

Notes about Asian Censers in the British Museum and Coptic type of Censers

Mamdouh El-Karadawy

Institute of Coptic Research and Studies - Faculty of Arts - Alexandria University

ARTICLE INFO

Received 12 August 2024
Revised 29 August 2024
Accepted 18 December 2024

JOURNAL ARTICLE



[10.21608/THALEXU.2024.311879.1135](https://doi.org/10.21608/THALEXU.2024.311879.1135)

Keywords:

Incense burners, Louts, pine corn, Buddhism, Hinduism

ABSTRACT

Incense burners had great importance in Monotheistic religions and other worships such as Buddhism as well as Hinduism. and they played an important role in prayer, also took important sacred forms in every Religion, including the lotus flower. As well as a sacred flower in Hinduism and Buddhism. In Christianity, incense burners appeared in many forms, such as in animal form, in the form of a church, or in floral shapes. They were used in daily life, while the incense burners used in religious rituals were in the form of a bowl with three chains. Coptic incense burners in the form of (pine corn), concentrated in southern Egypt (Nubia). I noticed that a similar incense burner appeared in the Asian department collection of the British Museum dating back to 14 A.D. in Indonesia (Java). that almost matches the types of the Coptic Censers style in the form of pine corn that spread in southern Egypt in the Fourth and the Fifth A.D. century, so I compared the group of Egyptian incense burners and the Indonesian incense burner and tried to reach the reason for the great similarity between them and the possibility that incense burner belong to Egypt or not in light of archaeological and artistic evidence.

Introduction:

Incense burners were one of the most important religious tools in many religions, whether Monotheistic, especially Christianity, as well as un divine religions, such as Buddhism⁽¹⁾ and Hinduism.⁽²⁾ They played an

important role in worship in a lot of religions and had important symbolism or were associated with religious symbolism in every religion like a lotus in Buddhism. a lot of fine arts included the form of a lotus flower ornament in East Asia since divine figures were sometimes depicted sitting on a throne of a lotus flower. So it appeared in the bowl of Asian censer and it was a symbol of purity and creation, while in Christianity, censers had important symbolism, as the incense burner symbolized the Virgin Mary carrying the holy embers (Jesus Christ) (Olderr, 2012, 16). the incense burner in Coptic art took many forms, including animal and floral forms as pine corn,

(1) **Buddhism:** A positivist philosophy of a religious nature that appeared in India. It was founded by Gautama, a luxurious prince who lived on the borders of Nepal. He left everything for asceticism and meditation. Enlightenment descended upon him and he began preaching. His philosophy revolved around eliminating suffering and abandoning desires and lust, as they are the cause of all human pain. It is capable of emancipation and reincarnation through Nirvana (salvation). After his death, a conference was held by his followers to purify beliefs and write the legacy of Buddha. With time and the spread of the religion, Buddha turned into a god who was worshipped, and it mixed with Hinduism in Indonesia, especially in Bali, east of Java (Ellwood, Alles, 1998, 54-57., the transmigration of souls, the unity of existence, and the cow is a sacred animal (Stutley M., Stutley. J, 1985, 100-101; Becchio, Scade, 2006, 140-142).

(2) **Hinduism:** A non-missionary Dravidian religion that prevailed in India, Nepal, and East Asia, including Bali in Indonesia, where the incense burner was found, but in Mali it is mixed with Buddhist doctrines and local beliefs. Hinduism originated in the Vedas and has no real founder. It stipulates spiritual and moral values, in addition to legal and legislative principles. The most

prominent Hindu gods are Brahma, the god of creation, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. Among the most important beliefs of this religion are) (Ellwood, Alles, 1998, 159-161; Bowker, 2005, 107).

and it is one of the styles of incense burners that spread in southern Egypt (in Balana in Nubia) (ممدوح القرضاوي، ٢٠٢٤، ٢٣٠). this style is similar to an incense burner preserved in the British Museum in the East Asia department dated back to 14 A.D., Java. The incense burner preserved in the British Museum differs in its cover from the Coptic incense burners in Being undecorated (just a plain perforated cover). The shape of the censer bowl resembles a lotus flower. The difference between it and the Coptic censer is in the censer cover, which when complete gives the pine corn, and when absent gives the lotus flower in both models.

1- Incense in Far East and Egypt:

In the Hinduism ritual, the incense is related to the element of air and stands for the perception of consciousness (Chevalier Gheerbyant, 1994, 539) and in India is used in both religions Hinduism and Buddhism, in Hinduism it is used in the ritual in the temple and at home before the device statue and they used incense stick as well as censers the adore of incense is used to waft prayers to the gods and to avoid the demons by good fragrance (Rahim, 1987, 162), it was a preparation for pray and it was a symbol of god presence and in Buddhism transferred to representation of Buddha (Bowker, 2005, 270) and the Buddhism spread the use of incense through the Far East and we can find it in every temple and the shrines in private homes (Biedermann, 1992, 185).

In ancient Egypt, incense had great important and it was used in daily life religious rituals, medical uses, and magic it was depicted in the walls of temples and the trees of incense and cultivated in temple gardens in the region of Hatshepsut (1479-1458) B.C. and the offering of incense depicted in art (ممدوح القرضاوي، ٢٠٢٤، ٢٨-٢٤) and it was a symbol of god's presence and it was associated with many gods

and goddess like Merit and Nefertem (Armour, 2016, 105).

In Christianity it had a lot of usages in rituals and before the sacred icons and in daily life and Funeral usages in the tombs (ممدوح القرضاوي، ٢٠٢٤، ٢٢٠-٢٢٤), it was a symbol of god presence and the pray ascension to god and the censer was a symbol of Marry the Virgin and the Christ was the burning incense and it was also a symbol of clergy (Olderr, 2012, 115-116).

2- Floral shapes in Egyptian and Far East arts:

Floral forms appeared in ancient Egypt, such as the lotus flower, papyrus, and many other Floral decorations. Also, in the Far East (India and Indonesia), the lotus flower had a special symbol and was associated with sacred figures. As for the pine corn, it didn't appear in the tropical region of East Asia, on the other hand, it appeared in the Mediterranean region, including Egypt. In the Christian religion, some plants, especially the grape, were associated with Jesus Christ.

2-1 Lotus flower between Egypt and India Civilization:

Lotus in ancient Egypt was a symbol of royalty, creation, and immortality (Copper, 1987, 101; Olderr, 2012, 131), because it was mentioned in the myth of the creation of the world (Biedermann, 1991, 212). according to the creation myth the Sun arose from Lotus flower floating on the water of Nun (Wilkison, 2005, 139) and linked with the sun god because it open at sunrise and closed at sunset (Biedermann, 1991, 212). it was associated with Hapi, Isis (Olderr, 2012, 131), Nefertem the son of Ptah and Sekhmet. in the pyramid texts in Unas pyramid "Unas has risen like Nefertem from the louts to the nostrils of Ra and he goes forth from the horizon on each day and the gods are sacrificed by the sight of

him (Armour, 2016, 105). In the New Kingdom, it was the symbol of Upper Egypt (Wilkinson, 1998, 121).

On the other hand, in India and Indonesia, it was a symbol of spirituality and art, it was called (Padma) in Hinduism and Buddhism.

In Hinduism it was a symbol of purity and creation and wealth (Johnson, 2009, 228) as well as a representation of the womb of creation and a symbol of the sun (Stutley J., Stutley. M, 1997, 215), moreover in Buddhism it was a symbol of purity (Keown, 2004, 158; Stutley. J, Stutly. M, 1997, 215) because it grows above the water (Stutley. J, Stutley. M, 1997, 158). in Iconography, holy figures are often depicted in an oriental seat on a lotus Blossom (Keown, 2004, 158). in Hinduism, Brahma sometimes was depicted as a seated figure in Lotus flower (Stutley. J, Stutley. M, 1997, 158). In the myth born of Vishnu who was sleeping in the water and Shiva the god of distraction was depicted with four handhold louts and surrounded by a serpent and discus and club (Arnex, Kripal, other – 445-447) also Lakshmi⁽³⁾ the wife of Vishnu, the goddess of fortune and beauty, and she is depicted as a female sat on louts throne (Lurker, 2004, 108). Also, Buddha is depicted as a seated figure in the Lotus flower.

2-2 Pine corn in Mediterranean Region and Far Asia:

Sometimes Dionysus often held pine corn as a scepter and it referred to continues of plants' life (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994, 754-755) as well as the glorified fertility (Cirlot, 1990, 256) and immortality. it's also an aphrodisiac symbol (Devries, 1991, 367), it was mentioned in the old testament as good for construction in the song of Sol. (1:17) and

⁽³⁾ Lakshmi: The goddess of beauty, good fortune and wealth as well as she is the wife of god Vishnu and she associated with Prosperity and fertility of land and she depicted as a beautiful young woman holding or seated on a Lotus (Johnson, 2009, 184).

good wood to the shapes in Ezek (27:6- 17) (Powell, 2011, 80). it grew in a temperate climate region like the Mediterranean Basin and North Far East of Asia like China and Japan, but was unknown in tropical regions like India and Indonesia. In China it was a symbol of longevity because the Chinese thought that a long life is the greatest gift in life (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994, 754-755). it was sacred also for Osiris Pan and Sybille.

3- Asian Censers in British Museum No. (1859.1228.15)

There is an Indonesian Censer, it's a bowl in the shape of a lotus flower, that surmounts a cylindrical openwork column ornamented with pierced triangles. Above it, there are four animal feted pedestal Ornamented with pierced lozenges and triangles, The lid is not ornamented it is just pierced to emit the incense. it is made of bronze with a height of 12.70 cm. it was found in Java in a Hindu and Buddhist site. it is preserved in British Museum no. 1859.1228.15 and dates back to (Semi Bddhis) 14 A.D., fig. (1) (<https://britishmuseum.com>). the cup-shaped in lotus flower, which was in Buddhism a symbol of purification and spiritual growth and a lot of Lakshmi statues in Hinduism seated in lotus flower, the lotus flower refers to the Lakshmi throne, also Buddha depicted seated on lotus flower



Fig. (1)

After:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1859-1228-141, 28/07/2024, 1 p.m.

4- Coptic Censers in the shape of pine corn:

There are types of Coptic Censers in the shape of pine corn the censer surmounts a cylindrical open work column ornaments with floral patterns and rows of beads on four animal feet pedestals ornamented with pierced lozenge and X ornament on each side and the other two sides grab leaves, the pine corn is divided into a cup and a lid with hinge, the height 26 made of bronze, founded in Aswan (Balana) in tomb 47 room 2 it preserved in the Nubian Museum date baked to (4-5) A.D. century fig. (2). (Emery, 1938, 362-363).



Fig. (2)

After: photo by: Yasser Abd Elrady, Nubian Museum curator, 12/10/2024, 9:40 a.m.

Moreover, there is another example of a pine corn shape divided into a bowl and lid with a hinge surmounted by a shallow dome on four architectural columns on a pedestal with four animal feet in the corners the pedestals are ornamented with priced triangles, and the censer made of bronze its height is 27.9 cm, founded in Egypt, the lid is messing preserved in Louvre Museum no. EH9169 date back to 400-409 A.D. fig.(3). (Benazéth, 1992, 98). That type was spoken in upper Egypt, especially the Nubia Region.



Fig. (3)

After: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010044071>, 28/07/2024, 12 p.m.

There is a pine corn Censers surmount a shallow dome with four architectural columns with rose ornaments on the top of every column based on a pedestal with four animal feet in the corners, the pedestal had a pierced ornament in two sides in lozenge and in one side pierced three circles and in other side floral grape ornaments, the Censer divide to the cup and lid with holes to emits the burn incense, made of bronze, the height 35cm, Founded in Balana in tomb 121 rooms 3, preserved in Nubian museum date bake to (4-5) A.D. century fig. (4) (Emery, 1938, 362).



Fig. (4)

نقلاً عن: ممدوح القرضاوي، ٢٠٢٠، كتالوج ٦١، ص ١١٨

There is a Censer pine corn shape divided into a cup and lid with a hinge on the top of an open work cylindrical column in a lozenge, 20 cm height, made of Bronze founded in Al-Fayoum, preserved in Berlin Museum dated

back to 5-century fig. (5) (Badawy, 1978,329; Leclercq, 1922, Colmen29).



Fig. (5)

After: Leclercq,1922,fig7040

5- Analysis and results:

The researcher sent email⁽⁴⁾ to the Asian department in the British Museum asking for additional data about that incense burner; if it had any modifications or any welds, the archaeological context of it, if there are related artifacts similar to it, and the biography for that incense burner fig (1).

They replied⁽⁵⁾ that *(This example was collected by Stamford Raffles during his time as lieutenant-governor of Java between 1811-16. A.D. It was donated to the British Museum, The museum does not know where Raffles acquired the object, but in his book (History of Java), he noted that when the Javanese knew he was interested in such things, they brought them to him when they found them while digging. There is no known archaeological context for this piece. Presumably, the censer was found in the area of ancient Hindu and*

⁽⁴⁾The e-mail sent by:
mmdoohkaradawi@gmail.com
Date: Thursday, May 9, 2024 5:41 PM
Subject: Re: About incense burner no. 1859,1228.141
To: <asia@britishmuseum.org>

⁽⁵⁾AGreen@britishmuseum.org
Date: Tuesday, June 25, 2024 3:05 PM
Subject: FW: About incense burner no. 1859,1228.141
To: mmdoohkaradawi@gmail.com
The replied e-mail by: Dr. Alexandra Green S. P. Shaw Curator for Southeast Asia)

Buddhist sites in central and eastern Java. Information about similar pieces can be found in Marijke Klokke and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer's book Ancient Indonesian Bronzes. I am not aware of any modifications to the censer)

The Researcher found out that the only incense burner in that catalog does not resemble the one under study at all, It is a vessel with a hand in the shape of (*Naja*)⁶ with bulging eyes, ears, and horns and emerges from his mouth cylinder to insert a wooden handle to carry the incense burner. outside the incense burner there is a lotus decoration and garland motif. it is made of bronze, found in Java and preserved in Museum of tropics, Amsterdam, dates back to the 13th century, fig. (6) (Klokke, Scheurleer, 1988, 130).



Fig. (6)

After: Klokke, Scheurleer, 1988, 130, Cat. 170

Another example of Indonesian censers is a censer in the shape of a round plate with a cover, made of Gold, its height is 13 cm, the its Dimensions are 5.1 cm, dating back to the Last quarter of the 10th–last quarter of the 15th century, preserved in Metropolitan Museum, No. 1998.544.44a, b, New York. Fig. (7) (<https://www.metmuseum.org/>)

⁶ Naga: The serpent being in the mythology of Hinduism and Buddhism lived in the underworld in a watery environment and it was a guardian of a hidden sacred text called (Mahāyāna) (Keown, 2004, 185).



Fig. (7)

After: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49706>, 20/10/2024, 4 p.m.

1) The Asian Censer is very similar to The Coptic type, so the researcher thinks it was a Coptic censer based on the following:

- a) In the Coptic censer fig. (2) apart from the lid in both censers is typical of fig (1) hasn't any decoration to be resampled to louts flower and all the details are typical, the open works in the column and the cup of the censer is too close to the Coptic censer fig (2), and the pedestal is open work in one side in Coptic censer in two sides lozange in the middle and X ornament in each side and in the other two sides floral ornaments and the animal feet of the pedestal is typical in both centers.
- b) As well as the censer bowel in fig. (1) is similar to the cup of the Coptic censer in fig. (3) which hasn't lid furthermore the censer cup of fig. (5) is similar to the censer cup of fig. (1) if the lid of the censer left up and the column open work which the censer cup surmounted close to the column holds the censer in fig. (1) and also the cup of censer fig. (4) close to the one in fig. (1) if the lid of fig. (4) left up.
- c) The Indonesian censer fig. (6) didn't have any openwork ornaments it had relief carving ornaments of louts in the rim and in the place of the hand mythical creature (Naga) in relief but the Coptic censer and Coptic metal work in general had open work ornaments mostly and seldom of relief carving like the cups of censers (2, 3, 4, 5) but a lot of openwork in the

pedestal and the column and the same in the censer fig. (1) which founded in Indonesia.

- d) There are trade relations between the Far East (Indonesia and India) on one hand, and on the hand Egypt and the Middle East. Since there is evidence from Berenike for example the beads from Jatim in Eastern Java found in Berenike fig. (8), it may not have a direct trade with Berenike, because it was small items like censers and jewelries maybe transported by second parts (India) (Sidebontham, Hense, Nouwens, 2008, 181).

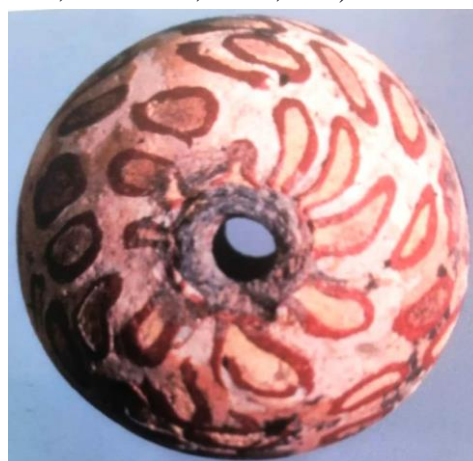


Fig. (8)

After: Sidebontham, Hense, Nouwens, 2008, fig. 7.5

And there is other evidence of the relations between Egypt and in the other hand India and the Far East, Buddha statue found in The Roman temple of Berenike, also a Sanskrit Inscription dating to (244-249 A.D.), the region of The Roman Empire, Philip the Arabs, the statute made of marble came from south Turkey and made locally may be made by one of Indian Merchants, who believed in Buddhism, the statute represents a standing Buddha with a halo with rays, and next to Buddha a lotus flower, and he holds his garment with his left hand, the height 71 cm, it maybe dates back to The Early Roman period (First Century) Fig (9). (<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/>)



Fig. (9)

After: <https://www.biblicalarcology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-egypt/buddha-in-ancient-egypt/>, 20/10/2024 5:30 p.m.

Based on what was mentioned above; it is a justification for believing that this incense burner does not belong to Indonesian art, most likely, but a Coptic censer transferred by trade between Egypt and the Far East of Asia, so it is a Coptic censer since that type was familiar in upper Egypt and especially El Ballana where it was founded (fig. 2, 4). Thus, it could be made in upper Egypt upon request without the ornamented lid, to be the cup similar to lotus flower to compatible with Buddha workshop, or the Indonesians replaced the lid with another one to be close to lotus flower especially the lid in fig. (1) not closed and not fully matched to the rim.

- 2- The Lotus had great symbolism in Indonesia, it was a symbol of Purity and Creation, and in Egypt, it was a symbol of Creation, royalty, and Immortality.
- 3- The pine cone a symbol of fertility was common in temperate climate regions like the Middle East and Mediterranean, but it was uncommon in Indonesia since it was a tropical region.
- 4- There is indirect trade between Egypt and Indonesia because there is much evidence in Red Sea Cost.

5- Buddhist worship was practiced on the Red Sea coasts by Indian merchants who came to trade with Egypt.

References:

- Armour P. A. (2016) Gods and myths of ancient Egypt, Cairo.
- Arney. P, Kripal. J (2006) Hinduism, Doniger. W (Ed.) Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions (p.p. 437-463), London.
- Badawy, A. (1978) .Coptic Art and Archaeology: The Art of the Christian Egyptian from the late antique to the middle Ages, Massachusetts : Institute to technology press Cambridge.
- Becchio. B, Schade. D (2006) Encyclopedia of world religions, New Jersey.
- Benazéth, D. (1992) . Catalogue du département des antiquités égyptiennes. L'art du métal au début de l'ère chrétienne, Paris.
- Biedermann. H (1992) Dictionary of symbolism, New York.
- Bowker. J (2005) The concise, Oxford dictionary of World religions, Oxford.
- Chevalier. J, Gheerbront A. (1982) A dictionary of symbols, translated from French By Buchanan – Brown. J, Oxford.
- Cirlot. J (1990) A dictionary of symbols translated from Spanish by Saga. J., London.
- Copper. J (1978) An Illustrated Encyclopedia of traditional symbols. London.
- Devries. A.D (1984) Dictionary of symbol and imagery, London.
- Ellwood. R. S, Alles G.D. (1998) The Encyclopedia of world religions, New York.
- Emery, W. (1938) .the Royal Tombs of Ballana and Qustul. volume II. Cairo.
- Johnson. W. J (2009) A dictionary of Hinduism, Oxford.
- Keown. D (2004) A dictionary of Buddha, Oxford.
- Klokke, Scheurleer (1988) Ancient Indonesian Bronzes, New York.
- Leclercq, H. (1922). Encensoir, Carbol. F., LeClercq. H. (Eds.) D. A. C. L. Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, Tome deuxième, (Colmén 21-34), Paris.
- Lurker M. (2004), The Rutledge Dictionary of God and goddess, Devils and demons, London.
- Morel. C (2004) Dictionnaire des symboles, mythes et croyances, France.

- Olderr. S (2012) symbolism A comprehensive Dictionary. London.
- Powell. M. A (2011) The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, New York.
- Rahim. H (1987) incense, (Ed.) Eliade . M, The encyclopedia of religion, vol. 7, (p.p. 161-163), New York.
- Sidebotham S.E, Hense. M, Nouwens. H.M, (2008) The Red Land: The Illustrated Archaeology Egypt's Eastern Desert, Cairo AUC Press.
- Stutley. M, Stutley. J (1985) A Dictionary of Hinduism: it's mythology, Folklore and development 1500 B.C – 1500 A.D., London.
- Wilkinson, R. H. (1998) Reading Egyptian art : a hieroglyphic guide to ancient Egyptian painting and sculpture, New York : Thames & Hudson.
- Wilkinson, T. (2005) Dictionary of Ancient Egypt, USA.
- ممدوح القرضاوي (٢٠٢٤). المبخرة القبطية في الفترة ما بين القرن الرابع حتى القرن العاشر الميلادي (دراسة أثرية فنية رمزية) دار مدرسة الإسكندرية، القاهرة.
- www.britishmuseum.org
- <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010044071>
- https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1859-1228-141
- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49706>
- <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-egypt/buddha-in-ancient-egypt/>
- <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/>
- <https://www.metmuseum.org/>