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## **Mayapán's Effigy Censers: Iconography, Context, and External Connections**

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## **Abstract**

Mayapán's Chen Mul Modeled censers are an ideal body of work for studying Postclassic Maya religion. Some of Mayapán's effigy censers represent central Mexican deities. Others share iconographic and stylistic features with Maya codices and Maya murals from Quintana Roo and Belize. Effigy censers found at Postclassic sites, distributed across the Yucatán peninsula and south to Belize and the Petén in Guatemala, provide comparative data that will help refine our interpretation of the censer cult as it spread out from Mayapán. Excavations documented by archaeologists in the Carnegie project and those conducted by INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) provide data about the precise archaeological context of the censers at Mayapán. Ethnohistorical accounts of rituals involving "idols" and calendric renewal ceremonies will help to refine our understanding of the role effigy censers played at Postclassic Mayapán. The ethnohistorical data, coupled with study of the iconography and archaeological context of Mayapán's censers, will allow us to reconstruct a great deal about Postclassic religious ceremonies and the role of individual structures at Mayapán.

## **Resumen**

Los incensarios Chen Mul Modelado de Mayapán representan artefactos artísticos ideales para estudiar la religión de los mayas durante el Postclásico. Algunos de los incensarios efigie representan deidades de México Central. Otros comparten elementos iconográficos y estilísticos con los códices mayas y los murales mayas de Quintana Roo y de Belice. Los incensarios efigie encontrados en sitios Postclásicos, distribuidos a través de la península de Yucatán y al sur en Belice y el Petén en Guatemala, proporcionan información comparativa que ayudará a refinar nuestra interpretación al culto de los incensarios, como se difunde desde Mayapán. Las excavaciones documentadas por los arqueólogos en el Proyecto Carnegie y las dirigidas por el INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) nos dan un contexto arqueológico de los incensarios de Mayapán. Los datos etnohistóricos describen rituales con "ídolos" y ceremonias del calendario de renovación. El estudio de estas fuentes de información nos ayudará a refinar nuestro entendimiento del papel de los incensarios efigie en el Postclásico de Mayapán. La información etnohistórica y el análisis de la iconografía, junto con el contexto arqueológico de los incensarios de Mayapán, nos permitirán reconstruir las ceremonias religiosas del Postclásico y el papel de las estructuras individuales en este sitio.

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## **Introduction**

Our FAMSI project photographically documented effigy censers as part of an ongoing study of the censer cult at Mayapán. Introduced around 1300 or 1325 at Mayapán, Chen Mul Modeled effigy incense burners represent an innovation in religious practices that extended until the abandonment of the site around 1450. This new style of censer is contemporary with some dramatic changes in Mayapán's architecture, including the construction of revival style architecture modeled on structures at Chichén Itzá and at Puuc sites (Aveni et al. 2004; Milbrath and Peraza 2003a).

## **Background on Mayapán Censers**

Excavations of the last Maya capital in México, begun in 1996 under the direction of Carlos Peraza Lope of the Centro INAH Yucatán, have unearthed many new censers. The well-documented INAH project, described in reports spanning 1996 to the present, and publications of the Carnegie excavations in the 1950s, allows us to explore the archaeological context and chronology of Mayapán's censers. Current studies by Carlos Peraza and Marilyn Masson (2005) provide evidence on the spatial distribution of the censers and relative frequency of different types of deities. Postclassic Maya effigy censers from Mayapán clearly depict gods and goddesses like those represented in Maya codices, but there is also some overlap with deities represented in Mixteca-Puebla art, such as those in the Borgia group codices.

Scholars have concluded that the cult associated with Postclassic effigy censers originated at Mayapán, based on the site's large quantity of censers and the diversity of forms (Masson 2000; Russell 2000:56; Sanders 1960:245). The effigy censer form was copied at a number of sites in Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Campeche. Similar effigy censers come from sites as far south as Belize and the Petén of Guatemala, where Zacpetén and Topoxte seem to show influence from Mayapán (Bullard 1970; Chung 1997; Gann 1900; Pugh and Rice 1996; Rice 1999; Russell 2000).

Carnegie archaeologists suggested that the effigy censer cult reflects a major religious change that was introduced by the Cocombs or their Canul ("Mexican") allies relatively late in the site's history, in accord with events described in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel during Katun 1 Ahau, (A.D. 1382-1401; Pollock 1962:8). The archaeological chronology indicates, however, that the effigy censers appeared earlier, based on Robert Smith's (1971) chronology of ceramic lots. Further study of the archaeological context of these lots suggests that Chen Mul Modeled effigy incense burners may have been introduced as early as A.D. 1300 (Milbrath and Peraza 2003b: table 1).

The appearance of effigy censers at Mayapán in the fourteenth century signals both a religious change and expanding trade contacts. Scholars have determined that some of Mayapán's Chen Mul Modeled censers are linked with Postclassic deities from central México represented in the codices, while others relate to Postclassic Maya codices and murals from Maya sites such as Tulum and Santa Rita (Taube 1992; Thompson 1957).

Our ongoing analysis of Mayapán's external relationships provides a framework for understanding the "foreign" deities represented in Mayapán's censers (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a; Milbrath 2005).

Friar Landa describes censers as containers for burned offerings of copal, a form of communicating with the gods, but they also may have played a role as "idols" in calendric ceremonies (Tozzer 1941). Broken censers found sealed in the different renovations of the Castillo's serpent temple may reflect the patterned activity of renewal ceremonies or other forms of calendric rituals described by Landa. Some ceremonial deposits at Mayapán may be compared with ritual dumps of censer fragments in Belize that are apparently related to calendric rituals (Chase and Chase 1988; Russell 2000).



Figure 1a. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: skeletal faces. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.

### Analysis of the Effigy Censers

The censers of Mayapán are a truly rich source of data, one that can help us to understand the site of Mayapán in new ways—allowing us to determine the function of specific religious structures and the role of censers in religion and ritual at this last Maya capital. The study of newly excavated censer fragments has revealed a number of well-

known gods, as well as some new deities that seem to be unique to Mayapán. Our study involves a comparative analysis of the corpus of Mayapán censers in terms of style, chronology, iconography and archaeological context.



Figure 1b. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: skeletal small heads. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.

Postclassic codices provide a major resource for identifying the deities on the censers. Comparative study of deities represented in Maya murals and codices is an essential part of this project, but we have only begun our analysis of this data. Our preliminary analysis suggests the roster of Maya deities represented by censer figures includes at least ten different gods, with the most common being representations of Chac, Itzamna, the Death God ([Figure 1a](#) and [Figure 1b](#), shown above), and the Maize God and Merchant God, linked respectively to Gods B, D, A, E and M of the Maya codices. Some censers clearly represent deities that blend traits of Maya and central Mexican deities (Milbrath and Peraza 2003b), whereas other 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: figure 19; Taube 1992: figures 63a, 64a, 65a; Thompson 1957:612). Study of the central Mexican deities on censers will enhance our understanding of foreign influences in the censer cult, and trade contact with the central highlands that apparently peaked around Phase II of the Aztec Templo Mayor (A.D. 1375-1420; Milbrath and Peraza 2003a:30).



**Figure 2. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: diving god. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**

A study of the patterned distribution of deities provides important information about the cult both at Mayapán and beyond. 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 clearly evident. For example, the diving god seems to be fairly common at Dzibanché, as well as at sites along the East Coast, but is rare at Mayapán ([Figure 2](#), shown above). Analysis to date suggests that the Maize God is relatively common at Mayapán and Chichén Itzá, but the Merchant God and associated representations of cacao are not evident at Chichén Itzá.



Comparing the censers from the "center" with those from the "periphery" yields information about the nature of the censer cult as it spread throughout the lowland Maya area in the Postclassic period. Archaeological data from sites with regional expressions of the censer cult provide comparative information about the context of censers. For example, the censers of Champotón (Chakanputun) and Chichén Itzá are found as offerings in pyramids and pyramid temples (William Folan and Peter Schmidt, personal communications, 2004). In contrast, those of Mayapán are found more widely distributed, located in round structures, shrines, colonnades, burial cists, and pyramid temples.

Studying effigy censers from other sites with those of Mayapán indicates that 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 (Russell 2000). Size differences are also notable, with the censers of Mayapán being generally larger than those from other sites. Preliminary study also suggests that 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.



**Figure 3. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: step-eyed god. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**

Several of the recently discovered pieces seem to be of exceptionally high artistry and may even be unique pieces ([Figure 3](#), shown above; Milbrath and Peraza 2003b). These would seem to contradict Tatiana Proskouriakoff's (1955:103) statement that Mayapán censers, while elaborate, are stereotyped and crude in artistic conception. The style of Mayapán's effigy censers may have changed over time, but use of molds for faces and other details masks stylistic change, since the molds could have been reused for a relatively long period of time. Study of censer distribution at the site may be more useful in determining chronological changes in the censer cult, based on the archaeological chronology of structures previously established for the site (Milbrath and Peraza 2003a: table 1). Linking individual censers to specific structures will also enhance our understanding of the cults served in different structures and may reveal some changes in the deities worshipped over time.

Archaeological context also provides specific data about religious cults at Mayapán. Although many altars were sacked in a major revolt that contributed to the city's collapse, fragmentary censers in certain religious structures allow us to identify the



deities worshipped there. For example, Venus gods bearing face painting characteristic of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Thompson 1957; Taube 1992) seem to be concentrated in a single shrine (Q79a; Masson and Peraza, in press). This suggests that the structure was dedicated to a Venus cult. One of the serpent temples (Q58) contained a censer depicting a howler monkey scribe, probably indicating that the altar was dedicated to the deity of artists and scribes (Milbrath and Peraza 2003b). Some altars have been found virtually intact with their ceramic "idols" in place, as in the case of Structure Q54, a colonnade where a group of five censers representing different deities are aligned with the altar.

## **Project Data Collection**

The project involved two trips to México to photograph effigy censers in Mayapán's ceramic depository and related ceramic collections in museums and INAH depositories, especially those in México City, Mérida, Chichén Itzá, Campeche, and Cozumel. Multiple images of each piece were shot using a tripod and varied lighting, including natural light and photoflood lights. All of the photos shot in the Mayapán repository in Telchaquillo include a card identifying the catalogue number or excavation year and lot. Other photos varied in format from formal shots with cloth backdrop and identifying cards, to museum shots using a tripod and lights, to more informal shots using available lighting, photos that were for information only, when publication was not the intended use of the photo.

Using a tripod and lights, we photographed all of the reconstructed censers at Telchaquillo and more than 80% of the Mayapán censer fragments in that repository, focusing on elements such as faces, headdresses, and diagnostic costume detail. After receiving a permit for photography from INAH in México City, Luis Millet, then director of the Centro INAH Yucatán, and Blanca González, director of the archaeological museum in the Palacio Cantón, gave us permission to photograph all the Mayapán censers in storage at the museum using a tripod and lights. Additional photos taken of censers on display at Palacio Cantón Mérida were taken with a tripod but no special lighting. The tripod helped to achieve high quality and these may be part of future publications. We also photographed censers in a temporary exhibit focusing on Maya religion at the museum (Boucher and Palomo 2005). Publication of any photos taken in the museum will require a special permit. The existing permit allowed us to photograph the original Mayapán collections from the Carnegie excavations, now housed in the Centro INAH Yucatán in the ceramoteca under the direction of Sylviane Boucher and Yoly Palomo. Photographs in this location also included representative examples from Chichén Itzá. Permission to publish these INAH ceramoteca photos will be required, so they are not part of the photographs submitted to FAMSI. A permit also allowed use of a tripod to photograph collections in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in México City, but a separate permit will be required for any future publication. Enrique Nalda permitted photography of unpublished censers in the Dzibanché archaeological lab for study purposes. Photos at the ceramoteca at the site of Chichén Itzá were for study purposes only and did not involve a tripod and lights. Only the reconstructed censers and

fragments in Telchaquillo are included as visuals in the FAMSI report because inclusion on the web site is a form of publication, and only those collections directly under the control of Carlos Peraza can be published at this point in time.

Time did not permit photography of censer fragments from a variety of sites distributed throughout the peninsula, although a preliminary survey was conducted to identify all the sites with censer fragments in the INAH repository in Mérida. These include sherd collections from El Meco, El Rey, and Tulum, three East Coast sites that seem to be most closely linked with Mayapán. Photography of INAH collections from those sites will continue in the coming year.

The original plan also involved a visit to see INAH collections in Chetumal, but Hurricane Emily made that trip impossible. The hurricane also delayed the photography project in Cancun, and even affected some parts of the project in Mérida. Preliminary discussions with the director of the archaeological museum in Cancun indicate there are about 30 whole censers in their collection.

Photographs of censers on display in the archaeological museums in Campeche and Cozumel were taken without a tripod or a special permit, and are for study purposes only. Photography of the numerous censers from Champotón in the ceramoteca at the University of Campeche, collections excavated by Linda Foley Folan in a project under the direction of William Folan, represent parts of some 50 different censers, were shot with tripod and lights, and we hope to receive permission to include these photos in future publications.



**Figure 4a. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: maize, cacao, copal. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**

The project resulted in over 1000 photos, but this number is somewhat misleading because some shots included many fragments from different censers, while others were the same censer photographed from multiple angles in the case of reconstructed censers. Photos of fragments generally included groupings of faces, ears, hands, arms, legs, feet, adornos, offerings, headdress and other costuming elements ([Figure 4a](#), shown above; [Figure 4b](#) and [Figure 4c](#), shown below).



**Figure 4b. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: eye forms. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**



Figure 4c. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: feet. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.

### Data Analysis

At present we are grouping sets of similar censers at Mayapán and preparing to plot their distribution in site maps. Some new themes have been identified by careful study of the Carnegie collection. Two censer fragments show individuals standing on jaguars, recalling the jaguar thrones and scenes of subjugation involving prisoners of earlier times. Another fragment in the Carnegie collection depicts a pair of hands bound with rope, clearly representing a prisoner. Hands holding an atlatl in this collection would presumably belong to a male warrior, but this need not be the case because the atlatl shows up in surprising places at Mayapán. For example, a maize goddess found in the recent excavations at Mayapán is armed with an atlatl.

For deity identification we are focusing on tooth types, face markings, nose shape, and headdress type when dealing with head fragments, and pectoral types and physical features (breasts, ribs, etc.) on torsos with body fragments. Feet and hands and arms seem less diagnostic of deity identifications, except in cases where there are some unusual elements, as in the case of the scribe, who actually holds a paint brush and shell paint pot (Milbrath and Peraza 2003b).



**Figure 5. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: Quetzalcoatl. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**

Preliminary study of the archaeological context of Mayapán censers is also producing some interesting results. A grouping of censers in Q54, previously thought to be a grouping of four censers, is now known to include five individual pieces. One of these is quite intriguing because it represents the Quetzalcoatl, the wind god ([Figure 5](#), shown above). Although some censers were found in positioned in the altars, they may have been intentionally broken prior to the site's abandonment. This is evident from the fact that so many of the censers have missing pieces, even those in the altar grouping. And others were clearly broken and cached or dumped, rather than broken as a consequence of collapsing architecture. Further study will be required to determine whether this destruction was the result of specific ceremonies, such as katun ceremonies and other forms of termination rituals, or a more violent form of destruction resulting from the revolt that ended the site's major occupation in the fifteenth century.





**Figure 6. Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: Step-eyed God. Photograph by Susan Milbrath.**

### **Mayapán Chen Mul Modeled Censers: Sample Photographs**

The group of 44 photos that follows is a sampling from over 1000 photos taken during our FAMSI photo documentation project. All the photos are Chen Mul Modeled Censers dating between A.D. 1300-1450. The censers were all excavated between 1996 and 2004 in the INAH project directed by Carlos Peraza Lope. All photos are by Susan Milbrath and show a centimeter scale; some also show a scale in inches. Most are labeled with cards that note the year of excavation and the lot number. For example, the photo labeled "Old God Frontal" includes a card recording MY-97-4331-capa 1. The MY refers to the site of Mayapán, 97 refers to the year it was excavated (1997), and the last number is the lot number. In this case, the lot was also subdivided by layers.



Another example, titled "Quetzalcoatl" ([Figure 5](#), shown previously) has a card that says MY-03 for the year, followed by a lot number (2035) and the structure number (Q54). The card also notes that it is "one of five." The photo titled "Step-eyed God," a detail from the censer shown in Figure 3, (MY-03-2190) is also from the group of five excavated during the 2003 season in Structure Q54 (see [Figure 6](#)). Other photos with titles that begin with the phrase "Set of 5" include the remaining censers excavated in 2003 in Q54. The cards in this group say "one of four" because at the time these photos were taken, the group was thought to have a total of four censers. Later analysis indicated that the group in Q54 actually included five separate censers. It is possible that the group may also have included a sixth censer. The photo labeled "Set of 5 or 6" (MY-99-0290) was actually excavated in 1999, but now is believed to have been part of the group excavated in 2003. It is noteworthy that despite the most careful excavation, not all pieces of the censers in this group were found. Either the fragments had disintegrated or the censers were broken elsewhere and set up in a fragmentary condition in front of the Q54 altar.

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