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SYMBOLISM AND CONTEXT: THE WORLD HISTORY OF THE LABRET  
AND CULTURAL DIFFUSION ON THE PACIFIC RIM

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Introduction

The question of whether or not Asiatic cultures have influenced cultures of the New World is linked with the problem of how we tell whether cultural change is internal or external. As Hodder points out "all change incorporates continuity and the archaeologist can emphasize one or the other at will". The problem he suggests has been "the failure to identify continuity and change as social-symbolic processes". There is, he argues, a "need for archaeologists to examine the origin and divergence of long-term cultural traditions" (1987a:8).



I will present an overview of my ongoing studies on the long-term cultural history of the labret (figure 1). This is not intended to be conclusive in itself but as a demonstration of the kinds of studies that need to be undertaken to gain a better understanding of diffusion processes and a new perspective on trans-oceanic cultural influence in the New World.

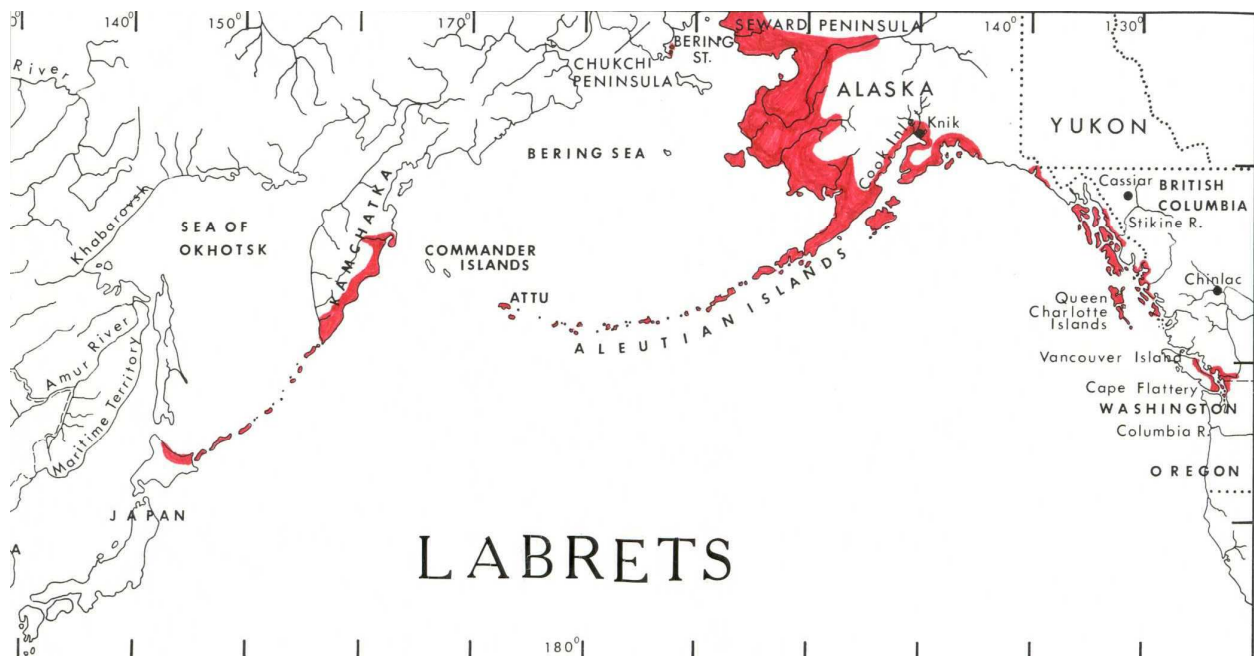
A Labret is an ornament worn in and projecting from a hole(s) pierced through the skin below the lower and/or upper lip or near the corners of the mouth. They occur in many shapes and sizes and are made of various materials, such as stone, bone, wood, shell, coal, ivory, glass, copper, silver, or gold. They can be made from a single item or composed of several parts and worn singularly or in combination with others (Keddie 1980). Labrets have an 8000 to 10000 year history and are still worn in some parts of the world to this day. They occur or occurred in select parts of Central Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific Rim from Northern Japan to the Northwestern United States, northern Central America and northern and central South America.

Since the 1950's, among American archaeologists there has been an increasing movement away from examining the interactions between cultural areas. This comes as a result of the development of a region-oriented cultural/ecological archaeology. In part, this was a reaction to early diffusionist ideas, which largely ignored contextual or processual questions.

More recently there has been movement to recognize and identify the symbolic content of archaeological data, with the application of Hodder's ideas (1982) and others on the contextual analysis of symbolic meanings; a new dimension has been added to studies in cultural diffusion.

Today we are interested not just in the facts of diffusion, that is, showing the connected distribution of similar objects, but in explaining why traits diffuse. Examining specific traits and their relation to other traits that occur on the Pacific Rim is an effective way to gain an understanding of the cultural-historical processes that occurred in the past.

With this new perspective, developments in regional studies, and new ways of perceiving the issues of cultural diffusion and cultural interaction (Hayden 1978; Schortman and Urban 1987) there is also a need to expand upon the existing regional research base and develop new strategies that will allow us to comprehend long-distance processes around the Pacific Rim.



**The Study of Labrets**

The impression of most investigators is that labrets are scattered throughout the world and are therefore an item of material culture, which is subject to random, multiple independent invention. Labrets, like other items of bodily adornment, are often perceived within cultures as objects of "fads" that pass easily in and out of existence. This assumption is clearly wrong. Labrets are important visible conveyors of information and as such are very conservative elements of culture. I contend that observations of the symbolic and contextual significance of labrets, and what I perceive to be the processes by which they diffuse, provide evidence that interaction between cultures involving intensive trade/marriage alliances over broad areas and involving extensive sea travel were present around the Pacific Rim 5000 years ago. These cultural exchanges played an important role in launching the "developmental stage" (see Fladmark 1986) of cultures on the Northwest coast and possibly had an effect on those of Mesoamerica as well.

The world distribution of labrets is very limited. From my observations independent development of labrets seems to be a rare occurrence. Labrets originate and disperse from a maximum of six localities in the World. These potential locations of origin include two locations in the Near East, and one each in central Africa, the North Pacific Rim, Mexico and South America. Through observations of both the historic process by which

labrets transfer from one culture to another and the archaeological record in each of these settings we can gain important insights as to the nature of interrelationships in other settings. I have chosen to focus on labrets because, as Mack states:

"It can plausibly be argued that objects associated with the body are more intimately and explicitly linked to questions of social identity than any other form of material expression. In the most immediate sense self-adornment is an act of self-definition" (1982:117).

It has been argued that "ideational structures are the most lasting and determinant" (1987b:7) and "the facets of a technology least likely to be transmitted to a new societal context are those that pertain to the most sacred realm of experience." (Hodder 1982:204). I have observed that labrets are symbolically tied to the most sacred realms of cultural experience and thereby reflect complex ideational structures.

As metaphors labrets have an effect on human behavior within and between societies. The most obvious effects are behavior, which results from recognition of sex, age, rank and ethnic affiliation. Through their associations in origin myths, labrets clearly represent a visual key to social, cultural, political and cosmological concerns. The primary cultural function of these objects is to empower elites by symbolically

associating them with the sacred realms of the mythological past or the mysteries of the present.

One example of the ways in which labrets become symbolically significant is found among the people of the central Sahel where the wearing of the labret causes a resemblance to the mythological frog which taught the first women how to instruct her daughters (Lebeuf 1953:1326). Other examples include the gold eagle labret of the Aztec emperor representing the eagle that guided the Aztecs to their place of origin (Weaver 1981), and the Mixtec Jaguar labret whose tongue moved up and down when the wearer spoke. A circle on the labrets worn by the Suyá of Brazil represents the Pleiades, whose position in the sky is a time regulator for seasons and economic events (Seeger 1981:64).

Over the years, I have examined the cultural complexity of labrets in various regions, the degree of symbolic content and its relation to the social order, the length of their use in each area, the extent of social changes, which the labrets have survived. Also, the relationship of labrets to the organization and direction of trade, population movements, and intersocietal interactions. I have also examined the circumstances under which labrets diffuse to other groups and the conditions under which they disappear from a culture.

I have found that Labrets which occur in two culturally distinct but geographically linked areas are most likely to be associated with two processes: (1) population migration, and (2)



extensive relations between two groups of people of sufficient intensity to result in the transfer of both the labret and the complex body of knowledge associated with its role in supporting the social position of the wearer. This latter is usually the result of a combination of intensive trade and intermarriage. Such processes occur worldwide.

Exceptions to this process would occur when there was evidence of the temporary residence of one group composed of a special class, such as traders or military personnel, in another group's territory. This occurs, for example, with the finding of Zapotec labrets in fortified sites among subjugated non-labret wearers (Redman 1983:11). There may also be transference of the labret through marriage for the purposes of establishing military or political alliances. In addition, use of labrets may be extended to those who are "non-wearers" when the labret is given as a distinguishing military award as occurred in the Aztec Empire.

In the sections to follow, I discuss labrets as they appear or appeared in various areas.

### **Neolithic Near East**

In the old world, labrets appear 8400 years ago in Iran (Hole 1969), 7000 years ago in the Balkans and 5300 years ago in the upper Nile Valley of Sudan. These are developed societies with diversified adaptations focused on domesticated plants and animals. Whether there were cultural connections between these areas is still a subject of much debate (Wenke 1988). In the Balkans, labrets lasted for a thousand years and then disappeared with the introduction of other cultures. In Iran and Sudan, labrets persisted for thousands of years surviving major shifts in economy.

Labrets flourished in western central Iran along the flanks of the Zagros Mountain region and bordering eastern Iraq (Mesopotamia). Between 8400 B.P. and 7600 B.P. they were present in the area from southwestern Iran through the Djeitun culture area, which extends in a long narrow strip along the trade route from the south end of the Caspian Sea to the southern Turkmenistan border. There is good evidence of cultural interactions between the Djeitun culture and western central Iran (Masson and Sarianidi 1985:45).

By 7000 B.P., labrets extended into southern Mesopotamia (S.E. Iraq) with the first large settlements and a shift in economy from dry farming practices to larger scale irrigation agriculture. By 6500 B.P. labrets were found in northern Mesopotamia (N.E. Iraq) likely the result of a very rapid expansion of southern Mesopotamian influence. Labrets are found in an expanded geographical area with the Ubaid culture, but then about 5500 B.P. disappeared from the main settlements in the most populated areas at the onset of the Uruk period when larger urban centers began to appear and when foreign influences were present. It appears that the ideational value structure reflected in labrets was no longer supported by either new religions or intrusive cultures. In Iran, according to Arasteh (Kirk et al. 1977), the process of assimilation by outside cultures seems to have progressed further in the more settled groups with the least effect on nomadic groups. The disappearance of labrets follows this general pattern.



## **Africa**

The first labrets in Africa appear in central Sudan at the site of Esh Shaheinab (50 km N. Khartoum) 5300 years ago (Phillipson 1985:166-117, Wendorf 1980:279, Cole 1963:277). From this location labret wearing, Nilo-Saharan language groups spread across the Sahel to Lake Chad and beyond to Mali (Colette 1933; Labouret 1952; Lebeuf 1953). This area was to become the location of the major trade route between northeast and West Africa.

Labrets spread to Congo-Kordofanian speakers to the south through direct contact with Nilo-Saharan speakers. The labret wearing Yoruba and kindred peoples of central Nigeria believe they are descended from immigrants of the Nile valley region. By about 3000 years ago labret wearers had spread to the south across the western Sahel; this migration occurred because of climatic deterioration.

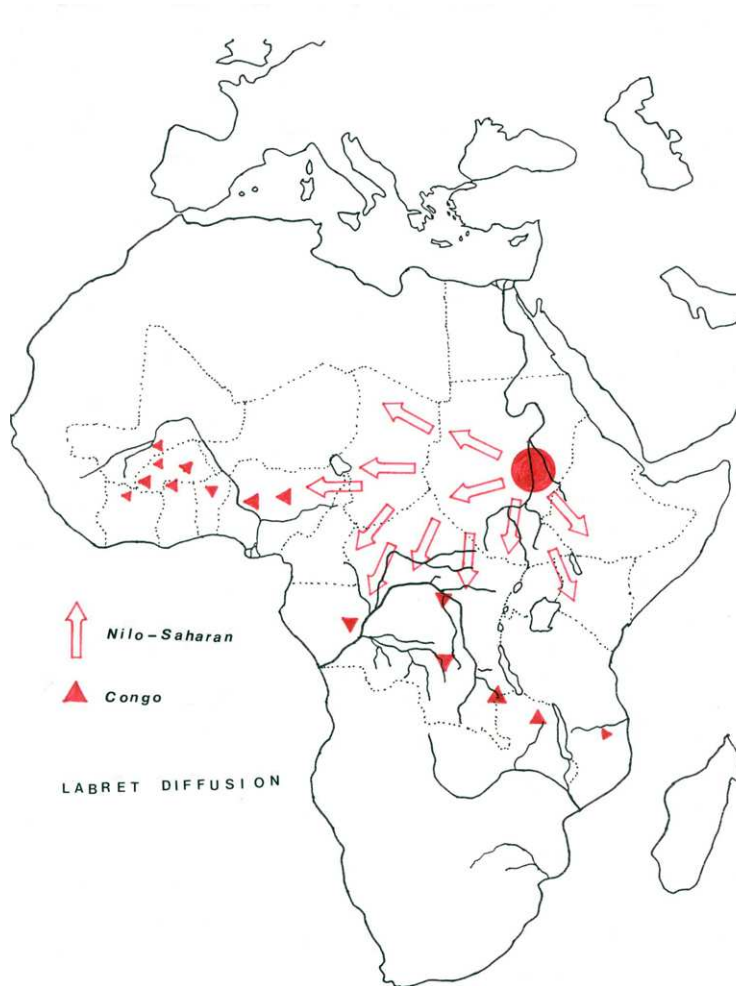
Labrets disappeared from the northern fringe of the Sahel in areas occupied by Afro-Asiatic speakers. In the eastern areas, because of influences from Egypt and the development of the kingdom of Meroe, which was dominated by non-labret wearers, the practice of labret wearing was dispersed from the principal populated areas of the north. In the Sudan labrets survived a shift from a sedentary agricultural to a mobile pastoralist adaptation (Sadr 1988). A movement of Nilo-Saharan peoples in the last few millennia took the custom south into Uganda and along a narrow corridor into Kenya. Another southward movement occurred in the eastern Congo and then spread south along a narrow corridor as far as northern Mozambique.

By 1100 B.P., Arab influence and Islamic traditions signaled the demise of the labret in the northwestern Sahel. Labrets were not worn by the rulers of a number of Empires spread across the Sahel from the 9th to 16th century. As a result, labrets fell out of use in most parts of these areas. However, the rulers of the Kingdom of Nok (440 B.C. - A.D. 200) continued

the practice, helping to sustain the custom along the southern edge of the western Sahel and causing its further dispersal. Labrets were a dominant feature at Ife, the religious center of the Yoruba people some 800 years ago.

During the period of Arab slave trade, further migrations occurred; and the last 500 years has seen the gradual shrinking of labret wearing populations into economically more peripheral areas across the Sahel.

The history of labrets in Africa shows that they are persistent and will survive as long as the value structure associated with them remains intact. They disappear only when populations are integrated with cultures, which are more dominant, or because of major population displacement.



## **Mesoamerica**

Labrets first appear on figurines with ear spools in the Ocos phase of the Mesoamerican Early Formative on the Pacific coast of Chiapas about 3500 to 3350 years ago (Blake 1989). They are found in the valley of Oaxaca about 3100 years ago (San Jose Phase) (Kowalewski, et al. 1989) and 200 years later in the Tehuacan Valley (Santa Maria Phase) (MacNeish et al. 1967). Similarity in pottery styles suggests trade contact between the latter two areas. Although the pan-Mesoamerican Formative cultures had similar artifact assemblages, labrets were initially restricted to these limited areas.

When labrets were introduced into the valley of Oaxaca people were, according to Flannery, "engaged in production of ornaments of shell and magnetite on a larger scale than any other known contemporary community in the region, and maintained trade relations with other areas of Mesoamerica" (Flannery et al. 1981:4).

During the middle Formative to Early Classic period (2800-1500 B.P.) the Mixtec acquired the custom of wearing labrets because of contact with the Zapotecs. Labrets spread to Teotihuacan and the Valley of Mexico from the Mixteca at a time when there were "clear material cultural affiliations" (Spores 1984:5-6) between those areas. During the Post classic Period (1000 B.P.) labrets spread to other areas when Mixtec culture was "having a powerful impact on the cultures of Oaxaca, Puebla, and



the Valley of Mexico." (Spores 1984:6). The Toltecs (900 A.D.-1168 A.D.) appear to have acquired the labret through intermarriage with groups in the Valley of Mexico or through the Mixtecs. Their favorite deity, Quetzalcoatl, is sometimes shown with a labret. There was likely a close relationship between the Toltecs and Mixtecs (Weaver 1981:390).

The Toltecs were responsible for the spread of labrets to certain areas of northern and northwestern Mexico. In some cases labrets were adopted through alliances with local peoples but in more remote areas they are found only in Toltec related defensive structures (Foster and Weigand 1985).

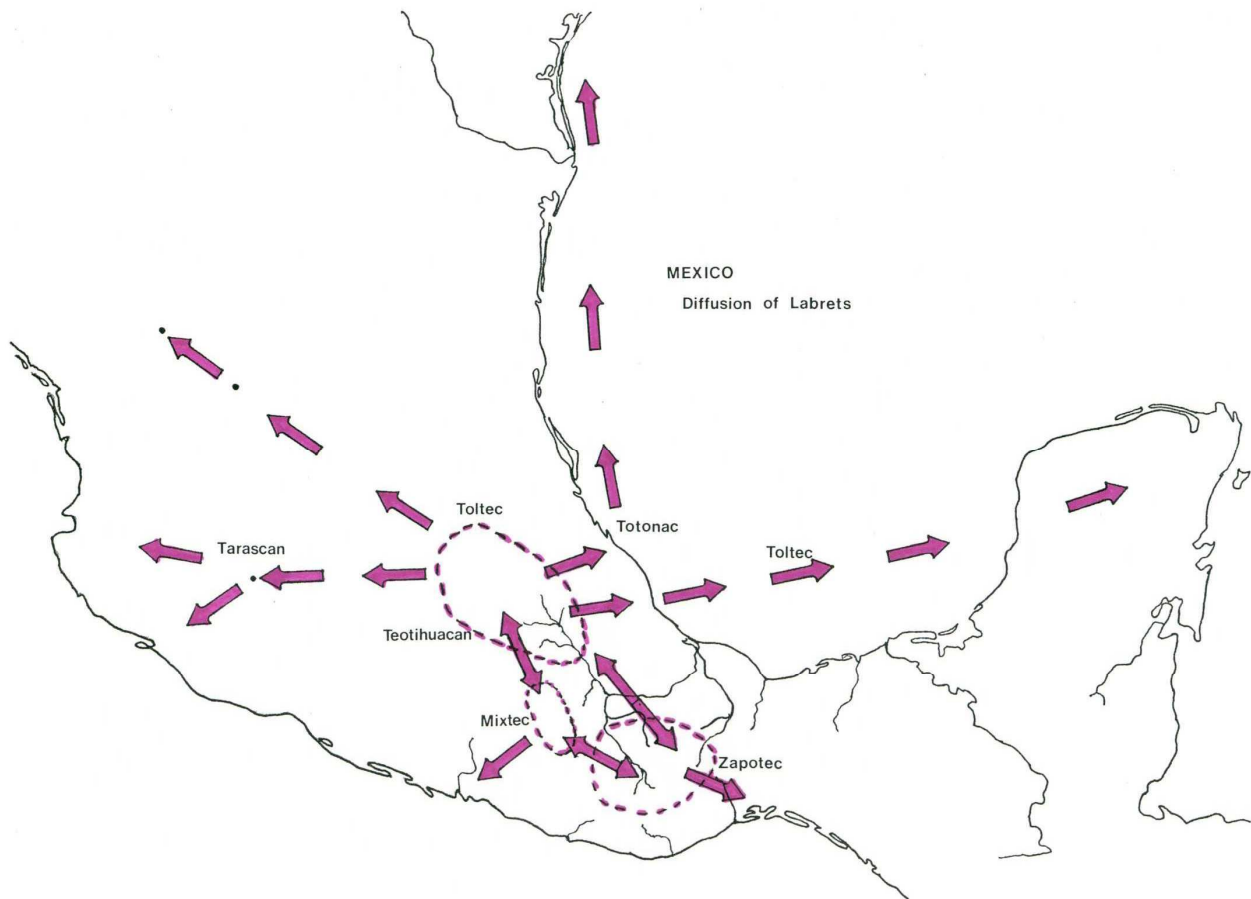
At least some lineages among the Totonacs (1150-750 B.P.) in the Vera Cruz area of the Gulf Coast adopted the labret under influence from the Toltec or Mixtec. In Maya kingdoms of the eastern Yucatan peninsula, during the Late Classic Period labrets appear for the first time among groups of noble warriors claiming descent from the Toltec rulers of Tula (Blake 1984:1; Coe et. al. 1986:134).

In the Michoacan region of western Mexico the Tarascan Kings (850-450 B.P.) wore labrets that had earlier been acquired from the Toltecs. By tradition one of seven women buried with a Tarascan King was called "caretaker of the lip plugs" (Weaver 1981:472).

The Aztecs (c. 625-429 B.P.) adopted labrets through intermarriage with surviving Toltec lineages. This resulted in

their further dispersal of labrets shortly before the contact period. The Aztecs specified the type of labrets for each rank.

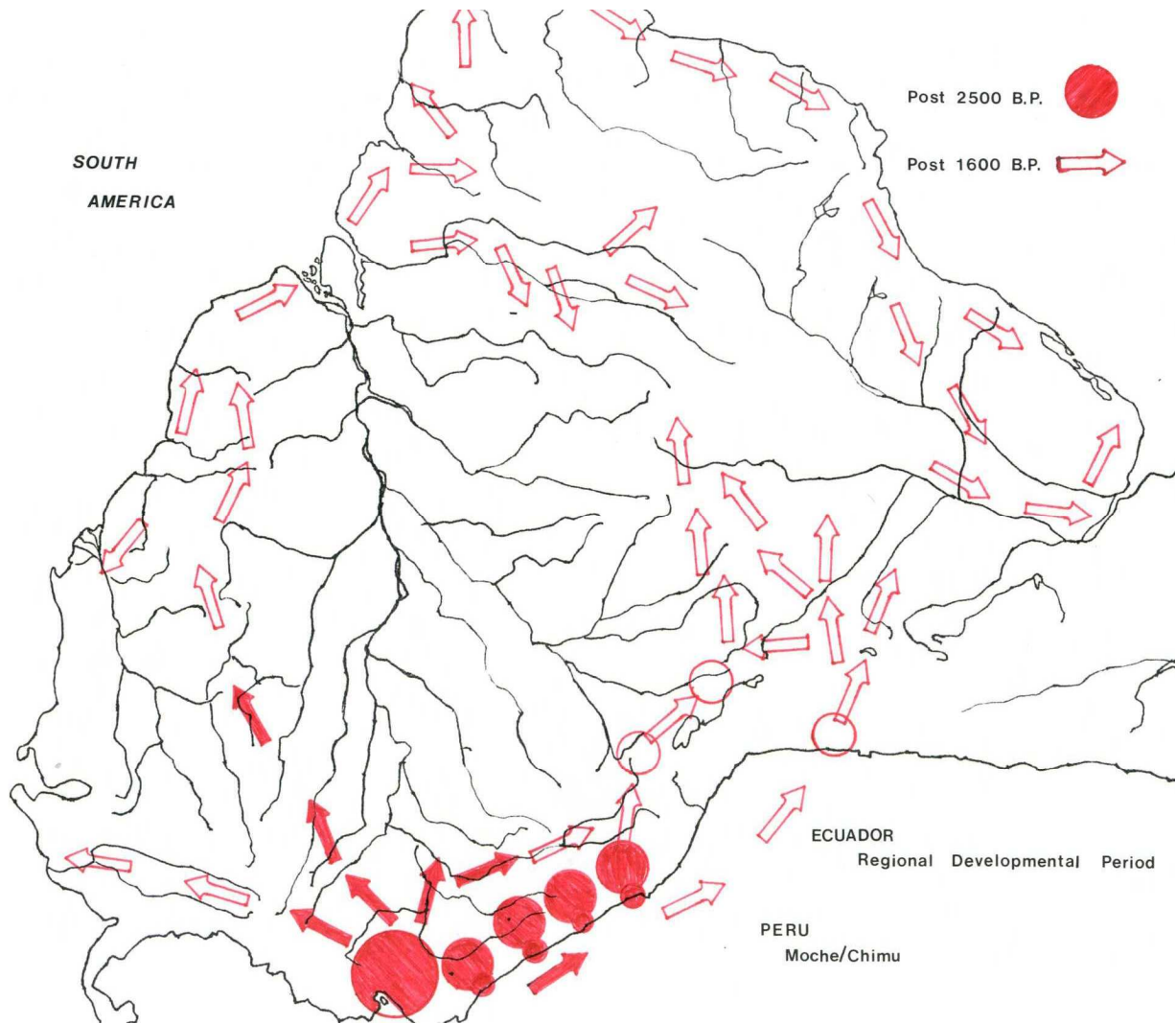
These specifications involved the use of many types of raw materials and many different shapes (Bernal 1980: 53; Burland & Forman 1980:61, 90; Anawalt 1981:30-31, 47-52, 60 & 69, 114, Plate 6, 198, fig. 58).



South America

Labrets appear in coastal Ecuador 2500 years ago at the beginning of the regional developmental period (Meggers 1966). Their diffusion through maritime contacts from the west coast of Mexico is certainly a possibility. Exchanges in metallurgical techniques, ceramics and other items were part of a network of maritime trade between Ecuador and Mesoamerica between 3500 and 1300 B.P. (see Weaver 1981; 496-501 with references, Davis 1975:58, Hosler 1988:834, 841).

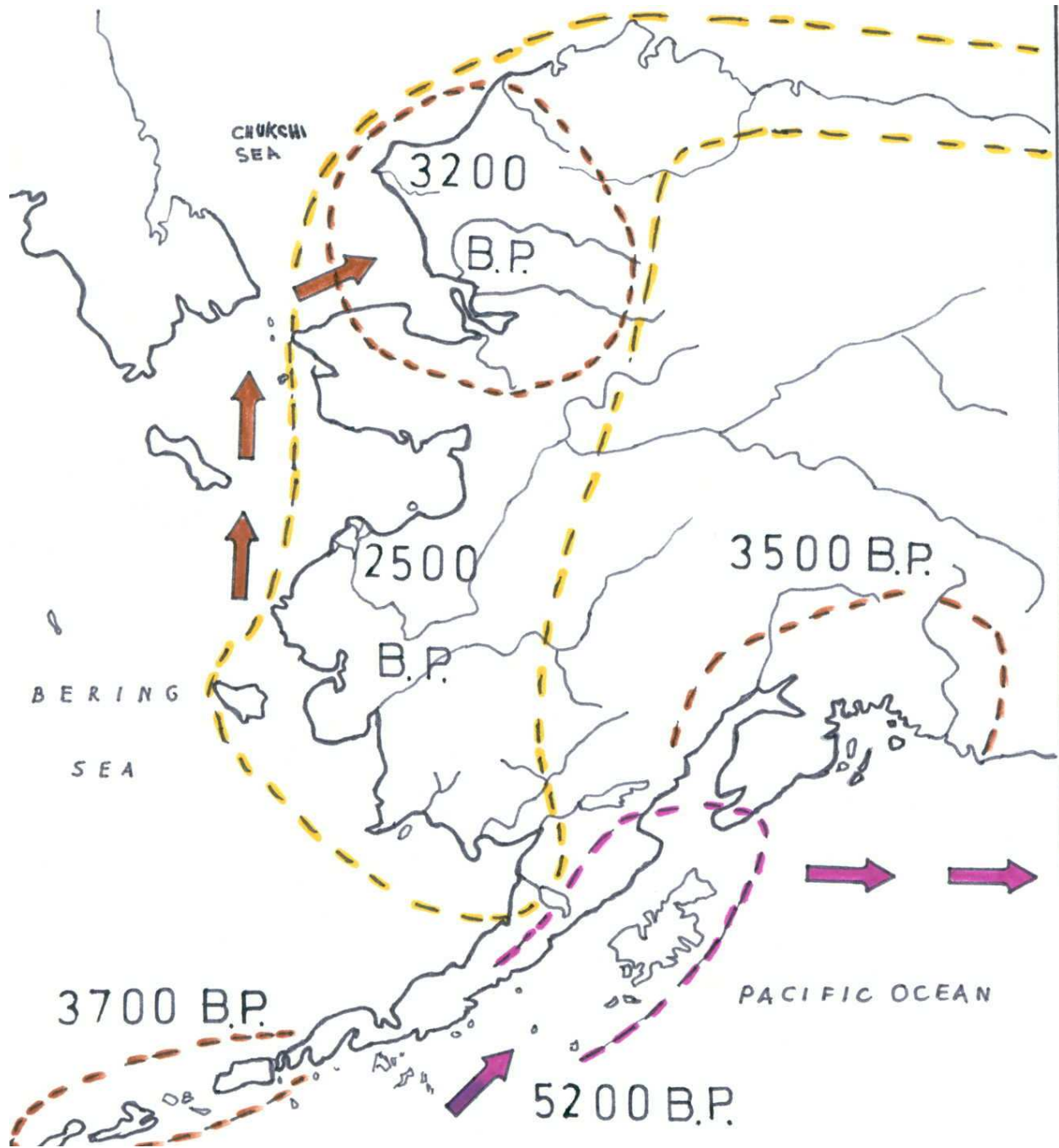
Labrets appear in the Mochica culture of Peru 200 years after their appearance in Ecuador. They may have been introduced from Ecuador or West Mexico where similar ceramics are found. Labrets occur in the Chimu culture of Peru and had by 1500 B.P. spread to Tihuanaco culture in Bolivia and to Northern Argentina. By coastal routes with Peruvian related assemblages they became part of the El Molle culture of southern Peru and northern Chile. Labrets likely diffused from Ecuador along the northern borders of the Amazon Basin to the Amazon delta. Eventually they spread down the east coast and into the Brazilian highlands with the migration of Tupi peoples after 1500 B.P.



### Pacific Rim

In northern Alaska only important leaders or men of wealth could wear certain types of labrets. Shamans wore a special kind of labret representing walrus tusks (Spencer 1959:317-318). The leaders of whaling crew wore a labret in the shape of a whale's

tail. Some lateral labret pairs, as with the ceremonial coppers of the Northwest Coast, had names and were of great value. A labret might be traded for an umiak that was regarded as the most valuable single piece of property (Spencer 1959:156,242). Hodder has emphasized our failure in trade studies "to incorporate the symbolism of the artifacts exchanged" (Hodder 1982:199). Named labrets among the Inuit provide a good example of the importance of the symbolic and ideological dimensions of exchange items.



On the northern Northwest Coast labrets were worn by the Tsimshian, Haida, most Tlingit lineages, Haisla and some northern Heiltsuk who were intermarried with Tsimshian. The highest-ranking women wore the largest labrets and very high-ranking women wore ones with special designs or inlays. A competition took place between wives of prominent Haida chiefs "as to which should have the longest protruding under lip and largest labret." (McKenzie 1891:55). The lip sometimes split by forcing a labret that was too large; women then tied the labret to the hanging lip. Among the Tlingit a woman had to fast to spiritually prepare for the piercing of her lip, "for otherwise she thought that the hole would spread and take her mouth entirely away" (Swanton 1908:437).

The age at which the incision was made varied according to the status of the family. Among the Tsimshian "when a girl was able to walk and had no hole in her lip, they would call her a slave" (Boas 1916:299). The incision of the lip was celebrated by potlatching and the raising of a pole (Howay 1930:92). To show the position and wealth of the family, a slave might be freed on this occasion (Emmons 1933:9).

Labrets were clearly used to validate supernatural ancestral relationships and in mythology to establish rank. For example, the supernatural prince Tsauda's daughter was born with "four holes in each ear and a hole in her lip and in the septum of the nose, as a sign of her high rank". Her husband became

"the first copper-worker among the natives" and the richest chief (Boas 1916:297-306).

Seeger has demonstrated how the cosmos can be interpreted through the adornment of the human body. Body ornaments are symbols that unite the organs and senses with components of the moral and social order. The close relationships of human beings and the natural world described in myths continue in symbolic forms. In central Brazil, Seeger sees an association of labrets and an emphasis on oral productions, oratory, speaking, curing chants and blowing (Seeger 1981). Similar emphasis seems to be present in the North Pacific, where the labret sometimes takes the form of a mouth with a protruding tongue. Among northern North West Coast peoples "the tongue is more often looked upon as an organ of oratory than of taste" (Jacobsen 1977:10). In prehistoric times some labrets were shaped like a protruding tongue. The tongue was viewed as "the embodiment of life-force that could be transferred from one individual to another" (Jonaitis, 1988:197). The transfer of life-force is often depicted on raven rattles as people linked by their tongues with frogs, bears and, in the case of shamans, with land otters. Through the visual plugging an orifice, the labret may also demonstrate one's spiritual mastery over bodily entrances from which spirits enter and exit and therefore by analogy one's power over the forces of nature. The labret is "a sign of wisdom" (de Laguna 1960:120) that may be indicative symbolically of a high-



ranking person's ability to control or appease the forces of nature.

A conceptual parallel can be seen between symbolism of the northeast Pacific Rim and Mesoamerica. Blanton and others emphasize, "Elite-level communication was the principal social mechanism behind the common Mesoamerican culture beliefs and symbols and the widespread distributions of material culture items from 1000 B.C. on." (Blanton, et al. 1981:246). Body adornment or "rank status apparel" were made to regional sumptuary specifications, but crafted from imported materials. "They were universally recognized as symbolic statements about the human versus the animal realm, and about the purity and degree of power of their wearers". (Ibid: 247).

The oldest labrets occur on the Pacific Rim have been found on the southern Kamchatka Peninsula. According to Dikov, labrets occur in layer VI at the Ushki I site dated to c. 10700 B.P. (Dikov, 1983:357). If the dating of these is correct, they are the oldest labrets in the world. Dikov believes that this late Ushki culture with its leaf shaped points and wedge-shaped cores spread into Alaska where cultures with similar assemblages, such as the Denali, Akmak and Anangula complexes are found. Labrets, however, are not found with these early complexes in Alaska. This absence in Alaska leads us to the question of whether labrets in the Ushki layers may be associated with intrusive features.

The dating of labrets in northern Hokkaido is, at present, uncertain but they seem to predate 3000 B.P. Labrets appear to have spread to the eastern North Pacific sometime after 5500 B.P.

Their initial movement was probably to the Alaska Peninsula/Kodiak Island area and south along the Alexander Archipelago, the Queen Charlotte Islands and to the Gulf of Georgia Islands. The earliest specimens in the latter area are found on Pender Island dating to at least 5100 B.P. (Carlson, 1989 pers. comm.).

In prehistoric times on the Northwest Coast both men and women wore them. They became extinct as a cultural trait in the southern areas (in the ethno-historic territory of the central Heiltsuk and Coast Salish) 1500 years ago. By the Historic period, they were only worn by women on the northern part of the North West Coast (Keddie 1980).

Labrets are found on the eastern Aleutians at 3700 B.P. in association with the open sea hunting/fishing economy at the Chaluka site on Umnak Island. They later spread to other parts of the Aleutians and were worn by both men and women in the Eastern areas in the historic period (but only by women on the extreme western islands (Lydia Black pers. comm. 1989)).

The oldest labrets found to date on the Pacific slope of the Alaska Peninsula are about 3000 years old (Clark 1977: 9, 159); labrets dated to about 2000 years ago are found on the Bering Sea slope of the Peninsula (Dumond 1981). Earlier dates in

the 4000 to 5000 year range will likely be found with further excavations in these areas.

Labrets are found by about 3500 B.P. on the north slope of the Brooks Range (see Gal 1982:175; Cook 1977:62). Labrets first appear with early pottery in northern Alaska in the Chukchi Sea region in the Choris culture (3200-2600 B.P.) in association with a caribou/seal hunting economy. They continue in the Bering Sea/Chukchi sea region in the Norton culture (2500-1800 B.P.). Labrets are part of the Norton expansion north to Point Barrow and east to the Mackenzie River delta. The economy during this time changed to one focused on sea mammals (seals, walrus, beluga), fish, and caribou. The Ipiutak culture, which replaced Norton in the Chukchi Sea region c. 2000 B.P., clearly continues the practice of labrets being worn by both men and women.

The Whaling Cultures of Okvik, Old Bering Sea, Birnkirk and Punuk of the Chukotka sea region did not contain labrets. A significant feature of the history of labrets in northern Alaska is their absence during the Birnkirk period and their absence in the Thule expansions eastward into arctic Canada. Their later re-introduction and the practice of males' only wearing labrets suggest obvious social interactions between the intruding Birnkirk or Punuk peoples and older local populations of the Norton tradition.

Although all cultures on the Pacific Rim may not be technically defined as ranked societies with a class system, they

all recognized differences in wealth or special abilities among their peoples. These differences were recognized in distinctive ways of dress, compulsory ritual behavior or other prescribed modes of behavior. If we can identify archaeological correlates of historic behavior and specify the historic mechanisms of interaction we should be able to extrapolate back in time to likely connections between prehistoric cultures.

In the proto-historic and historic period on the east side of the North Pacific Rim we can observe in seven different locations the similar process by which labrets crossed cultural boundaries. Trade relations between Coastal labret wearers and Interior Athapaskan speaking Ingalik, Anvik, Tahltan, Upper Liard Kaska, Tanaina, and Babine and Bulkley River Carrier resulted in the adoption of the labret only within those interior families involved in the trade networks and intermarriage with coastal peoples. Emmons notes among the Tahltan "if a women were found with the lip pierced, it was because she was of the coast people or related to them" (Emmons 1911:46).

Bishop's thesis (1983) that hereditary rank in Interior British Columbia first developed through inter and intra-societal exchange in luxury commodities and/or ritual objects is directly relevant not only to observations on the northwest coast but in explaining the mechanism by which labrets spread from one group to another in other parts of the world.

Bishop contends:

"As groups in one area came to exchange on a regular basis certain non-essential, but not necessarily non-utilitarian, commodities with groups residing in different habitats, certain persons emerged as traders...the first step in the process of converting achieved positions derived from trade to hereditary offices would have involved maintaining control over exchange alliances over time. Irregular trade would produce only 'occasional leaders', individuals who were important only when and only as long as they functioned in the exchange system. But regular trade would have required continual access to luxury goods and consequently continual kin support to produce items needed for exchange" (Bishop 1983, p. 149-150).

These continuing trading connections would need to be consolidated by marriage alliances. I contend that the socio-historical structures, such as values, myths and class relations and the artifacts, which had come to symbolize them, were passed through marriage from the dominant to the subordinate partner Bishop also states:

"Regional variation in resources was critical to the emergence of the rank system even though these resources were not essential to survival. The relative abundance of certain raw materials in localized areas permitted specific groups to control access to them and through their trader/chiefs to exchange them for non-local items (Bishop 1983:150)".

Bishop suggests that it was not traditional native trade but the intensity of the European fur trade that initiated the Babines' rank system which they acquired from the neighboring Tsimshian, perhaps during the last half of the 18th century (Bishop 1983:154). According to Bishop, the Carrier

"Seemed to have lacked or had an insufficient quantity of certain resources desired by coastal peoples that would have permitted them to engage in regular and large scale trade...it was only when furs for trade with Europeans on the coast became sufficiently important that a hereditary rank system could have been adopted (Bishop 1983:156)".

Archaeological work in the appropriate areas is lacking but no prehistoric evidence of labrets associated with Athapaskan speakers has been found.

What may be significant here is the inherent suggestion that the prehistoric trade, which resulted in the diffusion, must have been of intensity equivalent to that of the European fur trade. Could it be that during the initial spread of labrets around the Pacific Rim 5500 years ago there were highly intense trade relations, which in subsequent periods waned considerably?

I believe that the distribution, contextual significance and the process by which labrets diffused strongly suggest direct intense cultural linkages among select groups of people from the

Kamchatka Peninsula to Puget Sound during at least the time of their initial dispersal. Since these kinds of alliance and exchange relations are often continually extended into a wider region it may be appropriate to look for possible exchange relations between the Northwest coast and Mesoamerica.

It has been suggested that the tabula erecta type of intentional cranial deformation may have spread 3400 years ago from Ecuador to Mexico and that later the "napkin ring" ear spools spread from Mexico to Ecuador. The earliest napkin ring ear spools in North America occur with the earliest labrets on the Gulf Islands of British Columbia a thousand years before they occur in Mesoamerica. It is interesting to note that after labrets become established in Mexico, cranial deformation similar to a type found in Mexican appears in the area from the Columbia River to the southern Gulf of Georgia.

In order to establish empirically the existence of inter-societal contact we need to determine what variables and relationships are significant. I would suggest that studies on body adornment, which include shifts in body ornamentation, are important. We need to examine the process of addition and deletion in relation to the use of specific kinds of body adornment. In most cultures we see an accretion over time of body adornment, such as the introduction of cranial deformation, followed by ear spools, then lip plugs and nose rings; similarly we also see the deletion of all or some of these over a period of

time. This additive process may be partly related to internal cultural developmental, but it is also a reflection of diffusion processes. Such changes reflect the nature of the interactive process that has occurred. For example, if new items are added to existing status adornment, we are probably looking at a process of the merging of cultural traits, such as occurs with the introduction of a system of marriage alliances. This merging allows the maintenance of traditional local symbols at the same time that these local symbols are blended with new symbols from outside the culture. I suspect that the disappearance of labrets among certain groups, such as the use of labrets among females only in a situation in which both males and females had previously used labrets, as occurred on the North Pacific Rim, reflects intense trade relations that eventually worked to favor one group over another.

## Conclusion

I see the kind of study I have just proposed as an example of what Hodder refers to as a study of the "network of relationships" that "can be 'read' from the archaeological record by careful and self-critical analysis" (Hodder 1983). The significance and longevity of the practice of wearing labrets in different parts of the world indicates that these objects have played important socially strategic roles. It is unlikely that



the labret was independently "invented" in many parts of the world.

Diffusion has played a major role in the dispersal of labrets. Further, it is evident that the labret is a very conservative element that originates only in cultures with a high level of socio-cultural complexity. Labrets remain in use in their areas of origins for long periods. When they are adapted outside those areas we are observing not only the movement of objects but also a movement of the ideational structures of which they are a part. Their historical development and movement through space is highly regulated by specific cultural historical factors, which have yet to be fully documented.

The labret, because of its distinctiveness, its symbolic functions, the variety of materials and designs used, is an excellent example of an artifact that will be useful in assisting us to reconstruct not only internal social processes but also in the reconstruction of the organization and direction of prehistoric exchange and migrations.

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