

## OFFERING TO THE GODS IN ESCUINTLA NEW EVIDENCE ON RIM-HEADS INCENSE BURNERS

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Incense burners are ceremonial vessels considered to be part of the archaeological study of artifacts. Through them and their contexts, possible interpretations may be posited associated with the religious practices of the ancient inhabitants. Furthermore, they are valuable because they reflect iconographic issues linked to the symbology and cosmovision of the prehispanic world.

In archaeology, incense burners are defined like containers that were used to burn natural aromatic resins, without disregarding the possibility that they may have also been used to deposit other types of offerings. Actually, the majority of the incense burners found by archaeologists were made of mud and stone, but there is also evidence of others manufactured with wood, jade, and even rubber (Rice 1999:25).

Incense burners vary greatly in terms of shape. The most important part is the receptacle, which may present a variety of forms such as that of a bowl, a dish, a vase, or a flat surface. This basic form may include handles, bases, pedestals, lids, and/or flanges. Also, designs of human figures, animals, or a blend of both aimed at forming effigies and faces can be included (Rice 1999:25).

This study was mainly focused on the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla. We had the opportunity to excavate a small site called Quebrada La Culebra located at Nueva Concepción, in the banks of an affluent of the Coyolate known as Cardoza River. There, a substantial sample of fragments and incense burners was gathered. With these data and the available ceramic collections from Escuintla, an analysis of the incense burners was undertaken to find out about their function and meaning in the prehispanic world. This report presents part of the data and results included in the bachelor's dissertation of the author, titled "Rim-Heads Incense Burners at Escuintla, Guatemala".

### RIM-HEADS INCENSE BURNERS IN MESOAMERICA

Rim-heads incense burners have been reported in Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras (Kidder 1943:81). The form is characterized for having three heads adhered to the edge of the main bowl that forms the incense burner. This basic form varies from region to region. In archaeological literature they have been given different names: "*internal holders of incense burner lids*", "*bowls with three internal holders*", "*vessels with vertical ears*", "*handles that protrude from large pots*" (Seler

1915; Linné 1934; Stone 1943; Drucker 1943a and 1943b); but the more widely known name is that of *rim-head vessel* that Borhegyi gave them (1951a).

In Kaminaljuyu, incense burners consist of a bowl with a straight-divergent wall, flat base and three solid conical supports. They have three hollow heads adhered to the rim and with a hole at the back, at the height of the ear. The nose, ears, nostrils and ear flares were made by using the appliqué technique. The heads are hairless and occasionally feature white paint on them and red paint on the face (González and Wetherington 1978:286). These vessels date to the Late Preclassic period.

The rim-heads incense burners in Mexico show as well a peculiar shape. In Teotihuacan, they consist of bowls with a straight-divergent wall, and a flat base with no supports. Over the rim, they show three solid or hollow bulbs directed towards the inside of the vessel. On the rim, they have a depression in the shape of a “U”, right in the middle of two heads. These bulbs may have modeled appliques depicting individuals. No slip or paint is observed. In Teotihuacan, this kind of incense burners occurred since the Early Classic and continued up to the Late Classic period. However, their shape varied somehow with time (Linné 1934:114). Likewise, the incense burners from Santiago Ahuizotla, very similar to those from Teotihuacan, possess one disc at each side of the face, and another one on top of it. The most commonly represented form is that of an old man with wrinkles (Tozzer 1921:50-51). Also, incense burners have been reported in the Mexican Gulf area, in the sites of Cerro de las Mesas and Tres Zapotes. Even though the majority of the samples are very fragmented, it is assumed that the form greatly resembled that of Teotihuacan, though with less elaborate heads (Drucker 1943a:58). In Tres Zapotes there are representations of birds and animal heads that date to the Late Classic period (Drucker 1943b:76).

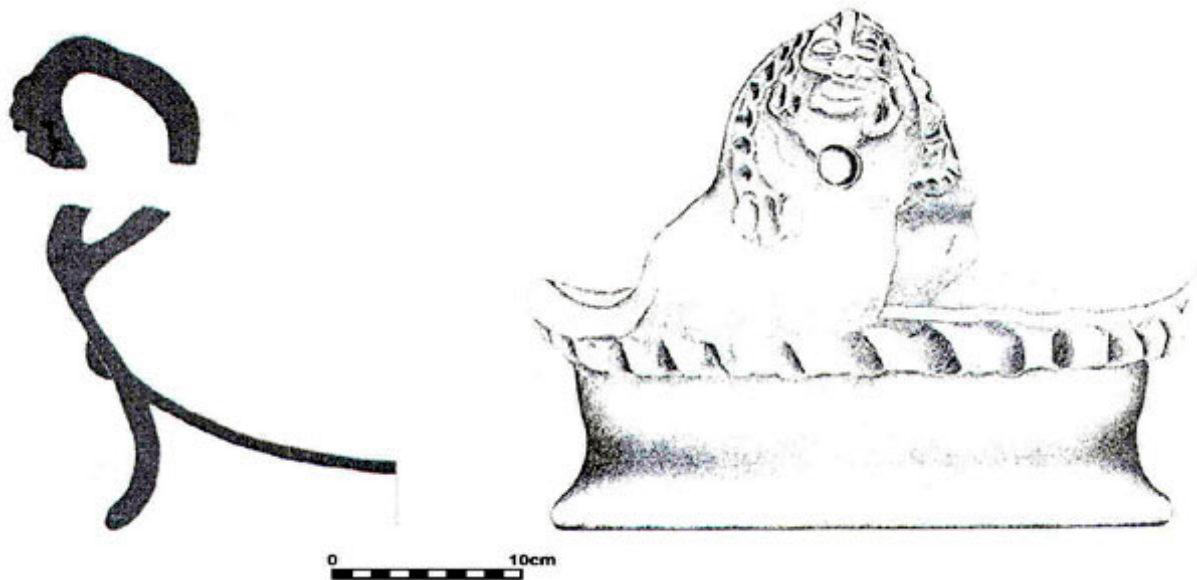
In Honduras, samples of these incense burners were found near San Pedro Sula and the site of Travesía, in the Ulua Valley. The heads are modeled, and samples of old men (Stone 1943:82) are also present.

## **RIM-HEADS INCENSE BURNERS AT ESCUINTLA**

Fragments of rim-heads incense burners were found in different areas in Escuintla: Cotzumalguapa, Coyolate, La Gomera-Sipacate, Tiquisate and the port of San José. It was during the research works conducted by Shook, Kidder and Borhegyi that those pieces were documented as a part of ceramic reports (Borhegyi 1950, 1951a, 1952b; Kidder 1943; Shook 1949). Today, the archaeological projects underway in Escuintla have also collected fragments of rim-heads incense burners from important sites such as Ixtepeque, Bilbao, El Baul and Los Chatos-Manantial, to mention just a few (Bove 1989).

The site of Quebrada La Culebra was excavated in 2003. Previous to this study, a substantial amount of censer fragments was found, together with other types of ceramic materials and very close to the surface. This was a surprising finding, and was the result of an excavation that recovered fragments of rim-heads incense burners, molds to manufacture incense burner heads, urns, bowls, dishes, *manos*,

grinding stones and obsidian fragments. The site has no mounds as such, and all excavations exposed a similar stratigraphy, pointing to a possible deposit of ceramic and lithic waste. Bearing this in mind, the ceramic analysis was carried out to establish both a date for the deposit and the relationship with other areas in Escuintla, and also to study the fragments of the incense burners.



**Figure 1. Rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla.**

The analysis revealed a remarkable homogeneity in the ceramics, including paste attributes, surface treatment, forms and decoration. In addition, all types coincided with the fact that the deposits found were from the Late Classic period, as they included types such as San Andres and Congo, typical of that timeframe. Moreover, there were other types such as Fronda, Tarros, Malta, Recuerdo, and Tiquisate, which had begun in the Middle Classic but lived on to the Late Classic period (Medrano 1997:649).

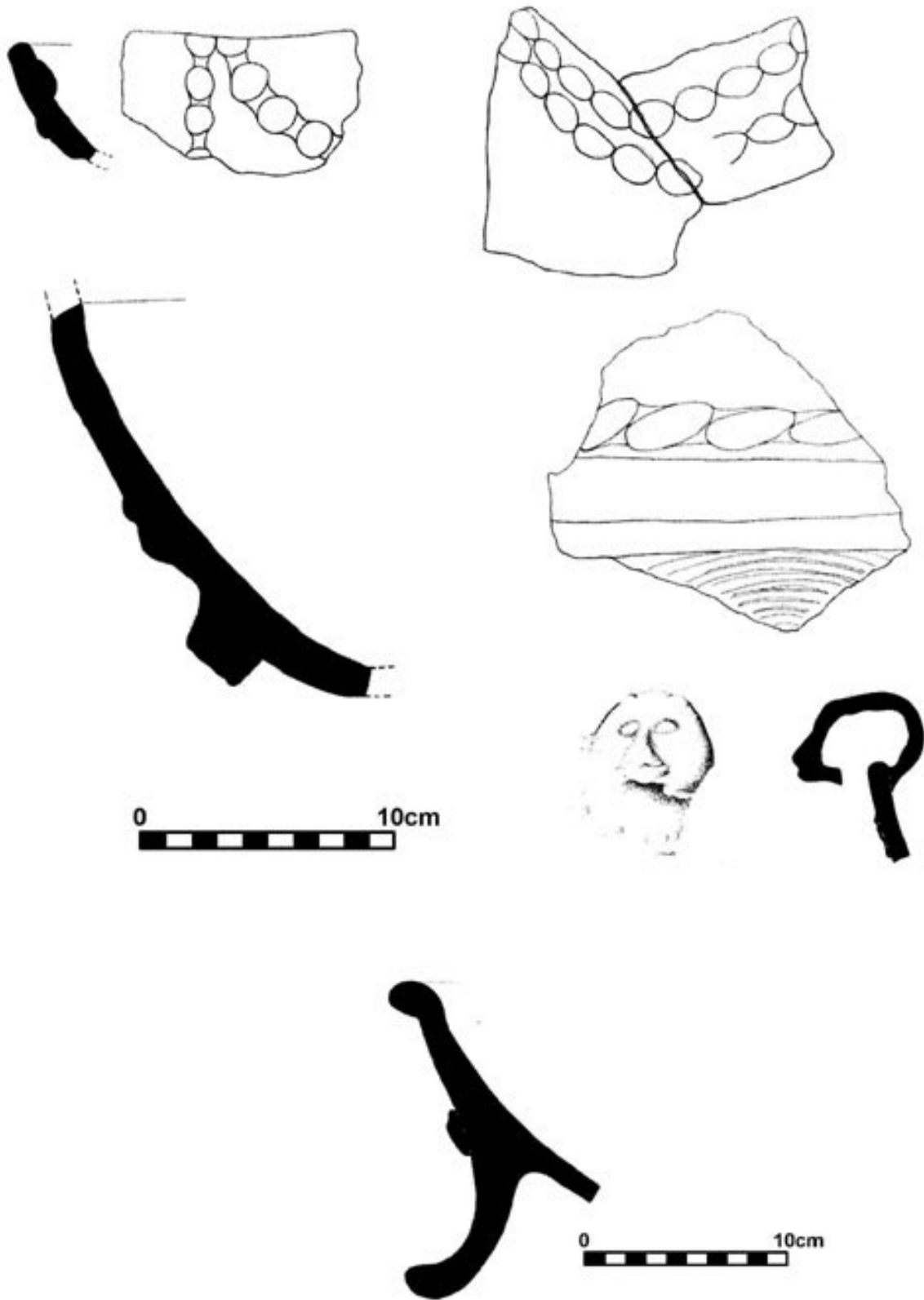


Figure 2. Fragments of rim-heads incense burners from Quebrada La Culebra.

When comparing this pottery with that from the areas of Tiquisate and Cotzumalguapa, it was observed that in general, the ceramic from Quebrada La

Culebra was more consistent with that of the latter area, particularly in regard to the treatment of the surface, color, and consistency of the paste. However, there were similarities with the Tiquisate pottery in form and decoration.

The rim-heads incense burners in Escuintla consist of three basic components: one pedestal-type base, one large bowl, and three heads adhered to its rim. It all forms one single piece. On the body of the bowl there is an appliqué decoration of fillets impressed with the fingers. Alike the samples from Teotihuacan, they have a “U”-shaped depression on the rim, between two of the heads. They are mostly modeled and hollow, with animal representations. They have no slip and no paint. To this day, only one complete sample was documented as a part of the Pullin collection, in Texcuaco, located east of the Coyolate River (Kidder 1943). Moreover, during the surface collection at the site of Los Chatos-Manantial carried out by the South Coast Project headed by Frederick Bove, an almost complete incense burner was found, with only the head missing (Figure 1). Both these incense burners have been valuable at the time of conducting the analysis of the material recovered during the excavations, as they have allowed us to examine their decoration, their average diameter, the inclination of the heads with respect to the bowl, and other significant details. At Quebrada La Culebra, the censer fragments were coincident in this basic form, which features two variations with respect to the rim of the bowl, which may be a direct rim or an everted rim with a rounded lip. The average diameter of the vessels is of 0.50 cm, with a total height of 0.30-0.40 m (Figure 2).

Finally, a typology of all incense burner heads recovered at Quebrada La Culebra was established. The sample includes human and animal heads, solid and hollow, manufactured with molding or modeling techniques. A direct relationship was observed between the hollow heads and the molding technique, which in turn were coincident in their zoomorphic forms. Likewise, there is a relation between the solid modeled heads and their human form. For what it seems, both these types of heads maintain a relation with their manufacture, as it is easier to model a human face based on three holes, two for the eyes and one for the mouth, than the head of a beast, which demands a greater accuracy to specifically identify what is the kind of animal represented. Among the animal forms, the heads of owls, spider-monkeys, night monkeys, armadillo, deer and felines, were identified.

Knowing the form of the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla, the question raises: how can we know that those vessels were used as incense burners? It was previously stated in the definition of a censer, that a vessel, no matter the form, will be considered to be a censer whenever, in the analysis, traces of burning that have remained as evidence of the fire used inside the container are found. Moreover, and as an auxiliary argument, one may turn to the context wherefrom the piece was recovered to find out whether or not it is linked to a ritual activity. Both characteristics are present in the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla; therefore, it is our belief that these vessels were in fact used as incense burners. Besides, in the regions of Tiquisate, La Gomera/Sipacate and Cotzumalguapa, the censer fragments were recovered in the central area of the archaeological sites. For example, in El Baul, the samples came from a ditch close to Structure 6 of the West Group (Thompson 1948:41). This structure was a building constructed with perishable materials, and

evidence so far suggests that it was used for religious purposes (Hatch and Rubio 1999:204).

These data altogether give way to another question: how were these incense burners used? There are three outstanding characteristics worth mentioning:

- In the first place, the size of these artifacts, usually large and showy, is to be taken into consideration.
- Second, the arrangement of the three heads makes the incense burner to have a three-dimensional or circular view, in a way that its form may be appreciated from wherever it is observed.
- Finally, the “U”-shaped depression between two heads makes us believe that said opening was necessary because another container was placed on top the heads. In this way, the fire of the censer that was burnt in the main bowl could be easily fuelled. Besides, the other container on the heads, a bowl or a dish, could be used to deposit some other kind of offering in the form of a beverage or food.

The idea of presenting other offerings in addition to incense is very common among the modern indigenous. The Lakandon, for example, use a small gourd that they place by the incense burner containing maize offerings that are presented to the deity (Boremanse 1999). Also the Q’eqchi’ groups share the same idea of feeding the gods or spirits. Even one of the rituals they celebrate is called *wa’tesink*, which means, precisely, “giving food to...”, or “feeding someone” (García 2003).

The ultimate question and perhaps one of the most difficult ones is: what was the meaning of these incense burners in the prehispanic world? To understand this, it is necessary to go deep into the overall symbology of incense burners.

All these artifacts were used for ritual purposes, and in their inside, copal was burnt to fill the atmosphere with a dense cloud of smoke and aroma. The Zinacantecan even attribute copal a special power, as it turns from something solid to gas and it technically “vanishes” in the air; therefore, it is believed that it is capable of crossing the threshold between the material and the spiritual world, something necessary for a successful communication with the deities (Vogt 1976:295). Also Stelae 5, 18 and 24 in Izapa show evidence of use of these incense burners. There are containers with smoke spirals coming out of them, and the scenes depict individuals sitting by them and surrounded with religious objects (Lowe 1965:57-59). To start with, these vessels are linked to fire, though symbolically they are also linked with rain, the sun and life, as the black smoke produced by incense is a symbolic representation of rain clouds (Thompson 1975, quoted by Rice 1999:28).

Referring once more to the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla, some specific queries come up, such as: why do they have three heads? It is common knowledge that number three was particularly significant in the prehispanic world.

- In the first place, it reflected the layers of universe: heaven, which in turn was integrated by three layers, the earth represented by the back of a reptile, and the underworld, divided in nine layers (Sharer 1998:499).
- Another significant aspect of number three has to do with the possibility that the incense burner heads were supporting a bowl or dish on which the offerings were placed. This action is analogous to that of placing three stones to light a fire inside the Maya houses. The literal translation of several modern Maya words for hearth is “three stones”, like in the *xkub* case in K’iche’ (Wauchope 1938:118).
- However, the hearth is also a symbolic figure. According to the prehispanic cosmic model of a house, there are four posts that represent the four cardinal directions, at times with one additional staff often representing the ceiba tree as the “tree of life” or a three-stone hearth. They are both symbols of the *axis mundi* (Taube 1998:432). According to Taube (1998), “*the hearth as a circular plane reflects concepts of centrality and represents ‘the navel of the world’, indicating a place of creation and a channel that communicates the three levels of the universe: heaven, the earth, and the underworld*”.
- This close relationship between the hearth and creation can also be corroborated through the Classic Maya myth of origin written in monuments of sites such as Quirigua, Palenque and Copan, among others, where the date 4 *Ahaw 4 Cumku* is mentioned as the beginning, where the three stones of the hearth were set to create the world (Freidel *et al.* 1993:66).

The evidence presented strongly favors the notion that the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla are the representation of a hearth with each head playing the role of a stone, while inside the bowl incense was burnt, just like fire is lit with firewood inside the hearth. To Freidel *et al.* (1993), incense burners constitute a central place and are a portal between the humane and divine planes. This notion comes to support once again the vision of centrality in rim-heads incense burners, as not only they are incense burners but also represent the hearths, centers of the world and of everyday life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla existed only during the Late Classic period, and probably played a crucial role in the organization of that period, as they were recovered at the most important political centers in areas such as Cotzumalguapa, Tiquisate and La Gomera/Sipacate.

These incense burners were used like ceremonial vessels to burn aromatic substances, with the possibility of including an additional container supported by the three heads, possibly to complement the rituals with offerings of some other type, including foods and/or beverages.

Moreover, with the described information, it may be suggested that the rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla represent a hearth, each head being a stone and the main bowl the place where fire was burnt. Just like a vessel is placed on the fire to heat the meals, a container was placed on top of the three heads of the censer to deposit the other offerings of the ritual. In both cases, the result would be to provide food for man and the gods, respectively.

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Figure 1 Rim-heads incense burners from Escuintla

Figure 2 Fragments of rim-heads incense burners from Quebrada La Culebra