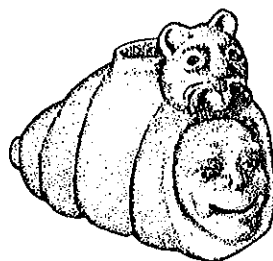


Caches and Censerwares: Meaning from Maya Pottery

DIANE Z. CHASE



INTRODUCTION

The ancient Maya of Central America made a wide array of pottery to serve various needs, from plain containers for everyday food preparation and storage to elaborate ceramic objects intended to serve as offerings in burials. Maya pottery is well studied in regard to form, technology, and decoration. It is, in fact, a major resource in determining relative dating throughout the Maya area (Figure 1). Even so, some kinds of pottery merit more attention and study by scholars, particularly two basic ceramic categories—cache vessels and incense burners. That caches and incensarios, or censers, should be inadequately studied is lamentable as both kinds of pottery, when conjoined with their archaeological contexts, can provide glimpses of Maya ritual activity difficult to view in any other way. Both these kinds of pottery have symbolic meaning that cannot be assessed solely by viewing them independently as ceramic objects or types without a consideration of their associations, placement, and contents.

Finding detailed archaeological information on Maya cache vessels and censers is not a simple task. Incense burners, given their frequent discovery smashed as the terminal offerings in a building, are not easily

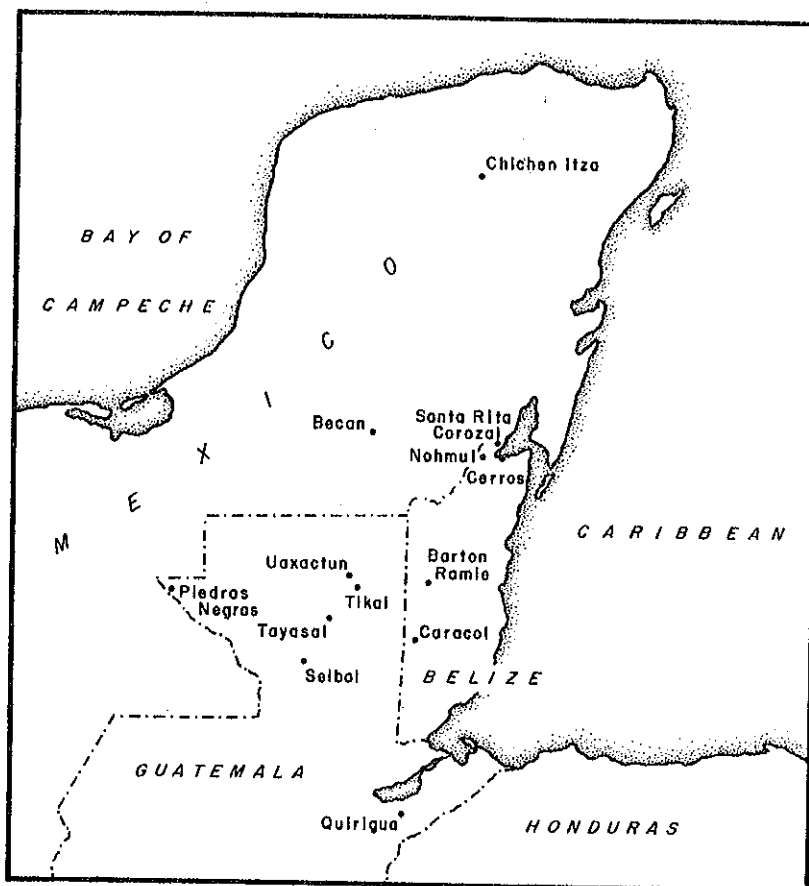


Figure 1. The Maya area, showing location of sites mentioned in the paper.

reconstructed for either full analysis or for a ceramic report. Cache vessels, although well illustrated in site reports, usually contain sizeable numbers of smaller items of jadeite, shell, bone, or other substances. The associations between cache vessels and their inclusions are rarely found in more than outline or tabular form. Ethnohistoric references likewise offer

incomplete glimpses into the Maya ritual in which both types of pottery were used. Despite the irregular information on caches and censers, it should be evident that further research is likely to result in a fuller comprehension of Maya ritual and symbolic systems and, importantly, their change through time. Both classes of ceramics served specific ritual functions that are far from fully understood.

MAYA CACHES

Although a few archaeological reports contain detail on the artifacts found in caches (for example, see Heye 1925 and Joyce 1932 for discussions concerning eccentric flints), published reports solely discussing caches, their contexts, contents, and significance are extremely rare. William R. Coe's (1959) combined discussion of artifacts, caches, and burials provides perhaps the best overview of caching practices at the Guatemalan site of Piedras Negras and elsewhere in the Americas. Even this monograph, however, provides only a listing of the contents of individual caches and barely hints at the underlying meaning of caches. Detailed drawings of the *in situ* contents of caches are rarely provided in archaeological reports; although the overall numbers of items are generally indicated, often in a master chart, a discussion of the layout of the objects within caches is only infrequently found. The assemblage of these objects and their arrangement are crucial to understanding the purpose of cache vessels themselves and in reconstructing the symbolic system they represent. Clearly, there is room for further investigation of the significance of caches in Maya culture.

Following Coe (1959:77), the term *cache* is used to mean "one or more objects found together, but apart from burials, whose grouping and situation point to intentional interment as an offering" and, again following Coe, caches are things that are intentionally hidden. His definition differs from others, such as J. Eric Thompson's (1939:184), in that Coe's use of one or more items allows for the case of a container apparently devoid of contents upon excavation, but that may have included perishable remains at the point of deposition. Taking this situation one step further, there seems to be no reason why a single object without a container may not also be considered a cache given the appropriate contextual considerations.

Although identification of most caches is straightforward, there are some problematic finds that defy simple definition as caches—such as plates containing human skulls. These are sometimes referred to as burials even though the deposit most likely represents a sacrificial offering (see Coe 1959:77; A. Chase 1983:114–115, 209; Becker no date). There are also terminal deposits in constructions that sometimes are problematic to define; Coe distinguishes between caches and terminal deposits (see also Garber 1983), indicating that final deposits of archaeological materials in a construction, prior to new building activity, do not constitute caches. Although certain terminal deposits, such as mass breaking of vessels, are not purposefully hidden offerings and thus technically not caches, other terminal deposits, such as vessels left in a niche and then purposefully covered, do fill the criterion for caching. Thus, the content and context of the items being considered are important in assessing them as caches in contrast to some other kind of deposit.

Discussion of Maya caches often finds the word "votive" as a preface to indicate the ritual nature of such an offering and is thought to preclude "confusion with the utilitarian storage caches found frequently in North American archaeology" (Coe 1959:77). Although it is true that most Maya caches do not contain solely utilitarian items, one is left to wonder if purely utilitarian items cannot also be cached as part of ritual offerings. Referred to as *problematic deposits* rather than as caches, certain deposits in the small residential groups at Tikal, Guatemala, such as Problematic Deposit 46—where a metate covers two manos and another metate (Haviland and others 1985:156)—further confuse the utilitarian-votive issue and may reflect a nonceramic cache pattern.

Distinctive containers, or associations of containers when present, are important components of many Maya caches. These are most often made of pottery, but might also be made of stone or perhaps a perishable material. There are sometimes single vessels and other times two vessels or a single vessel with a lid (Figure 2a–c). Although cache vessels may form a specialized part of the ceramic assemblage, they may also on occasion be no different from standard vessels used in utilitarian or burial contexts. Even in cases where pottery vessels for caches appear to be undifferentiated from other pottery at the site, a further question may still be asked: was the item specially made for the deposit?

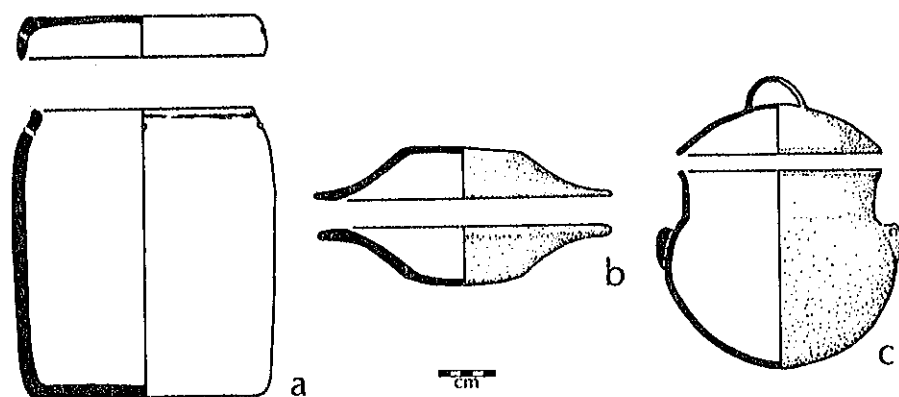


Figure 2. Ceramic cache containers. *a*, Early Classic period red-slipped cache vessel from Caracol Structure A6; *b*, Middle Classic period unslipped cache vessel and lid from Caracol Structure L3; *c*, Late Postclassic period unslipped cache vessel and lid from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 37 (drawn by Muriel Kirkpatrick).

In addition to containers themselves, there are other components of caches such as various quantities and combinations of worked and unworked shell, bone, jadeite, flint, and obsidian, as well as ceramic figurines. These items, frequently placed within ceramic containers, although extremely variable in their specific combinations, do show certain patterns when studied synchronically and diachronically. The combination of context, container, and contents is clearly most directly related to meaning.

The variety of caches and cache contents found archaeologically in the Maya area should be not at all surprising, especially given the Maya propensity for making offerings, documented following Spanish contact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Diego de Landa noted Maya offerings of everything from food and drink to incense, jadeite, and shell beads, to human blood (see Tozzer 1941:315–321 for an index of items). Maya books also refer to offerings of incense, candles, flowers, food, animals, and human blood (see Edmunson 1984:94). It is clear that these

ceremonial offerings, once made, could never be returned to their former uses (Tozzer 1941:166). It would appear that offerings had to be completely eaten, burned, thrown into a cenote, or otherwise removed or destroyed (Tozzer 1941:104, note 474, 114, 181; Edmunson 1984:94); obviously, some of these items were secreted in caches. Descriptions of caches per se are difficult to locate in ethnohistorical works. Landa notes the Maya belief that the gods themselves descended to receive at least some of these offerings (Tozzer 1941:143, 158). During certain of the New Year (Uayeb) rites, the offering of a dog or human heart was made "between two platters"—perhaps the most explicit reference to caching (D. Chase 1985a). Maya depictions of caching are sometimes found in painted scenes (see Smith 1934; M. Robertson 1972).

Historic accounts of Maya religious practices make it evident that offerings were made in different ways and combinations depending upon the rite being observed; explicit numbers and kinds of offerings were unequivocally important symbolically. In two of the four years of the Uayeb, for example, specific and distinctive numbers of grains of maize were ground and made into incense or drink. During Kan years 43 grains of maize were ground and burned with incense in a brazier while 415 grains of parched maize were made into a drink (Tozzer 1941:140–141); during Muluc years, 53 grains of maize were ground and burned with incense in a brazier, while 380 grains of maize were made into a drink (Tozzer 1941:144). In a similar way, the other offerings vary between these two versions of the Uayeb rites. Given this emphasis on specific numbers and kinds of offerings, a delineation of patterning in the contexts or contents of caches would clearly be a significant step towards eliciting the specific meaning of individual Maya caches. Work at Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, has already led to the association of certain caches with specific Uayeb activities (D. Chase 1985b).

CACHE CHRONOLOGY AND CONTENTS

Caches have been found at most Maya sites beginning during the Middle Preclassic period (900–300 B.C.) and continuing through the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1300–1530 at Santa Rita Corozal); however, archaeologically recovered caches are far more abundant during the Classic and Postclassic periods. From the limited published examples of

Preclassic caches, it would appear that these occur predominantly in specialized containers, specifically in flat-based, flaring-walled vessels placed lip-to-lip (Figure 2*b*) or in lidded jars. The contents of these Preclassic caches are generally not exorbitant, consisting of a jade bead or an obsidian lancet (Coe 1965:464). Several caches, however, recovered in northern Belize at Cerros and Nohmul date to the Late Preclassic period and are reminiscent of later Classic period ones (Garber 1986:118, 124; Hammond 1986) in that they contain carved figures, in this case of jadeite. One Middle Preclassic cache from Seibal, Guatemala, consists of a series of vessels and jadeite celts laid out in a cruciform arrangement (Smith 1982:245), very reminiscent of the placements subsumed in barrel-shaped cache vessels of the Classic period at the site of Caracol, Belize (see below). By the onset of the Classic period around A.D. 250, however, the numbers of caches appear to increase as do the quantity and variety of containers and offerings. The majority of Classic period caches appear to be placed in specially made containers — either two plates placed lip-to-lip, or a single vessel, often with a lid. However, isolated examples of nonspecialized vessels utilized as offerings do occur. Whereas ceramic cache vessels are often simple in form, some specialized pieces, particularly from the southeast at Quirigua (Sharer and Ashmore 1978:photograph, page 17; D. Chase, personal observation, 1977) and from Becan (Ball 1977:Figs. 38–42) in the Northern lowlands, are modeled and show effigy figures.

Objects within Classic period cache vessels are many and varied. The symbolism of the objects also ranges from relatively clear to extremely abstract. Coe (1959, 1965) attempted to organize the contents of Lowland Maya caches. He (1965:465) found that the caches of Piedras Negras and Uaxactun "fail in their own different ways to show a significant or at least useful change of composition." Tikal caches on the contrary "show fairly distinct and profound shifts in content with time, providing a general and occasionally a specific predictability" (Coe 1965:465). Late Classic monument caches at Tikal appeared to fit into four stylistic groups containing up to nine distinct eccentric flints and incised obsidians depicting up to nine deities. These caches generally were contained in one to four pottery vessels and sometimes were associated with pieces of jade, but never with marine materials. Late Classic Tikal structural caches,

in contrast, contained both eccentric obsidians and marine material. Incised obsidians and eccentric flints in structural caches, however, did not appear to have the same standardized numbers or designs of the sets associated with monuments. Thus, by Late Classic times there was a clear distinction between monument and structural caches and the trend in monument caches was toward more orderly and recognizable patterns.

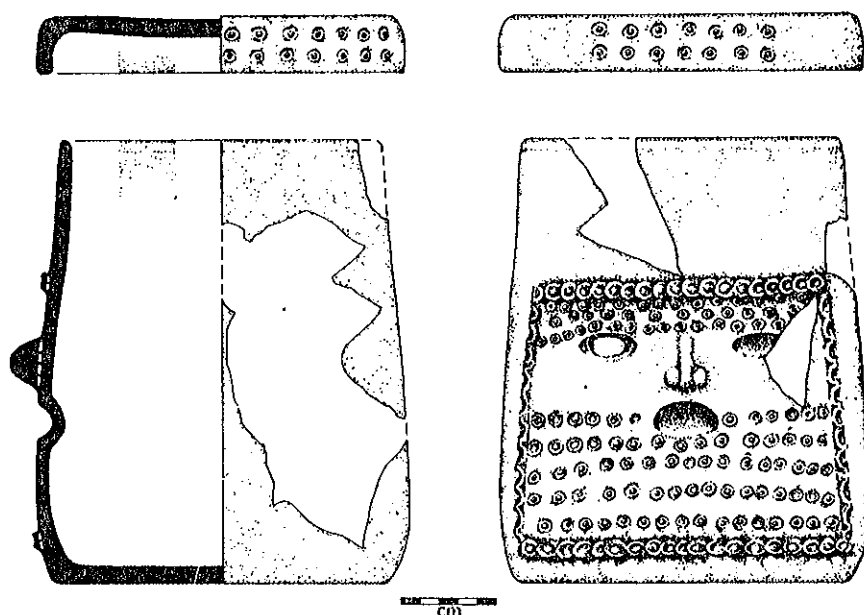


Figure 3. Modeled-and-appliqued, unslipped Early Classic period cache vessel from Caracol Structure 8F8 in the Tulakatuhebe Acropolis (drawn by Karen A. Keivit).

The variation present in Early Classic caches is well indicated in deposits from both Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1986a, 1988:33) and Caracol, Belize (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987a, 1987c:12-13, 40-41, 46-48). Importantly, the meaning underlying some of these caches is well illustrated by several of the caches from Caracol. Two similar lidded caches, one from Structure A6 and the other

from the part of the site referred to as Tulakatuhebe, provide complementary information. At Tulakatuhebe a looted barrel cache was recovered (Figure 3). Whereas the interior barrel lid depicts a winged Itzamna, and perhaps the heavens, the interior bottom of the barrel has a portrait of the deceased corn god, probably representing the underworld (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987c:Fig. 41). As the container can be seen to be symbolically representing the upper and lower orders of the Maya universe, it may be projected that the contents of this cache vessel denote the symbolic order of the living world. Thus the container and its contents together symbolically represent the entire Maya universe.

Such an interpretation is reaffirmed in the Structure A6 cache. Within the unlooted Structure A6 barrel-shaped vessel numerous objects were carefully placed in a specific pattern (Figure 4). Marine shells roughly mark the four directions both in orientation and in a correct Maya color scheme. Some items such as carved shell and jadeite turtles, shark teeth and stingray spines directly suggest the underworld and blood sacrifice, whereas other jadeite and shell artifacts form more abstract figures similar to configurations found in other caches with varying world, underworld,

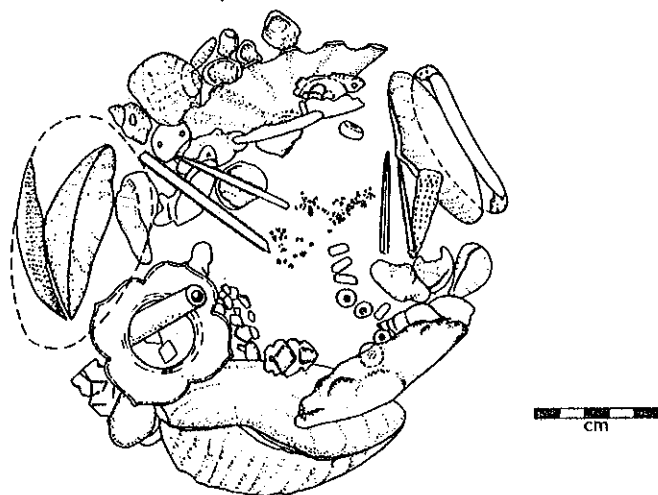


Figure 4. In situ, nonceramic contents of the Early Classic cache from Caracol Structure A6. North is located at the top of the drawing (drawn by Sarah J. Ruch).

and "heavens" connotations. In the middle of the cache a jadeite earflare was placed; this artifact, by its location and green color may represent a central, fifth world direction (compare Thompson 1970:197).

On a later time level, Santa Rita Corozal provides some of the most significant caches known from the Postclassic period (Figure 5, see also D. Chase and A. Chase 1988). These later caches, however, are clearly indicative of continuities with earlier Classic and Preclassic patterns, particularly in reference to quadripartite directionality, as many of these caches were found with four of each kind of figurine be they jaguars, warriors, women, or monkeys (Figure 6). As mentioned previously, many of the Postclassic caches have the same trends toward regularity as the Late Classic caches of Tikal and it may be that some of the Postclassic structural caches continue the ceremonies previously associated with monument caches in the Classic period. This would accord well with the defined association of some Postclassic caches with calendar ritual (see D. Chase 1985a:121-123, 1985b, in press; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986b:23, 1988:73-75).

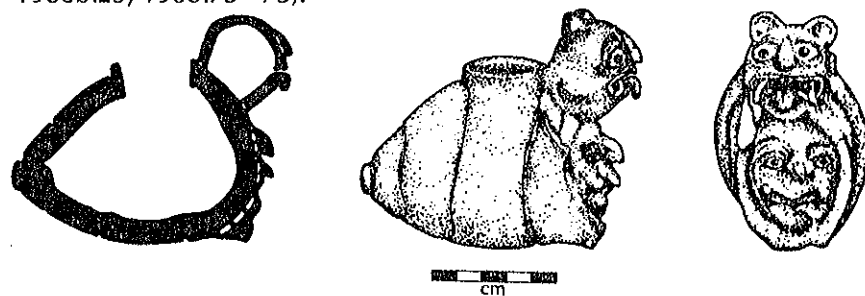


Figure 5. Late Postclassic period, previously painted, cache vessel from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 218 (drawn by Karen A. Keivet).

Likewise, the totality of structural meaning inherent in a cache clearly relates the Maya conception of the universe directly with blood sacrifice and the underworld creatures depicted. Perhaps even more interesting, however, is the distinction made between the interior and exterior of the container. In some cases all items were included within the ceramic containers whereas, in other cases certain figures were exterior and others

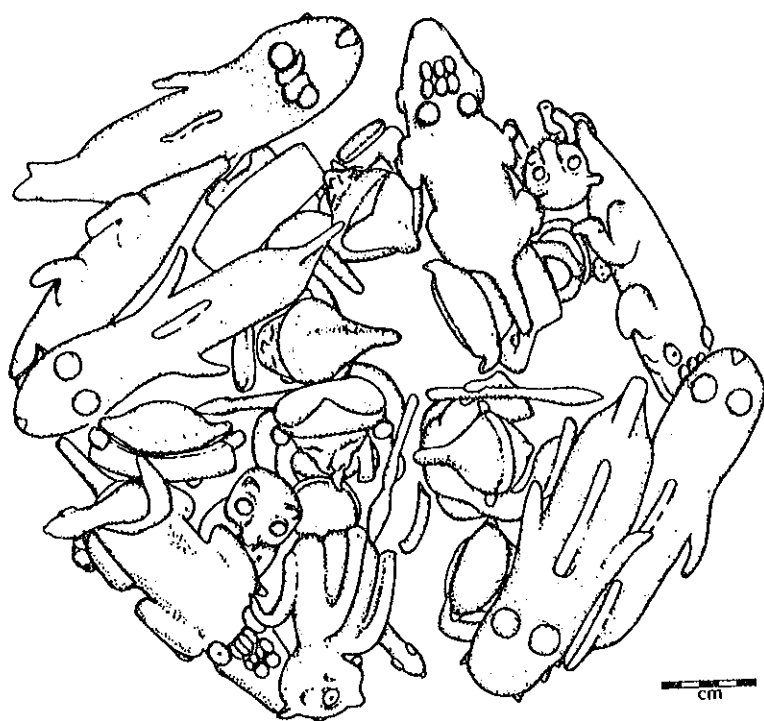


Figure 6. Ceramic contents of the Late Postclassic Santa Rita Corozal Structure 183 cache. North is located at the top of the page (drawn by Sarah J. Ruch).

were protected within. The four *bacabs* of one cache literally appear to hold up the four corners of the sky as they surround other figures and a ceramic vessel with lid (D. Chase and A. Chase 1986a:16; see also Figure 7). Thus, certain of these caches may also be viewed as representing the symbolic ordering of the universe.

The continuities between Classic and Postclassic caches are striking, but so is one obvious difference—Postclassic caches focus on ceramic items. No longer is pottery relegated only to the role of container, but

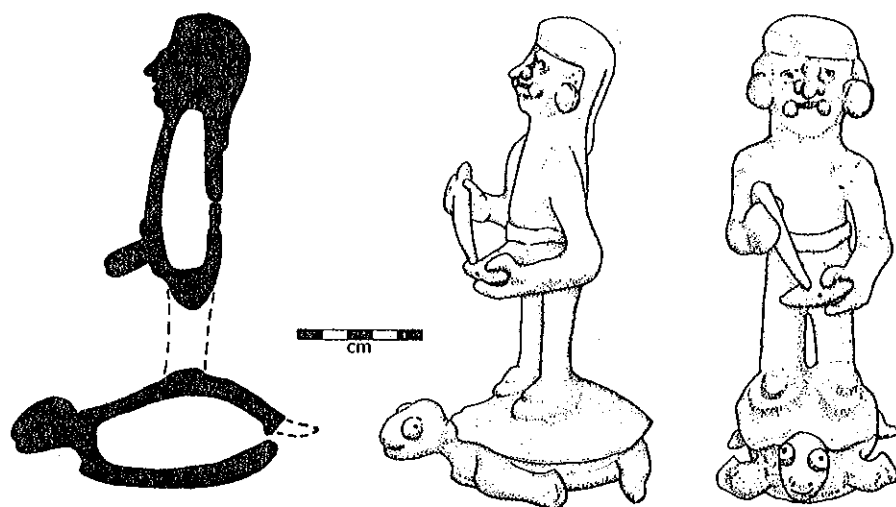


Figure 7. Late Postclassic period, previously painted, pottery figurine from a multiple-figurine cache in Santa Rita Corozal Structure 213 (drawn by Diane Z. Chase).

rather it also fills the role of contents in the form of figurines. This move toward ceramic items as the focal aspects of ritual offerings does, however, have precedent in Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic Chichen Itza, Mexico (Brainerd 1958:303, Fig. 93e) and in the Late Classic modeled ceramic cache vessels of Becan and Quirigua. I suggest that this Postclassic switch in emphasis to pottery effigies and figurines from small and sometimes unidentifiable symbols of shell or stone in the Classic period marks a trend toward more publicly visible and understandable symbols of ritual activity.

INCENSE BURNERS

Censers are by definition specialized ceramic forms; because of this their identification is usually simpler than with caches. Like cache vessels censers are containers important in Maya ritual, but unlike caches, they and their contents are not necessarily, or even usually, "hidden." Instead, the primary function of censers is the burning of a specific kind of

offering—incense. Burning incense was an integral part of all Maya ritual occasions (for examples see Landa in Tozzer 1941:144, 145, 147, 153, 155, 159, 160, 161, 162, 164, 166).

From their initial appearances in the Maya area, there was always more than one contemporary form of incensario and always one form that contained effigy representations of humans, gods, or both. This latter type of incensario may have been an idol made to represent the deity to which other offerings, including caches, were made at such times as the previously mentioned New Year or Uayeb rites (see Tozzer 1941:138–149). Best known from the Early Classic period through the Postclassic period, censers are found in a variety of contexts—smashed on floors, in niches, and sometimes in burials or caches.

Censers are better documented at some sites than others. In some cases, such as for the site of Barton Ramie, Belize, virtually no information exists on censers in either the excavation (Willey and others 1965) or the ceramic (Gifford 1976) reports. Studies specifically dealing with incensarios are particularly rare (but see Benyo 1979; Borhegyi 1951, 1959; Ferree 1970; Goldstein 1977; and Thompson 1957). Nevertheless, censers are often utilized in critical discussions of the change in Maya culture over time. A major point in many discussions of Postclassic Maya artifacts is the apparent increase in quantity of censer material; this has been taken as one line of evidence to support suggestions of a breakdown in the uniform cultural and religious system of the Classic period. However, a reconsideration of incense burners specifically from the sites of Santa Rita Corozal and Caracol suggests that other interpretations are possible.

Early Classic censers from Santa Rita Corozal are best known from a cache in a niche in Structure 7–3rd. Here, two vaguely human effigy ceramic stands (Figure 8) are surmounted by paired, unslipped ceramic plates. This deposit constitutes one of the final offerings made in this building prior to its incorporation within the later Structure 7–2nd; this concentration of artifacts would be called by some a cache and by others a *termination deposit* (R. Robertson 1980:10; A. Chase 1983:51; Garber 1983). Extremely similar censers were encountered at the site of Cerros (Freidel and others in press; Walker 1986), across the bay from Santa Rita

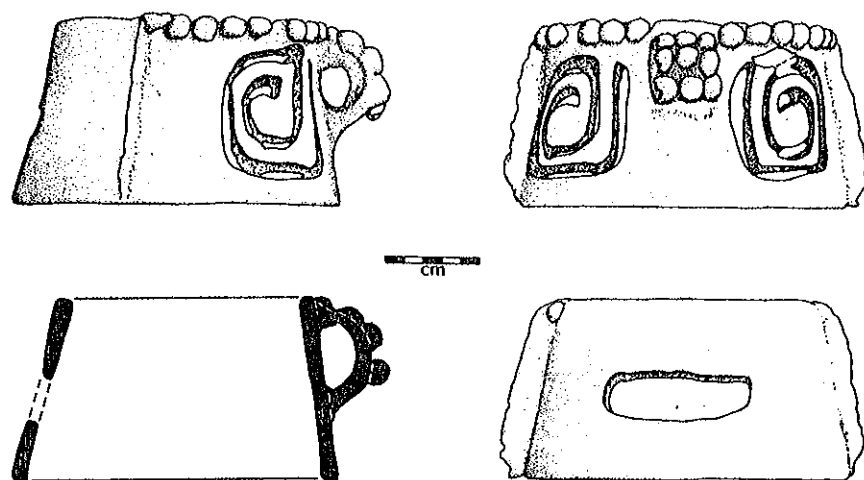


Figure 8. Early Classic period unslipped, effigy censer stand from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 7 (drawn by Diane Z. Chase).

Corozal, and at Uaxactun, in Guatemala (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:281, Pl. 85e–g). At Cerros the censers were found smashed in several areas of Structure 4. Apparently, out of four areas of censer deposition, at least two contained paired sets of effigy stands in conjunction with dishes and buckets, or both. At Uaxactun three effigy censer stands were included in a cist, most likely a cache, along with a series of other ceramic and nonceramic items (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937:95). Although association of paired censers in deposits was not the common pattern at Uaxactun, the pairing at Santa Rita Corozal and Cerros surely was not fortuitous. It is suggested that—as with caches—the varying numbers, kinds and placements of incensarios were key elements in Maya religion. Pairing of censers was also found in varying contexts at other Maya sites; Early Classic censer material from a burial at the site of Tayasal, Guatemala (A. Chase 1983:311, 1984:Fig. 2b) included a censer

with modeled face in conjunction with a spiked censer stand.

Late Classic censers at Caracol may also be found in groupings of two. Smashed incense burners on the floor of Structure A3 constitute a large chalice censer and a flanged cylinder; these represent the latest use of this building (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987c:13, Fig. 9). In front of Caracol Structure B19 in a deposit associated with Altar 16, which is dated to the katun 10.0.0.0.0 in Maya long count (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:98), two flanged censers were found (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987c:24, Fig.19). One of these effigy censers exhibits the scroll between the eyes typically associated with the jaguar god of the underworld (Figure 9).

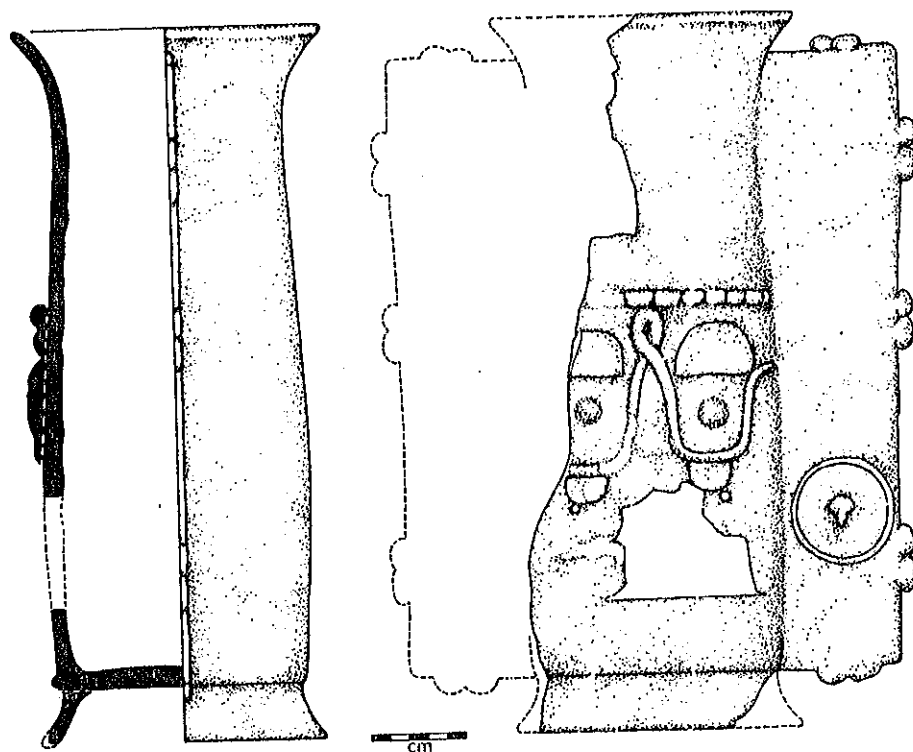


Figure 9. Late Classic period, previously painted, flanged effigy censer from Caracol Structure B19 (drawn by Karen A. Keivet).

Similar effigy censers are noted from most sites with Late Classic occupation (Goldstein 1977) and an analogous pattern of censers or "idols" occurring with monuments apparently also was encountered in the Structure 5D-32 cache dated to the onset of the Late Classic period at Tikal (Coggins 1975:279-280).

Postclassic censers are abundant from the site of Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase and A. Chase 1988) and it is their associations, in conjunction with certain ethnohistoric statements, that may shed light on the role of certain Classic period censers in Maya religion. Postclassic censers at Santa Rita Corozal are of varied kinds. There are chalice forms and unusual tripod forms as well as a limited number of handled incensarios (D. Chase 1984, 1985a; A. Chase and D. Chase 1987b:64); the most predominant kind, however, is the effigy incensario (Figure 10). These, like their Classic period counterparts, are difficult to analyze as they are often found smashed, but when time is taken to reconstruct them it becomes clear that they were deposited primarily in one of two ways—shattered and presumably redeposited so that they are largely unreconstructible, or smashed and reconstructible in paired sets.

The Late Postclassic full-figure incensario, frequently cited to help suggest discontinuity between the Classic and Postclassic Maya cultures, is not without antecedents in the earlier Classic period. An example may be found in the full-figure censer idols of the Classic period, such as those known from Tikal by 9.13.0.0.0 (Coggins 1975:380-381) and from Quirigua slightly later (Benyo 1979; D. Chase personal observation, 1977).

Although statements in early Spanish accounts have been taken to indicate that the Late Postclassic Maya were idolaters who made an image for every conceivable animal, insect, or occupational specialty, evidence at Santa Rita Corozal has suggested that censers are far more limited in their representations (D. Chase 1985a, 1985b; D. Chase and A. Chase 1986b). Likewise their distribution in pairs, although not stressed previously in archaeological reports, suggests some continuity with certain Classic period practices relating to censers. There are many other duplications over time including symbols such as the scroll between the eyes. The emphasis on paired censers in the Postclassic period has been related to the pairing of katun idols to mark the passage of twenty-year periods at Santa Rita Corozal (D. Chase 1985a:119-121, 1985b; D.

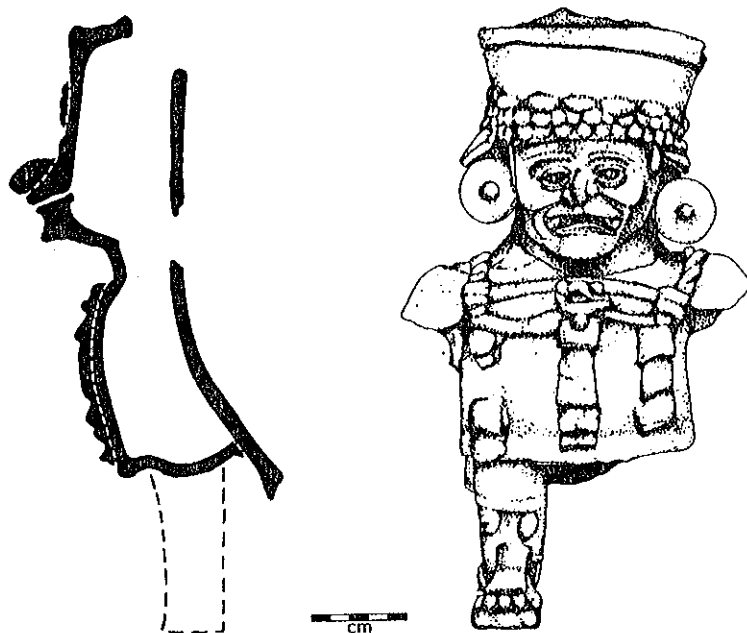


Figure 10. Late Postclassic period modeled, appliqued, and previously painted, partial effigy censer figure from Santa Rita Corozal Structure 213 (drawn by Karen A. Kievit).

Chase and A. Chase 1986b). A similar association is clearly suggested at Caracol where a broken set of effigy censers was found in a deposit in Structure B19 beneath one of the giant Ahau altars; these altars distinctly mark katuns. Thus certain censer creation and deposition may have been keyed to marking the passage of time. The increased number of Postclassic censers as compared to Classic period censers, however, may well be indicative of a phenomenon similar to that suggested in caches, an increased public presentation of religious motifs and paraphernalia. This public presentation would have been reinforced by the more life-like representations of the full-figure Postclassic forms.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, Maya cache vessels and censers are two kinds of pottery whose symbolic content and function have been largely neglected. It is clear, however, that both forms have much to offer to interpretations of Maya rituals and their change over time. The study of caches and censers is greatly enhanced when the pottery is not viewed in analytic isolation, but rather in conjunction with other aspects of archaeological context.

Deposits of censers and caches are in some ways similar in overall function in that both serve as offerings to the gods, with the major exception that censers are generally disposed of through destruction rather than secretion underground. However, and not surprisingly, the specific rituals in which caches and censers are involved may overlap or vary greatly. It has been suggested that caches were often an integral part of calendric ritual and that through time they continued to portray the Maya view of their universe. Certain censers likewise have been suggested as important components of ritual marking the passage of time, specifically in katuns.

It has been argued here that comparison of cache vessels, censerware, and associated contexts from the Classic and Postclassic periods reveals that basic rituals remained relatively unaltered over time. Importantly, however, Maya practices regarding caching and censer deposition over time witnessed trends toward standardization as well as a reduction in abstract ritual symbolism that is reflected in the development of a more explicit public expression of ritual activity in the Postclassic era. This reduction in abstract symbolism undoubtedly served to better unite a wider spectrum of the Maya populace into the well organized religious system of the Postclassic period.

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