioned primarily as ceremonial objects. Although some may have been used as braziers—vessels used to generate heat to cook food, warm hands, or repel bugs—in general, the ancient Maya used censers as receptacles in which to burn incense and other organic materials as offerings to petition and nourish deities and deceased ancestors. Because they functioned as receptacles for offerings, censers were an important component of rituals. The smoke from the burning incense allowed communication between humans and supernatural forces, and its smell created an aroma that would perfume the space in which the offerings were made. New Year rituals, architectural renewal rituals, and offerings to sacred bodies of water frequently included the use of censers.

Despite these generalizations, the specific uses of censers—and the circumstance under which they were used—varied considerably. Archaeologists have excavated censers from different contexts. Throughout Mesoamerica, censers have been found most frequently in association with public religious architecture, such as temples; private spaces, such as the patios of apartment compounds; and in burials and caches. In some instances censers may have been permanently enshrined, or transported for temporary use, in temples. At many sites, censers were found to have been ritually broken.

The Burkitt censers were functional, ritual objects. Most show evidence of use, including smoke-blackened interiors and/or exteriors, suggesting that they did indeed serve as receptacles in which organic materials were burned. There is even evidence that at least one censer was used to burn corn. That censer, found *in situ*, still contained a burnt corn cob and several burnt grains of corn.

The depositional contexts of the Burkitt censers also suggest that they—like other Mesoamerican censers—were ritually important

This censer was excavated from a cemetery and was likely used as a reduced burial pot. It was found in association with a human skull and other human bones. UPM # 11537; 37 cm tall.

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Throughout the Maya area, censers display spiky protrusions. These protrusions likely represent the spikes on the trunks of young ceiba trees. This censer contained a burnt corn cob and several burnt grains of corn. UPM # NA 11370; 39.3 cm tall.

objects. Burkitt found one of the censers in the ruins of a temple, suggesting that the ancient Maya used the censer during public religious ceremonies. He also excavated two censers and the censer lid from disturbed burials. These depositional contexts suggest that the censers were indeed ritual objects; objects with no ceremonial value are unlikely to have been disposed of ceremonially. Their placement in burials thus suggests that their use may have been associated with the final, ritual disposal of sacred objects or human remains.

Additionally, although the graves were disturbed, it is not clear whether they were intentionally disturbed by the ancient Maya or by natural forces, or whether they contained re-deposited or original burials. If the graves did contain re-deposited burials, it is possible—and perhaps even likely—that the censers were used in the rituals that accompanied the re-deposition ceremony and that they were purposefully broken and interred at the conclusion of those rituals.

## CENSER ICONOGRAPHY

Mesoamerican censers tend to follow certain iconographic conventions, and three principles in particular are nearly ubiquitous. The first is an emphasis on frontality. Although censers are three dimensional objects, they were not intended to be viewed in the round. Rather, they were intended to be viewed from only one vantage point—the front. Second, their iconographic images are always balanced and almost always exhibit bilateral symmetry. Figures that appear on censers have symmetrical bodies in symmetrical poses and any decoration that appears on one side of a censer will almost always appear on the other.

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Third, 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 registers. 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 (300–900 CE) cylindrical censers—into registers mimics the division of the universe into vertical realms. Like the universe, the space on a censer is itself separated into different domains.

Despite following these basic conventions, Mesoamerican censers exhibit a rich iconographic repertoire. Although some of the decoration found on censers is difficult to decipher and not every image is easily explained, many common representations—such as deities, anthropomorphic figures, warriors, plants, and animals—tend to relate to one or more of several recurrent themes, including sacrifice, transformation, and militarism.

The Burkitt censers themselves follow the basic iconographic principles common to most Mesoamerican censers, yet still exhibit a complex, difficult to interpret iconography. Much of the imagery on those censers—including plants such as the ceiba tree, deities such as the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and animals such as monkeys—relates to the crossing of the boundaries between the different realms of the Maya universe.

The spiky protrusions, for instance, likely represent the spikes on the trunks of young ceiba trees. The ancient Maya associated the ceiba tree with the sacred Tree of Life—the tree that lies at the center of the universe connecting its three realms. It is not surprising that a censer—a receptacle in which materials were burned to nourish and communicate with deities and the deceased—would be decorated with images invoking the connection between the earth, sky, and Underworld.

Other iconographic symbols that appear on the Burkitt censers have a similar association. Two of the censers portray images of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. This deity has several distinguishing features, including a "cruller" that twists over the bridge of its nose; a large T-shaped front tooth; a pair of jaguar ears above human ones; and a hank of twisted hair over its forehead. Like the ceiba tree, the Jaguar God of the Underworld traverses the boundaries between the different realms of the universe. During the day he merges with the sun god, traveling east to west across the sky. At night, however, he returns to the Underworld, moving west to east under the earth. He thus migrates daily between the different realms of the universe.

The censers also include depictions of plants and animals—depictions that likely relate to concepts of sacrifice

Many censers, including this one from Chama, display images of the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Notice the distinctive "cruller" that twists over the bridge of its nose and the spiral-shaped "deity" eyes. UPM # NA 11235; 36.5 cm tall.

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This lid, the only lid in the collection, features a Janus-headed feline. UPM # NA 11541; 19.2 cm tall.

and thus to the crossing of boundaries; sacrifice, be it of incense, blood, or other materials, allows the living to petition, nourish, and communicate with the dead and the divine. Some of the censers contain figures resembling monkeys and the arms of one anthropomorphic figure are covered by a series of small appliqué ovals resembling cacao seeds—a fruit that monkeys commonly consume. Some scholars have suggested that cacao pods symbolize the human heart and that chocolate—the liquid made from the seeds in those pods—symbolizes human blood. Drinking cacao may thus have been a metaphor for human sacrifice. Indeed, the ancient Maya drank cacao during various rituals and presented it as an offering to deities and to the deceased. Consequently, both cacao seeds and monkeys, the animals who ate those seeds, may have been associated with notions of sacrifice. It is thus not surprising that the ancient Maya would choose to include their representations on censers.

In short, the ritual burning of organic materials in censers allowed the ancient Maya to communicate with and nourish the dead and the divine. It is only fitting that the Burkitt censers display an iconographic repertoire symbolic of their ability to emit aromas capable of crossing the boundaries between the realms of the Maya universe.

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