



**Above: Babylonian King Esarhaddon of Assyria with two prisoners.**  
**Below: Unalaskan woman and man circa 1778.**



**Right: Kodiak man circa 1791**



## Paul King on Lip Piercing

Current Western piercing culture has defined the centered piercing just under the lower lip as a "labret." Historically, anthropologists have referred to piercings anywhere in the region of the mouth and cheek as "labrets." For the sake of this article consider piercings currently referred to as Monroe, Beauty Mark, Madonna, Philtrum, cheek and side lip as falling into the category of labret.

Fellow piercing geeks will enjoy knowing that contrary to popular urban myth Labret is not a French word. Actually it is English derived from Latin and created some time in the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. The "t" should be pronounced, not silent. Labret (\La' bret\) is formed by the compounding of the Latin word labrium meaning Lip<sup>2</sup> and -et meaning "small" or "something worn on."<sup>3</sup> There is even an archaic form of the word "Labretifery" which means "the practice of wearing labrets."<sup>4</sup> How fancy is that? (Okay, I'm a geek).

After the 2003 APP conference in Amsterdam I traveled to Berlin to visit the Babylonian exhibit at the famous Pergamon Museum. While wandering the halls of the Mesopotamian exhibits I stumbled across a Stele from 671 BCE of King Esarhaddon of Assyria. The approximately 6 foot tall stone monument was excavated from the citadel of Sam 'al Zinjirli. The carving depicts the King holding 2 ropes in his left hand that attach to rings in two prisoners' lips. This is not my interpretation but the museum curator's description listed on the artifact.

The book, *Marks of Civilization*<sup>5</sup>, contains perhaps the best collective information on North American labrets. The wearing of labrets was widely practiced by the Eskimos and Aleuts of Alaska in prehistoric and early post-contact eras, yet disappeared within three generations due to intense efforts on the part of Christian missionaries. One essay lists the largest labret found measured 11.9 cm and weighed 7 ounces. The first European record reporting the Aleut labret is from 1741, though we know Russian fur traders had contact before that. The practice of wearing labrets varied all over Unalaska. In some areas only boys would get their lips pierced, while in others, only girls. In some regions the custom was to pierce infants, for others they pierced at puberty. The reasons varied as well. For a boy it could be part of his induction into manhood, for a girl, part of her coming of marrying age, and for some tribes as part of the marriage ceremonies. Most of the indigenous people believed in animal reincarnation. This sympathetic association was revealed by the wearing of a whale-tail shaped labret or paired lateral labrets imitating a walrus' tusks.

In South America only the boys of the Suyá tribe have their lips pierced. The lip plugs are painted red for confidence in speech, war, ideas, etc. Both the boys and girls get their ears pierced at adolescence. They are then expected to "listen" an act like adults, etc. The plugs are painted white for passivity, good listening.

Kichepo and Surma women of Southeastern Sudan, in Africa, have the largest lip piercings in the world. The elder more respected women will sometimes have their lips stretched over 10" in diameter! Some myths say it is to imitate birds while other stories say it's to eat less, and thus be less of a burden, or to gossip less, or possibly



to be made less attractive to other tribes and slave traders to help prevent kidnapping.

In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica the indigenous people would adorn their lips with expertly worked pieces of obsidian, semiprecious stone and gold. These lip piercings held great significance of both religious and social status and were considered objects of great beauty. See page 18 for APP's International Liaison, Alicia Cardenas' article on Mesoamerican lip piercing. She explores the question of whether or not the Olmec, (from 1100 BCE to 200 CE, the oldest known Mesoamerican advanced civilization), practiced lip piercing. If they did the Olmec would be the oldest known people to engage in labret-ifyery! ❖



<sup>1</sup> Collin's English Dictionary, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Webster's Dictionary, 1913.

<sup>3</sup> American Heritage Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> www.quinion.com

<sup>5</sup> Marks of Civilization, Edited by Arnold Rubin, University of California, Los Angeles, 1992. ISBN 0-930741-12-9, Essays of interest: "Labrets and Tattooing in Native Alaska" by Joy Gritton and "Women, Marriage, Mouths and Feasting: The Symbolism of Tlingit Labrets" by Aldona Jonaitis.

From the top of the page: Two renderings showing early 19th Century Eskimo adornment; woman and man from Prince William's Sound, circa 1778; Suya men