

Effigy Censers of the Chen Mul Modeled Ceramic System and their Implications for Late Postclassic Maya Interregional Interaction

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Effigy censers are iconic artifacts of the Maya Late Postclassic period found in numerous sites on the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico, northern Belize, and the Petén region of Guatemala (Fry 1987:119; Russell 2000; Vail 1988). They are often identified as a type called Chen Mul Modeled at the Late Postclassic Maya capital of Mayapán, (Smith 1971). Used for burning incense in a variety of different ceremonies, they are most numerous at Mayapán, where they exhibit the greatest variety of deity images (Masson 2000:224; Smith 1971:210-211; Thompson 1957). Robert Smith's type name is sometimes applied to effigy censers from other lowland areas, but some of these resemble the Chen Mul Modeled of Mayapán much more closely than others. Although a few Mayapán censers may have been carried to other sites, most seem to reflect local styles that emulate Chen Mul.

Some form of religious unity is clearly evident in the widespread occurrence of these vessels in the Maya Lowlands (Rice 1987:187) but if we are to use the effigy censers as evidence for interregional contact, we must address variations in style more directly in our classifications. We suggest that in the initial stages analysts should place effigy censers in the Chen Mul Modeled ceramic *system* (Henderson and Agurcia 1987). Ceramic systems group ceramics based on broad similarities in surface treatment and form without reference to technological qualities (e.g., paste/temper) and any specific stylistic elements that would be used for type designations after detailed analysis. Here we focus on Chen Mul Modeled system censers from Mayapán,

Champlotón in Campeche, and several sites northern Belize, in light of their potential to inform archaeologists about intersite and interregional interaction.

Mayapán

Recent studies suggest that Chen Mul Modeled occurred at Mayapán as early as A.D.1250 (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a:7, Table 1; Peraza et al. 2006:168, 170-172, Table 1). Smith (1971:255) points out that full-figure effigy censers can be traced back at least to Cehpech times (A.D. 800-1000), where they occur with Puuc Slate ware at Xcaret and possibly also at Mayapán. He notes that the Hoal Modeled effigy censers occur in Hocaba phase levels (now dated A.D. 1000/1050-1100/1200) and Chen Mul Modeled censers first appear in the Hocaba-Tases levels, becoming predominant in late contexts of the Tases phase (Smith 1971:135-136, 255, Figs. 68a1, 68a3). Since the Hoal Modeled censers do not extend into the Tases Phase, they may presage the Chen Mul Modeled censers (**Figure 1**).

Whatever the precise chronology, the size (often 50 cm. high), quality, and elaboration of the Mayapán sample suggests that religious practices associated with effigy censers were most fully elaborated at Mayapán, if not developed there. Chen Mul Modeled effigy censers signal both religious change and expanding trade contacts around A.D. 1250. Some of Mayapán's Chen Mul Modeled censers are linked with Postclassic deities represented in codices from central Mexico, while others relate to Postclassic Maya codices and murals from Maya sites such as Tulum and Santa Rita (Boucher and Palomo 2005; Milbrath and Peraza 2003a; Taube 1992; Thompson 1957). The roster of Maya deities represented by censer figures includes at least 10 different gods, with the most common being Chac, Itzamna, the Death God, the Maize God and the Merchant God, linked respectively to Gods B, D, A, E and M of the Maya

codices (**Figures 2, 3**). Certain censers represent deities that blend traits of Maya and central Mexican deities (Milbrath and Peraza 2003b), whereas other censers represent deities are like those of central Mexican codices, such as Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, Tlazolteotl, and Xipe, a god also represented among Mayapán's stucco sculptures (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a:Fig. 19; Taube 1992: Figs. 63a, 64a, 65a; Thompson 1957:612). Study of the central Mexican deities suggests that these foreign influences came as a result of trade contact with the central highlands that may have developed around A.D. 1375-1420 (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a:30).

The contexts for Chen Mul Modeled effigy censers at Mayapán are varied, including burials, middens, caches, and specialized deposits found associated with altars. Some deposits suggest they were smashed in one location and the sherds were then dumped elsewhere. The number of the missing pieces from figures found in front of the altar in one colonnaded hall (Structure Q54) suggests they were broken purposefully and repositioned (**Figure 3**, Peraza et. al 2004:foto 15). A similar altar group was found more intact, and although broken virtually all the pieces remain (Lot C72 in Q81; Smith 1971:Fig. 67). Architectural associations of censers further suggest that specific deities were venerated in different structures, for example a concentration of Venus gods in the Q80 group (Q79, 79a, Q80, Q81; Peraza and Masson 2005). The varied contexts effigy censers at Mayapán suggest that they were used in many different ceremonies, including funerary rites.

Northern Belize and Lamanai

Raymond Sidrys (1983:240-41) proposes that the ritual use of effigy censers spread from Mayapán or northern Quintan Roo along the eastern seaboard to Belize because: a) they are found in terminal levels, with no gradual development in Terminal

Classic or Early Postclassic; b) the period of use of censers in Belize (A.D. 1250-1550) corresponds to the time of mass production at Mayapán (AD. 1250/1300-1450); and, c) there are strong stylistic similarities between the Belize censers and those at Mayapán (see also Masson 2003:271).

Eighty percent of the Postclassic ceramic inventory of Sidrys' excavations in northern Belize excavations were effigy censers removed from "ceremonial deposition areas" at Aventura, Patchhacan, Chan Chen, Santa Rita Corozal and Laguna. A large deposit from Aventura may have been broken elsewhere and then ritually deposited at the site (Sidrys 1983), and this may also be the case at Lamanai. Out of a sample that includes fragments of at least 36 censers (based on 36 differing feet), only two figures could be (partially) reconstructed (**Figure 4**).

At Lamanai, most of the Chen Mul Modeled system censers were found smashed at the top of Structure N9-56, first constructed in the Early Classic. Although they were deposited after the structure had been abandoned, there are some Postclassic architectural additions in the form of small low platforms in the front of the structure. One of these platforms, N9-56 supported a repositioned Classic period stela (Pendergast 1981). All of this suggests that the otherwise abandoned Classic period structure was used in the Postclassic period for smaller-scale ritual activity. One of the three partially reconstructable censers was deposited in a cache in an elite courtyard in the site core that otherwise shows no evidence of use after the Early Postclassic (Graham 2004).

The effigy censers of Lamanai are large and well made, like those at Champotón. They are somewhat smaller than those of Mayapán, and preliminary examination suggests that their iconography also differs slightly from Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled (Johns 2007; Pendergast 1985: 242). They are, however, of considerably

better quality than many of the similar effigy censers from other sites in the region. Accordingly, effigy censers found at Santa Rita were designated as Kol Modeled (Chase and Chase 1988:Fig. 26) which helps to distinguish them from the larger and finer Mayapán specimens. Some were found virtually intact in multiple burials, others were smashed on the front steps of a building that has multiple phases of construction beginning in the Early Classic period (Chase and Chase 1986). As at Lamanai, effigy censers continued in use at Santa Rita after the fall of Mayapán around A.D. 1450 (Chase and Chase 1988:57, 78).

Champlotón

Smith (1971: 256) noted a strong relationship between Mayapán censers and those at Champlotón on the west coast. Excavations in 2001 under the direction of William Folan substantially increased the inventory of Champlotón effigy censer sherds recovered from Structure 1 (the Great Platform in Group 1), a structure built in the Late Preclassic with Classic and Postclassic additions. Effigy censer deposits were found near the Late Preclassic central staircase (1-FA) and a midden (ca. 1.5 m thick) between the Classic period Structure 1-B and Structure 1-L, a Postclassic shrine (**Figures 5, 6**).

Champlotón ceramics indicate a long occupation into the Postclassic, but the Postclassic complex is 96% censers, with Chen Mul Modeled system censers being the most common (Forsyth 2004; Forsyth and Jordan 2003). It seems that Structure 1 was a specialized deposit contemporary with the small Postclassic shrine. Other excavations in 2003 produced no censers, and Donald Forsyth suggests that the Postclassic component represents a subcomplex formed exclusively by censers and a few other specialised serving vessels, including Fine Orange of the Matillas Group, produced in the area or in neighbouring Tabasco. Forsyth notes that Champlotón may have been

outside the sphere of Maya ceramics, but was an important point of interchange between Maya cultures to the north and non-Maya cultures in neighbouring coastal Tabasco.

The Champotón effigy censers are relatively well made and more numerous than those found at sites other than Mayapán. Their size compares with the Mayapán examples, and some iconographic details overlap, such as the beaded headdress crowned by pods that may be cacao, similar to examples of the Merchant God at Mayapán (**Figure 5**; Thompson 1957:Figure 1f). The quality of the effigies is somewhat inferior to those at Mayapán, for example hands and feet are generally modelled without nails. Similar “short cuts” are employed for teeth, represented as rounded pellets or more simply as incised lines. The range of deities depicted also seems much smaller than at Mayapán, although there are overlaps, such as the Death God, the Merchant god, and a Warrior God with a shield. Some images of the Rain God merge traits such as the fangs or goggles of Tlaloc with the long nose and sunken cheeks features of Chac, a combination seen also in effigy cups at Mayapán (**Figure 6**; Taube 1992:Fig. 73b). Nonetheless, in the Rain God imagery at Champotón Tlaloc features predominate, whereas at Mayapán traits of Chac predominate in the majority of effigy cups and effigy censers (Smith 1971:Fig. 63; Thompson 1957:Fig. 3f). Although Forsyth originally classified the Champotón censers as Chen Mul Modeled, it seems that the Champotón censers are a local emulation of Mayapán forms. Instrumental neutron activation analysis shows that the chemical composition of the pastes is like the clays available in the Río Candelaria, indicating the censers tested were all locally made (Bishop et al. 2006). Given differences in both surface style and technology, a new type name for these Chen Mul system censers may be warranted.

The Function of Chen Mul Modeled Censers

Censers were containers for burned offerings of copal, used in communication with the gods, but they may also have played a role as “idols” in calendric ceremonies (Tozzer 1941:161-162). Broken censers found sealed in the different renovations of Mayapán’s Castillo’s serpent temple may reflect the patterned activity of renewal ceremonies or other forms of calendar rituals described by Landa. Some ceremonial deposits at Mayapán resemble ritual dumps of censer fragments in Belize that have also been related to calendric rituals (Chase and Chase 1988; Russell 2000). Other fragmentary effigy censers were found in burials, indicating they served some funerary function (Chase and Chase 1988:51, Fig. 26; Smith 1971).

The possible role of censers as katun idols has been discussed by Diane and Arlen Chase (1988:72; D. Chase 1985a, b), based on Landa’s description of katun idols as markers of the passage of time (Tozzer 1941:166-69). Landa indicated that there were two idols, and the older idol eventually fell into disuse and was taken away. This pattern is suggested at Santa Rita where the Chases found that pairs of censers included one almost complete example and another more fragmentary effigy (Chase and Chase 1988:85). Cyclical renewal ceremonies may also be evident in the effigy censers found broken in situ on the top of structures (as at Lamanai and Champotón) or spread over refuse deposits.

Ethnohistorical analogy and archaeological contexts suggest that effigy censers were used in processional ritual at sites and pilgrimage among sites, and the latter may have been related to trade (Chase 1982, 1985; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Masson 2000). Deborah Walker (1990: vi) ties the effigy censers of Cerros to Santa Rita through procession ritual which functioned to integrate disparate economic systems into a mutually beneficial network, including proscribed methods for travel and

exchange. Thus, processional ritual, in conjunction with interregional networking, "functioned to delimit and maintain territorial boundaries" and fostered trade (Walker 1990:vi). Marilyn Masson (2000: 262) draws a similar conclusion, noting that the Cocom revitalization at Mayapán fostered an "economic boom that marked a new florescence for participating centers and their surrounding communities engaged in pilgrimage trading circuits." For Cozumel, David Freidel and Jeremy Sabloff (1984:185) note that "All traders were in fact "pilgrims" traveling under divine sanction for the ostensible purpose of visiting shrines and participating in festivals."

Style and Interregional Interaction

A study of the patterned distribution of deities provides information about their ritual uses. Censers from Mayapán represent a wider range of deities than are found at outlying sites. Analysis of the distribution of different deities at other sites is ongoing, but some patterning is evident. For example, the Maize God is relatively common at Mayapán and Chichén Itzá, but the Merchant God and associated representations of cacao seen at Mayapán are not evident Chichén Itzá (**Figure 2**, Peter Schmidt, personal communication, 2005). The Merchant God is clearly present at Champotón, but this site also includes a number of representations of Tlaloc, a god scarcely seen at Mayapán.

The archaeological context of censers also varies. For example, the censers of Champotón and Chichén Itzá, are found as offerings in pyramids and pyramid temples. In contrast, those of Mayapán are found more widely distributed, located in round structures, shrines, colonnades, burial cists, and pyramid temples.

Stylistic differences are also notable. Mayapán censers predominantly represent the eyes with painted pupils, whereas censers depicting pupils with punched holes are more characteristic of sites in Belize and the East Coast of Yucatán (Russell 2000;

Smith 1971:212). The censers of Mayapán are generally larger than those from other sites. The use of broad ornamental flanges is especially common at Mayapán and Chichén Itzá, but this trait is not characteristic of the East Coast, Petén, or Belize.

Masson (2000:262) notes that the effigies are increasingly generic farther away from Mayapán, allowing local leaders to interpret them various ways. The stylistic similarity of the effigy censers at Champotón, Mayapán, and Lamanai reinforces long-standing ideas about Late Postclassic interaction across the Yucatán peninsula (Smith 1971:256). Although the spread of Chen Mul-style effigy censers is typically associated with coastal interaction, it is notable that the censers from the inland center of Lamanai resemble the Mayapán censers more closely than those at coastal Santa Rita. However, Lamanai was almost certainly involved in trade between the Caribbean coast and the central Maya Lowlands by virtue of its location on the New River.

Mayapán may also have been connected to an inland route to the Petén. Zacpetén and Topoxté both show specific overlaps with Mayapán in terms of architecture and effigy censers (Pugh 2003). An unpublished censer fragment from Timothy Pugh's excavations of Zacpetén depicts a Chac face that closely resembles images from Mayapán. Nonetheless, Petén effigy censers usually differ from Mayapán censers (Bullard 1970:278-285, Figs. 18-22; Pugh 2003:Fig. 8; Rice 1987:Fig. 61).

The scale of Late Postclassic architecture at Lamanai, the quality and quantity of its Postclassic remains (e.g., burials), the similarities between Lamanai redwares and those of Mayapán, as well as the similarity of the Chen Mul system censers all suggest that Mayapán and Lamanai were in contact. This is not surprising since based on size alone Lamanai was unrivalled in the Late Postclassic southern lowlands. The similarity of the effigy censers at Champotón and Lamanai is also notable, and all three sites may have been important nodes in a trade and pilgrimage route linking the coast

of Yucatán with the inland southern Maya area, especially with the Petén Lakes, where Postclassic effigy censers are also found (Bullard 1970; Pugh 2002). In terms of broader connections, Mayapán censers have the greatest percentage of central Mexican gods, and the presumed period of contact with central Mexico probably began relatively late in the Tases phase (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a:28-31). Oddly enough Tlaloc is virtually unknown among the Mayapán censers, despite his presence at Champotón.

Conclusions

Effigy censers were important to rituals that integrated far flung sites and may have occasionally been physically moved among some sites. Nonetheless, even when pilgrims deposited censers in Classic or Terminal Classic cities as offerings the censers may have been made nearby, because the censers show regional stylistic or thematic traits. If we are to be more specific about the nature of these interactions a first step is to deal more consistently with the stylistic and compositional variability of the pieces themselves. More trace element analysis will be needed to confirm whether any censers for transported from site to site, but in the meantime it is clear that the distribution of the Chen Mul Modeled system reflects the interconnected nature of the Postclassic world and its integration through ideology and trade.

Acknowledgments

Our thanks to the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., for funding study of the Mayapán censers (Grant number 05025, 2005-2006). We also thank the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History (I.N.A.H.) for permission to photograph pieces from Mayapán and Champtón. We also acknowledge the contributions of the team of archaeologists working at Champotón under the direction of William Folan, and the Lamanai project, under the direction of Elizabeth Graham and Scott Simmons, co-director, and David Pendergast, excavator of the Chen Mul style ceramics. And we thank the Belizian Commissioner of Archaeology, Jaime Aiwe.



Figure 1. Hoal Modeled Effigy Censer, Mayapán. Photo by Susan Milbrath, Courtesy of INAH, Museo Regional de Antropología de Yucatán, Palacio Cantón



Figure 2. Itzamna, Chen Mul Modeled Effigy Censer, Mayapán. Photo by Susan Milbrath, Courtesy of INAH,





Figures 3a, b, Death God, Chen Mul Modeled Effigy Censer, Structure Q54,
Mayapán. Photos by Susan Milbrath, Courtesy of INAH,



Figure 4. Effigy Censer, Lamanai, Photo by Jim Aimers, Courtesy of Belizian Commission of Archaeology



Figure. 5. Effigy Censer Fragment, Structure 1, Champotón, Photo by Susan Milbrath,
Courtesy of INAH



Figure 6. Group of Effigy Censer Fragments, Structure 1, Champotón, Photo by Susan Milbrath, Courtesy of INAH.

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