

# Overturning Certainties in Near Eastern Archaeology

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# Contents

- Foreword IX  
*Carol Bier*
- K. Ashhan Yener Publications XIV
- 1 Pointed Juglets as an International Trend in Late Bronze Ritual Practices: A View from Alalakh 1  
*Murat Akar*
- 2 Demographic Trends in Early Mesopotamian Urbanism 25  
*Guillermo Algaze*
- 3 Lapis Lazuli and Shells from Mari to Ebla 34  
*Alfonso Archi*
- 4 The Metals Trade and Early Bronze Age Craft Production at Tell Tayinat 48  
*Stephen Batiuk and Timothy P. Harrison*
- 5 A Gold and Lapis Lazuli Bead from Petras, Crete 67  
*Philip P. Betancourt, James D. Muhly and Susan C. Ferrence*
- 6 Alloys and Architecture: Periodic and Quasiperiodic Patterns in Sinan's Selimiye in Edirne 82  
*Carol Bier*
- 7 A Syro-Cilician Pitcher from a Middle Bronze Age Kitchen at Tell Atchana, Alalakh 101  
*Müge Bulu*
- 8 Available in All Colors! Remarks on Some Masks from the Late Bronze Age Levant 117  
*Annie Caubet*
- 9 Alalakh Monsters 128  
*Dominique Collon*

- 10 **Sharing Technologies and Workspaces for Ceramic and Vitrified Material Production at Tell Atchana-Alalakh** 139  
*Gonca Dardeniz*
- 11 **Unpublished Hittite Seals in the Collections of the Amasya Museum** 157  
*Meltem Doğan-Alparslan and Metin Alparslan*
- 12 **Thoughts on the Anthropomorphic Pottery Vessel Found in Liman Tepe** 171  
*Armağan Erkanal and Ayşegiül Aykurt*
- 13 **The Role of Metal Procurement in the Wide Interregional Connections of Arslantepe during the Late 4th–Early 3rd Millennium BC** 186  
*Marcella Frangipane*
- 14 **Why Alashiya is Still a Problem** 211  
*Allan S. Gilbert*
- 15 **Novel Uses of Wild Faunal Resources at Transitional Middle-Late Bronze Age Tell Atchana** 222  
*Mara T. Horowitz and Canan Çakırlar*
- 16 **The Extramural Cemetery at Tell Atchana, Alalakh, and GIS Modeling** 245  
*Tara Ingman*
- 17 **Origins of the Copper Ingots of Alalakh** 260  
*Ergun Kaptan*
- 18 **Were There Sea Peoples at Alalakh (Tell Atchana)?** 275  
*Robert B. Koehl*
- 19 **Alalakh and Kizzuwatna: Some Thoughts on the Synchronization** 296  
*Ekin Kozal and Mirko Novák*
- 20 **Early Iron in Assyria** 318  
*Hartmut Kühne*

- 21 **Balance Stone Weights and Scale-Pans from Kültepe-Kanesh: On One of the Basic Elements of the Old Assyrian Trading System** 341  
*Fikri Kulakoğlu*
- 22 **The Organization of Metal Production at Hattuša: A First Assessment** 403  
*Joseph W. Lehner and Andreas Schachner*
- 23 **A Metal Workshop? Multi-Hollow Anvils at Taştepe Obası in Southeastern Konya** 436  
*Çiğdem Maner*
- 24 **Upstream from Alalakh: The Lower Orontes Area in Syria** 453  
*Stefania Mazzoni*
- 25 **The Çaltılar Archaeological Project: Archaeological, Archaeometric, and Ethnoarchaeological Investigations of Pottery Production and Consumption in Southwest Turkey** 477  
*Nicoletta Momigliano and Mustafa Kibaroğlu*
- 26 **New Observations for the Late Chalcolithic Settlement at Barcın Höyük** 503  
*Rana Özbal, Hadi Özbal, Fokke Gerritsen, Ayla Türkekul Byık and Turhan Doğan*
- 27 **Pass the Wine: Drinking Cups at Early Bronze III Tarsus** 521  
*Aslı Özyar*
- 28 **An Underworld Cult Monument in Antioch: The Charonion** 543  
*Hatice Pamir*
- 29 **The Iron Age II “Spoon Stoppers/Censers” Production in the Amuq: An Example from Chatal Höyük** 560  
*Marina Pucci*
- 30 **Unprovenienced Seals from the Amuq in the Hatay Museum** 577  
*Robert K. Ritner, Hasan Peker and Ömer Çelik*
- 31 **Alalah/Mukiš under Hittite Rule and Thereafter** 614  
*Itamar Singer†*

- 32 **The Anatolian-Syrian Relationship in the Light of the Ortaköy-Šapinuwa Tablets** 634  
*Aygül Süel*
- 33 **Iron Age Arrowheads from Kerkenes** 645  
*Geoffrey D. Summers*
- 34 **The Contexts of Painted Plaster in the Middle Bronze Age Palace of Tel Kabri** 665  
*Assaf Yasur-Landau, Nurith Goshen and Eric H. Cline*
- Index** 683

# The Iron Age II “Spoon Stoppers/Censers” Production in the Amuq: An Example from Chatal Höyük

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## Abstract

This article deals with a specific class of materials, commonly called censers. Their retrieval in large numbers at the site of Chatal Höyük, and especially the discovery of two unfinished ones, sheds new light on the production area in the Amuq. Moreover, their archaeological distribution at the site and their stratigraphic assignment provide scholars with crucial information concerning their function and dating. Craft production models will be employed to identify the workshops and their commercial range, while stylistic analysis of the Chatal ones suggests specific elements related to the local production. The analysis clearly demonstrates on the one hand that Chatal Höyük hosted one or more workshops specializing in the production of artifacts made of local stone, while on the other they were used mainly in domestic contexts, and belong to the usual household inventory.

The term “censer” was first employed in scholarly literature (Przeworski 1930) in ancient Near Eastern archaeology in the 1930s to describe decorated stone bowls with a long perforated shaft that were commonly distributed within the Iron Age Levant. This term was based on the supposed similarity to Egyptian artifacts called arm of Horus and dated to the Middle and New Kingdoms (Laisney 2009) that bore some similarities to the Iron Age ones and implied a use for the burning of perfumed oils. In later periods, it has also been proposed, due to the lack of burnt traces on the vessels, that these bowls were used for aromatic oils or as spoon stoppers (Athanassiou 1977; Fritz 1987): the bowl would have been fixed to a leather container and employed as dispenser for aromatic oils.

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Macroscopic analysis of the Chatal Höyük censers' internal surfaces (clay or stone) does not show evidence of a specific use, such as burn traces, local erosions, or residues. The perforation running from the bowl and through the tube seems to have had a practical function, although the absence of any traces of erosion near the hole in the bowl seems to rule out the possibility that a fluid frequently ran through it. Moreover, the diameter of this hole would allow only a very slow flow. The different interpretations of the objects' use have been analyzed by Amiran (1962: 170). In the documentation of the small finds from the excavations at Chatal Höyük, the term "censer" has been kept in order to indicate a homogeneous group of objects, but this designation is not intended to presuppose their function.

Several scholars have been dealing with the origin and the function of these objects, two questions that are strongly related to each other. One group of scholars has traced the origin of these objects back to Anatolia, establishing a connection between the hand bowls and the libation arms; Bittel (1957: 40) links the bowls with the Hittite libation arms as does Ertem (1979: 39–41) for those found at Korucutepe. Others locate the origin of these objects in Egypt, emphasizing the similarities with the metal hand-shaped bowls represented in several Egyptian paintings as containers in which to burn essences (cf. Przeworski 1930; Parrot 1964: 237–239 and references; Kozloff 1974). However, all scholars proposed a dating based on stylistic comparisons to the 9th and 7th-centuries and a stylistic sphere of influence at that time based in North Syria and Palestine (Merhav 1980: 102; Fritz 1987: 236; Mazzoni 2001: 293; 2005: 56–60; Bombardieri 2008: 282).

Muscarella (2000: 190–191) affirms that "to date 132 examples are recorded from excavations, of which 90 from north Syrian sites". This appears to be the most recent counting of this kind of object. Although a comprehensive study including all of them does not yet exist, they have been published separately in excavations reports or museum publications. Athanassiou (1977) affirms that there were 67 from Rasm et-Tanjara, although Muscarella in particular made some remarks on the authenticity of these objects. Galling (1970) counts 90 pieces, Mazzoni (2005) added four pieces from Tell Afis. Besides Rasm at-Tanjara, which will be discussed separately, Chatal Höyük hosts the largest group of censers (49 pieces) found in the Near East and includes an interesting variety of materials and types which may provide crucial information on craft production and context distribution.

All of the bowls found at Chatal Höyük (Fig. 29.1) in good stratigraphic contexts date to Phases O\_Middle (mid 9th to mid 8th-century BC) and O\_Late (mid 8th to the end of the 7th-century BC), emphasizing a gap with the Late Bronze Age Anatolian and Cypriot libation arms. This four hundred years' gap

does not allow one to establish a direct link with the earlier kind of artifact. The same statement is valid regarding the Egyptian influence: no burn traces are visible on the surfaces of the bowls, so it would seem that they could not have been used in the same way as in the Egyptian paintings. Instead, it seems likely that the presence of a carved hand supporting a bowl is common to objects that may have had different purposes, and the hand does not mean that such objects are directly related to each other. A similar statement can be made concerning the lion bowls, one of which was also found at Atchana (Yener 2005: 104). Although also in these vessels a lion is connected to the use of a bowl, the features and size of these lion bowls strongly differ from the censers considered in this article (cf. Meiberg 2013).

### Censers from Chatal Höyük

Generally speaking, all Chatal censers consist of a hemispherical bowl (diameters range from 5 to 7 cm), perforated on one side (hole diameters range from 0.3 to 0.8 cm), and provided on the same side with a hollowed handle or peg (conical in shape). The part of the peg adjoining the bowl in the stone examples is finished and decorated, while the other end is left rough, as if it was used for insertion into another support. The objects were usually created from a single piece of stone, first rough-hewed, then finished. Among these, two pieces found at Chatal can be considered unfinished.

The censer A12639 (Figs. 29.2 and 29.3) is a roughly hewed brown stone artifact. The bowl is clearly visible although it has been left uncarved. The shaft is also roughly shaped. A protuberance visible where the shaft connects to the bowl would likely have formed a lion's head and the lion's front legs embracing the bowl. Traces of chisel marks are visible on the whole surface of the object, carried out with a movement from top to bottom on the sides and sideways on the top surface of the object. On the bottom side, an evident triangular mark suggests that not only a chisel was employed but also an adze with a triangular shape. There is no evidence that suggests why the object was left unfinished. It was found in a secondary context of Area I (Fig. 29.6, pentagonal shape in square U-12 according to the map grid) inside the earth accumulation of the domestic structures brought to light in this square (phase O\_Late).

Censer A17434 (Figs. 29.4 and 29.5) may be either unfinished but at a more advanced stage of the shaping process, or an extremely roughly carved yet finished one. It is a "hand bowl" made of a greenish stone very common among the small stone objects at the site. The hand is abstract and consists of six fingers, stretched along the bottom surface in order to reach the rim. The nails



are carved with simple incised lines, while the attachment of the tube to the bowl is rendered with a simple roughly bossed bulge. The rim is not decorated, and where the small finger connects to the rim, several chisel marks are still evident (see Fig. 29.4).

The surfaces inside the bowl as well as on the rim also bear clear marks of the chisel, distinguishing this censer from the finished censers found at the site. In fact, all other censers found at the settlement show a clear finishing of the surface, carried out with a tool (possibly sand and a leather piece) that left circular marks concentric to the center of the bowl, providing the artifact with a smoother surface. The absence of this even surface treatment may then suggest its unfinished condition. This censer was found in one of the narrow trenches dug on the northeastern top of the mound (Square S9) together with two simple clay lamps in a so-called cache (i.e., objects found all together in primary context). The few architectural elements uncovered within the trench do not allow a more specific identification of their function; it is merely possible to say that they do not differ in size and building technique from those in the domestic quarters.

While the brown stone of the unfinished lion bowl A12639 is not common at the site (two censers total), the greenish stone of A17434 is the one used for the majority (29) of these artifacts at the site as well as the production of spindle whorls, cosmetic pyxides, and kohl boxes. However, the two objects discussed above seem to indicate that at least during Phase O\_Late (end of the 7th-century BC), the village of Chatal was home to a “workshop” for this kind of artifact, at least those decorated with a lion or hand.

In addition, two baked clay hand bowls were also found at the site, one from a context dated to Phase O\_beginning (1150–950 BC) context and the second one recovered from the topsoil. Their shape, size, and decoration seem in every aspect similar to the ones made of stone, except for the shape of the peg. In the baked clay specimens, the pegs are not conical for insertion into something else but instead they open into a cylindrical shape. The pieces are both broken, so the length of the shaft cannot be determined. Considering that the only stratified example was found in a phase O\_beginning context they can be considered “forerunners” of the stone ones, or alternately, they may represent a poor quality version of the stone hand bowl type. However, they differ from the Anatolian libation arms in several features: the clay employed is chaffy and the sides are thin and instable, the shaft is not cylindrical, it is handmade, and it is not red burnished.

Moreover, their shafts differ also from so-called cup-mouthed vessels (for the connections between censers and cup-mouthed vessels in general, cf. Athanassiou 1977: 66; Fritz 1987: 238), which have rims directly attached to the

bowl. Thus they do not provide crucial elements to establish a connection with similar vessels. Nevertheless, the existence of baked clay “censers” suggests that this specific kind of artifact might have also been produced with material different from the stone. If the material employed was perishable (such as wood), it may be that the type had a broader chronological range of use than is currently known.

From a typological point of view, it is possible to observe three main decorative patterns employed on censers found at Chatal Höyük. They mirror in part the usual typological distinction noted by Merhav (1980): lion, hand, or palmette. No specific pattern seems to be “more ancient” than the others due to the fact that the palmette, hand and/or lion decorations appear at the same time. Palmettes (16 pieces) and hands (14 pieces) were commonly used locally for the decoration of the bottom of the bowls. As far as it is possible to observe, the motif of palmettes in two rows seems to have had a local development, according to the archaeological contexts; it merely became increasingly geometrized over time. Only the bottom of one piece (OIM inv. Nr. A17409) bears a completely geometric pattern—which is a single cross and similar to two examples currently in European museums: one in the Museum für Kunst Gewerbe in Hamburg (cf. Fritz 1987: 234) and the other in the Louvre (cf. Parrot 1964: Fig. 13).

The lion decorations on the tubes (8 pieces from Chatal Höyük, only one combined with a hand pattern) are most likely locally produced. It is, however, possible to distinguish two main styles. One group (3 pieces) seems to bear several Assyrianizing elements in the rendering of the mane or paws (the fur is rendered with lanceolate shapes instead of the usual cross-hatch, cf. Winter 1982). The second group shows very typical North Syrian features, well-known from the carvings and lion representations on door jambs (as at Zincirli or Karkemish, cf. Orthmann 1971, C/2, K/19). Bowls made in these two styles seem to have coexisted during the same period. They were at least used at the same time and may eventually be traced to two different workshops.

Two Chatal Höyük censers stand out because of the stone employed and, in part as a consequence of this, for the more detailed and different decoration: one is made from red jasper (OIM In. N. A17392) and the other from white marble (Antioch inventory 5465). They differ from the local ones not only because of the stone, but also for their style. Thus, their almost certain foreign provenience indicates that these artifacts were also imported to the site from different external workshops.

While the three main themes decorating the censers are common in the whole northern Levant and are not distinctive of a specific workshop, we may consider some stylistic features which could indicate specific local characteristics and consequently help to assign them to local workshops. Decorative

patterns employed underneath the rim of the censers at Chatal Höyük are usually restricted to oblique lines, zigzag/wavy, or frequently plain bands. None of the bowls exhibit concentric circles, parallel triangles as in Tell Afis 86.D.118 (Mazzoni 2005: Fig. 5), crosshatch as in Marash (cf. Przeworski and Zacharov 1934: pl. XXVII, 3), concentric arches as in Zincirli S1997 (cf. von Luschan 1943: pl. 14h), or rosettes as in Hazor (Yadin et al. (eds) 1960: Pl. CVIII).

Moreover, the lip of the bowl is left plain at Chatal Höyük: although this element is not a distinguishing feature for a local work, it differs from the few decorated with hollows on the rim—cf. one from the antiquity market (Kozloff 1974: Fig. 6) and one in Egyptian blue from Hasanlu (cf. Fritz 1987: 235). The attachment of the bowl to the tube is rendered with a simple foliated decoration, which in a few artifacts from Chatal Höyük has been simplified to a doughnut-shape. Artifacts very similar to those from Chatal Höyük were found only at Zincirli and at the Yunus cemetery of Carchemish (Woolley 1914: pl. 27, M1-2), suggesting that the range of distribution was limited to the Amuq area up to the Euphrates. This may confirm the existence of several workshops in different regions of the northern Levant serving a relatively small area of distribution. Moreover, one unfinished stone censer from Tell Tayinat (probably a lion censer) is on display at the archaeological Museum of Hatay; although it is not possible to establish the original context, it could suggest that more than one workshop was active in the same region.

Considering that unfinished censers in a stratified context have been found only at Chatal Höyük, we may postulate the existence of specialized production and a workshop likely located in the northern area of the site (Squares S-9-W-15). A few other unfinished stone artifacts of Phase O (a spindle whorl, a cylinder seal) were found in the same area, and we may hypothesize that the production of stone censers was part of a broader stone industry. In particular, the abundance of stone pyxides (15) and kohl containers (31) may suggest that these types of artifacts were also produced at the site.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, these objects share with the stone censers a common range of decorative geometric patterns (such as oblique or wavy lines). They also share common materials employed in their manufacture, and they completely avoid other decorative elements common abroad (e.g., the guilloche). The local workshop for the production of small stone artifacts (certainly for the censers,

2 It is more difficult to establish archaeologically whether these stone workshops produced also large stone containers, such as tripod bowls, which were however at Chatal Höyük not very frequent. However, the recent discovery at Hazor of an Iron Age workshop specialized only in stone containers (cf. Ebeling and Rosenberg 2015), seems to suggest that these artifacts were produced separately.

and postulated for the kohl boxes and pyxides) was located inside the village and followed the model of a household craft production. It provided the site with these specific artifacts, which apparently had a very wide distribution in the site and were intended for a general public. The archaeological contexts in which they could be employed may better clarify their range of distribution in the site.

### Archaeological Contexts of the Censers at Chatal Höyük and Other Sites

Considering that the largest number of stratified censers at a single Near Eastern site was found at Chatal Höyük, a detailed analysis on the distribution of these artifacts across the site may eventually suggest their context of use. As mentioned above, all of the stratified stone censers were found in archaeological contexts dated to Phases O\_Mid and O\_Late. Figures 29.6 and 29.7 show their distribution in each of these two phases; the findspots for the unfinished ones are indicated with a pentagonal shape. This mapping clearly demonstrates that they were uniformly diffused within the domestic quarters and that in every area where Phase O\_Mid or Late structures were found, some specimens of these objects could also be collected.

Only the trench dug in the area of Squares S/R-9 seems to host a higher concentration of censers (and also one of the unfinished ones). This may be related to its proximity to a production workshop, or alternately to the censers' use in a specific structure. However, the architectural remains in this limited excavated surface do not allow the assignment of a specific function other than a domestic one. The objects with which the censers were found, seem to belong to the usual household assemblage, may be considered as part of the personal sphere and related to everyday domestic activities.

Comparing the Chatal Höyük data with other archaeological sites in which stone censers were found does not yield much new information as only a few examples exist; most of the published pieces were recovered in the antiquities market and consequently lack a secure archaeological context. The largest group of censers found at a single site were from Rasm et-Tanjara (Athanasiou 1977). The so-called hoard or treasure (which also contained 67 censers) only became known to scholars once it started being progressively sold on the antiquities market in Beirut in 1961. According to Athanasiou (1977: 13), the hoard was recovered at the Syrian site of Rasm et-Tanjara (Eastern Ghab, Fig.29.1) by "inhabitants under unknown circumstances", and following this, the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities carried out a sounding at the site in

1961, bringing to light an “Aramaean burn level and a Late Bronze Age/Iron Age cremation cemetery”. Although no further traces of remains of the “treasure” were found in this sounding, Athanassiou states that all of the objects most likely came from this site due to a specific “incrustation” which was also found on the pottery recovered during the sounding.

Even though several criticisms have been raised about the authenticity of some of the censers, or about the existence of such a hoard, it is possible that at least some of them were really obtained at the site and that they might eventually be related to one of the two “levels” identified during the sounding. However, considering the paucity of information available and the uncertainty of the retrieval, it doesn’t seem possible as yet to: (1) identify the site as a likely production center, or (2) state with certainty that all censers were really found grouped together with other artifacts or belonging to one of the excavated layers.

More detailed information on the contexts of retrieval of stone censers comes from the sites of Tell Afis, Zincirli, and Carchemish. At Tell Afis, three of the four documented censers were found in the lower town (Area D) inside domestic units, while the fourth fragment was also found in a domestic context in Area E (Mazzoni 2005). In the Carchemish region, censers were found in the Yunus cemetery as part of the grave goods (Woolley 1914: pl. 27, M1 and 2) together with other artifacts such as kohl boxes, pottery, and fibulae, possibly suggesting again that they belonged among the personal belongings.

At Zincirli, ten pieces were collected, which were scattered in different parts of the site. The few pieces found in stratified contexts were used all as building materials inside the walls, and only in one case (S3559, von Luschan 1943: pl. 13, i and k), the specimen was apparently<sup>3</sup> part of the burnt inventory recovered in room J2. The inventory of this room consists of numerous artifacts (cf. Pucci 2008: 62) not so much related to the usual domestic assemblages but rather to the house depot of an elite residence, which mainly included objects that were precious due to the material employed or their manufacture.

Considering that the few excavated contexts that included censers clearly suggest that they were used in the households and were considered personal belongings, it seems more likely to ascribe them to the sphere of the domestic or personal care.

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3 There is a discrepancy between the context information in the report and the data entry in the original fund context journal. In the original (courtesy of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin) the object is marked as belonging to the J2 inventory, while in the publication as found in the burnt debris of one of the northern rooms of Building J.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the objects from Chatal Höyük confirm the start date for the censers' production during the middle stages of Amuq Phase O, and that this class of artifact probably should be considered as functionally belonging to personal equipment. It is also evident that the Chatal censers were produced locally, they show local decorative patterns and, as per Mazzoni (2005: 60–62), they fit well into the stylistic and cultural *koinè* of the north Syrian Iron Age II and III.

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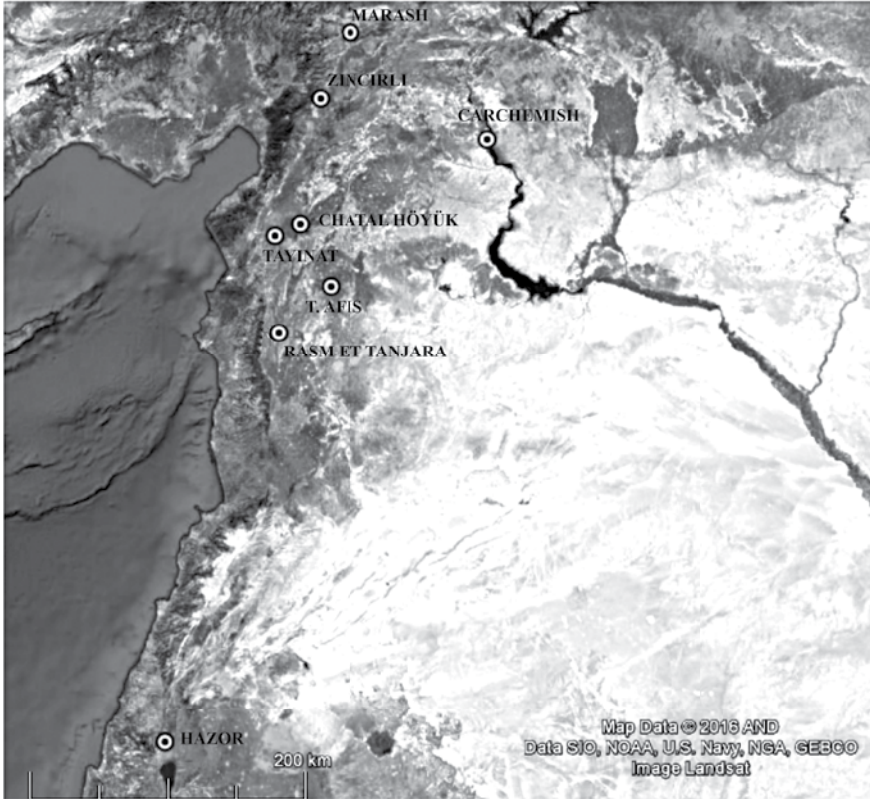


FIGURE 29.1 *Geographic map of the region with the mentioned sites.*  
DRAWING BY MARINA PUCCI



FIGURE 29.2 *Oriental Institute Museum n. A12639.*  
DRAWING ANGELA ALTENHOFEN AND TIZIANA D'ESTE

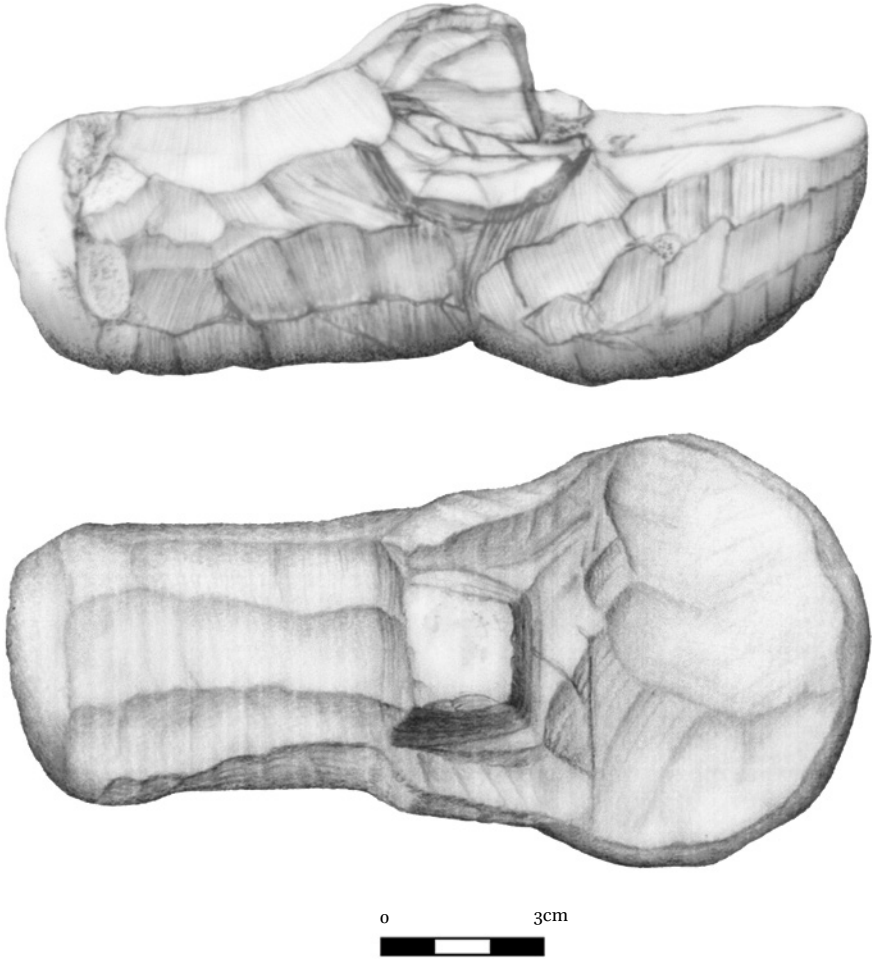


FIGURE 29.3 *Oriental Institute Museum n. A12639.*  
PHOTO BY MARINA PUCCI



FIGURE 29.4 *Oriental Institute Museum n. A17434.*  
PHOTO BY MARINA PUCCI

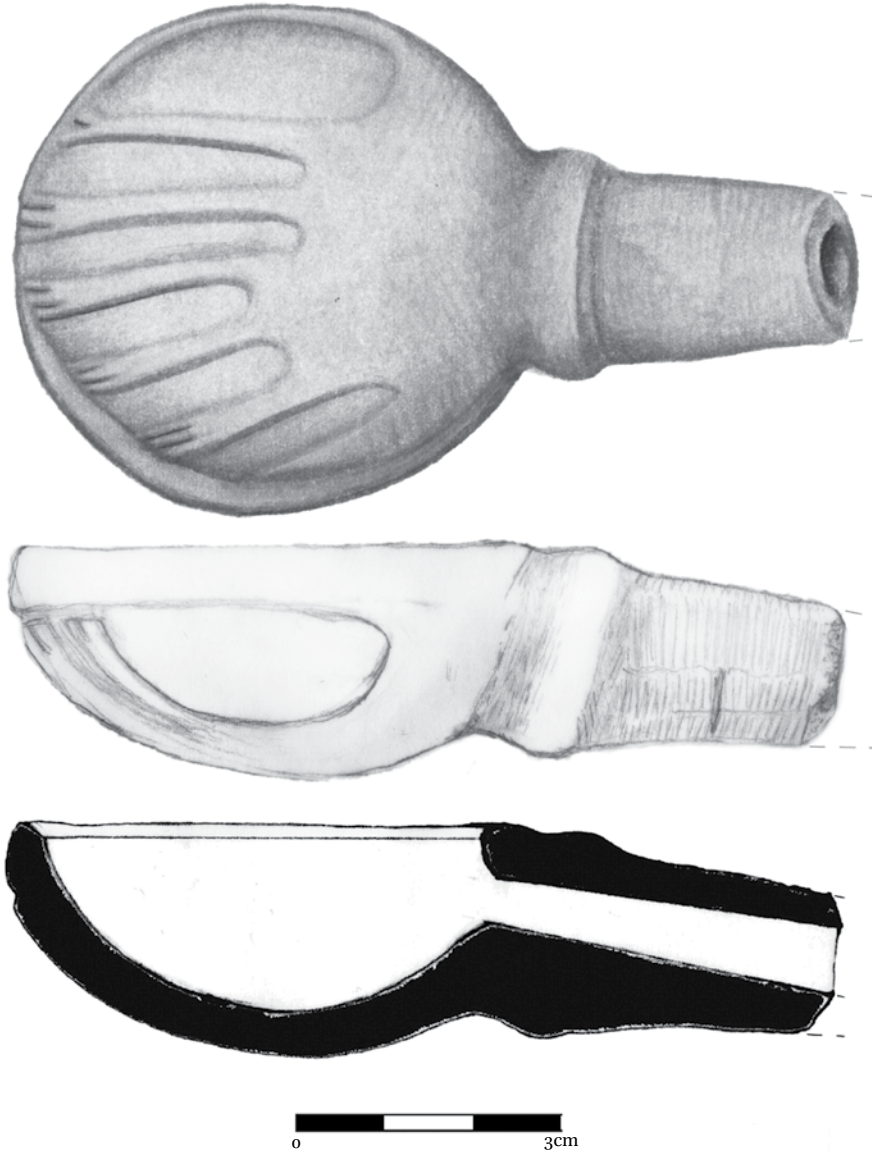


FIGURE 29.5 *Oriental Institute Museum n. A17434.*  
DRAWING ANGELA ALTENHOFEN AND TIZIANA D'ESTE

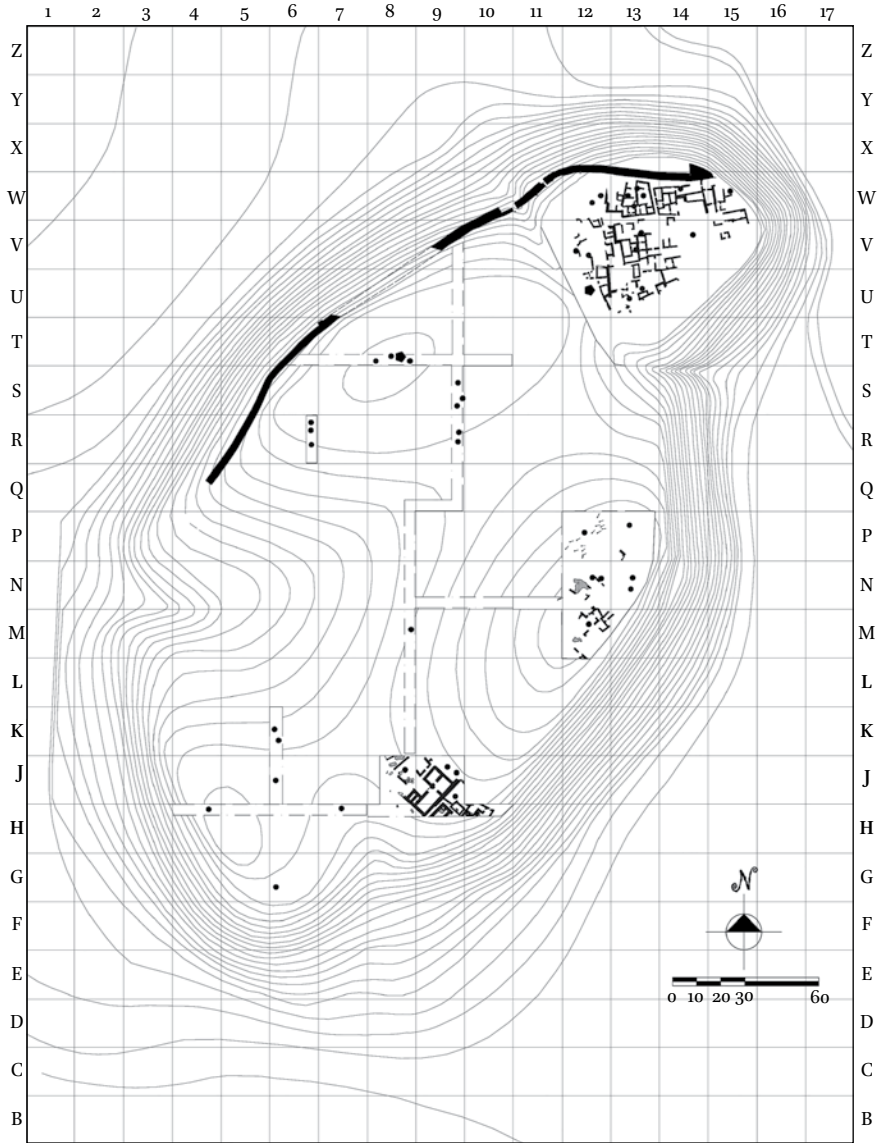


FIGURE 29.6 *Plan of Phase O\_Late architecture at Chatal Höyük with location of the censers.*  
DRAWING BY MARINA PUCCI

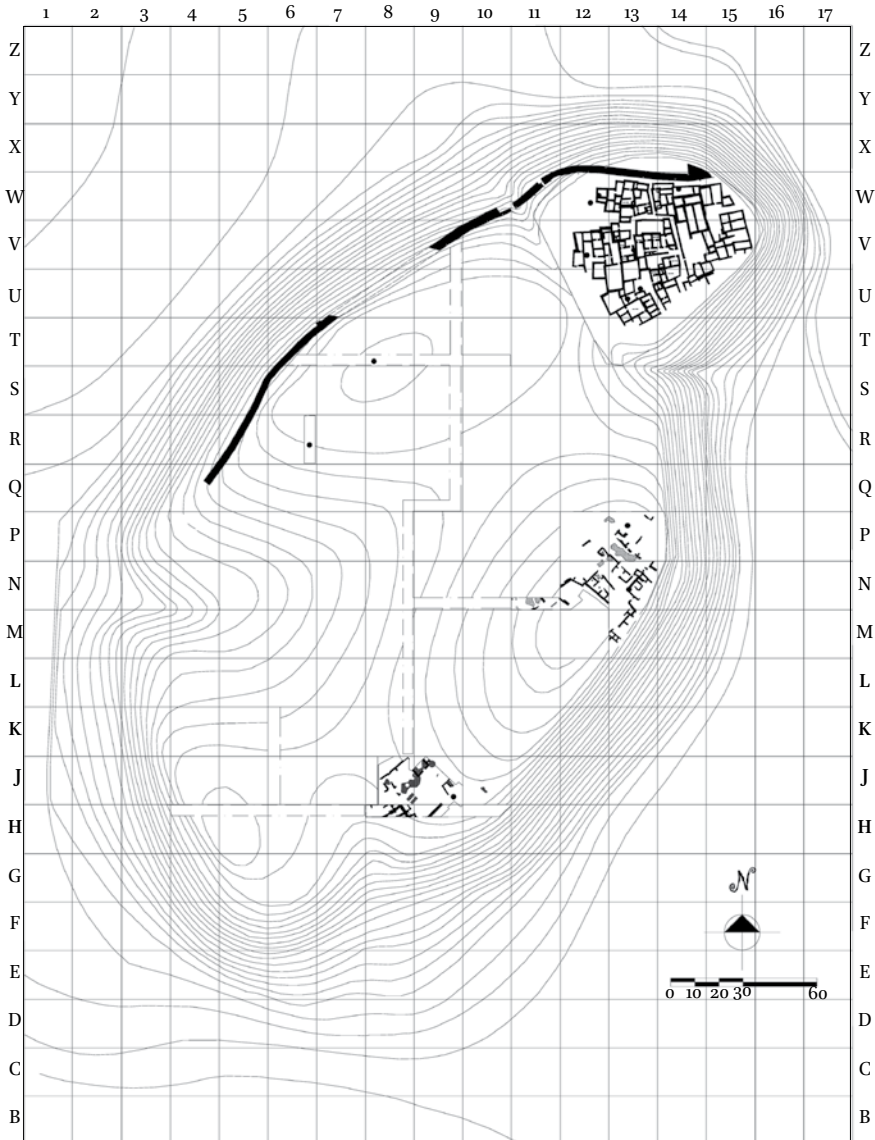


FIGURE 29.7 *Plan of Phase O\_Mid architecture at Chatal Höyük with location of the censors.*  
DRAWING BY MARINA PUCCI