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# Through a Smoke Cloud Darkly: The Possible Social Significance of Candeleros in the Terminal Classic Naco Valley

Edward Schortman, Patricia Urban, Jacob Griffith-Rosenberger, Reagan Neviska, and Chelsea Katzeman (Kenyon College)



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## Possible Functions

**Burning:** Smoldering fires were lit and sustained in candelero chambers.

Given the diminutive sizes of these receptacles and the limited quantity of fuel they contained, these blazes likely generated more smoke than light or heat. Soot adhering to chamber vents supports this inference. What purposes might such smoke have served?

**Distribution:** Drawing on a sample of 5 households in northern La Sierra we can discern that candeleros are concentrated:

At specialized storage facilities (Structure 16-Sub1);

In residences with evidence of storage (Structures 16 and 41A);

Where bowl/jar frequencies are close to equal and there are high densities of ceramic, *incensario*, and figurine fragments.

**Interpretation:** Two hypotheses are suggested by this patterning:

**H.1** Candeleros were simply stored with other ceramics;

**H.2** The smoke they generated was integral to the storage process.

In H.2, smoke from candeleros possibly suppressed insect pests that threatened organic materials, such as grains curated in large jars. The strongest evidence for

H.2 is from Structures 16-Sub1 and 16 where some of the highest candelero

densities were recorded together with 4 large jars found *in situ*, 3 at the latter

building and 1 at the former.

Candeleros, therefore, may have served diverse uses, fumigation being but one of them.

## Meaning and Identity

**Decoration, Storage, and Networks:** Candeleros are adorned with a limited array of incised and modeled decorations. The most common incised modes are crosshatching and parallel diagonal or vertical lines. Modeling usually creates candeleros that evoke a howler monkey with an open mouth flanked by fringes of fur.

These symbols likely conveyed social messages seen as uniquely suited to this artifact and its uses. If protecting comestibles was one such function, candelero symbolism possibly instantiated a connection between a subset of stored goods and the social network(s) constituted through the production, disbursement, and consumption of these items. The distribution of candelero motifs should thus map these social webs.

As few decorated candelero fragments are large enough to reconstruct their original motifs, we enlarged the sample to include 302 examples from Late and Terminal Classic contexts across La Sierra and its Near (within 1km of the center) and Far Peripheries.

**Patterning:** Crosshatched designs are most common (29% of the total) and are prevalent (40-41%) in Near (N=17, 4 sites) and Far Periphery collections (N=53, 16 sites), less so at La Sierra (26%; N=232, 18 structure clusters).

Parallel diagonal lines are the next most common mode at La Sierra and in its Near Periphery (25% and 24%, respectively); at Far Periphery settlements parallel vertical lines predominate (23%).

Monkey effigy candeleros are relatively frequent in La Sierra and Near Periphery contexts (17% and 24%); they are far rarer in the Near Periphery (2%).

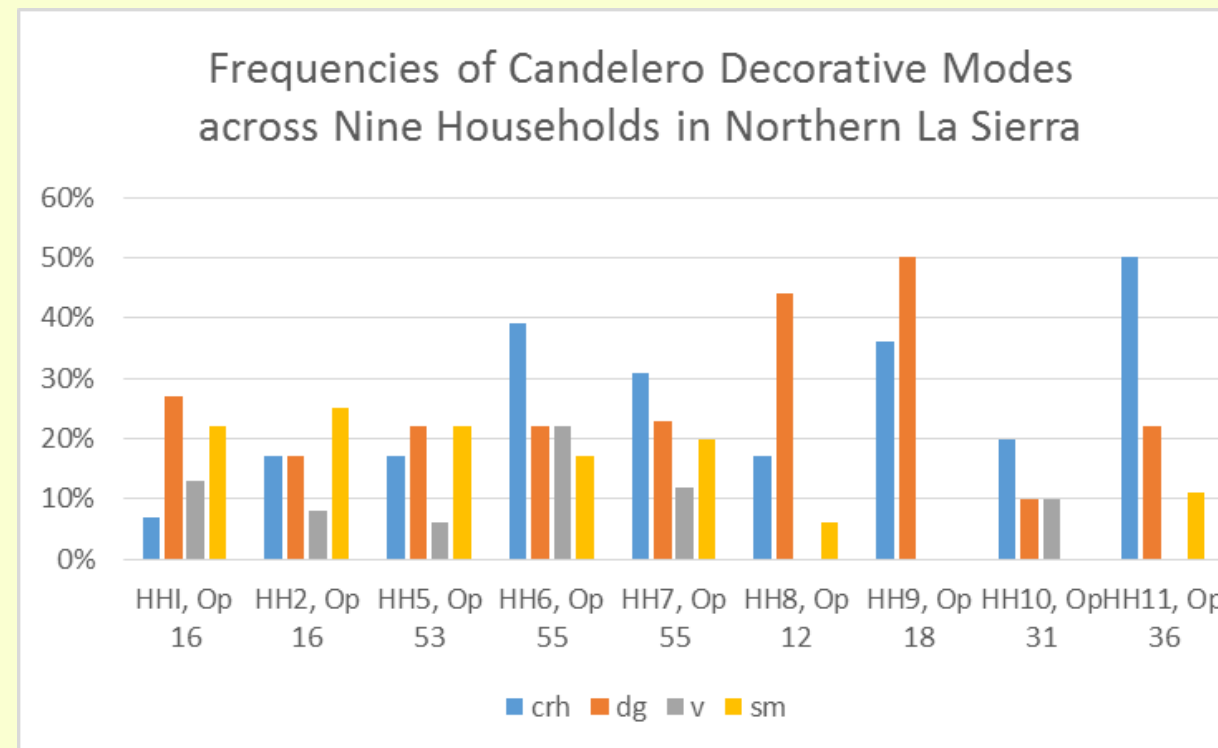
**Interpretations:** These distributions suggest that:

Crosshatching's ubiquity hints at the existence of a widely shared symbolic association among candeleros, the goods they safeguarded, and the social groups instantiated through both..

Variations in the frequencies of other motifs point to possible distinctions within the valley-wide web based on these understandings.

Such divisions are not absolute as candeleros decorated in varied ways are found within the same households. This is especially the case at La Sierra where decorated candeleros are most numerous.

Looking more closely at where different decorative modes are found across La Sierra households yields the following observations (limited to samples containing 10 or more items; N=9, all in northern La Sierra):



Crh: Crosshatch  
Sm: Screaming monkey  
Dg: Diagonal lines  
V: Vertical lines

Different households are dominated by distinct candelero decorations:

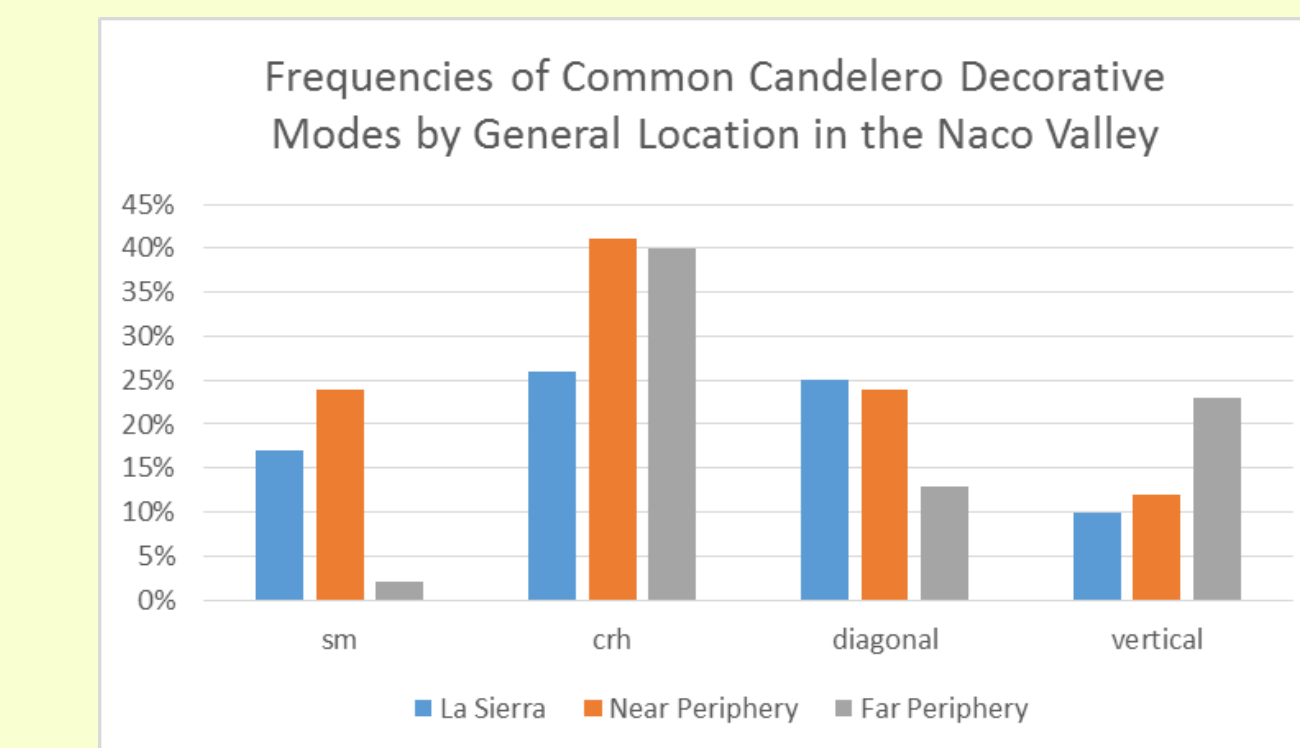
Crosshatching predominates in 3 closely spaced households (30-50%);

Parallel diagonal lines dominate in 3 nearby households (27-50%);

The effigy monkey form dominates in 1 household (25%);



Distribution of Dominant Candelero Decorations in the La Sierra North Group  
Pink: Crosshatched  
Turquoise: Parallel Diagonal Lines  
Yellow: Effigy Howler Monkeys



Crh: Crosshatch  
Sm: Screaming monkey

Effigy monkey candeleros are common in households that define an arc stretching across northern La Sierra (4 households, 20-25%).



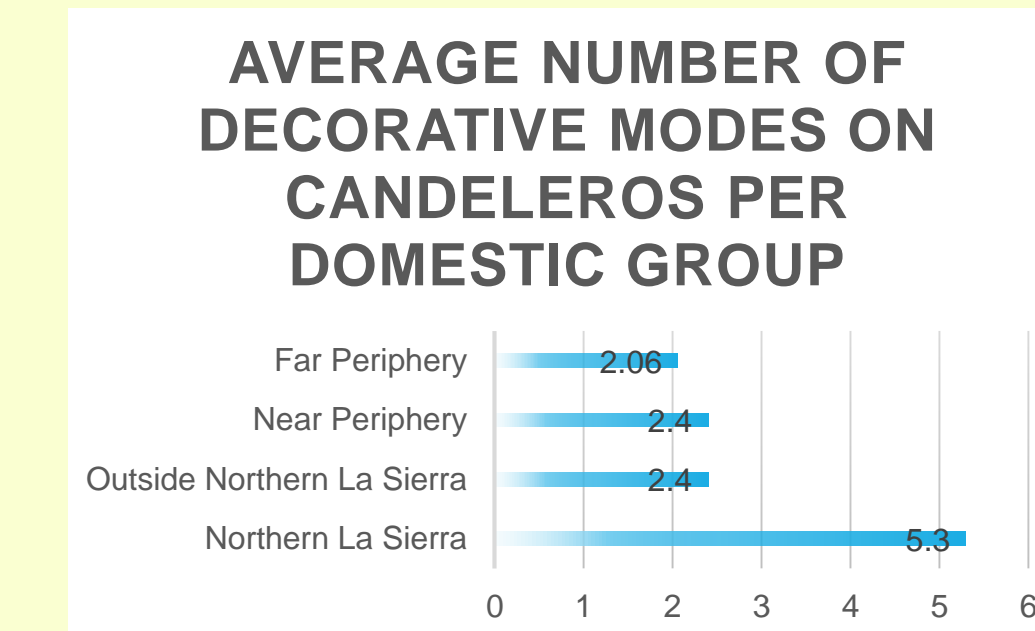
Location of the Four Households in Northern La Sierra where Effigy Howler Monkey Candeleros are >19% of the Decorated Assemblage.

Outside this arc, and especially in southern La Sierra, decorated candeleros are rare (0-17%), their frequencies comparable to those noted outside the center.

**Implications:** Several inferences seem warranted by these patterns:

The social signaling candeleros were involved in was most intensely carried out in northern La Sierra.

Perhaps nucleation of settlement here encouraged clear statements of social affiliations and their associations with stored goods.



Within this settlement zone, as throughout the valley, some sense of unity transcending household boundaries was

expressed and enacted using candeleros that shared crosshatch designs.

Such commonality was disrupted by the variable extents to which particular households or household clusters employed candeleros emblazoned with different motifs. Such diversity may have signaled distinct social networks.

An intermediate level of affiliation was possibly constituted by the use of effigy monkey candeleros which cross-cut households

distinguished by their emphasis on crosshatched and diagonal-line motifs.

This association further distinguished households in northern La Sierra from others found in the center's Far Periphery where effigy monkey forms are very rare.

## Summary

The following hypotheses are based on patterning noted in the forms, styles, and distribution of candeleros in the Late and Terminal Classic Naco valley:

**H.1** Candeleros were primarily used to generate smoke, possibly in part to suppress insect pests in residences but especially in storage compartments.

**H.2** Decorations on candeleros may have materialized connections between people and curated items, the designs limning social networks constituted by the use of candeleros and the stored goods they protected..

**H.3** Social signaling employing candeleros was most pronounced within northern La Sierra where close-packing of people possibly encouraged drawing explicit social boundaries.

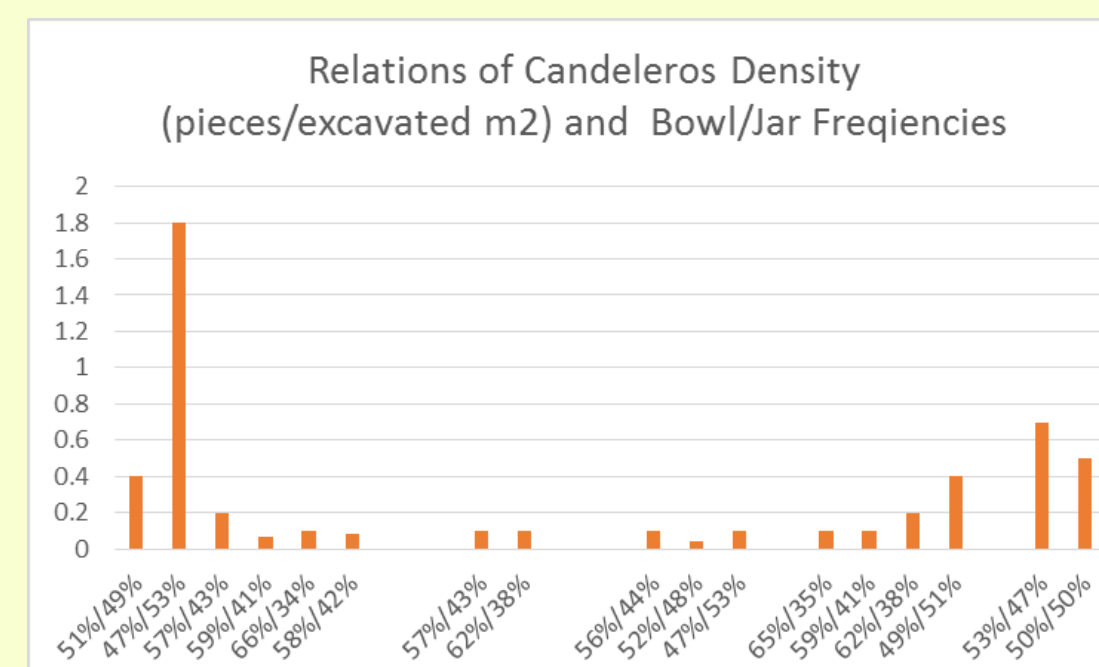
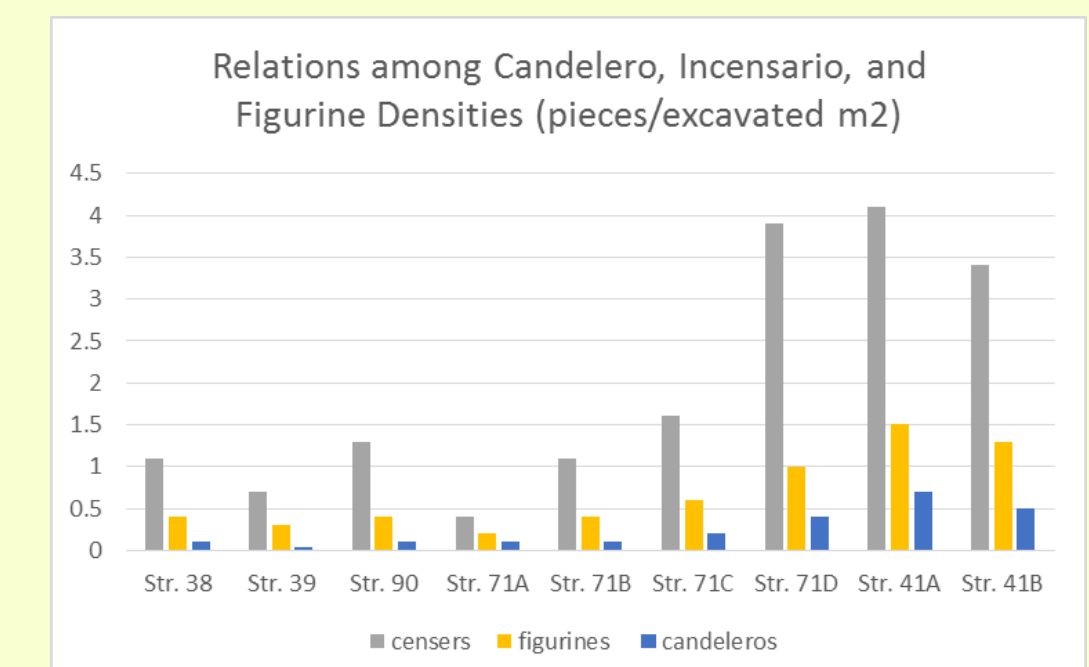
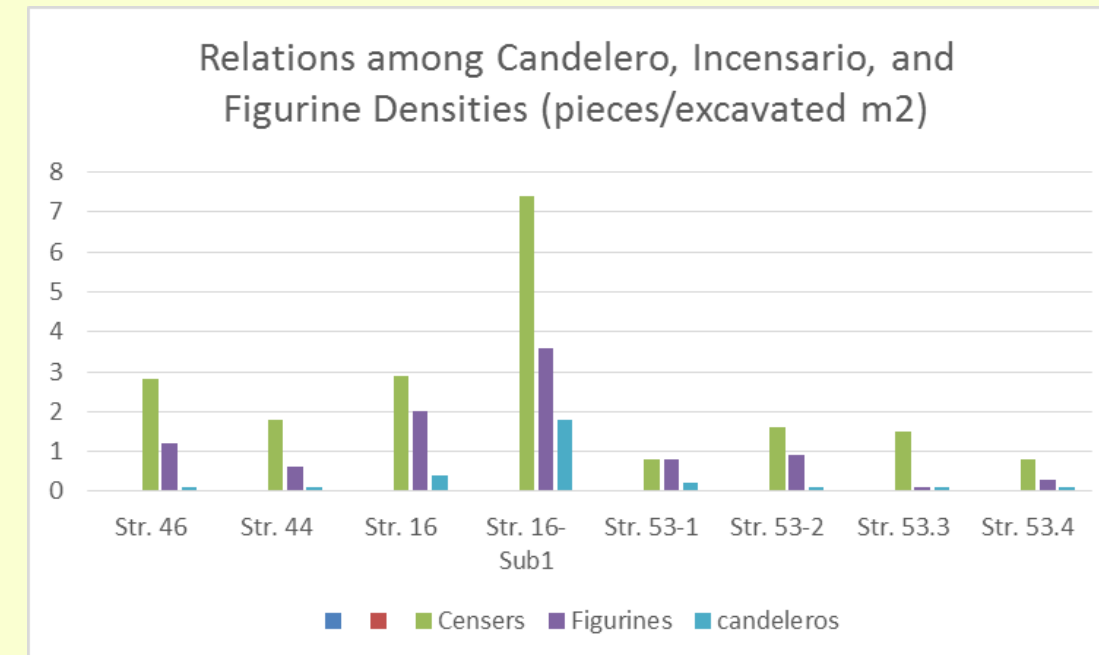
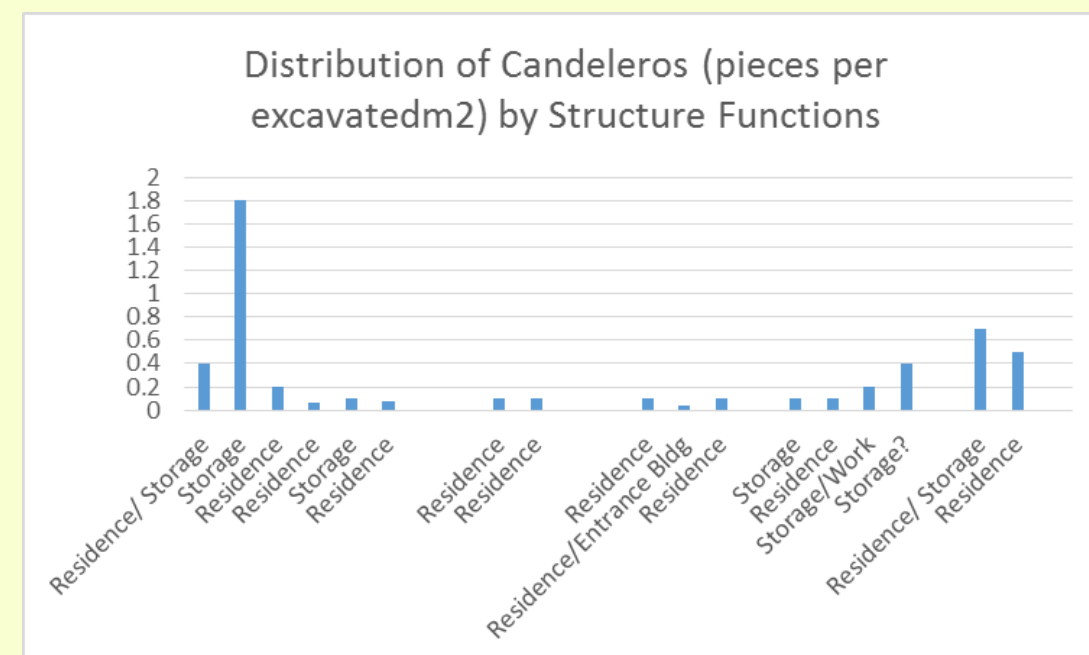
**H.4** These nets complexly overlapped; most valley residents participating in a web materialized through candeleros decorated with crosshatched designs.

**H.5** Households and household clusters within this putative overarching affiliation were distinguished by their variable emphasis on other candelero motifs.

**H.6** The relatively high frequency of effigy monkey candeleros among 4 households in northern La Sierra may point to a net that cross-cut such localized affiliations.

**H.7** This social web, in turn, strongly set the 4 households apart from their rural counterparts where effigy monkey candeleros are exceedingly uncommon.

It may be that the styles found in other artifact classes, such as pottery vessels, incensarios, and figurines, conveyed distinct social information. Evaluating this notion, and the hypotheses listed here, requires further investigation of material patterning across Late and Terminal Classic Naco valley contexts. Nonetheless, this exercise suggests that there is much to be learned from the study of an artifact class that has long been ignored.



## Acknowledgments

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