

A NOTE ON LABRET USE AROUND THE BERING AND CHUKCHI SEAS

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ABSTRACT

In the earliest contacts with the widely spread speakers of Eskimoan languages, European observers noted an obvious contrast in the wearing of lip ornaments or labrets, with the practice spread over what is now the coast of Alaska but absent in most of Canada and in Greenland as well as on the northeast coast of Asia. In addition, archaeological studies have provided indications of differences in the history of labret use between those American areas to the north and to the south of the Bering Strait, and although some scattered and ancient uses are in evidence for north Asia, the northeastern Asian coast has apparently been labret-free for the past three to four millennia. Some archaeologists have attempted to use the prehistoric presence or absence of labrets as markers of people specifically of western American or of Asian heritage. Examination suggests that these attempts have been only partially successful—some reasonably compelling, others less so, in part because of conclusions drawn on the basis of insufficient evidence.

KEYWORDS: labrets, northwest Alaska, northeast Asia, arctic prehistory

At the time of early European contacts with Native people of arctic North America, one of the major if superficial contrasts among Eskimoan peoples was in “labretifery,” to use the coinage of William H. Dall (1884). That is, on the one hand, the wearing of lip ornaments or labrets by people of Alaska, especially men, and on the other hand, the general absence of such ornamentation throughout arctic Canada and Greenland—and, as emphasized here, in northeast Asia. Indeed, from the beginning of such contacts, Europeans reported friction between the people of far northwestern America, who wore labrets, and their linguistic relatives of Asia, who wore none. At times this contrast in the west has been taken to provide identification of Americans or of Asians not only in historic times, but in still earlier contexts. The aim of this paper is to address this usage, and in order to do so it is necessary to summarize relevant historical and prehistoric data from this broad area (Fig. 1).

An earlier survey of labret use by Keddie (1981) is certainly still current, as are his illustrations of labret form, the most common range of which for present purposes is

indicated by the first three examples in Fig. 2. In brief, the ornaments more nearly round in cross-section were commonly inserted in pairs, each one near and slightly below the corner of the mouth; more elongated labrets were worn in a horizontal slit below the lower lip. Here I provide a few additional sources. I also note that my view is from a little farther north than Keddie’s, which for all its geographic spread was rooted on the Northwest Coast.

HISTORY AND PREHISTORY

NORTH ALASKA

In the earliest known contact, as of about 1648, the Russian cossack Semen Dezhnev (1985 [1655]:323) reported that

when one goes by sea from the Kolyma River to the Anadyr River, one passes a cape which juts far out into the sea [i.e., East Cape]. . . . Opposite this cape there are two islands [the Diomedes] inhabited by Chukchi [sic]. They wear tooth ornaments made

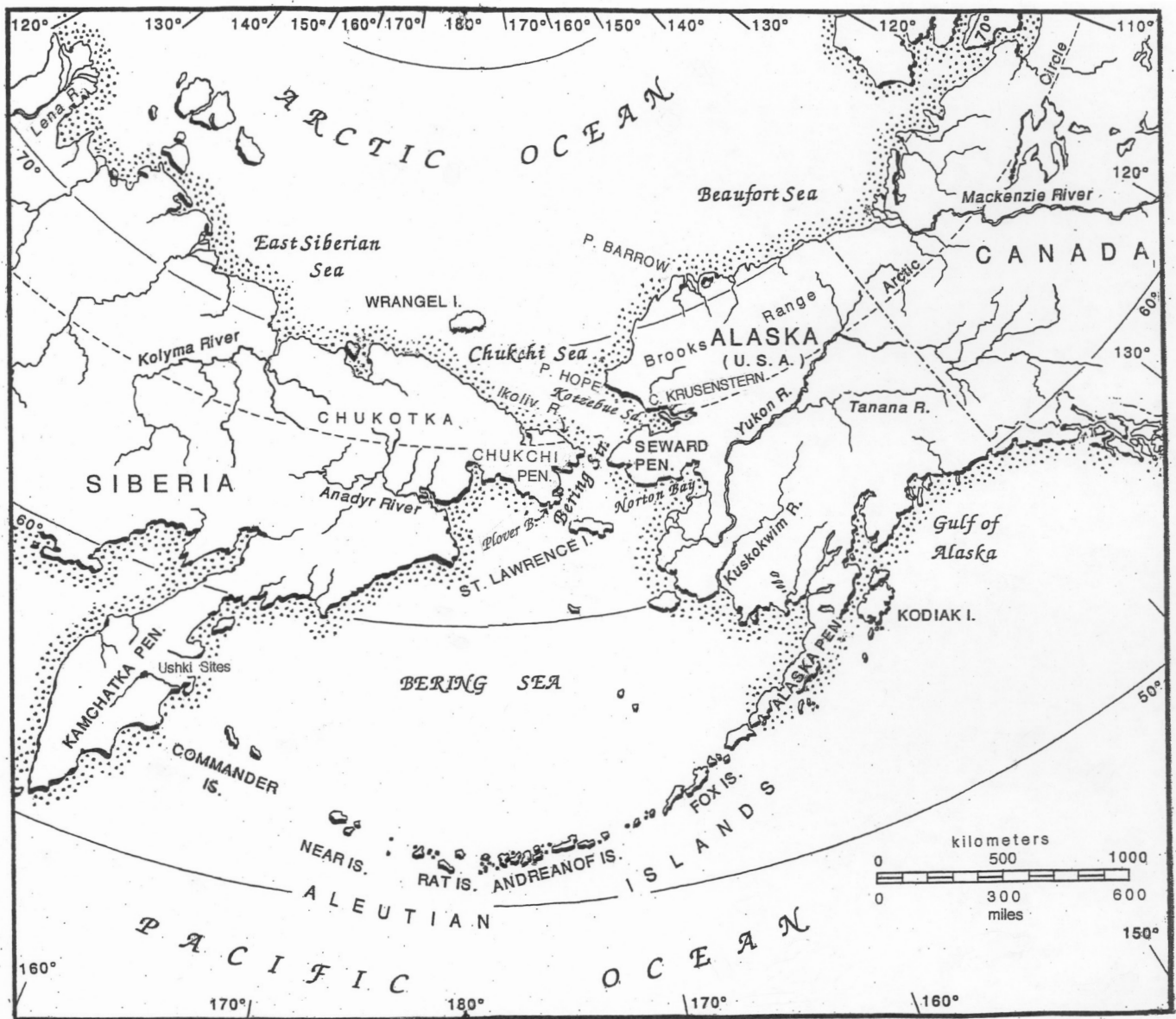


Figure 1. The Bering and Chukchi Seas, with some locations mentioned in the text. "Ikoliv. R." indicates the site at the mouth of the Ikolivruneem River, as reported by Dikov (2003 and elsewhere).

of ivory which protrude through holes which they pierce through their lips.

This practice of Diomedes islanders and people of the American mainland was confirmed by slightly later travelers, as in information cited for example by Dall (1870:375) and also Dikova (1980). Still more recently, within the late nineteenth century, the wearing of labrets by either men or women¹ was still apparent in parts of western Alaska, in a practice that extended from the Bering Sea northward around Alaska and then eastward to the region around

the Mackenzie River mouth (Murdoch 1892:145; Nelson 1899:44–45). By this time active hostilities between labret-wearing Americans and their Asian neighbors had evidently ceased, although endemic warfare was within traditional memory. As Dall (1870:375) related:

At Plover Bay [on the southern Chukchi Peninsula] I was informed... that the inhabitants of the country were of two kinds,—“deer men” (i.e., true Chukchees [herdsmen]) and “bowhead men” [coastal Eskimos]. The “deer men” were the original inhabitants, and the “bowhead men,” to which

1. Evidently identifying symbols of social groups, special status, genders, etc., the usages commonly varied between the sexes. No attempt is made to discuss intrasocial aspects of labretifery here, where the focus is on to the presence or absence of labret use as a clue specifically to prehistoric ethnic identities.

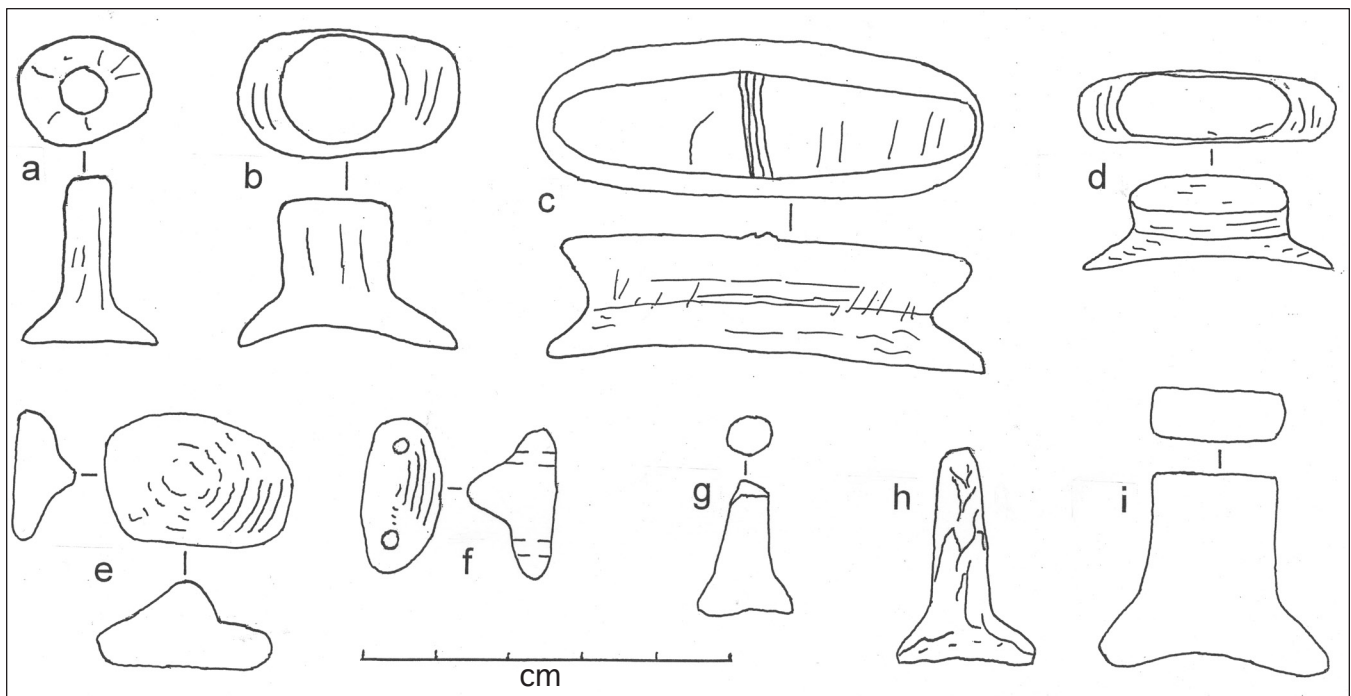


Figure 2. Labrets and putative labrets: (a–c) Barrow area, Utkiavik site (redrawn from Ford 1959:Figure 108a, c, e); (d) Ikolivrunveem River site, northeast Chukotka (redrawn from Dikov 2003:Plate 166:12); (e, f) Ushki 1 site, Level VI (redrawn from Dikov 1983:Figure 6); (g–i), Tar'in culture, Kamchatka (redrawn from Dikova 1980:Figure 1:3, 5, Figure 2:7).

class he [the informant] belonged, had come, long ago, from the islands (the Diomedes) to the northeast. He said that the reason they came was because there was war between them and the people who wore labrets. The latter proved the stronger, and the former were obliged to come to the country of the “deer men.” The latter allowed the “bowhead men” to settle on the barren rocky coast, and formed an offensive and defensive alliance with them against the invaders from the eastward. On interrogating one of the “deer men” . . . , he confirmed the above, as identical with the Chukchee traditions.

Again according to Dall (1870:376), a visitor to the Asian side of Bering Strait in 1711 found among the coastal people “ten of the islanders wearing labrets, who had been taken prisoners of war.” At this point it seems clear both that people of America and of Asia were in conflict and that labret-wearing marked the Americans.

But as I have summarized elsewhere (Dumond 2009), the wearing of labrets in portions of the American coast of Alaska was not consistent throughout more ancient times. In the coastal region north of Bering Strait, for instance, Ford (1959:221–222) reports labrets only from his

latest archaeological component in the Barrow vicinity, representing a period after about AD 1700 (Figure 2a–c), while he notes that from the somewhat more refined seven-hundred-year tree-ring-derived chronology for the lower Kobuk River, Giddings (1952:87–89) reported the earliest appearance of lip ornaments at around AD 1400, with their popularity expanding only after 1700. This is concordant with results from the Mackenzie Inuit territory of the lower Mackenzie River region, where McGhee (1974:73) reports occurrences after AD 1400, although he apparently sampled no earlier components there. Indeed, the most easterly specimen clearly identified is a “top-hat shaped limestone labret” from the Rita-Claire site on the west side of Cape Bathurst, at the far eastern edge of that same ethnic territory (Morrison 1997:20). Labrets are not reported historically or archaeologically from regions farther to the east, save for two excavated objects regarding which the authors of the reports have expressed reservations, with which I wholeheartedly agree.²

For parts of the northwest Alaska coast information appears less clear, chiefly because of small samples from crucial periods. At Point Hope, where the major Ipiutak

2. These are so-called “composite labrets” from the Clachan site near Cape Hearne in western Coronation Gulf (Morrison 1983:161; Morrison personal comm. Sept. 8, 2009) and from Skraeling Island, off Ellesmere Island in northeastern Canada (McCullough 1989:200).

site was the real focus of interest by Larsen and Rainey (1948), samples from the post-Ipiutak period (i.e., after AD 900 or so) do not include lip ornaments but are too meager to be definitive. On the Choris Peninsula a labret is reported from a fifteenth-century AD house (Giddings and Anderson 1986:53). From Cape Krusenstern at the northern corner of Kotzebue Sound the only possibly related item is one from a Birnirk site that is labeled a possible chipped “labret blank” of bitumen—the identification admittedly uncertain in the absence of reports of lip ornamentation from any known Birnirk site elsewhere (Giddings and Anderson 1986:97).

More promising is evidence from the immediate vicinity of Wales at the west extreme of the Seward Peninsula, where labrets were absent in a Birnirk-related site (Dumond 2000a:112), while appearing in the post-Birnirk sequence—at a time beginning not earlier than the period of the late Punuk culture of St. Lawrence Island (Dumond 2000a:67, 94–96). A date after about AD 1400 for labrets at Wales would seem reasonable. Thus it appears that a situation similar to that in the Barrow region existed also on the Bering Strait coast of America for the centuries after about AD 800 or 1000.

This was not the case still earlier in northwest Alaska, however. At Point Hope labrets were recovered from Ipiutak deposits (predating AD 800 or 900), and although the number of actual specimens was limited, graphic representations of humans were so frequently specific with indications of lip ornamentation that Larsen and Rainey (1948:114–116) concluded that the wearing of labrets was common. Still earlier in the part of the west coast of Alaska north of Bering Strait, Ipiutak was preceded by a Norton-culture occupation that began as early as 500 BC, although in terms of reported samples it must have been scattered and of relatively short duration. Nevertheless, in the closely related, widespread, and plentiful Norton evidence around the Bering Sea coast south of the Seward Peninsula, the use of labrets by all Norton people was consistently heavy (e.g., Dumond 1982, 2000b, both with references), and the same must have been the case in north Alaska as well. Still earlier there is evidence of labret use—by 700 BC—in a house of the Choris culture from the type site on the Choris Peninsula near the mouth of Kotzebue Sound (Giddings and Anderson 1986:205). That this labret-producing site is located near the southern terminus of the northwest Alaska coast is presumably related to the fact that the source of labret practice in Alaska lay to the south, as will be seen. Although the

fact that Choris people represent the first Alaska users of pottery clearly suggests at least indirect intercourse with Asia, much in the Choris inventory—stone lamps and certain harpoon types, for instance, as well as the presence of labrets—bears the specific mark of connections to the south.

SOUTH ALASKA

That is, labret use in Alaska is especially southern. In the region south of Bering Strait, evolving aspects of the Norton culture endured from a beginning several centuries BC until sometime close to AD 1000, with later Norton people contemporary with those of Ipiutak farther north. Norton assemblages, primarily otherwise of chipped stone, consistently include evidence of lip ornaments of polished stone or bitumen. Further, unlike the post-Ipiutak period in the north, at the replacement of Norton south of Bering Strait with slate-polishing forerunners of historic Eskimoan peoples, there was no cessation in the heavy use of labrets, although the most common forms of the ornaments clearly changed. This conjunction of events around the eastern Bering Sea is indicated in the north by the collections from the Nukleet site in Norton Bay (Giddings 1964) and in the south by collections from the Alaska Peninsula (Dumond 1981). Thus, labret use continued in the south without a break.

It must be also pointed out, however, that before the first millennium BC both this region and north Alaska had been free of labret use. In this earlier period, the first consistent occupants of the coastal hinterlands from the Alaska Peninsula north to Point Barrow and even beyond to the east were people referred to collectively as participants in the Arctic Small Tool tradition. Small Tool collections everywhere in Alaska, Canada, and Greenland are consistent in a lack of evidence for the use of any lip ornamentation, a lack that in the eastern Arctic continued unabated through the evolution of aspects of Dorset culture and into the period of the nonlabretiferous Thule immigrants after AD 1000—although the lack of labrets among these late immigrants had come to them by a somewhat different route from that of their Dorset predecessors, as will be indicated.

Rather, evidence presently available is that the earliest signs of the consistent use of labrets in what is now Alaska—that is, signs earlier than the Choris and Norton periods—are to be found even farther to the south. Around the northern Gulf of Alaska, including the Kodiak

Archipelago, labrets were in use by 1500 BC and continued thereafter (Steffian and Saltonstall 2001), and by the same time—if not even earlier—were to be found in the eastern Aleutian Islands (Aigner 1966, 1978; Knecht et al. 2001). Still farther southward, labret use is in evidence on the Northwest Coast as far south as the Strait of Georgia and Puget Sound (Donald 2003; Shantry 2008), with evidence of the earliest use of all found on islands off the central coast of British Columbia as early as 2000 BC and possibly a millennium earlier (e.g., Cybulski 1991:5–11, 1992:67–73; Dahm 1994).³

In a cursory summary for Alaska, then, it seems that the use of lip ornaments of one shape or another had its origin somewhere to the south on the Northwest Coast. After the introduction around the Bering Sea around 500 BC, labrets were to be found consistently in the region from the Alaska Peninsula north to northernmost Alaska until about AD 800. Thereafter, whereas labret use continued without a break in the Bering Sea region until European contact, the evidence available from the region between Wales and Barrow suggests that no labrets were worn there between AD 800 and 1400. As is to be pointed out, this was the time when aspects of the Birnirk culture appeared in the region, followed by at least scattered elements of the Punuk culture. It is presumably no accident that both of these were derived from Asia.

This leads us to a brief consideration of features of the northeastern portion of that continent.

NORTHEAST ASIA

That there was at least scattered use of lip ornamentation in Siberia before 2000 BC is made clear by the report of examples (largely T-shaped) in a Neolithic culture from the far north Taymyr Peninsula, presented with a brief discussion of a very small number of other examples (Khlobystin 2005 [1998]). The north Asian examples that could be cited are few and far between, however. Approaching the northeast Asian coast, the evidence continues uneven, although less so for at least one period.

At the most ancient end, archaeologist N. N. Dikov reported the presence of labrets from level VI of the Ushki sites on the Kamchatka River, in a component representing the later Kamchatka Paleolithic and dated around 10,000

BC. He has said specifically that in those level VI deposits “three completely finished labrets were found...in 1978” (Dikov 2004:99). Unfortunately, the specimens have been only poorly illustrated (e.g., Dikov 1979:109; 1983:Figure 6), and in one case the caption is “labret like” (Dikov 2004:Fig. 21). (See Fig. 2e–f.) Dikova (1980:57) describes these as “tiny artifacts of steatite, round in plan. On the outer side a prominence is carved into a kind of lug, and two holes drilled through for sewing something on, possibly with sinew.”⁴ Nevertheless, that the button-like objects illustrated were in fact lip ornaments seems subject to question on morphological grounds, with the question much intensified by the absence of any labret specimens reported from any comparable deposits that, like Ushki level VI, represent the northeast Asian Late Paleolithic with its healthy and widespread microblade technology. On the other hand, a specimen reported to be of a much later Neolithic level at one of the Kamchatka Ushki sites is more clearly formed as a labret (Dikov 1969:Fig. 114, upper)—and this is of a period for which there is additional evidence from the south Kamchatka coast.

Such latter evidence is presented by the Tar’ in culture of southeastern Kamchatka, where more than a score of labrets are described and illustrated by Dikova (1980; see Fig. 2g–i), dating specifically to a period between about 3000 and 2000 BC. Following this, after the first millennium BC, any wearing of labrets in Kamchatka or northeast Asia as a whole was generally eschewed, although Dikov (1969:208) refers to two examples dating from only the last few centuries, one from the northern Kurile Islands south of Kamchatka (presumably from an Okhotsk culture context), the other from the mouth of the Ikolivrunveem River, one of several relatively insignificant streams on the north shore of Chukotka not far west of East Cape. This will be mentioned again below. Otherwise, the same absence of labret use is indicated throughout the known developmental sequence of the Eskimo-related occupations of western Bering Strait, which began early in the first millennium AD.

This western Bering Strait sequence was first set out in the work of Henry B. Collins (1937) on St. Lawrence Island. The original description of the cultural sequence now accepted as that of the northeasternmost Asian coast, is concerned with a stylistically developing culture that

3. The earlier date is apparently based on collagen from a single remains from the Pender Canal site, the individual with what is concluded to be labret wear on the teeth (Cybulski 1991:7).

4. I am indebted to Richard L. Bland for this translation.

had first been identified by Diamond Jenness (1928), and which Collins (e.g., 1937) later dubbed Old Bering Sea. In the 1930s, on the basis of stylistic and spatial distinctions in the area near the St. Lawrence Island community of Gambell, Collins defined three stages. These he termed Old Bering Sea styles I, II, and III, which he presumed at least in large part to represent temporal stages. Old Bering Sea as a whole was followed by Collins's Punuk culture of people especially notable for whaling, while somewhere between the Old Bering Sea and Punuk units appeared less plentiful artifacts with elements of a style related to the Birnirk culture that had come to attention before AD 1900 from scattered work in the Barrow region of north Alaska. All of these so-called cultures were defined according to styles of decorative engravings related to toggling harpoon heads of varying morphology, a practice that at times may have resulted in archaeological units too narrowly defined to reflect actual whole societies.

In any event, not long after the publication of the Collins results (1937), Froelich Rainey (1941) described collections excavated from an islet off the east coast of St. Lawrence and defined the Okvik culture—a stylistic entity both he and Collins recognized as closely related to the latter's Old Bering Sea style I. This new terminology Collins finally accepted, in effect using Old Bering Sea style I and Okvik as synonyms. That is, Okvik was regarded by both Collins and Rainey, and also by later American archaeologists (e.g., Ford 1959), as the earliest stage of Old Bering Sea. None of these St. Lawrence Island assemblages, it should be remarked, included lip ornaments.

In the 1960s, when excavations of cemetery sites on the Bering Strait coast of Chukotka began to be reported, the distributions of stylistic elements within burial offerings led some influential Russian archaeologists to reject the sequential positioning of Okvik and Old Bering Sea as well as the complete integration of Okvik into the development of the Old Bering Sea culture. Rather, Okvik was taken to be a style defining a separable social division related to, but distinct from, Old Bering Sea, and one with its origin significantly later than the earliest appearance of Old Bering Sea in its style I (e.g., Arutiunov et al. 1964). This involved the separation of two decorative and morphological styles that Collins and Rainey had both included in their Okvik-Old Bering Sea I unit, creating thereby two separate units—Okvik on one hand, and Old Bering Sea I on the other (e.g., Bronshtein 2006). This conclusion was to some extent supported by conflicting radiocarbon determinations published in the late 1950s and early

1960s (Rainey and Ralph 1959; Ralph and Ackerman 1961), and the view of Okvik as something other than the initial stage of an Old Bering Sea continuum was at least provisionally accepted by a number of other researchers (e.g., Ackerman 1984:109; Dumond 1977:119). At the same time it was recognized that the known distribution of Okvik, as reported by both Americans and Russians to be confined to St. Lawrence Island and the east coast of the Chukchi Peninsula, was significantly more restricted than that of various Old Bering Sea manifestations, which were also found on both the north and south Chukotkan coasts (e.g., Ackerman 1984:109).

Through some of the Russian research, it was pointed out that collections apparently related to the Birnirk culture, first reported from north Alaska, were widely spread along the north Chukotkan coast—as far west as the mouth of the Kolyma River—whereas there was a partial separation in distribution between the Birnirk and the slightly later Punuk, with the latter most heavily distributed farther to the south and clustered along the ocean pathways taken by migrating whales (Ackerman 1984:110, with references). Further, Birnirk assemblages were associated with faunal remains most commonly of small seals, whereas Punuk people were clearly whalers (e.g., Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006b:191–193). Later discussions based on cemetery materials modify this view somewhat, with certain Birnirk people practicing some whaling alongside their reliance on seals, as attested by out-sized harpoon heads in burials characterized especially by Birnirk-style artifacts (Bronshtein and Dneprovsky 2002). Both Birnirk and Punuk sites are significant in this regard, inasmuch as both have been implicated in the origins of the Thule culture that is noted for its fairly rapid trek (or treks) after AD 1000 across northern Canada from Alaska toward Greenland.

As concluded by Ford (1959:238–242) on the basis of trait comparisons and with reference also to Collins (1937), the culture of these Thule people who moved across arctic Canada to Greenland was heavily derived from earlier Birnirk as represented near Barrow, which in turn had experienced contributions from Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and early Punuk (as known from St. Lawrence Island), plus some from Ipiutak, the local Birnirk predecessor in northwest Alaska. At about the time of the eastward Thule expansion there was also in evidence a certain amount of proto-Thule contact with late Punuk people of Asia. Thereafter, according to both Ford (1959:241) and Collins (1937:364–372), there appeared in northernmost Alaska some innovative traits they concluded to be de-

rived from the east, from the developing Thule culture that was by then in place in Canada. Disregarding this presumed return of traits, their presumption was evidently that the Thule expansion to the east had been predominantly a single movement.

Later research and reevaluations have complicated the discussions regarding a Birnirk-to-Thule transition (e.g., Gerlach and Mason 1992; Mason 1998; Morrison 1989; Stanford 1976; Taylor 1963; Yamaura 1979), a subject that in any event is largely outside the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, traits that in Alaska are considered to be late Birnirk or early Thule appear as far east in the Arctic as Ellesmere Island and northwestern Greenland (e.g., Schledermann and McCullough 1980), but there have been suggestions of other such movements including one even somewhat earlier from the Birnirk settlements in the Barrow region (Morrison 1999). That is, some recent researchers have conceived of the “Thule migration” as more complex—as more than a unitary event (but see Friesen and Arnold 2008).

Finally, and concordant with at least portions of the archaeological evidence cited, physical anthropologists have concluded that Birnirk burial samples from the Barrow region reveal the Birnirk people to have been morphologically close to the early Thule inhabitants of the eastern Arctic (see Utermohle 1988 for a recent statement). Although such suggestions may also lead somewhat outside the intended scope of this paper, related findings first iterated by Stewart (1959) are to the effect that the remains of more recent (i.e., “Late Thule” and historic) people of the Barrow region indicate them to be morphologically distinct from Birnirk, with some researchers finding them closer to Ipiutak people of the Point Hope area and to some of more southerly Alaska (e.g., Turner 1988). This suggests a late population replacement in the Barrow vicinity, or at least a significant measure of influx from outside. After a survey of relevant literature as well as additional multivariate analyses of cranial measurements, these conclusions have been reaffirmed by researchers of the Repatriation Office of the National Museum of Natural History:

Biologically the historic inhabitants of the Point Barrow area were a very different people from those that inhabited the region during the Birnirk Culture times. Many studies have also shown that the Birnirk populations are most similar to later populations of Greenland, specifically western Greenland. The biological evidence indicates the Birnirk population is genetically affiliated to the

Thule and historic Inupiat populations of eastern Canada and western Greenland. (Hollinger et al. 2004:34)

Finally, one may observe that these last suggestions based on both archaeology and physical anthropological assessments appear in line with the reported occurrence of labrets in north Alaska. That is, people of the Birnirk and Punuk cultures of St. Lawrence Island, like those of earlier Old Bering Sea, were not users of labrets. These people apparently intruded into northwest Alaska from northeast Asia sometime in the second half of the first millennium AD, and were instrumental in the development of the culture of the early Thule people who after AD 1000—perhaps as late as AD 1200 (Friesen and Arnold 2008)—moved eastward across northern Canada. After AD 1400 or so, Alaska remnants of these people were replaced by, or amalgamated with, those who owed more of their heritage to Ipiutak and even more southerly Alaska folk—who, of course, had been longtime wearers of lip ornaments.

Does this fit with other evidence? Not entirely: that of the language distribution seems most immediately at variance. The eastern division of the Eskimoan languages, the heterogeneous language Inupiaq-Inuit or Inupiaq-Inuktitut, historically has included Native people resident from northern Alaska to eastern Greenland and has been thought to represent a heritage from the (labret-less) Thule expansion. The westernmost major dialect of this language, Inupiaq, extended from the southern coast of the Seward Peninsula and adjacent Norton Sound around north Alaska and into territory of the Mackenzie Inuit around the delta of the Mackenzie River (Woodbury 1984; see also McGhee 1974). In the nineteenth century the extremes of this distribution were evidently being expanded especially by Inupiaq traders (e.g., McGhee 1974:92–93; Oswalt 1967:136–137; Ray 1975:chapt. 11, esp. 135–139). Probably significantly, the coastal region from Wales to the Mackenzie River delta embraced the Alaska region of productive whaling, with major whaling villages tending to attract some immigration from hinterlands.

Can these physical and linguistic differences be reconciled? Probably, although evidence beyond that presently available would be highly desirable. The major divisions of the Eskimoan language family have included five separate languages of the western or Yupik division (three in Asia, one on the Bering Sea coast, one on the Gulf of Alaska), and the single heterogeneous language of the eastern or Inupiaq-Inuit division, dialects of which are variant

enough at the distributional extremes (in north Alaska and Greenland) to be classified as separate languages, but they are held together as one simply by the clearly intergrading dialects in between (Woodbury 1984). As suggested elsewhere (e.g., Dumond 1988, 2009), it seems most reasonable to suppose that the linguistic radiation within Eskimoan that accounts for both the Alaska Yupik languages and Iñupiaq-Inuit occurred in the late first millennium AD—in short, coinciding with the appearance of the pre-Thule and non-labret-wearing Birnirk (and possibly elements of Punuk) people in north Alaska and also with the heightened appearance of some Thule-like characteristics around the Bering Sea (Dumond 2009). In the north, however, there then proceeded a period of Iñupiaq expansiveness, coupled with cultural consolidation with predecessor people—including labret-wearers to the south, and probably those of the interior, some of whom may have been remnant Ipiutak folk. The reappearance of labrets in the north, then, can be considered a measure of this consolidation. The questions raised by the present suggestion, of course, call for empirical answers well beyond the scope of this treatment and definitive answers that very likely cannot be presented in any concrete way at the present time.

With all of this said, it is well to take note finally of what has been proposed as an exception of the labret-less character of the Birnirk or Punuk occupations. This involves one of those recent examples of labrets from north-east Asia, cited by Dikov and referred to above—specifically the object from the mouth of the Ikolivrunveem River on the eastern segment of the north coast of the Chukchi Peninsula. Dikov (2004:172) discusses this in his section on sites of Birnirk culture, but earlier had reported it as follows:

On the left of the stream mouth, on a 4 to 5 m high rocky bank, was a cultural layer 2 m thick.... Profiling the bank over an extent of 15 m, two broken Punuk toggling harpoon heads, two foreshafts for them, a small labret of walrus tusk, an adze, an arrow point and pieces of knives of argillaceous slate, and three picks, three punches, and a bead blank of walrus tusk, were found..., as were a paddle (ceramic stamp) of the same material decorated with concentric circles. (Dikov 2003:176–177)

The labret could not well be anything else (see Figure 2d). The archaeological context, however, may leave something to be desired. Was the object Birnirk? Possibly the decoration on the pottery paddle was crucial in leading

Dikov to this conclusion, although it is well known that identical concentric circle impressions were used in north Alaska after the Birnirk and into the so-called Western Thule period. Could this deposit represent a post-Birnirk period, when labrets were again in use in north Alaska? Related to this, and as in the historic example from the eighteenth century referred to by Dall (1870) and cited near the beginning of this paper, could this be the trace of an American prisoner? Or, perhaps more basic—are associations in this profiled deposit really clear?

LABRETS AS ETHNIC BADGES AGAIN

On some points, the Russian investigator N. N. Dikov disagreed strongly with his colleagues on the placement of the Okvik culture, and as part of his argument he invoked the apparent American-Asian contrast in the use of lip ornamentation as permitting the identification of populations. Specifically, Dikov (2004:135–146) rejected the argument that the Okvik assemblages were more recent than early Old Bering Sea especially on the basis of the forms of artifacts such as the well-known “winged objects,” with the specific Okvik forms he saw as significantly more archaic than those of Old Bering Sea. He did not, however, reject the Russian idea that Okvik was socially separable from Old Bering Sea. That is, he saw Okvik as appearing earlier but thereafter coexisting with Old Bering Sea for a substantial time.

A strong indicator of a distinction from Old Bering Sea, according to Dikov, is evidence for the use of labrets in Okvik—which in turn, given the distribution of labretifery around the Bering and Chukchi seas, he saw as marking Okvik as more heavily Americanized than was Old Bering Sea. Unfortunately, no graphic evidence for Okvik labret use is provided in Dikov’s publications, and his descriptions include no citations of specific examples. Rather, Dikov says,

Often labrets are very definitely depicted on... bone images from mixed Okvik-Old Bering Sea burials [on the Chukchi Peninsula]. The fact that there are no similar images with labrets in pure Old Bering Sea burials or in Old Bering Sea sites permits concluding that these images are associated with Okvik (Dikov 2004:137).

That is, he goes on to say, the origin of Okvik is heavily, although not exclusively, American (Dikov 2004:141–143). On the other hand, the affinities of Old Bering Sea are much more heavily Asian (Dikov 2004:161–167), al-

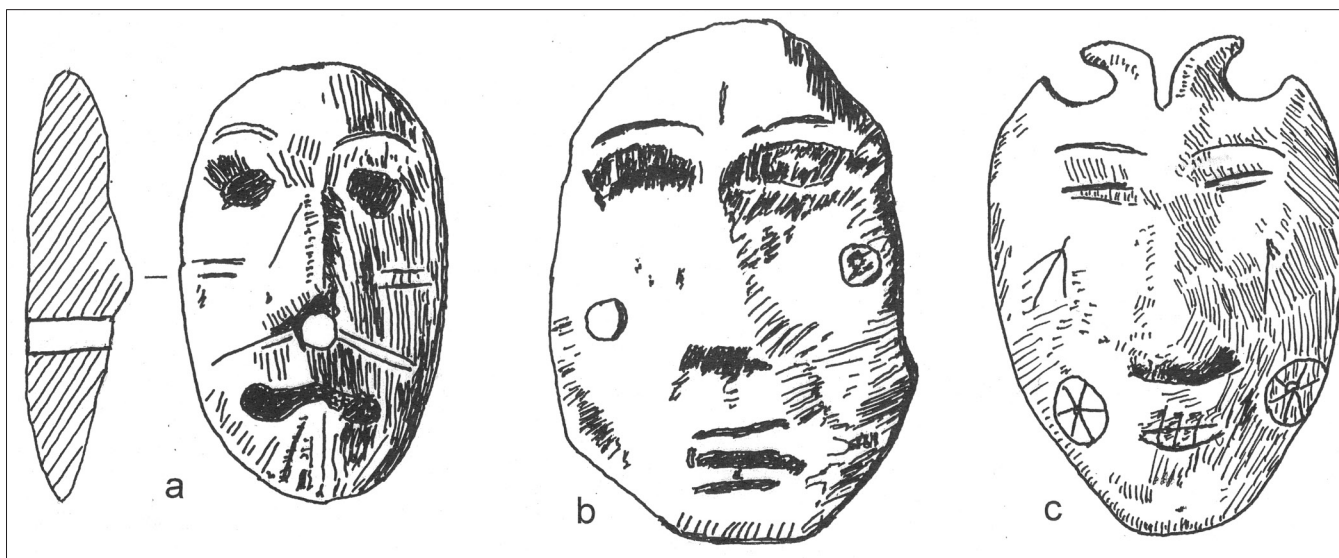


Figure 3. Images of faces in bone and ivory, Chukchi Peninsula burials (although all are apparently small, no scales are provided in the sources): (a) Uelen cemetery, burial 22 (58) (redrawn from Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006a:Fig. 99:1); (b) Uelen cemetery, burial 7 (59) (redrawn from Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006a:Fig. 98:9); (c) Ekven cemetery, burial 15 (redrawn from Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006b:Fig. 80:8).

though he states that both drew from the Norton culture of Alaska as well as from groups known in northeast Asian prehistory.

What is the evidence for Okvik labrets? Although implicating human representations from burials in Chukotkan coastal sites (Uelen and Ekven) that contain mixtures of Okvik and Old Bering Sea styles in artifacts, as indicated, Dikov does not specify particular burials. A review of reports by Arutiunov and Sergeev (2006a, 2006b) reveals only a few images that might be those Dikov was referring to. Specifically, there are only three cases in which the possibility is raised by Arutiunov and Sergeev that labrets may be indicated: two from Uelen, in burials 7 (59) and 22 (58) and one from Ekven burial 15. These are illustrated in Fig. 3.

The most provocative comment pertains to an object from Uelen burial 22 (58), a grave set that Bronshtein (2006:171) lists among twelve Uelen burials accompanied predominantly by Okvik objects. Representing a human face, Arutiunov and Sergeev (2006a:Fig. 99:1) regard the object as an amulet: “Two holes, not drilled through, represent eyes. A hole drilled through the center of the face served for attaching the amulet. At the corners of the mouth there are two more holes, not drilled through, which evidently represented labrets” (Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006a:194). See Fig. 3a.

With regard to a second human face, this one a portion of a decorated walrus tusk from Uelen burial 7 (59)

(Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006a:Fig. 98:9), they say only that “decorative circles on the cheeks may illustrate a tattoo but perhaps represent labrets” (Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006a:195). They also compare this to a second tusk with a face carved on it that is from Ekven burial 15 (Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006b:Fig. 80:8). In the first published reference to this latter image (Arutiunov et al. 1964:339–342), the authors remarked that it “has tattoo marks on the cheekbones in the shape of bird tracks and also shows cheek labrets,” but in the more recent compendium (Arutiunov and Sergeev 2006b:18) it is simply called “a medallion with the image of a tattooed human face.” Neither of these grave lots, from Uelen burial 7 (59) or Ekven burial 15, is listed by Bronshtein (2006:171) as containing any carvings he recognized as Okvik—classing the first lot as equivalent to Old Bering Sea II, the second as showing a mixture of Old Bering Sea II and III.

Of these three images, the face in present Fig. 3a may represent labrets at the corner of the mouth, although the drill marks may also be no more than a drill technique to render that mouth; probable tattoos seem indicated by grooves on the cheekbones, and either a mustache or additional tattoos extend outward from the drilled hole below the nose (compare Murdoch 1892:Fig. 87). With regard to the two other images, the cheek marks appear much more convincing as tattoos than as labrets, especially as those in Fig. 3c are almost exactly duplicated in the sketch of a nineteenth-century man from the Chukchi

Peninsula coast provided by Nelson (1899:Fig. 15). Given that no lip ornaments themselves are reported in collections from sites on St. Lawrence Island or from the Okvik site, in addition to their absence from graveyard collections made on the Chukchi Peninsula, the present evidence of the Okvik use of lip ornaments appears too weak to be acceptable.

With reference to an American association of Okvik, it may be noted that Collins (1959) referred to an “Okvik artifact” as originating in southwestern Alaska, a situation that could be taken as confirmation of a clearly American connection. This was an object collected northwest of Kuskokwim Bay by E.W. Nelson in the nineteenth century, with Collins’s characterization of it written after he had adopted the use of Okvik as synonymous with Old Bering Sea style I. The artifact he figures (Collins 1959:Fig. 1), as well as his description, suggests that it would be classed by Russian archaeologists (including Dikov, apparently) not as Okvik but as Old Bering Sea. If there is an especially strong American strain to be seen anywhere in the Okvik collections—strong and in opposition to affiliations of collections classed by the Russians as Old Bering Sea—it must needs rest on evidence in addition to imputations of Okvik labret use. Again, such a further consideration is outside the scope of the present essay.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence for a recent prehistoric contrast between western Alaska and northeastern Asia in the customary use of lip ornaments or labrets appears compelling. The time depth of this contrast would appear to be at least as early as sometime in the first millennium BC. At this time labrets appear in western mainland Alaska with the Choris culture, and by the same time have evidently disappeared in northeastern Asia. Thereafter the contrast between America and Asia evidently holds until a time around AD 800 or 900, with the demise of the Ipiutak culture, at which point labret use disappears in America north of Bering Strait, while continuing unabated farther south. Given the gestation of the Thule culture in northern Alaska at this time, it is reasonable to conclude that the decline of labretifery is related to an influx of actual people from the Asian side of the Bering Strait,

with skeletal characteristics apparently supporting such a conclusion. Following the Thule movement or movements eastward, labret use is resumed in north Alaska, this at a time in which characteristics of skeletal morphology suggest a closer tie of north Alaska population to the considerably earlier Ipiutak people. All in all, to the extent that the available samples permit a conclusion, it appears that the absence of labret use is a reasonable shorthand identifier of northeast Asian proto-Eskimo peoples, that the presence of labret use characterizes people of principally (northwestern) American descent, and that this circumstance probably held true since 1000 BC. Near the end of the first millennium AD, labret-less Asians apparently took over northern coastal Alaska, with the spread of labret use in the region thereafter indicating infiltration of the Inupiaq-speaking people by remnant populations of the earlier Alaskans. One may note that population movements to the major coastal centers continued into the twentieth century, when formerly inland people moved into the Barrow region after the coastal population was decimated by disease (e.g., Oswalt 1967:234–235; Stewart 1959:246).

Beyond this, in the absence of empirical information it appears not possible to proceed. So far as other facts indicate, although the presence of lip ornaments in the ten-millennia-old deposits from the Ushki sites on the Kamchatka River seems doubtful—or, at least, much less than demonstrated—the use of labrets on the southeastern Kamchatkan coast before 2000 BC is evidently undeniable. With regard to other suggestions made by researchers—that labrets were in use on the northeastern Chukotkan coast in the Birnirk period, or that labret use characterizes people recognized as Okvik and marks their culture as significantly American, in contrast to that of the contemporary, if not integrally related, Old Bering Sea people, the samples available are simply insufficient to support such conclusions.

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