THE MISSING NOSTRIL JEWELRY

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First I need to clearly delineate where the information I have gathered comes from. There are ancient manuscripts found in Mexico that are pictorial representations of the ceremonies and practices of the ancient people. Because no written language remains from these people, these manuscripts are the only "books" that document this history. They are painted on a bark-like paper or animal skins, put on hard plates and attached as screen-fold, and are read from right to left. These books are often called "codices." However, there are two types of codices referred to in books and museums: ones that people drew of themselves, documenting their rituals and stories prior to their conquest; and drawings done by onlookers such as missionaries, Spanish informers and conquistadors. Unfortunately, both manuscripts are often given the same name. To refer to the type of manuscript we will be talking about as a "codex" is actually a misnomer. The term "codex" usually refers to European manuscripts, which are easily distinguished from the other renditions of these people. [Compare Figure 1, a traditionally drawn "codex" and Figure 2, a Spanish drawn codex.] It must also be noted that the manuscripts cannot be separated from the political history of their time. European observers drew a very biased version of what they were seeing to send back to Europe and "justify" the genocide that was going on.

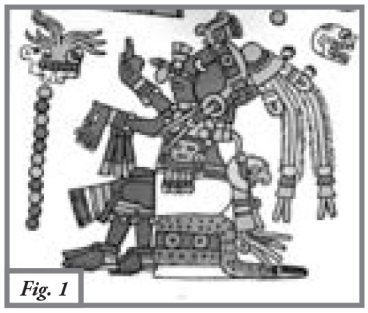

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

The information I am referring to in this article is taken from the codices drawn up by the indigenous people of Mexico, not by their onlookers. I am working specifically from the Codex Nuttall, a famous set of plates that map out very important ceremonies and deities. In the early Nineteenth Century, an Italian friend presented the Codex Nuttall to Hon. Robert Curzon, 14th Baron Zouche, who had a collection of interesting and valuable rare manuscripts. The Codex now resides in a British Museum and has not been back on Mexican soil since its departure.

Over my years of studying the ancient codices of the people of Meso-America, it came to my attention that there is a piece of jewelry worn in the drawings that until now, I have never seen in a museum or otherwise documented in a book. Historians and anthropologists alike recognize many of the different body modifications practiced by the ancient peoples, including ear piercing and stretching, septum piercing, labret piercing, and teeth modifications. But there is one particular piercing and piece of jewelry that has rarely been mentioned and continues to be overlooked as a part of the ancient practices. From my observation of the Codex Nuttall, it is clear that there was large gauge nostril piercing being done, with a single piece of jewelry that went through both holes and across the bridge of the nose. This is a rare and as yet unaccounted for piece of jewelry. It looks as if there are several styles but are all basically worn the same. My suspicions have been confirmed by my most recent discovery of a three dimensional ceramic figure wearing the piece in question. [See Figure 3.]

The reality of this piece is that in order for it to sit the way it is shown in these examples there had to be two different types of jewelry worn in these drawings. They both must be lightweight and stiff. One style was two separate plugs on each side with a feather or lightweight extension that fanned up towards the forehead. These two

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pieces may or may not have been connected. The other piece -- and most unique concept -- is one single piece that could be erected vertically and fits in both sides of the nose. It very well could have been made of ceramic or wood, but probably not stone, due to its weight. In order for a piece this size and style to sit up over the bridge of the nose would have to have been worn in a set of large gauge holes.

Some very precious and delicate obsidian ear spools have been preserved for hundreds of years without a scratch. Why has this nostril piece not survived? There may be a few reasons why this piece of jewelry has never been seen or documented properly. It could very well have been made of feathers or another degradable material that has not survived the test of time. Another very real possibility is that it has been mistaken for another type of artifact and has been placed in a completely different part of most museums' archives. This is actually more common then one might think. Out of the body, I imagine this piece looks like a tool of some sort, or possibly a child's toy. It could also be mistaken for a simple ear plug. When an artifact doesn't fit into the school of knowledge of a particular archeologist, it often gets pushed aside or cataloged incorrectly. Either way, and for whatever reason, THIS piece of jewelry is missing and not accounted for.

I am in an intensive search for a piece that fits this description. I believe this nostril piece is a rare and undocumented piece of adornment so unusual in its wear that it is possibly unique among the world's cultures. I have been to many of the largest Pre-Columbian collections throughout the U.S. and Mexico and have not seen or been able to find this piece. For the last few years I was unsure that this piece even existed, but after finding a few distinct three-dimensional representations in ceramic pottery, I am confident that this piece is out there somewhere. I also suspect that because of the design of this jewelry, it may have broken so easily that it didn't survive in its entirety. In Figures 3 and 4, you can clearly see that there is a person wearing a septum piece only, another wearing a nostril and septum piece, and one with just the nostril piece in question. In Figure 5 it is clear that there was a piece being worn, but it has been broken from even this ceramic representation, giving us only a glimpse of its look and wear.

Stumbling onto something never before written about is like finding a very important part of the historical puzzle. In a modern culture that is always re-defining beauty, it is exciting that a part of the past can reveal itself and give us a better understanding of our aesthetic history. In the last few years large gauge nostril piercing and stretching have become more common in the US. With their increasing popularity comes a desire to know the origins of these practices, and the techniques and jewelry used to achieve and adorn them. I am excited to present this information to you all, and to share at the Mexican APP Conference, I also had the opportunity to present this information to the Director of Archives at the Museo de Anthropologia in Mexico City. Director A. F. Josefina Bautista was invited to participate in the APP Anthropology lecture by Danny Yerna. She has since expressed an interest in reviewing my research and helping with the search. With access to the Museo's archives and the opportunity to look through some of its collections (other then jewelry), I believe I could identify these pieces. So this article is both an announcement, and a call out to any and all collectors or jewelry lovers: If you have a contribution to this search, please contact me. As individuals committed to and educated in the interaction of the jewelry and the body, both in the present and in the past, we are uniquely qualified to investigate and solve this historical mystery.

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UPDATE ON OSHA'S RULING ON FREEHAND PIERCING

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Since my article in The Point #34 on the use of receiving tubes in freehand piercing technique, OSHA has passed an official ruling on the subject. Piercing without an instrument to receive the needle (like a cork or receiving tube) is now considered a violation of Provision 29 CFR 1910.1030(d)(2)(i) of the Bloodborne Pathogens Standard. This ruling is intended to protect the person handling the needle from needlesticks by minimizing potential contact with the contaminated end of the needle.

Not only does this affect freehand piercers, but it also affects piercers that use forceps, but do not bed the needle tip in a cork or other device during jewelry insertion. While it may not seem as dangerous as freehand piercing, leaving the needle unbedded does increase the risk of a needlestick to a level comparable to that of freehand piercing without a receptacle.

As the body piercing industry continues to grow, and continues to permeate popular culture, we need to make a concerted effort to abide by OSHA's recommended guidelines. In doing so, we facilitate OSHA's continued support of our industry. No matter what anyone thinks, the cooperation of organizations like OSHA will come in handy when local governments try to pass regulations on body piercing. Our compliance will help stop outright banning of body piercing, and will help include professional piercers in the creation of regulations. A small adjustment in daily procedure is a minor price to pay to keep our profession.

To view these documents,
go to www.hlthedu.com under OSHA Interpretations.