LABRETS AND THEIR SOCIAL CONTEXT IN COASTAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

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As a visually prominent form of body modification, the labret, or lip-plug, has a complex and varied history on the Northwest Coast. Observations made by early explorers and ethnographers of the northern coast indicate that labrets were worn by high-status women, an association frequently invoked more generally by archaeologists. Moss (1999) demonstrates that this generalization masks local patterns according to which, in some cases, men also wore labrets. Cybulski's (1991, 2010) research on dental abrasion caused by labret use also demonstrates that both men and women wore labrets during different times, patterns that he relates to shifts in tracing descent and ascribed versus achieved status. Archaeological evidence of labrets in this region is recounted by Keddie (1981), who suggests that labrets were status symbols, connecting cultural groups regionally through a shared symbolic grammar. The precise relationship between materiality and social identity conveyed in labrets, however, remains unclear.

In this article, I review the observations of labrets made by early ethnographers and outline the archaeological and osteological evidence testifying to labret use over the past five thousand years. The association of labrets with high-status women is thus queried in relation to the complexity of social identity and body modification as "materiality." I then outline a typological analysis undertaken to determine whether different social meanings are manifested materially in the form and style of labrets, and I explore how the various types correlate temporally, geographically, and/or by sex/gender association. Here, I make a comparison between labrets that were worn Coast-wide in ancient times and those that were worn by North Coast Indigenous groups well into the nineteenth century. I suggest the results show that changes in the form of labrets, correlating geographically and temporally between the South Coast archaeological examples and more recent labrets from the North

Coast, represent a corresponding shift in the social *meaning* of labrets. Sparse contextual information prevented my understanding this shift in terms of sex/gender, but there is geographical patterning at multiple scales – regional, sub-regional, and even on the village or site level. This supports the concept of the labret as an exclusionary tradition, conveying individual and group identities that vary through time and space in this region. I further explore the complexity of multi-layered social identity by looking at contemporary labret-bearers and First Nations artists who depict labrets in their work. Their perspectives highlight the inadequacy of archaeological approaches to identity that continue to essentialize and to simplify meanings that are inherently contextual and scalar. Thus, I conclude that, while simple correlations of the labret with "status" and "gender" are not wrong per se, they nonetheless obscure the complexity of body ornamentation, which, though manifested materially, remains inherently ambiguous.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT LABRETS?

Although labrets were worn only by northern Northwest Coast peoples as recently as the nineteenth century, they are recovered along portions of the Coast from Alaska to Washington dating back at least five thousand years. Study of the labret by Northwest Coast archaeologists dates back at least to Charles Borden, who presented a paper entitled "Labrets in Western North America: Eskimo or Indian?" at the 1959 Society for American Archaeology meeting. Therein, he attempts to use archaeological data to identify the origin and to trace the spread of this tradition across vast distances; yet, in relation to the social identity of the labret-bearer, he notes only that labrets "were commonly worn by women" among northern coastal groups (Borden 1959).

Grant Keddie's (1981) interest in labrets takes Borden's initial work many steps further along by tracing the distribution of labrets worldwide and exploring the social context of this form of ornamentation. Keddie describes labrets as "the most visual evidence of status," expressing "sets of reciprocal relationships" that were likely adapted between groups to facilitate "trade relationships" (76-77). He recognizes that labret-wearing was an exclusive (i.e., restrictive) tradition with significant social implications not only for the labret-wearers and their children (e.g., influencing marriage ties between communities) but also for the interpretations that archaeologists have made of this artifact type (Keddie 1989).

Keddie also notes that indirect evidence of early labret use shows that some of the earliest associations of labrets are in fact with men (Cybulski 1974, 1991). Indeed, on the North Coast, skeletal evidence supports the "known north coast historic pattern," which indicates that, about one thousand years ago, labrets were worn exclusively by women (Cybulski 2010, 19). According to Cybulski (1991, 11), this may relate to a shift towards both matrilineality and ascribed status (see also Cybulski 2010, 20). Meanwhile on the South Coast, it is often suggested that artificial cranial deformation "replaced" labrets as status markers sometime after 2000 BP (Ames and Maschner 1999; Cybulski 1991, 2010; Keddie 1981).

The potential of labrets to yield important social information has been stressed by Ames and Maschner (1999, 182), who suggest that "the most crucial evidence about status on the coast is that provided by labrets and by the practice of cranial deformation." Status means many things, depending on the scale of analysis, but it is frequently reduced to meaning socio-political rank based on economic wealth. Carlson (1996, 221) hints at this association: "There is some suggestion from the [Blue Jackets Creek and Namu] that the males may have been sea mammal hunters which suggests further that the female [labret] wearers were their wives. If so, it may be further inferred that they constituted the top echelon of society."

The association of labrets with women, particularly with high-status women, in this region derives largely from descriptions provided by early ethnographers. Many of these observations confirm that labrets were worn by women and that they were objects of elevated status, with greater size reflecting higher rank (Dall 1884). Yet the ethnographers who wrote about the labret and the role it played in society convey a nuanced complexity of meaning when discussing this ornament.

For example, La Perouse (cited in Dall 1884, 87-88) notes: "The older the woman the larger is the ornament," and "young girls have only a needle in the lower lip, the married women alone have the right to the bowls." Dall (1884, 81-82) describes the labret, worn by all women but slaves, as "a symbol of vigor, fortitude, and mature development," of "sexual freedom," of "maturity only," and of "power, privileges, and respect." Madonna Moss's (1999) analysis of George Catlin's notes also confirms evidence of men wearing labrets, perhaps shamans or even a third gender. In this sense, the labret may have simply communicated the liminal social position of its bearer.

These early ethnographers also recognized regional stylistic differences in the shape of the labrets worn. Dawson (1880, 108-9) and Niblack (1890, 256-57) claimed the shape of the Haida labret was oval, that of the

Figure 1. Mask of the Slave Woman. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Harlan Smith, 56914. "Wooden mask belonging to Willie Mack. It represents the slave woman who is believed to have been murdered long ago by a powerful chief to give power to a Kusiut ceremony which he was inaugurating. Whenever this ceremony is given the murdered slave appears. The mask is unpainted. In the chin can be seen a plug of abalone shell to represent the labret worn by the northern tribes. The 'hair' is from the tail of either a horse or a cow." This mask is striking in that it conveys the contextual nature of social identity: in one setting high social ranking is conveyed, in another enslavement. Social rank does not hinge on the presence or absence of the labret.

Ts'msyan labret was "elongated,"[1] and that of the Stikine River Tlingit labret was circular. This suggests that there is some form of cultural identity conveyed in labret type; however, these texts also highlight that the meaning of labrets is both ambiguous and contextual. Dall (1884,

[1] "Ts'msyan" is the preferred spelling for the Anglicized version of "Tsimshian."

Figure 2. "Queen Johnny of Masset" or "New Gold Harbour Jonnie with Labret," 1883 or 1888, taken by Hannah or Richard Maynard. This Haida labret-bearer is typical of images used to illustrate the ornament's use, which is nearly always associated with women. Image courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BCA, call no. AA00008.

81), for example, notes that, among the Tlingit at least, "the labret was forbidden to slaves." Yet the mask of the slave woman (Figure 1), used in ceremonies by the Nuxalk peoples to represent a "northern" woman, reminds us that the self is only defined in opposition to the other.

MOVING BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHIC "TYRANNY"

Although archaeologists frequently acknowledge that labrets are known to have been worn by both men and women at different periods, nonetheless there is a tendency to represent the labret graphically in association with women, using photographs and drawings of female labret-bearers (Ames and Maschner 1999, 182; Keddie 1981, 59, 65; McMillan 1995, 190; Cybulski 1996, 12; Stewart 1973, 92; Blackman 1990, 248; Ames 1995, 166). Such focus on ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts, and the blurring of these data with archaeological evidence, has translated into a synchronic, simplistic "high-status-women-wore-labrets" message that is commonly communicated in widely accessible formats, such as textbooks (Fagan 1995, 214), guides to Northwest Coast Indigenous culture (Duff 1975; Drucker 1965; Stewart 1973, 1976), and encyclopaedias (Paterek 1996, 299; Werness 2000, 177). "Woman" as labret-wearer has become the "default gender paradigm" (as per Nord and Herbert 2007; Figure 2).

In this way, the ethnographic pattern becomes the apparent status quo. Even when acknowledging temporal ambiguity in terms of gender, the correlation with high economic status resolutely remains in the archaeological literature (Carlson 1996; Matson and Coupland 1994; Ames 1995; Cybulski 1992; Keddie 1981). Yet the labret potentially exemplifies myriad forms of "status" (e.g., gender, age, spiritual efficacy) on multiple scales (e.g., individual, familial, cultural), depending on the social context of its display (e.g., inside the home, at a public ceremony, in front of strangers, while trading). Thus, it is not sufficient to declare an object to be a "status" marker without indicating what kind of status is being marked.

This may be particularly true of the labret. As an object that perforates the body, a labret is both a decoration and part of the self. Taylor (2005) describes body modification as a means of "surfacing the body interior," while Joyce (2005, 140) suggests that the body is a "metaphor for society." In this sense, it is used as a canvas upon which social values, beliefs, and ideology are literally inscribed – the physical manifestation of living culture. Dahm's (1994, 100) research on "Gulf Islands complex" soapstone artifacts (known commonly as "whatzits") and labrets from Pender Island suggests that body ornamentation is indicative both of "transformation from one state, or period of the life cycle, to another" and of "the relative wealth or socio-economic status of the wearer." Meanwhile, Duff (1975, 35) refers to the labret as "convey[ing] hints of the sexual duality" of its bearer. Thus, body modification represents social interaction between people (Favazza 1996) as well as between the

bearer and her/his environment – a statement of both self and other, or of "personhood" (Gilchrist 2006, 147; Fowler 2004).

This review of the literature on labrets suggests that their characterization as simple "status" markers underestimates the complexity and ambiguity of meaning conveyed in a form of social expression that, over the last five thousand years, has been far from static. Considering the varied geographical distribution of labrets during the vast period of their use, it is certain that the practice of labret-wearing has changed, and one must be wary of falling into the trap of "tyrannical analogy" (Wobst 1978) (i.e., of presuming that the meaning of an object will remain static over time). Indeed, Ames and Maschner (1999, 183) recognize that "the wearing of labrets is a permanent and visible modification of the face, and so can be an unambiguous status marker – one wears a labret or one does not"; however, without knowing the rules of use, can we be certain what kind of social status it is marking – age, gender, rank, cultural affiliation, economic status, spiritual efficacy? Thus, the labret may be acknowledged as an imperfect *gesture* towards social distinction, visibly dividing labret wearers from non-labret wearers. What this distinction reflected, and to what extent its meaning and material manifestation were heterogeneous, is not clear.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My goal is to bring clarity to a poorly understood form of material expression – to put together baseline data and see whether it supports the idea of labrets as status markers. I therefore devised a research strategy to (1) document the formal variation in labrets and create a labret typology, (2) trace these types through time and space, and (3) compare these data with contextual information that may relate to social identity (e.g., sex identified in burial sites). My research was limited to 220 positively identified labrets recovered in British Columbia and housed at four Canadian institutions – the University of British Columbia (UBC), Simon Fraser University (SFU), the Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC).

For each labret, I recorded various artifact attributes, including material properties (e.g., raw material, colour, texture, luminescence, iridescence), technological manufacture (ground/abraded), and any notable wear or fracturing. Observations of the body (visible portion) and flange (worn inside the mouth) were recorded separately, and these included shape, dimensions, weight, and any decoration or detailing (e.g., drilled holes).

Subsequent analyses focused largely on the visible portion of the labret, the assumption being that this aspect would be more sensitive to use as visual communicators of social identity. Available contextual information was also recorded, including site location, object provenience, associated dates, and, where recovered from burial sites, the sex of the individual.

I used this dataset to evaluate existing typologies (Stewart 1976; Loy and Powell 1977; Keddie 1981; Ames and Maschner 1999; Steffian and Saltonstall 2001) and to consider the creation of new ones that would enable me to examine patterning that may be suggestive of social identity (including age, gender, status, village, and cultural affiliation) through time and space. I compiled the data in Statistics Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS V15.0) for analysis and included frequencies, cross-tabulation, and a variety of scatterplots, boxplots, and histograms to illustrate relationships between variables. I used cross-tabulation specifically both to aid in the formulation of typological classes and to compare expected and hypothesized types with other attributes, including raw material(s), size (visible body area), date, and geographic distribution. I employed basic frequency analyses to consider temporality and the geographical distribution of labret types (and specific attributes thereof) on regional, sub-regional, and site scales, as well as their association with the remains of sex-identified individuals recovered from burial sites. Full results and data are available in my master's thesis and appendices (La Salle 2008).

Typology

While the organization of labrets into types was fundamentally the "first step," it was also the most challenging one. The sheer range of variation, even within so-called "types," has defied the very goal of creating typology – in this case, to standardize and to reveal meaningful patterning. Additionally, there is a paradox in that, while seeking to complicate the notion of simple equations between material culture and social identity, typological analysis necessarily involves an over-simplification of what is infinitely complex: meaning at one scale can mask meaning at other scales.

Nonetheless, for an object such as the labret, which is intended for ocular display, meaning should be reflected visually through material form (Hodder 1991). This being the case, types should be meaningful. Thus, I have attempted to contribute to the known types of labrets, identified based on a correlation of shape between each of the labret elements (flange, neck, body). While the typology I propose (Figure 3) appears to reflect discrete types, in fact even these remain ambiguous. Consequently, when attempting to interpret what these patterns may

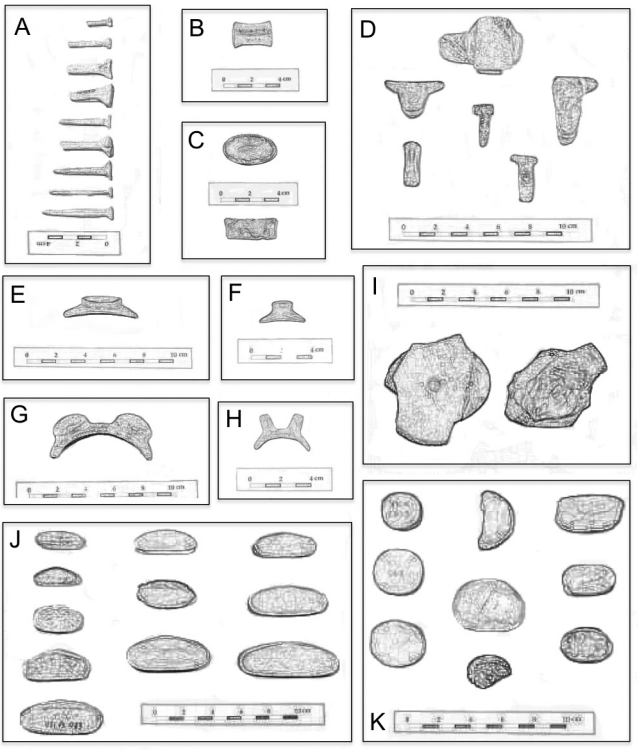

Figure 3. Labret typology of a sample of 220 labrets.
A. Tee: includes "T-shaped" and one "circular flange, extended body" labret, cylindrical to rectangular body, circular, rectangular, laterally tapered flange, concave, flat, or convex anterior and/or posterior (n = 51).
B. Spool: circular or oval body, "circular flange, extended body," extended flange-body length/neck, concave anterior and posterior (n = 1).
C. Disc: circular or oval body, with or without drilled hole, concave, flat, or convex anterior and/or posterior (n = 31).
D. Pendulant: this type has the most variation and "outliers" and is difficult to classify, extended usually downward projected body, lateral flange, often concave (n = 15).
E, F. Knob: includes "button" and "top-hat," circular, oval, square, circular-square, or "zoomorphic" body (zoomorphic labrets are rare and have only been recovered from the North Coast), concave, flat, or convex anterior, lateral flange, often concave (n = 81).
G, H. Double-Knob: same as Knob style but with two bodies (n = 4).
I. Plate: circular, oval body, oval flange, grooved or constricted neck, concave or flat anterior and/or posterior (n = 4).
J. Bowl: elongated oval, ovoid body, with or without grooved or constricted neck, often inlaid, concave or flat anterior and/or posterior (n = 17).
K. Pulley: circular, oval, or circular-square body, with or without grooved or constricted neck, concave or flat anterior and/or posterior (n = 16).
Note: Another type of possible labret, referred to as "Plug" style, was considered but evidence of this artifact's being a labret was inconclusive and so I exclude it from this typology. Similarly, a series of artifacts similar to labrets in shape, made of a steatite-like material and hollow in the centre, were analyzed; however, due to their uniformity and size, I agree with their initial assessment as earspools.

TABLE 1
Cross-tabulation of material class by labret type

Labret types	Material class						Total
	faunal	faunal, faunal	floral	floral, faunal	floral, metallic	lithic	
Bowl	4	0	7	5	1	0	17
Disc	0	0	0	0	0	31	31
Double-Knob	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Knob	3	1	0	0	0	77	81
Pendulant	7	0	0	0	0	8	15
Plate	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Pulley	2	1	0	0	0	13	16
Spool	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Tee	19	0	0	0	0	32	51
Total	36	2	7	5	1	169	220

Note: Categories including two designations (e.g., faunal, faunal; floral, faunal) indicate that two materials were used to make the labret (e.g., antler and shell; wood, shell).

mean, it is useful to conceive of these types more as trait-clusters on a gradation leading from one form to another.

RESULTS OF TYPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Raw Materials and Size

I recorded several aspects of labret material in order to consider their inclusion in typological classification. These efforts to look at materiality more broadly met with varying results. Initially, I considered properties, such as colour, patterning, texture, and polish; however, after examining the results, I did not see any relationship between these attributes and type, size, geographical, or temporal distribution, nor did I see any correlation with sex-identified remains found in burial sites. There is, however, some correlation between raw material and labret types identified and their geographic distribution.

Due to the prevailing assumption that labret size signified the bearer's status, I considered this to be one of the more critical variables to test. The nature of the labret as inherently divisible into two parts – the internally worn flange and the externally visible body – somewhat complicated my efforts to standardize size. However, as a form of visual

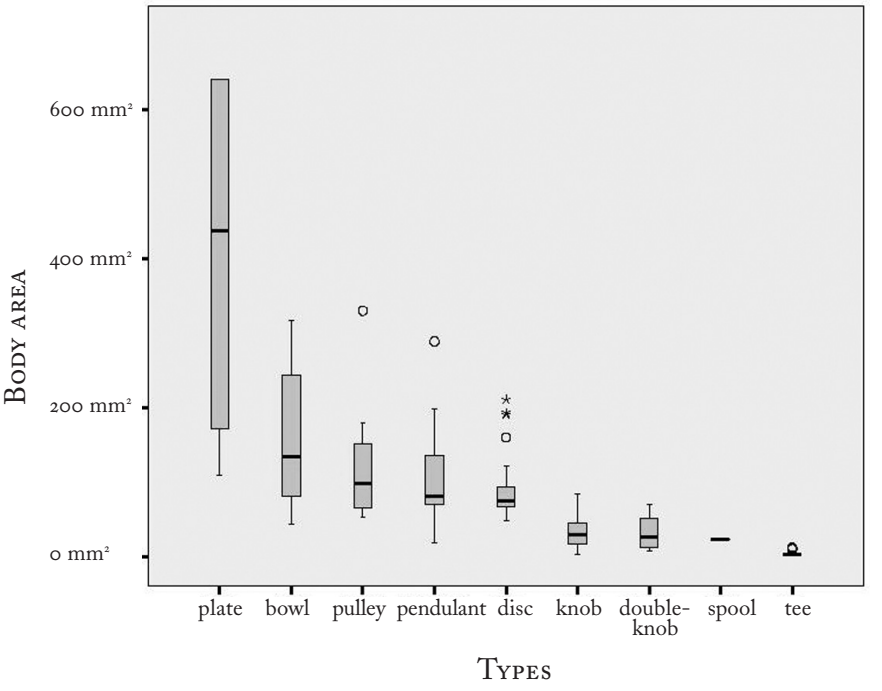

Figure 4. Labret body size frequency by type.

communication, if the association between size and status is valid, it is important that the former be demonstrated visibly (i.e., via the body of the labret). Therefore, I focused on the size (area, width by height) of the labret body in particular and filtered out labrets from the testable sample to include only artifacts for which the body was complete (or could be accurately estimated based on symmetry) in order to provide a reduced sample of 217 labrets (Figure 4).

Geographic Distribution

Although North Coast groups most recently wore labrets, according to archaeological contexts, the geographic distribution of labrets is heavily weighted towards the South Coast (N = 159; Table 2). This represents a sampling bias, reflecting, in part, the amount of archaeology that has been conducted in these particular areas, specifically the Gulf Islands and the Fraser Delta sub-regions (Tables 2 and 3). The frequent occurrence of labrets in burial contexts compounds this bias as the

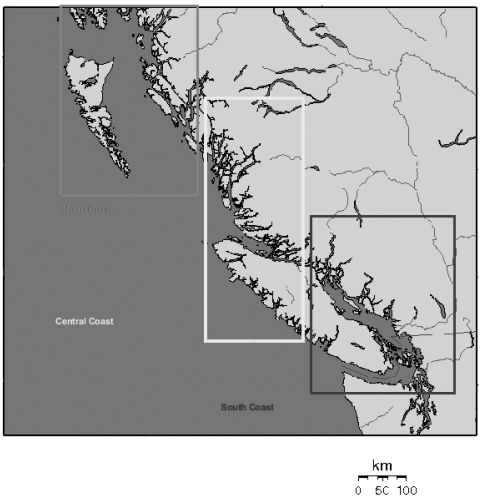

Figure 5. North, Central, and South Coast geographic areas as used in this study.

TABLE 2
Frequency of labrets considered in this study by geographic region and sub-region

Region	Sub-region	Number	Percent of total
North	Haida Gwaii	20	9.1
	Kitimat	1	0.5
	Nass River	4	1.8
	Skeena River	20	9.5
	Unknown	9	0.4
	Total	54	
Central	Central	4	1.8
	West Vancouver Island	1	0.5
	Total	5	
South	East Vancouver Island	21	9.5
	Gulf Islands	69	30.9
	Fraser Delta	64	29.1
	Upper Fraser	4	1.8
	Unknown	1	0.5
	Total	159	
N/A	Unknown	2	1.0
	Total	220	100.0

TABLE 3
Labret type by sub-region

Labret type	Sub-region											
	Central	East Van. Island	Fraser Delta	Gulf Islands	Haida Gwaii	Kitimat	Nass River	Skeena River	Unknown	Upper Fraser	West Van. Island	Total
Bowl	0	0	0	0	11	0	2	0	4	0	0	17
Disc	0	6	7	17	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	31
Double-Knob	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Knob	0	7	27	34	1	0	0	4	5	3	0	81
Pendulant	1	6	7	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
Plate	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	4
Pulley	0	0	0	0	7	1	2	5	1	0	0	16
Spool	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Tee	3	2	19	17	0	0	0	9	0	1	0	51
Total	4	21	64	69	20	1	4	20	12	4	1	220

sites in this region that produced the most labrets were cemetery shell middens that were heavily excavated. Conversely, the Central Coast is vastly underrepresented (N = 5) in light of ethnographic support for labret use in parts of this region (Galois 2004), and this reflects a lack of comparable archaeological excavation and, specifically, excavation of burial sites.

Temporal Distribution

Of my sample of 220 labrets, directly associated radiocarbon dates were available for only twelve, ranging between circa 1880 to 4320 BP.[2] Such a small sample of absolute dates frustrated my attempt to look at labret distribution through time, and I was reluctant to rely on either the associated date ranges (2000 to 3000 BP) or the cultural phases (Locarno Beach) that were assigned. It is often difficult to determine what evidence has been used to assign labrets to "associated" time periods, and there is the danger that these designations have reified a priori assumptions. Thus, some sites may be considered to date to a particular time period because of the presence of labrets that are thought to date to that period (Mitchell 1971). This amounts to a teleological assumption, which makes it impossible to test whether it is the labrets or the site that actually date from this time.

This being the case, I chose to focus more on labret distribution according to the collection methods ("archaeological" versus "ethnological"), the assumption being that ethnological labrets should date roughly to the period from which they were collected (e.g., European contact period) and thus represent the most recent manifestation of the labret tradition in this region. Separating ethnological from archaeological labrets afforded the opportunity to evaluate the accuracy of these accounts by testing the extent to which material patterning correlates with what is documented in early written sources. Furthermore, because archaeological understanding of labrets has been largely reliant upon the relatively recent literature, a comparison of patterning between archaeologically (N = 183) and ethnologically collected (N = 30) labrets should reveal any discrepancies between what has been *assumed* based on recent observations of labrets and what is actually *observed* in "deep time" (Table 4). If we accept that labret form has meaning, then a shift in the labret tradition likely correlates to a shift in its particular meaning.

[2] Rorabaugh (2011) was subsequently able to contribute additional dates, both radiocarbon-derived and through stratigraphic association, to this sample; however, these additions do not illustrate any additional temporal patterning with respect to labret form.

TABLE 4
Ethnological and archaeological labret types

	Collection source			
Labret type	Archaeological	Ethnological	Unknown	Total
Bowl	0	16	1	17
Disc	31	0	0	31
Double-Knob	4	0	0	4
Knob	76	4	1	81
Pendulant	14	0	1	15
Plate	2	1	1	4
Pulley	5	8	3	16
Spool	0	1	0	1
Tee	51	0	0	51
Total	183	30	7	220

Note: Labret types are organized as "ethnological" (the era of European contact and thereafter) versus "archaeological" (defined, as per the Heritage Conservation Act, as pre-1846 and recovered using archaeological methods). Admittedly, there may be some overlap in these categories as many of the labrets studied at the CMC are considered ethnological by virtue of having been collected by ethnographers, although they may be older than the arbitrary date of 1846.

Contextual Data

In my sample of labrets, less than half (N = 81) were considered to have been recovered in situ, and, of these, associated contextual information (sex of human remains in burial sites) was limited to thirteen individuals: five males, four females, three "shamans" (sex not specified), and one unidentifiable individual. In this small sample, there was no observable difference in the type of labret associated with either sex or age (where this could be determined). The only correlation worth noting concerns the three labrets recovered from "shaman graves" during the ethnographic period, all of which are bowl labrets. This is notable in light of Moss's (1999) suggestion that male shamans wore labrets, although it is also possible that these shaman graves were those of women.

Therefore, based on this sample, there is no demonstrable association between labret type, material, size, time and space, and sex/gender or age of the labret-bearer. As discussed, according to osteological, archaeological, and ethnohistorical evidence, clearly both men and women *did* wear labrets; however, during what time periods, during what phase of life, what kind of labret, whether they were worn by all men or women or just some – these issues remain uncertain, and the archaeological examples have brought me no closer to clarifying any pattern.

WHAT CAN WE NOW SAY ABOUT LABRETS?

Based on the artifact analysis undertaken, some simple observations may lend clarity to a poorly understood form of material culture. First, *there is a clear association between some labret types, raw material, and size*. For example, bowl, pulley, plate, and pendulant labret forms fall within a larger size range than do the other types. Of these, bowls are primarily made of wood, pulleys of various types of stone, plates of slate, and pendulant labrets of shell or stone but predominantly of steatite. Falling in the middle-size range, disc labrets are both relatively homogeneous in size and account for most of the steatite labrets in this sample. Finally, tee labrets are the smallest and also have the highest proportion of faunal examples, particularly bone. The extent to which labret form dictated its materiality, however, is unclear since each type is also represented by labrets of other materials (e.g., stone tees, coal discs). Thus, it appears that the choice of material for particular kinds of labrets in certain geographic areas (Table 5) had to do with cultural concepts of what constituted an appropriate and valued material for a labret rather than with the physical demands of either the labret shape or the labret wearer.

Second, *there is geographic patterning for some labret types, while other types are Coast-wide*. Bowl, plate, spool, and pulley labrets are recovered almost exclusively on the North Coast, while the South Coast accounts for all disc, double-knob, and pendulant labrets, which are clustered in the Gulf Islands and Fraser Delta sub-regions (Table 6). Knob and tee labrets are found all along the Coast. Based on this broad geographic distribution, it appears that types do correlate somewhat on the level of regional social or cultural groups, although there is frequent overlap at the sub-regional level. Meanwhile, typological distinction is also apparent between sites in the same sub-region.

Third, *there is an association between raw materials and region, sub-region, and/or individual sites*. Wooden labrets were recovered exclusively from the North Coast, where the frequency of faunal labrets, including bone, antler, horn, and ivory, was also proportionally elevated compared to other regions. The South Coast accounted for nearly all steatite labrets as well as coal labrets, which were found concentrated in sites on the Fraser Delta and the Gulf Islands. Purple-hinged scallop and other shell labrets were primarily found on the South Coast, particularly in the Gulf Islands (one was also found on the Central Coast). The particular materials employed were likely influenced more by what was valued and considered culturally appropriate than by what was locally available.

TABLE 5
Labret raw material frequency by geographic region

Material type	Region				Total
	Central	North	South	Unknown	
Antler	0	2	2	0	4
Basalt	0	0	2	0	2
Bone	1	8	4	0	13
Bone, shell (abalone)	0	1	0	0	1
Coal	0	2	13	0	15
Horn	0	1	0	0	1
Ivory	0	4	0	0	4
Ivory, shell (abalone)	0	1	0	0	1
Mudstone	0	12	14	0	26
Quartz crystal	1	1	0	0	2
Quartzite	0	1	4	0	5
Sandstone	0	0	1	0	1
Schist	0	0	1	0	1
Shell (purple-hinged scallop)	1	0	11	0	12
Shell (unknown)	0	0	1	0	1
Siltstone	0	0	21	0	21
Slate	1	2	1	1	5
Soapstone	0	3	16	0	19
Steatite	0	3	52	0	55
Unknown, antler	1	0	0	0	1
Unknown, cast	0	0	0	1	1
Unknown, clay	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown, limestone	0	0	2	0	2
Unknown, mudstone	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown, pumice	0	0	3	0	3
Unknown, serpentine	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown, siltstone	0	0	4	0	4
Unknown, soapstone	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown, talc	0	0	3	0	3
Wood	0	7	0	0	7
Wood, copper	0	1	0	0	1
Wood, shell (abalone)	0	5	0	0	5
Total	5	54	159	2	220

Note: For materials noted as "unknown," I provide my educated guess.

TABLE 6
Labret type frequency by broad geographic region

Labret type	Region				Total
	Central	North	South	N/A	
Bowl	0	17	0	0	17
Disc	0	1	30	0	31
Double-Knob	0	0	4	0	4
Knob	0	8	72	1	81
Pendulant	1	0	14	0	15
Plate	1	2	0	1	4
Pulley	0	16	0	0	16
Spool	0	1	0	0	1
Tee	3	9	39	0	51
Total	5	54	159	2	220

Fourth, *there is geographic patterning regarding labret size; however, this is also correlated temporally*. The larger forms of labrets are primarily found in ethnological collections from the North Coast. However, the largest labrets (plates) represent a geographical mystery as two were found on the North Coast while another represents the only labret from the west coast of Vancouver Island. Generally, however, larger labrets are clustered on the North Coast, with the exception of pendulant forms on the South Coast (a form that required a smaller pierced hole than the North Coast types, even though the body area may be comparable). The relationship between size, geography, and time is further discussed below.

Fifth, *there is no demonstrable association between time period and labret type, material, or size, except between archaeological labrets and ethnological labrets*. As noted, the biggest stumbling block in looking at associations of labret forms through time and their relationship with status, gender, and age has been a lack of associated dates. However, of the labrets with established dates, a few simple statements can be made. The oldest labrets in my sample date to circa 4500 BP (tee and knob labrets), while most fall between 3500 to 2500 BP (tee, knob, and disc labrets, among others), which, on the South Coast, are associated with the Locarno Beach period. This is consistent with contemporary interpretations of labrets in this region, which appear to have been gradually phased out during the Marpole period (Cybulski 1991, 2010; McMillan 1995, 191).[3]

[3] During my presentation of this research to the Musqueam First Nation, one community member stated that his mother had told him about the past use of labrets by their people. Although simply a passing comment, this highlighted my own perpetuation of the assumption

Of course, this pattern is also skewed by sampling bias in that many more labrets have been recovered from the South Coast, an apparent overrepresentation that has played a significant role in archaeological studies and has translated into a strong tendency to focus on labrets from that region, in particular from the Gulf Islands, as "the standard." Indeed, in the archaeological literature labrets feature as a diagnostic artifact type in the South Coast Locarno Beach and Marpole assemblages (Mitchell 1971), despite the fact that, for the longest duration, and as recently as less than one hundred years ago, labrets were used on the North Coast by the Tlingit, Ts'msyan, and Haida. Thus, while general observations can be made regarding the temporal distribution of archaeological labrets, the small sample of dated labrets and their low spatial resolution requires that such observations be made on a broad scale. Ultimately, there is no observable patterning that allows a simple correlation to be made between time period and labret type.

The exception to this is seen in the comparison of archaeological labrets with ethnological ones, the latter of which were worn most recently and are restricted to the North Coast. In this case, geographic distribution reflects distance between peoples both spatially and temporally. Similarly, there is clear geographic patterning in labret forms that are correlated temporally – for example, large wooden bowl labrets represent one of the most recent manifestations of the labret tradition on the Coast, accompanied by both lithic and faunal pulley labrets. Excluding plate labrets, these two categories represent the next largest size ranges for all types observed. Conversely, in the archaeological sample of the South Coast, where labrets were used between 5000 and 2000 BP, relatively standardized sizes of smaller, steatite disc, knob (and double-knob), and plug labrets were pervasive.

This suggests two correlations: (1) size was more variable and thus a more important attribute during the recent labret use on the North Coast; and (2) the labret tradition as observed by European explorers and ethnographers, and cited frequently by archaeologists, is *not* necessarily representative of labrets on the Northwest Coast over the last five thousand years. Therefore, the correlation of size with status, and status with labrets, is *contextual* rather than *inherent*, a point further examined below.

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that labrets had disappeared on the South Coast so long ago that contemporary First Nations would be unfamiliar with them. I had never considered the possibility that this assumption may have been incorrect and so did not pursue information that might have challenged it.

Sixth, *the association between labret type, material, size, occurrence in time and space, and status is uncertain*. The concept of "status" is frequently characterized as part of a simplistic "privilege-and-power" package and is rendered as synonymous with "elite"; however, on the Northwest Coast, the pattern variability in labrets through time and space cannot be fully accounted for through this characterization. Indeed, the concepts of "status," "elite," and "power" are complex and contextual as they rely on the distinction between self and other for classification and meaning. Therefore, part of the challenge of using the labrets = status association is not that it is incorrect but, rather, that it encompasses too many potential definitions of context-specific status to be useful on anything more than a very general level.

Based on this study of labret form and distribution, there are two observations that I propose as significant: (1) when labrets are most prolific, their form is most varied and their size within type most consistent; and (2) when labrets are geographically constrained, their form remains comparatively homogenous while their size, decoration, and/or material are more variable. Certainly, to some extent these patterns simply reflect an unrepresentative sample, geographically and temporally. Yet the relationship between these patterns, social organization, and status is significant: I argue that this relationship suggests that, on the South Coast, the *kind* of status that labrets represented was itself being queried by their bearers, while on the North Coast, the *degree* of status within an accepted concept of what it meant to be a labret-bearer was at issue. In other words, to wear a labret required that one be part of a particular social category and that, within that category, one be ranked – something that was reflected in labret size.

To support this suggestion, the greatest variation in labret style is seen during the broad time period during which labrets were present on the South Coast, where there is little deviance from an almost standardized size range within types. For example, disc, knob, and double-knob labrets, all characteristic of the South Coast, cluster fairly tightly in size range, while the bowl and pulley labrets of the North Coast are not just larger but also have a broader size range. On a local, or sub-regional, level, there is more internal consistency in type and material. For example, the Fraser Delta and Gulf Islands have a similar ratio of types and similar materials are represented, yet some sites within those sub-regions are proportionally distinct (e.g., Crescent Beach has the largest number of pendulant labrets of any site, while Musqueam North East has the highest concentration of lignite coal labrets).

Thus, on the South Coast, standardization of size within types may denote relative stability in social positioning on one scale (e.g., the distribution of disc labrets in the Gulf Islands and Fraser Delta), while variation highlights distinction at other scales (e.g., coal versus steatite disc labrets). Additionally, if descent was reckoned bilaterally, as it is now among the Coast Salish (as Cybulski [1992, 71-72] suggests based on mortuary evidence), it may be that the labret was less critical as a symbol of power per se and instead reflected other kinds of identity, perhaps even at the village level. This suggests that the *kind* of status that labrets communicated, and thus the meaning of the labret itself, was being negotiated between groups on the South Coast at multiple scales and in widely varying contexts.

Conversely, on the North Coast, the ethnological examples from Haida, Tlingit, and Ts'msyan territories are testimony to an increasing emphasis placed on size, while the shapes remain geographically homogeneous and standardized. This is perhaps most clear in the examples from Haida Gwaii, where wooden labrets accommodated inlays of copper and abalone shell, frequently with ornate designs. The increasing variation in size and material within fewer type classes highlights an emphasis on the importance of these ornaments as visual markers of distinction (Wobst 1977) that were sensitive to shifts in social positioning. Here, the labret as a signifier of high status was the *accepted* meaning, but the size and, for example, use of abalone or copper inlays indicated the *degree* of elevated position *within* that restricted elite class. This is consistent with the use of the labret as a statement of power within a relatively rigid and formalized matrilineal social structure, whereby the position of labret-wearer is as strictly governed as are the various resources and privileges inherited (Ames 2001).

Overall, the material patterning for the North Coast and the South Coast is sufficiently different for us to suggest that two separate and historically particular processes seem to be at play. While the South Coast pattern suggests an ongoing discourse concerning what kind of status labrets carry, on the North Coast labrets = elite was accepted, and it was the rank within that particular class that was negotiated via labret size. The range of typological variation on the South Coast highlights the fact that labrets were an imperfect gesture of identity since one piercing could accommodate any number of different types of labrets (facilitated by the fact that most labret types on the South Coast fall within a comparable size range). The same could be argued of the North Coast based on the *archaeological* labrets in this sample,

and, indeed, it may be that this pattern was Coast-wide prior to circa 2500 BP (Cybulski 1992, 72). However, beginning at this point on the South Coast, labrets were gradually abandoned and cranial deformation became more widespread – a physically permanent marker of non-negotiable status, arguably again signifying "kind" rather than "degree within." Meanwhile, sometime thereafter, the recent labret tradition of the North Coast overcame the "imposter" potential by emphasizing size: quite simply, a big labret requires a larger pierced hole, and it takes time to stretch the lip – a process that is not reversible.

If labrets are used to communicate both solidarity and difference, then the use of a particular type may serve to strengthen ties with certain groups (Weissner 1988) while creating distance from others; however, the motivation for reinforcing such differences can vary. Such permanent body alteration may have been consciously manipulated as a tactic for naturalizing the social position of the labret bearer and her/his family – a position that, on the Northwest Coast, is intrinsically related to access to resources, both material and incorporeal, the inheritance of which may have been eased as a result of such alteration. During times of social instability, permanent body modification may be used as a tactic to demarcate and to naturalize social distinction and, thus, to secure access to scarce or tightly controlled resources, whatever those may be. A fluctuation from heterogeneity to homogeneity in labret use may be one illustration of an increased need to adhere to orthodoxy; the later use of cranial deformation may be another, potentially related to environmental and social stresses (Lepofsky et al. 2005). Meanwhile, the conventional markers indicating distinction may become exaggerated or enhanced. The sudden influx of wealth that accompanied prolonged contact with Europeans may be one stimulus that provoked increased economic disparity, materially manifested in the larger wooden bowl labrets with increasingly ornate designs of abalone shell and copper (Figure 6).

This again highlights the social importance of visible distinction and emphasizes that the labret is dynamic: it both defines and is defined by the bearer and larger social groups within and external to the culture (Barth 1969). The cultural meaning of labrets, like all cultural gestures, shifted with the scale and nature of the social context in which its meaning was communicated, translated, and interpreted (Giddens 1984; Hodder 1987). The labret therefore operated on individual, community, and inter-community scales as a complex identity marker, the meaning of which was manipulated, reinforced, or revised by conforming to or refusing the conventional rules of its use, thereby changing the rules (Bourdieu 1977).

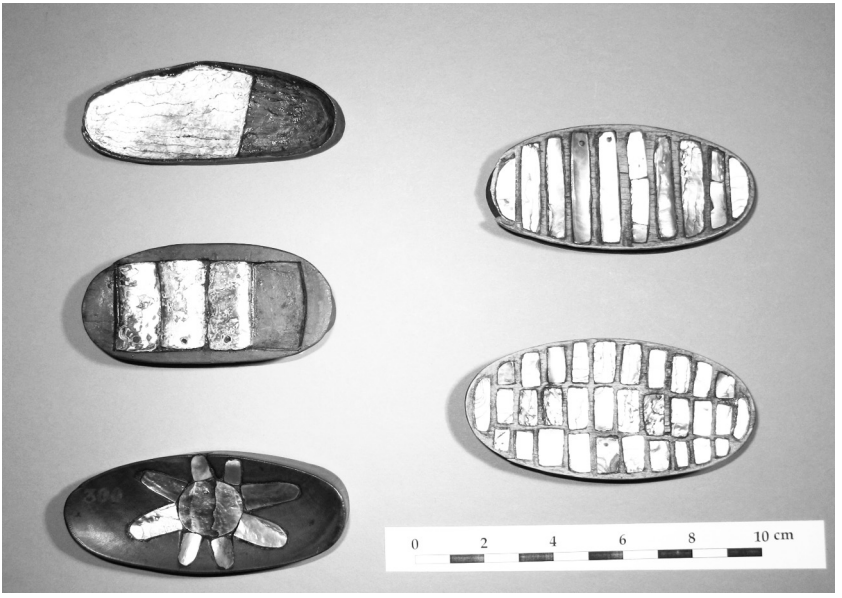


Figure 6. Wooden bowl labrets with shell inlays exhibiting a degree of visible shine. Photograph by author. *Souce*: Canadian Museum of Civilization.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT

As a prominently visible form of personal ornamentation, the labret signifies a cultural boundary between those who understood at least some of its meaning on "the inside" and those who were excluded from this meaning. While conducting this research, I became aware that labrets were becoming prolific as a form of contemporary personal ornamentation. I therefore sought the perspectives of people who today wear labrets, primarily by visiting body modification web forums to get a sense of the subculture of contemporary labret use. In recent years, the labret has become a socially acceptable form of individual expression, yet at the same time the style of labret is shifting to more visually prominent forms, becoming at times more ornate, using a wider range of raw materials, and/or exaggerating size, all of which are dependent on the labret type. This veritable explosion of stylistic heterogeneity is pushing beyond the previous limits of acceptable labret form, and it is being pushed by individuals who are reacting against the normalization of body modification in order to retain it as an expression of individuality, of "difference between" (Emberling 1997).

This sense of both belonging and being different was stressed by one labret-bearer, who stated that she both "liked the aesthetic value" of her lip-piercing and "that it was a little out of the norm." She clarified her position as follows:

> By "out of the norm" I meant that it was an aesthetic expression that wasn't too overly common. I guess I'm not big on the idea of looking exactly like everyone else on the street … In the same breath though it wasn't so out of the norm that I would be stared at, nor necessarily judged negatively in academic/professional situations … Strangers didn't really react usually, I think because [my labret] was reasonably small and unobtrusive.

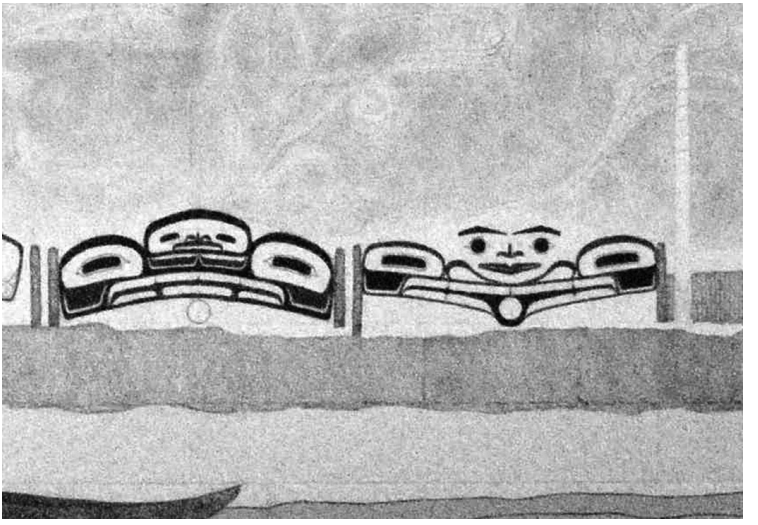
In an effort to further explore the social role of this form of material culture, I spoke with two First Nations artists, Russell Mather of Lax Kw'alaams and Christian White of Masset, Haida Gwaii, both of whom depict labrets in their art (Figures 7 and 8). In speaking with these two people I found that the concept of layered identities was expanded, and it became clear to me that the labret continues to be a powerful symbol and to carry significant cultural meaning that both hearkens back to the past and is informed by the present (Silliman 2001).

Christian White describes the labret as a "sounding-board" for women, "a symbol of their voice," something to help "carry their voice." He explains that, for a long time, it was rare to hear women speak at public events; but, more recently, they have started to speak at the potlatches not only in English but also in Haida. Christian describes this by saying that the women had lost their voice but that it was coming back again and that they were speaking more strongly. To honour and encourage this, Christian made a series of labrets to be worn as medallions, which he gave to all his female friends at a potlatch in 2006. Thus, although these labrets are not worn in the mouth, the meaning they carry concerns inner strength that is "sounded," relating to women and the matriline, both of which are empowered through speaking and being heard.

Christian also stresses that the labret symbolizes the female line, the matrilineal nature of Haida culture, going back to Labret-Woman (see Swanton 1905). As such, he describes it as a symbol that youth are using to empower themselves by reconnecting with their culture, just as he did during the repatriation ceremonies by reflecting upon labrets as burial objects, and as the women do when they wear labret medallions and speak in their own language at the potlatch. This connection between

Figure 7. (left) Frog bowl on labret. Piece by Christian White held at the Spirit Wrestler Gallery. Image used with permission of the Spirit Wrestler Gallery and Christian White.

Figure 8. (below) A mural designed by Russell Mather. It depicts two clan houses, one with a labret (left) and one in which the door to the house is itself a labret (right). Photograph taken by Jennifer Wolowic and used with her permission.



being a matrilineal society and the power and the voice of women was also discussed by Russell Mather, a Ts'msyan artist who describes this as his motivation to include labrets in his work:

> I started to include labrets in my work because first and foremost we are a matrilineal society and we use[d to] honoured women in our opening remarks so I thought why not use what we speak in my art and then my art will speak.
>
> [The labret is] a memory of what used to be and an instant connection to my ancestors. It reminds us of a time long ago and how women were honoured and recognized and to this day in my tribe we still follow that.

For both Russell and Christian, the labret is a symbol of the power of women to both speak and be heard: this is a total reversal of the

interpretations of some early ethnographers, who saw labrets as oppressive and inhibiting (see Dahm 1994, 97, for a discussion of these accounts). The labret thus represents the veneration of women and, by extension, of Ts'msyan and Haida cultures, respectively. It is a connection to the past through lineage and, thus, is the ultimate symbol of heritage. This being the case, the labret operates at different scales of personhood (Fowler 2004) in that it simultaneously connotes personal and group relationships, including gender, spirituality, the family and clan, ancestry and kinship, and what it is to be a matrilineal people, Ts'msyan or Haida, as well as (more broadly) what it is to be human and to socialize the body. Yet these "nested," or "fractalized," senses of self and other, while multi-layered, are not necessarily expressed in explicit material form (e.g., with different styles relating to different scales of identity) but, rather, are embedded in the labret, discernible only to those who understand their context-specific meanings. For archaeologists seeking to understand social identity in material culture, this translates into an inability to separate what is inherently intertwined; consequently, discerning material patterning related to social identity may be fundamentally limited.

It is precisely because of the complexity of meaning located in material culture that alternative methodologies must be employed as, whether or not this is their aim, archaeologists are always studying social identity. The goal must therefore be to make the effort to understand the complexity of materiality rather than to mask it with simplistic "explanations" that ultimately do not satisfy. The past only matters insofar as it is given meaning by people in the present (Tilley 1989); thus, it is in speaking with people today that the labret is placed in its wider context as an ornament that continues both to inform and to be informed by contemporary cultural identity (Giddens 1984; Owen 2005).[4]

SOME CONCLUSIONS

My research shows that the interpretation of labrets as unequivocally signalling elite position, while not necessarily wrong, is not supported over the entire history of labret use on the Northwest Coast and so only conveys a small and recent piece of a complex picture. While labret style is patterned geographically and to some extent temporally, the wide

[4] Owen (2005) provides a detailed discussion of the relationship between body modification, including labrets, and Haida cultural identity today based on interviews she conducted towards a Masters degree. However, I did not encounter Owen's research until after my own, and only following the completion of this paper. As such, her findings have not been incorporated.

range of variation observed suggests that labrets conveyed many kinds of identity in varying contexts and on different scales. I argue that a somewhat different social process accounts for the divergent patterns between the North Coast and the South Coast, with the mutability of the meaning of the labret eventually being confronted by an emphasis on size in the North and being outright rejected in the South, where the disappearance of labrets coincides with the introduction of cranial deformation.[5] Although interaction between these regions was almost certainly constant, there is an internal cohesiveness to each that distinguishes them culturally. Thus, it would be appropriate to refocus and to conduct separate analyses of each within the broader context of the region's archaeology.

However, my research highlights the inadequacy of using archaeological methodologies to address something as multi-faceted and contextual as social identity. Multiple lines of evidence are necessary in order to address any one research question, and I found that speaking with people who are experiencing and relating to the labret in different ways was a most rewarding avenue of research – both in considering the social significance of this ornament and, more broadly, in considering how meaning is constructed by individuals within the constraints of the collective consciousness. This avenue of research indicates that one of the critical features of identity is a shared concept of common history: who you are is where you come from, and, because of the role of heritage in the construction of group identity, archaeology can have profound implications for contemporary people's understanding of who they are. This is particularly significant for the Indigenous peoples in North America, where a colonial myth of disconnect between First Nations and their heritage is still being perpetuated.

Thus, while I sought to look at identity in the archaeological record, it became clear to me that the labret continues to have meaning, connecting the past with one's present sense of self and other. Other archaeologists would also benefit in their understanding of past and present peoples by striving for multivocality in their interpretations of materiality and social identity, a challenging endeavour that can only benefit by privileging voices intimately connected to the heritage that we study.

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[5] Cybulski (2010, 20) discusses the perceived relationship between the disappearance of labrets and the appearance of cranial deformation, offering the latter as an indicator of both "group affiliation" and broad social rank. Labrets were already being phased out before cranial modification became widespread; thus, the outstanding question remains whether population movements may, in part, account for what Cybulski considers to be different "cultural patterns."

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