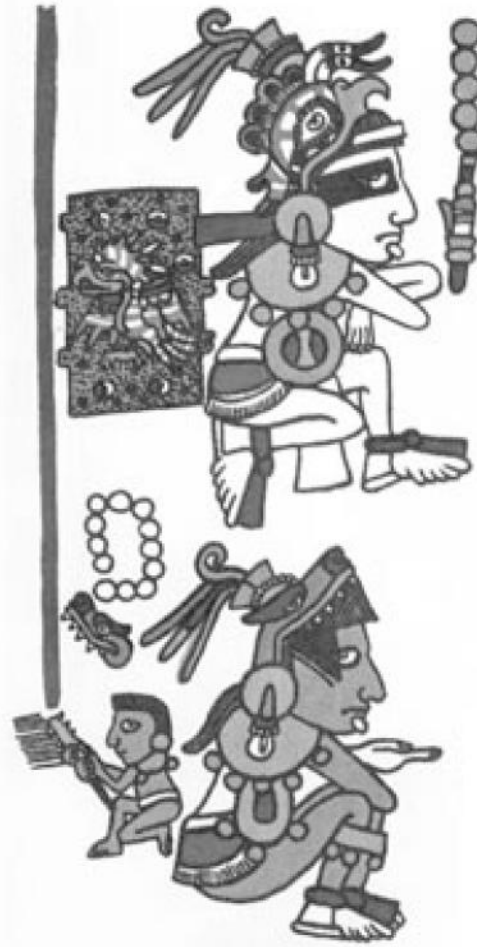


IN SEARCH OF THE OLDEST LABRET IN THE WORLD

Alicia Cardenas

Twisted Sol
Denver, Colorado



Please take into consideration that there is a dearth of written information about the actual ritual of this piercing in Meso-America. The facts are in the jewelry, the pictorial representation, and also the accounts of the Spanish Conquistadors. The older the culture is, the less information is available about it. I have been collecting pieces of this puzzle from numerous books, the codices, trips to Mexico, and oral history.

The labret piercing was a common practice amongst the people of Meso-America; it has been really difficult to decipher exactly what specific sub-culture started it. Appearance of this particular ornamentation began to flourish in the artwork and statues during the early to late Classic periods, approximately 600–900 AD.

Some of the best documentation is in the codices. The codices are ancient manuscripts with profound spiritual and historical depictions of

The evidence is in the ancient paintings and carvings and also in the written and spoken (still today) language of the Mexican people, Nahuatl

- Lip:
te, tentli
- Gold:
teocuitla
- Gold Lip Plug:
teocuitlatentetl
- Gold Lip Pendant:
teocuitlatempilolli
- Green Stone Plug:
chalchiuhentetl
- Their lip plugs:
intenteuh

Resources:

Mexico: From Olmecs to Aztecs, by Michael D Coe
Codex Nuttal, Zelia
Aspects of Mixteca, Middle American Research Institute

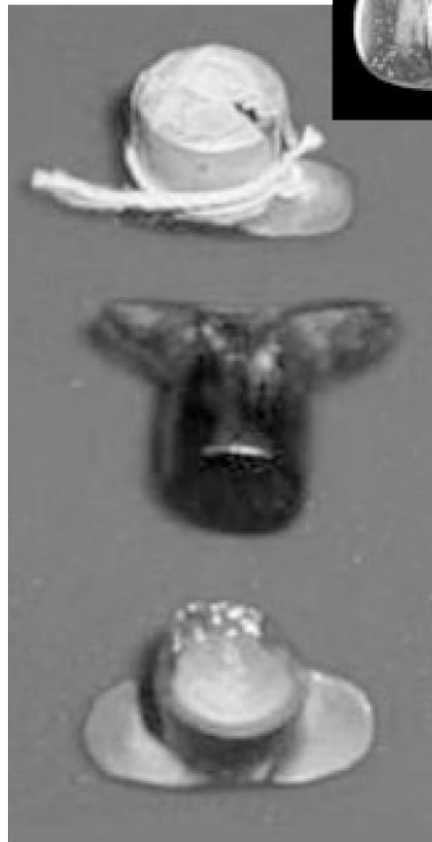
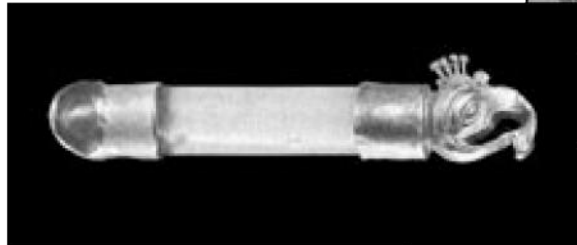
the ancient people. The codices range in age and author; unfortunately they are referred to as all the same, but there are the manuscripts the ancient people did of themselves, and also writings of the Spanish. It is very easy to tell the difference. Regardless of who was painting them, there are numerous representations of the lip piercing and the jewelry.

The piercing was a sign of nobility and masculinity. Mixteca, Toltecs, Chichimecas as well as Mexicans practiced ritualized perforation of the bottom lip ranging in sizes up to 1 inch in diameter. The piercing, although beautiful, was not solely about adornment. It was the result of a ritualized blood letting, which varied in motivation, but essentially gave a man higher status within the community. It was as common to perform this piercing on oneself (auto-sacrifice), as it was to have a local shaman perform the operation.

The procedure itself consisted of a piercing with a maguey, jade, stone, or bone instrument, and stretching or a cutting with an obsidian blade (Note: obsidian blades are 100 times sharper than a modern scalpel!) Regardless of the manner in which the procedure was performed, a large plug was left behind and worn comfortably through the duration of one's life. The labrets of these cultures are by far the most glamorous found in history, including solid gold carved pieces, jade with gold inlays, obsidian with gold, crystal with gold, bone, stone, and turquoise. They range in size and decoration, from small gauges up to one inch in diameter. The jewelry itself is of superior design regardless of its large size; it was designed so it fits the teeth and gums comfortably without destroying the gum line. In fact, the design is so great, it is now commonly being used for modern large-gauge labret jewelry.

In the history of Mexico and Middle America there are three much discussed cultures: the Olmec, the Mayan, and the Aztec. The word 'Aztecs' is a very general term for the people of the valley of Mexico during the Late Post-Classic period; it encompasses many different tribes. Mayan culture that dates even back to Late Pre-Classic to Middle Pre-Classic has many bloodletting rituals including the perforation of the tongue, nose, and ears, but did not have apparent lip piercing.

The Aztecs, having direct lineage to the Olmec, were by far the most documented wearers of this jewelry. If, in fact, the Olmec did begin this tradition, then they would be the oldest culture on the planet to participate in this modification, dating back to 1800 B.C. So far I have not been able to confirm my belief in this, but the search continues for any Olmec art that may display a lip piercing. For those who study and are interested in this research please contact me with any new findings. ❖



Opposite page: Pre-Columbian men wearing labrets in the Codex Nuttall. This page from the top: Spanish depiction of Aztec warrior wearing extremely nice labret, Spanish Codice; Gold and crystal labret with eagle carved into it, Metropolitan Museum, NYC; Solid Gold Labret with serpent and moveable tongue measuring 3/4 in diameter, Metropolitan Museum, NYC; Obsidian labrets, personal collection of the author.