

The Chinkultic Effigy-Urns Complex and How They Made their Way to our Museums

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For decades, a group of large-format effigy-urns from the Classic Maya site of Chinkultic remained understudied. This can be explained by their perceived marginal location compared to other Maya areas and their lack of scholarly iconographic interest and contextual data. Archival documents and new urns found in Mexican collections allow us to generate a preliminary corpus of six complete and dozens of fragmentary urns and to find out how, where, and when most of them were unearthed. We propose two types (I & II) for these urns and argue that their main iconographic themes are the cult of ancestors, the Jaguar God of the Underworld, ch'ajoom ritual specialists, and monkey-cacao symbolism, all surrounding male and female elite characters.

A central document to this paper is an archival police inquiry narrating how the first two urns were discovered east of the Montebello Lakes. This transcript of interviews with the looter, buyer, and appointed guardian of ruins contextualizes the objects as cave offerings. Further work reveals how the rest of these urns were seized from looters by the military in the same area. The narrow area where these urns were located, and their consistent ritualistic themes strengthen the idea of an effigy-urn workshop controlled by Chinkultic elites to perpetuate their dynasty, religious duties, and memory.

Key words: Chinkultic; effigy-urns; provenance; ch'ajoom; ancestor worship



For decades, a group of effigy-urns from Chinkultic and its vicinity received little attention due to a lack of provenance data. The urns belong to a Late Classic Maya ceramic tradition from the eastern highlands of Chiapas, as defined by Navarrete and colleagues (1999), which includes the neighboring area of Chaculá located in Huehuetenango, Guatemala (Figure 1; see Earley and Wölfel 2023). Earlier Mayanists struggled to study these urns due to a lack in published information on their context and elaborate imagery. Recent studies (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022) and newly discovered documents provide contextual information to review this artistic tradition and rightfully place it in Maya research.



In 2019-2020, while a team from the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural (CNCPC) of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) was documenting and restoring the collections of Chiapas's museums, they identified a new Chinkultic stela displaying a monumental, knotted headdress identical to one from an urn from the Museo del Fuerte de San Juan Ulúa (MFSJU) in Veracruz (Figure 6). This first crucial association between the stela and the MFSJU's urn led to the subsequent identification of analogous examples located in the Museo Regional de Chiapas (MRCH), Museo Nacional de Antropología (MNA), Museo Arqueológico de Comitán (MAC), Museo Na Bolom, New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF), and in private collections in Comitán, Tzimol, and Tziscaco, Chiapas.

Chinkultic lies on the eastern edge of the Comitán plateau, near the present Mexico-Guatemala border, in the Montebello Lakes system, characterized by mixed pine-oak forests and karstic landscape including cenotes, and caves; natural features which likely evoked a symbolic landscape for its ancient inhabitants. The main occupation on the site happened during the Yobnajib phase (700-900 A.D.) in the Late Classic period and coincided with the arrival of one branch of the *Chan ajaw* lineage who ruled for approximately 300 years (Ball 1980:90-95). During this period, the region saw both the dedication of hieroglyphic monuments and the development of the Chinkultic effigy-urn tradition.

These effigy-urns are large clay sculptures with complex appliquéd imagery that can be separated into two main types. The first type (Type I or Andasolos style) comprises tall, cylindrical urns (flat-bottomed bases and straight walls) with anthropomorphic lids (small arms, necklaces, bracelets, and faces on the pull). The urn from Andasolos cave, found in association with smaller vessels with similar appliquéd imagery and effigy lids, is the type example of this style (Figure 2; Navarrete and Martínez 1977). Large characters, ranging from one to three figures, are appliquéd along its walls. The compositional layout of the urn is a central figure paired by smaller identical side figures, surprisingly recalling two contemporary urns from Cacaxtla, central Mexico (Brittenham and Nagao 2014:87-92, Figures 25 and 26).

The second type of effigy-urn (Type II) is characterized by squatting figures, a flat-bottom with straight or diverging walls sided with vertical, rectangular flanges. The squatting figure is perched atop the container, legs bent and elbows resting on the knees. This pan-Mesoamerican posture is associated with sacrifice, ballcourts, and regenerative rituals (Fox 1993:57-60; Earley 2023:51-53). Squatters feature on the ballcourt markers from Tenam Rosario near Chinkultic and in the effigy-urns discussed in this paper (Agrinier 1983:243; Earley 2023:45-55). Scherer and

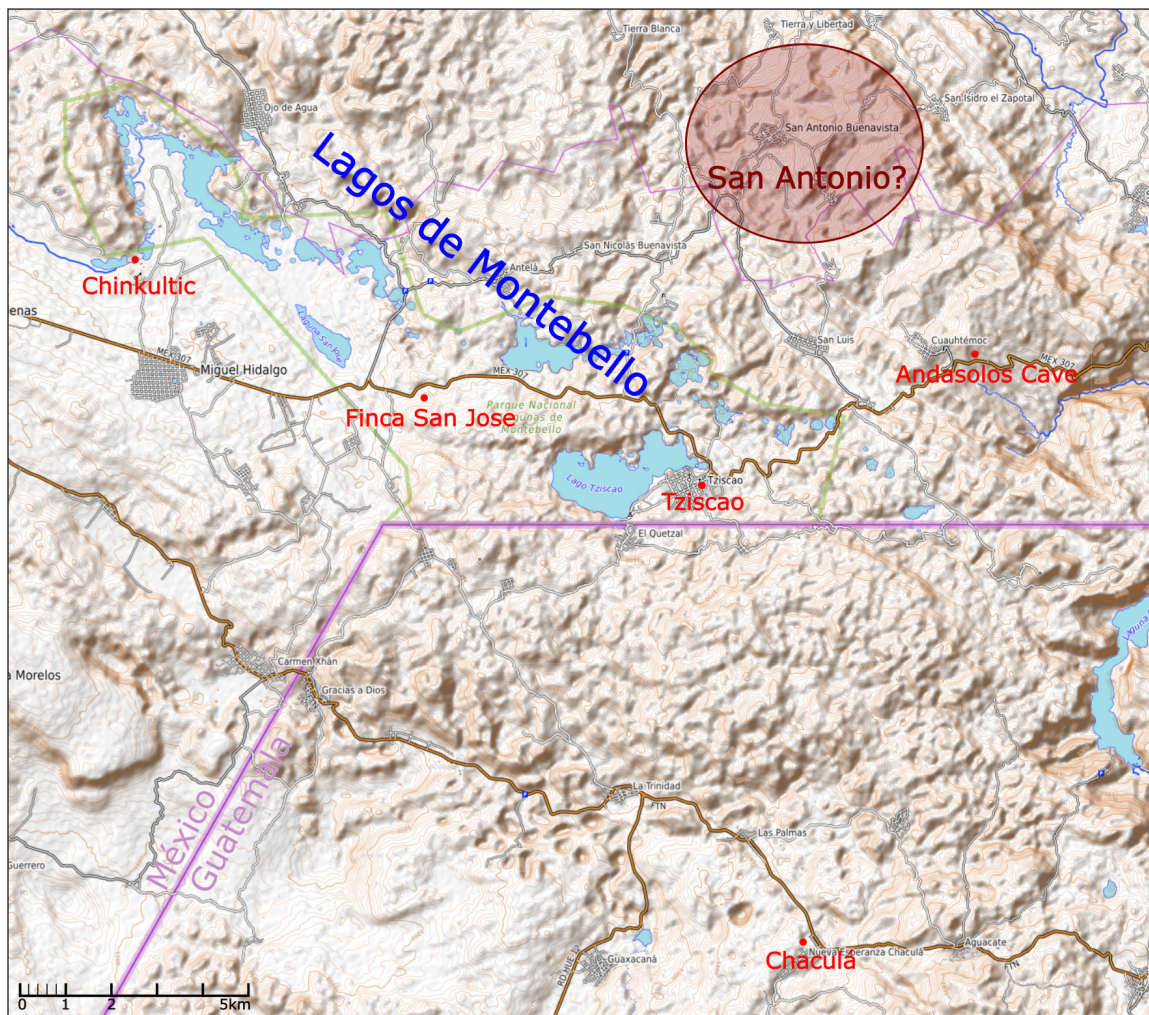


Figure 1. Map of the eastern highlands of Chiapas including Chinkultic, the Montebello Lakes region, and Chaculá (© Openstreetmap.org modified by Folch).

colleagues (2018:183) argue that the “Death God, sacrificers, and the people of central Mexico were all generally rendered as squatters” by Maya artists, a hypothesis that is reinforced by the present analysis. The iconography of the Type II lower containers usually replicates the upper perched beings emerging from the maws of a supernatural creature and tends to incorporate central Mexican imagery, ancestors with simian attributes, and other symbols (Figures 3, 5, 6, and 7). A variation of this type appears in Tomb 1 from Chinkultic, the container being held between the legs of the squatting character (Figure 4). The height of these urns ranges from 12 to 120 cm (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022).

The squatting figures usually hold staffs, triangular incense bags, spear-thrower darts, and square mirrors. Male figures impersonate the Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU) while females



Figure 2. Frontal and lateral views of Andasolos cave's urn (Type 1) with *ch'ajoom* ancestor paired by two old figures, now sheltered in MAC (photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara © CNCPC-INAH).

are associated with central Mexican imagery. Both are ancestors depicted as *ch'ajoom*, ritual specialists associated with censuring, fire offerings, bloodletting, human sacrifice, ancestral veneration, and nagualism practices (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022). These narratives are complemented by monkey-cacao symbolism in a paradisiac locale surrounded by cacao vines and birds.

New archival information about the Chinkultic effigy-urns provides crucial contextual information, particularly from three effigy-urns which, along with other unprovenanced ones, enrich interpretations about their ritual significance. This investigation provides a documented corpus of effigy-urns, their stylistic and iconographic analyses, and delimits their geographic distribution. Two cultural spheres are proposed: 1) a larger tradition in the Chinkultic and Montebello Lakes region, in the eastern highlands of Chiapas, and 2) a southern tradition around Chaculá and Quen Santo north of Huehuetenango, Guatemala.

The Discoveries of Chinkultic Effigy-Urns

Few Chinkultic effigy-urns have contextual information, since most were looted. Their use-range extends from the Comitán Valley throughout the Montebello Lakes, and south into Chaculá (Figure 1). In the late 19th century, Eduard Seler found the first fragments of squatting body parts and masks depicting the JGU in Quen Santo, Huehuetenango (Seler 2003: Figures 198, 199, 204-208).

Nearby, in Chaculá, Gustav Kanter gathered an important collection of similar fragments including male and female anthropomorphic faces, and sometimes others with simian and feline features (Burkitt 1924; Villacorta and Villacorta 1927; Navarrete 1979; Earley 2023). Unfortunately, Kanter's collection was destroyed in the early 20th century (see Earley and Wölfel, this issue).

In 1931, the first two Type II urns were located in a narrow cave east of the Montebello Lakes in a place called San Antonio (Figure 5 and 6). The male and female effigy-urns were found facing each other in a setting similar to the nearby Andasolos cave. They were found by Eduardo Castellanos, a rancher and owner of Finca San Jose el Arco, sold to Enoch Ortiz, a wealthy Comitán man, and confiscated by Mauro Quintero Brisac, the regional guardian of ruins. The female urn (Figure 5) was sent to Mexico City in 1932 and continually showcased in the MNA (Cat. n° 05.0-00095). The male urn (Figure 6) was accidentally broken and, after sitting in a private collection for decades, was donated in 1992 to the MFSJU in Veracruz.

Enoch Ortiz was ordered by the local judge to stop acquiring antiquities in 1931; yet, he added a third urn by 1943 (Figure 3). Ortiz gifted this urn to President Manuel Ávila Camacho while he was visiting Comitán in 1943, who then donated it to the MRCH (Ceough and Corin 1947:4). The origin of the third urn is debated (Kidder 1954:496, Erben et al. 1954-55: Figure 14; Na Bolom Archive, Frans B. Fotografias), but most likely came from the same region as the first two reported by Quintero.



Figure 3. Frontal and lateral views of effigy-urn (Type II) donated by President Manuel Ávila Camacho to MRCH (photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara © CNCPC-INAH).

Archaeological contexts, military seizures, and private collections

The first urns found by archaeologists come from Yerbabuena, a Late Classic site located northwest of Comitán excavated in 1959 by Patrick Culbert (1965:9-10). A semi-complete Type I urn was placed atop the skeletal remains of a small bird in a dedicatory cache offering in the center of a ballcourt. In Chinkultic in 1966, Stephan de Borhegyi (1968:124) discovered effigy-urn fragments on the surface of Group A and, in 1969, hundreds more were found on the surface and in construction fill. Large quantities were also found in Group C's ballcourt during excavations undertaken in 1970 (Ball 1980: Table 1).

When the road to the Montebello Lakes region was built in 1969, the two-day horseback trip from Comitán became only a few hours by car (Montiel 1990:76-80), facilitating access to looters. A fourth effigy-urn (Type II) was seized by the military in 1972 from Eduardo Díaz Díaz in Comitán



Figure 4. A selection of the fragmented effigy-urns (Type II) discovered in Tomb 1 from Structure 1 of Chinkultic by Carlos Navarrete in 1975-76, now stored in MRCH (photos by Jorge Pérez de Lara © CNCPC-INAH).



Figure 5. Two different photographs of the ‘Indian Queen’ urn (Type II) that was seized from Enoch Ortiz by Mauro Quintero in 1931, now sheltered in the MNA (Cat. n° 05.0-00095, photo by Archivo Digital MNA). Left, historical photograph of female *ch’ajoom* (photo by Berlin State Museum).

and given to the MRCH on September 30, 1972 (Figure 7), according to the museum’s old catalog (Object n°860). The catalog mentions it originally had a “thin layer of limestone” and likely came from a cave. Road construction from Montebello to Colonia Cuauhtémoc also led to the discovery of the Andasolos cave by Carlos Navarrete and Eduardo Martínez (1977: 17) in April 1975, located 15 km east-southeast of Chinkultic. The only semi-complete Type II urns found archaeologically (by Navarrete 1976, 2020) come from Chinkultic Tomb 1, in Structure 1, located atop Group A.

Additional effigy-urn fragments in the MRCH collection were confiscated from looters in 1992 and donated by the military. Among the objects are two large cylindrical urn fragments (Figures 8a, 8d), one zoomorphic lid (Figure 8e), one container with a human face (Figure 8f), and fragments of hairy extremities (Figures 8g-8h) manufactured in Andasolos style (Type I). A torso and an arm holding a staff with a cacao pod from a simian Type II urn complete the lot (Figures 8b-8c), along with fragments of a stone bowl with carved inscriptions recording a new example of Chinkultic’s emblem glyph, suggesting they all came from that general area.

An unprovenanced miniature (12 cm) complete Type II effigy-urn is also found in the MNA (cat. number° 05.0-00045) featuring the characteristic female, elbow-on-knee position holding

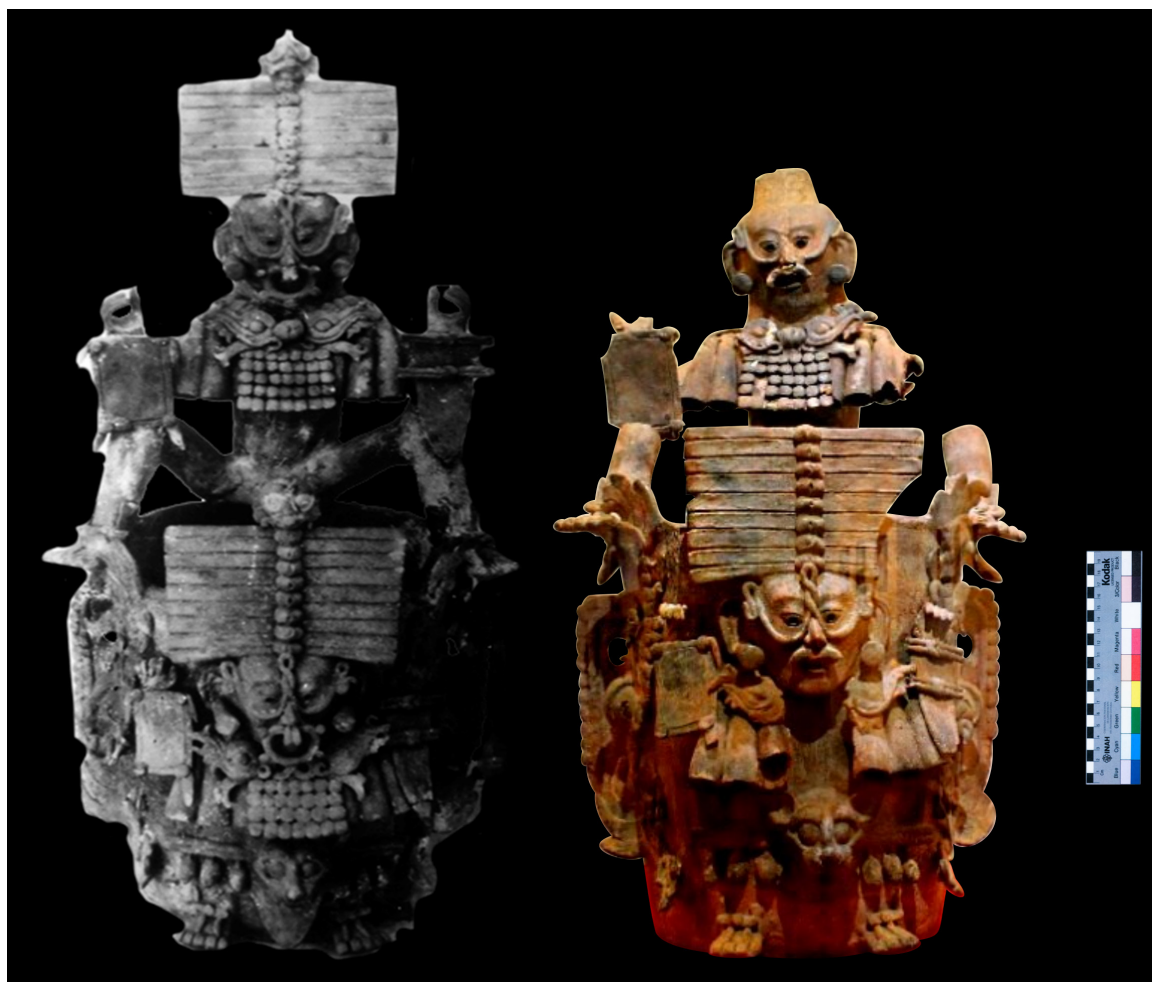


Figure 6. Different photographs of the ‘Indian King’ urn (Type II) seized from Enoch Ortiz and later acquired by Luis Beverido until it was donated in 1992 to the Museo Fuerte de San Juan de Ulúa, now sheltered in MAC. Left, historical photograph when it was more complete (photo by José de Jesús Nuñez © Musée du Quai Brainly). Right: current conservation state of the effigy-urn (photo by Ramón Folch González).

a bag of copal in her left hand (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022: Figure 1d). She wears a rope with dangling beads across her forehead and large circular earflares, is crowned by a foliated headdress, and her hair cascades over her shoulders.

A private Comitán collection includes a smaller container and an Andasolos style urn (Type I) with a simian face (Figures 9b-9c). Another private collection in Tzimol, southwest of Comitán, revealed to Ramón Folch on August 12, 2020, features effigy-urn fragments found in the area (Figures 9d-9e). In Tzisco, in the Montebello Lakes region, collections shown to the authors exhibit more affinity to the Chaculá materials: crudely modeled masks with depictions of the JGU and simian faces that are quite different from the more realistic style of the Chinkultic urns tradition.

The Museo Na Bolom in San Cristóbal de las Casas holds a semi-complete Type II male urn. The squatter has a simian face with leaf-shaped earflares, a beaded necklace, and a long beard (Figure 9a). Remnants of thick hair can be seen on the sides of its head; a label on the back reads: “Adquirido en COMITAN obsequio SR. PEDRO UVENCE JULIO 1967”. The Na Bolom archives also include a 1950s catalog card with a photograph of a small container similar to those found along Type I urns, featuring a figure with thick hair holding a bag of copal with a rope circling its head and neck (Figure 9f). Limestone drippings along the vessel walls suggest it came from a cave. The card indicates the piece was in the Übersee Museum in Hamburg, Germany, directed by Helmuth O. Wagner (1950-1962). The name “Hernanz” is also mentioned, and could refer to the brothers who owned a textile factory in San Cristobal at the time and who may have acquired it. More examples will likely be found in collections across Mexico and other countries as research on the urn tradition continues.

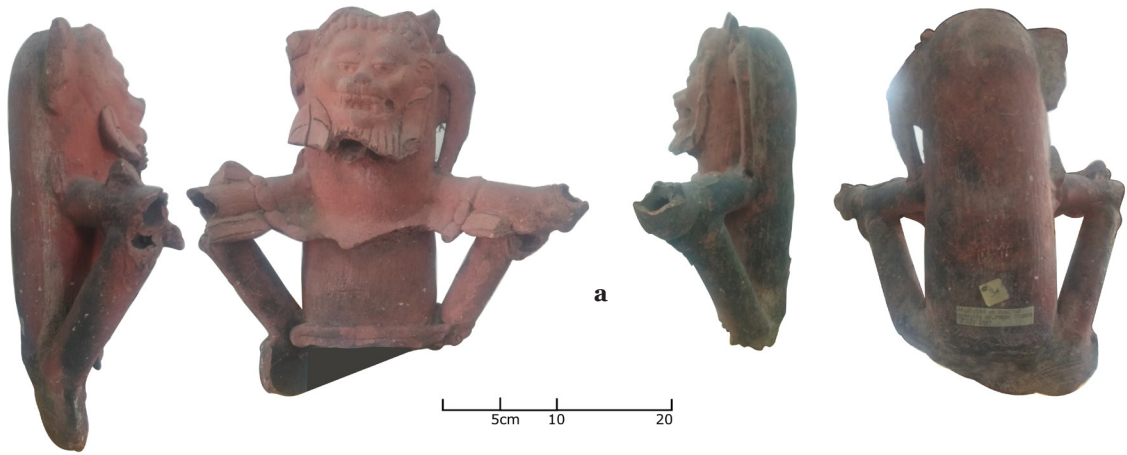


Figure 7. Back and front views of an effigy-urn (Type II) with the representation of a nagual in the shape of a jaguar in a squatting position. It was seized by the military in 1972 and now is stored in the MRCH (photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara © CNCPC-INAH).



Figure 8. Effigy-urn fragments (Type I and II) seized by the military in 1992 and now stored in the MRCH (photos by Ángel A. Sánchez Gamboa © CNCPC-INAH).

Na Bolom Museum



Comitan private coll.



Hamburg urn (Na Bolom Archive)

Tzimol private coll.



Figure 9. A: Na Bolom Museum urn from Comitan. B: Small vessel with a simian face. C: Face with a simian feature from Type I urn, Comitan private collection. D-E: Tzimol urn fragments, private collection. F: Urn from Comitan in Hamburg's Ubersee Museum (Archivo Na Bolom, Frans B. Fotografias).

Repatriation of the San Juan de Ulúa's urn

As mentioned above, while visiting the remodeled MFSJU, Martha Cuevas identified a Type II effigy-urn (Figure 6) wearing a knotted headdress similar to the recently documented Chinkultic stela. This attribute was key to the establishment of a link between the urn and the Chinkultic archaeological site. INAH's documentation indicates the MSFJU urn was in Luis Beverido's possession in 1958 when he solicited his collection to be registered by INAH, which happened until 1974. Beverido's family donated this collection to the MFSJU in 1992.

After publishing a seminal paper in *Arqueología Mexicana* (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022) and working alongside the authorities of Centro INAH-Veracruz and the MFSJU, the urn was returned to Chiapas on October 27, 2022, where it is currently stored in the MAC after a 90-year journey (1931-2022).

Soon after, Ramón Folch González located judicial documents from the Procuraduría General de la República in the archives of the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia (BNAH) reporting the confiscation of the first two urns from Comitán. This document linked the female urn in the MNA collection with the male urn at MFSJU (Figures 5 and 6). Most importantly, it provides contextual information of their discovery.

The Enoch Ortiz file: the 1931 confiscation of two urns

The information on the first two Type II Chinkultic urns comes from the transcripts of interviews done by the judge of Comitán with Mauro Quintero, Enoch Ortiz, and Eduardo Castellanos. The interview document was divided in two untitled files: O C3/V1L7/E190/D1 and O C3/V1L7/E636/D1. The protagonists are Mauro Quintero Brisac (1874-1941), guardian of ruins appointed by the Departamento de Monumentos Artísticos, Arqueológicos e Históricos in the Comitán region, Enoch Ortiz (1889-1976), a rich landowner from Comitán, and Eduardo Castellanos (1883-?), owner of Finca San José el Arco, discoverer of the urns. In 1931, Quintero formally accused Ortiz of "stealing two idols that belong to the nation," referred to as an 'Indian Queen' and 'Indian King'. The queen was shipped to the MNA shortly after in 1932 (Figure 5). The King, however, was accidentally shattered to pieces and somehow ended up in Luis Beverido's hands before being donated to the MFSJU (Figure 6; the watercolor accompanying this paper illustrates the accident described in the transcript).

Ortiz's first involvement with archaeology occurred in 1925 when the first Tulane expedition documented Tenam Puente located on his property (Blom and La Farge 1925:423). Some years later he acquired the first two urns and, in his own words, "various stone idols that he has in the garden of the house of his *finca rustica* called 'El Puente.'" Eduardo Castellanos described how he found the urns:

In some virgin mountains about three leagues east of his ranch [...] the place where these figures were is not exactly a cave, rather a [...] hole about one meter or one meter and a half in circumference and the bottom is two meters deep and in the side walls were found the two aforementioned figures [...] In the hole where these figures were, there were no other archaeological jewels [...] the precise location of the hole is about

three leagues distant from the border with Guatemala, in an untraveled place not being able to signal the name of the mountain where the hole is [...] near this place is a place named San Antonio, about 3 or 4 leagues away...

Castellanos suspected the urns were placed in the hole recently, mentioning freshly broken bits, no “parasites” or patina, and that a wooden stairway led down into the cave. Nearby Maya inhabitants could have visited the cave until recent times. It is surprising how similar the setting of the cave is to the Andasolos cave, which was also merely a crack in the rocks. Navarrete and Martínez (1977) could barely fit, yet Andasolos had dozens of offerings deposited while the San Antonio ‘hole’ was devoid of them.

Iconography of the Chinkultic effigy-urns

Chinkultic was a paramount Late Classic court and a seat of a branch of the *chan ajaw* dynasty in the eastern highlands of Chiapas, near the southwestern Maya frontier (Grube 2002:66; Wölfel and Wagner 2010; Carter and Santini 2019:4). It interacted with polities such as Tenam Puente, Tenam Rosario, Lagartero, with lesser-known sites to the south like Guajilar, Los Encuentros, and Piedra Labrada nearing the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, and also with the Chaculá-Quen Santo area in northern Huehuetenango.

Below we present the main visual narratives displayed in these effigy-urns. This iconography is related to the covenants and ceremonial duties of rulers and elites as ritual specialists motivated to perpetuate these religious obligations to ensure the stability of the lineage or dynasty.

The Cha'joom title and the Jaguar God of the Underworld

The main theme in the Chinkultic effigy-urns is the representation of rulers and elites as squatting ancestors. For the Maya, the squat-like position contrasted with the aesthetical and ideal cross-legged position displayed by rulers and elites (Stone and Zender 2011:63). Scherer and colleagues (2018:179-183), associate it with death gods, *ch'ajoom* sacrificers, and “foreignness”, as exemplified in Copan 10L-26-1's outstanding inscription which contrasts cross-legged, Maya full-figure glyphs with squatting, central Mexican-style full-figure glyphs. In the Chinkultic urns, squatting male ancestors impersonate the JGU: a fire deity, a nocturnal aspect of the sun passing through the underworld, and the patron god of war and caves (Stuart 1998:408; Taube 1998:441) shown wearing a diagnostic “cruller” (a twisted rope delimiting his eyes). Meanwhile, squatting female ancestors are associated with foreign imagery related to central Mexican storm gods.

Ancestors are displayed as *ch'ajoom*, a title derived from the word *ch'aj* “incense” and the agentive suffix *-oom*, referring to the ritual specialist charged with casting incense during fire rituals. On a bench from Copan's Sepulturas Group (Group 9N-8) is carved a full-figure **CH'AJOOM** logogram in a squatting position scattering incense into a spiked censer (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022: Figure 4c; see K1560 for another example). In this sense, male and female elites bear the *ch'ajoom*-title due to the covenants with ancestors and the supernatural realm (see Monaghan 1995:222-223). Another proposal for the squatting position is related to the act of defecation and

flatulence associated with the Death God (Scherer et al. 2018:181).

Some diagnostic traits of *ch'ajoom* attire include the headband with extruded tendrils or curls, along with a cloak of leaves (Scherer and Houston 2018:118-119; Scherer 2020). Interestingly, these attributes have not yet been detected in the eastern highlands of Chiapas. Instead, other systematic motifs appear, including staffs for fire-drilling ceremonies. The fire-drilling episode is key in the iconography of Chinkultic's urns, where most of the ancestors impersonating the JGU hold staffs. The female *ch'ajoom* also holds them (Figure 5), yet she is associated with predatory birds linked to the Storm God in the guise of a moth. These staffs sport knotted motifs, tagging them as ritual tools.

Another style of Type II urns includes seated *ch'ajoom* ancestors wielding knotted staffs, along with small, rounded shields with frontal stylized depictions of the JGU (Figure 4). They wear jaguar paws on their arms and legs, a garment related to royal attire in Chinkultic's monumental art (e.g., Monuments 2, and 21 in Earley 2020:291-292).

Ancestors wear diagnostic knotted headdresses which are another important feature of *ch'ajoom* (Scherer and Houston 2018:116). The MFSJU effigy-urn (Figure 6) and the aforementioned stela from Chinkultic (Sánchez Gamboa et al. 2022: Figure 3) share an identical, nine-level knotted-headdress related to sacrifice (Schele and Miller 1986:176) or to the ancestral concept of *Baluun Tz'akab Ajaw* "9/Many Ordered Lords" (Wagner 2005:29-36). Sometimes these headdresses are accompanied by knotted ponytails or are wrapped in paper ribbons with blood stains. Occasionally, they hold knives and jaguar-paw flints (Scherer and Houston 2018:122, Figures 5.11a-5.11b). While none of the Chinkultic urns feature weapons, the Chaculá-Quen Santo urns (Burkitt 1924; Villacorta and Villacorta 1927) feature weapons akin to the iconography of Tenam Rosario: shields, spears, and spear-thrower darts (see Agrinier 1983).

Male *ch'ajoom* Type II squatters are usually repeated on the lower container, sometimes emerging from the maws of a supernatural serpent. The urn representing a squatting jaguar has a supernatural *ch'ajoom* male ancestor with simian features in the lower position (Figure 7). *Ch'ajoom*-title bearers are also related to a class of co-essences and spirits known as *way*: the embodiments of different diseases that protected kingdoms and lineages (Grube and Nahm 1994; Helmke and Nielsen 2009; Sheseña 2019). The jaguar wears a death-eye collar with dismembered eyeballs associated with these nefarious creatures (Miller 2022), but also with the Death God (God A) and JGU. The sacrificial scarf is another accessory of *way* creatures, also worn by the Chinkultic rulers (see Monuments 3, 5, 8, 18, 20 and 23 in Navarrete 1984; and Monument 27 in Earley, 2015: Figure 83b).

The female squatting *ch'ajoom* (Figure 5) is associated with an owl attacking its prey. The Storm God's face emerges from the owl's open beak. The Storm God's nose can be reconstructed thanks to historical photographs (Figure 5, left) as a hand holding spear-thrower's darts, which in turn emulates the Lepidoptera's proboscis (Berlo 1983:83; Headrick 2003:151). This is directly associated with the "Black Witch Moth Tlaloc" (Bassie-Sweet 2021:136-142), a deity related to night and fire as well as blood and weaponry, particularly obsidian projectile points, eccentrics, and bloodletters. This Lepidoptera deity is the main headdress worn by local rulers after ca. 750 AD (Guerrero Martínez et al. 2022).

A Paradisiacal Realm: Monkey and Cacao Iconography

Andasolos Cave's main urn (Figure 2) characterizes the "cylindrical" Type I. The lid is crested with a bejeweled male ancestor with bent arms. Along the walls are three squatting anthropomorphic figures with arms folded. The central effigy is a male ancestor situated in a paradisiacal location with birds, likely quetzals, and vines of cacao pods. He wears a jaguar headdress, knotted hair, and the JGU cruller, along with a knotted, tri-lobed necklace pendant (Finamore and Houston 2010:281). He has a swollen belly with a snake-like umbilical cord emerging from his navel. On the sides are two squatting old figures, apparently deceased since their eyes are closed. The central *ch'ajoom* in the guise of the JGU carries a small-sized human figure wearing a sacrificial scarf, probably a reference to child sacrifice as part of their ritual obligations.

Ancestors surrounded by a paradisiacal landscape are associated with monkey and cacao imagery as part of a pan-Mesoamerican narrative of human sacrifice, sustenance, and nourishment (Nájera Coronado 2012:155; Chinchilla 2016:372). Cacao was an important source of wealth in the economic and social affairs of Classic Maya polities (McNeil 2006) and ancient Maya conceptions of life, death, and generational rebirth (Martin 2006:163).

In Maya art, monkeys are portrayed as artists and scribes, sometimes a cultural hero, a trickster, or even as a *way* creature (Coe 1977; Coe and Kerr 1997:106; Grube and Nahm 1994). In Chinkultic urns, howler monkeys, identified by their beard, short limbs, and hook tails (Rice and South 2015:283), are represented wearing cacao pods (Figures 9a-9b) and with cacao vines in their hands or sprouting from their bodies (Figures 8c-8e). Cacao and human heads substitute for one another by using visual metaphors linking the pods with severed heads, captives, and sacrificial victims (Chinchilla, 2016:372). Among the 16th century Pipil, captives meant for sacrifice wore strings of cacao around the neck (García de Palacio 1982:279). Necklaces with severed heads were part of Chinkultic's Late Classic royal regalia (e.g., Monuments 2, 8, 17, 18 in Navarrete 1984; for Monument 2 see Ceough 1945: Figures 67) and are also present in Chaculá-Quen Santo's monumental art (Navarrete 1979: Figures 5, 6, 8, 14, 16; Earley 2023:87-88). The relation between the severed heads necklaces worn by Chinkultic rulers in monumental art and the cacao necklaces worn by simian figures in the effigy-urns from Chinkultic and Chaculá-Quen Santo spheres should be further studied.

Ancestral fruit trees are related to the notion of generational rebirth and lineage (Martin 2006:161-162). On Chinkultic's Monument 11, a deceased ruler impersonates the JGU and transforms into an ancestral fruit tree with vines sprouting from his face (Navarrete 1984: Figures 41-42). In Tenam Rosario's ballcourt markers, leafy elements sprout from male *ch'ajoom* squatters (Agrinier 1983:243).

In sum, monkey and cacao narratives conveyed important religious meanings about sacrifice, feeding the gods, death, and rebirth, and reinforced the ritual obligations of rulers and elites in their *ch'ajoom* roles. The manufacture of Chinkultic effigy-urns and their related ceremonies allowed the *chan ajaw* dynasty to perpetuate a message of rebirth and regeneration through religious practices aimed at ensuring the continuity of their dynasty.

Concluding Remarks

This paper described and analyzed the effigy-urn traditions from the Chinkultic region, whose iconography relates to elite ancestors. These individuals are shown performing religious duties connected to fire and JGU symbolism, incorporating central Mexican imagery. The *chan ajaw* kingdom, settled in Chinkultic in the late 6th century, likely controlled the Late Classic manufacture and distribution of these urns throughout the eastern highlands of Chiapas and in northern

Huhuetenango. This corpus provides a dataset that can enrich interpretations of iconographic themes in other Maya regions. This paper reframes the eastern Chiapas highlands as a point of comparison rather than an isolated region and provides new data regarding the still problematic squatting gesture, JGU's symbolism, central Mexican deities, the *ch'ajoom* title, and ancestor iconography.

Archival research solved some historical gaps regarding the history of effigy-urns, particularly the context of the first two discovered. Due to the lack of any remains inside them, specific use eludes us. With their association with fire, the JGU, and the *ch'ajoom* title, these could have contained mortuary bundles or more simply have been held as relics or heirlooms. Further archaeometric analyses could offer new information about these important ceremonial objects.

In sum, the urns from the Chinkultic and Chaculá-Quen Santo areas share most of the following themes: male and female *ch'ajoom* ancestors, the JGU, central Mexican deities, and the monkey-cacao complex. Two different spheres have minor stylistic differences: 1) the Chinkultic and Montebello Lakes region, plausibly the dominant tradition, and 2) the Chaculá and Quen Santo region, a peripheral tradition. The standardization in the manufacture and production of these effigy-urns, despite size differences, likely wields a political message of rulership, succession, and its ritual obligations, along with the likelihood of a workshop maintained by the elite. The naturalistic style and size of Chinkultic's sphere suggest importance when compared with the crudely modeled faces in the Chaculá-Quen Santo sphere. A thematic distinction is the absence of squatters holding weapons in the Chinkultic sphere. Further study of both traditions will better define them.

The eastern limit of the effigy-urn tradition was likely north of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. The western extent of the Chinkultic influence towards the Comitán plateau remains unclear, notwithstanding the plateau's isolated northwest and southwest cases of Yerbabuena and Tzimol. The absence of these urns in other major political centers such as Tenam Puente, Tenam Rosario, or Lagartero hints at broader geopolitical implications for future research.

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