

Maritime Transmission of Ritual, Symbol, and Sky-Knowledge: The Handbag Motif the Jōmon–Valdivia Hypothesis, and the Case for Trans-Oceanic Cultural Contact

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1. Introduction

This essay draws together three threads of an ongoing inquiry: the recurrence of a distinctive iconographic element — a U-shaped, handled object here referred to as the "handbag motif" — across geographically and chronologically separated cultures (Moche, Göbekli Tepe, Mesopotamia, and occasionally Mesoamerican iconography); the long-debated Jōmon–Valdivia hypothesis, which proposes early contact between Pacific-coast Japan and coastal Ecuador around 3000–2000 BCE; and a broader working hypothesis that astrology, as a symbolic-ritual system, has its technical roots in the practice of determining position at sea. The unifying question is methodological rather than sensational: when two or more cultures separated by ocean share a symbol, a ritual structure, or a technical practice, how does one distinguish independent invention, common ancestral inheritance, and actual contact — and what kind of evidence would move that judgment in either direction?

The essay is organized as a working reference document: it summarizes what is currently known, identifies the researchers and frameworks most relevant to testing the hypothesis, and closes with a set of concrete next steps.

2. The Handbag Motif: Distribution and Divergent Meaning

The motif in question — a container-like object with a curved handle, held by a standing or processional figure — appears in at least three well-separated contexts:

- **Moche culture (Peru, c. 100–800 CE):** figures, often associated with ritual or priestly roles, are shown holding a U-shaped handled object. Proposed interpretations include a ceremonial vessel, an offering basket, a container for ritual paraphernalia, or an emblem of priestly office.
- **Mesopotamia:** the *apkallu* figures carry a handled bucket (*banduddû*), whose function in a purification ritual is comparatively well documented in cuneiform sources. This is the one context in the set where meaning is not purely speculative.
- **Göbekli Tepe (c. 9600 BCE):** near-identical handbag-like objects appear carved atop a pillar. No textual tradition survives to anchor an interpretation; candidate readings include ritual containers, cosmological or celestial symbols, or abstract religious signs.

The methodological risk here is treating visual resemblance as evidence of a shared origin. A more defensible approach compares: (a) who carries the object (deity, priest, king, shaman), (b) the ritual context in which it appears (offering, procession, initiation), (c) accompanying iconographic elements, and (d) whether any physical exemplar of the object has been recovered archaeologically, as opposed to the motif existing only symbolically. Independent invention across unconnected purification or offering rituals is entirely plausible given how common handled containers are as a

functional object class — which means the motif alone is weak evidence and needs to be triangulated against ritual structure, not shape.

If a wider survey is warranted, natural comparison points include Assyrian reliefs, Olmec and Maya iconography, Tiwanaku and Chavín material, and rock art traditions such as Val Camonica in Italy — with the goal of testing whether a shared symbolic function recurs, or whether formally similar objects arose independently in unconnected ritual systems.

3. The Jōmon–Valdivia Hypothesis

3.1 The original claim

The hypothesis originates with Betty Meggers, Clifford Evans, and Emilio Estrada, who argued in the 1960s that the earliest Valdivia ceramics (Ecuadorian coast, c. 3000–2000 BCE) showed striking similarities to Middle Jōmon pottery from Japan — in decoration, vessel form, and approximate dating. The proposed mechanism was not mass migration but contact by a small group: Meggers suggested that a limited number of Jōmon fishermen could have reached the American west coast via Pacific currents.

3.2 The specific parallels cited

Proponents pointed to several concrete features shared by the two traditions: castellated (crenellated) rim forms, incised decoration, female clay figurines (Jōmon *dogū* and Valdivia "Venus" figures), and a shared coastal-fishing economic base in both cultures.

3.3 The counter-evidence and its actual weight

The hypothesis has been challenged less by disproving the ceramic parallels than by two developments: the discovery of older, local Ecuadorian precursor cultures (notably Las Vegas) that make a purely local origin for Valdivia plausible without external input, and the absence of unambiguous genetic, maritime-technological, or archaeological finds that directly confirm Jōmon contact.

Critically, these two lines of evidence are not mutually exclusive. A local-origin scenario (Valdivia developing from Las Vegas) and a contact scenario (limited Jōmon influence layered onto that local development) can both be true simultaneously — a small seafaring group joining or influencing an existing population is a well-attested pattern elsewhere in world prehistory, and does not require displacing the archaeological evidence for local continuity. The discovery of Las Vegas-culture precursors weakens the "Valdivia is Japanese" version of the claim, but does not by itself weaken the more modest "Valdivia had contact with Pacific voyagers" version. These are different claims requiring different evidence.

3.4 The sharper research question

Given the above, the most productive framing is broader than a Japan-specific claim: *is there evidence, anywhere between roughly 4000 and 2500 BCE, of contact across the western and eastern Pacific* — not necessarily via Japan specifically, but potentially via other maritime populations of East or Southeast Asia? This framing keeps the local-development account intact while leaving room for external influence to be tested on its own merits.

4. Beyond Ceramics: The Missing Evidence Layer

The Jōmon–Valdivia debate has largely been fought over pottery, which is exactly the category of evidence least able to settle the question, since decorative styles can converge independently. A stronger evidentiary approach would look past ceramics to the practical infrastructure of long-distance seafaring:

- **Boat technology** — hull construction, sail or paddle systems, capacity for open-ocean voyages versus coastal hopping.
- **Fishing tools** — hook and net technology, which tends to be conservative and diagnostic of technological lineage.
- **Celestial navigation** — star knowledge, wayfinding technique, and whether it shows structural parallels across the proposed contact zone.
- **Ritual symbolism** — motifs and practices tied to seafaring, addressed in Sections 5–7 below.
- **Coastal settlement patterns** — whether settlement chronology and structure suggest arrival by sea versus purely inland-linked development.

It is known that Jōmon populations were capable blue-water sailors within the Japanese archipelago — they transported obsidian over open-sea distances of hundreds of kilometers, which proves inter-island seafaring capability but does not by itself prove a Pacific crossing. The open question is whether that maritime competence extended, even occasionally, much further than currently assumed. If parallels in boat technology, fishing gear, navigational technique, or ritual symbolism were found alongside the ceramic parallels, the Jōmon hypothesis would rest on a substantially stronger footing than it currently does on pottery alone.

5. Celestial Navigation and the Roots of Astrology

A separate but related thread in this inquiry is the hypothesis that astrology — as a symbolic and ritual system — has its technical origin in the practical necessity of determining position at sea (and, more broadly, in time-reckoning by sky observation on land and water alike).

The historical record supports a close entanglement of the practical and the symbolic from very early on. In Mesopotamia, the Babylonians meticulously recorded the positions of celestial bodies, producing star catalogues that served both practical navigational reference and the divinatory, calendrical, and religious systems that developed into astrology. Polynesian navigators independently developed an elaborate non-instrumental system: they memorized the positions of over 150 stars, organizing them into "star compasses" divided into houses corresponding to where specific stars rise and set — a system that is simultaneously a navigational tool and, in Polynesian cosmology, bound up with genealogy, deity, and ritual status. Chinese navigators similarly mapped sections of the Milky Way as the "Celestial Ship" (Tianhe), tying cardinal-direction navigation to seasonal ritual practice, while Phoenician sailors used Polaris as both a practical bearing and, in the broader Mediterranean tradition, a fixed point loaded with symbolic permanence.

The pattern across these independent traditions is consistent: the practical technique of reading the sky for position and the symbolic-ritual elaboration of that same sky are not sequential (technique first, then myth) but appear to co-develop, with the same body of star knowledge serving both functions simultaneously. This supports the working hypothesis at a general level — astrology as a system plausibly shares a technical root with navigation — but turning that general pattern into a specific claim about *transmission* between particular cultures (rather than parallel, independent development) requires the methodological apparatus described in the next section.

6. A Methodology for Testing Diffusion: Comparative Mythology and Motif Databases

The central methodological problem throughout this inquiry — shared motif versus shared origin — is not unique to the handbag motif or to Jōmon–Valdivia. It is the central problem of comparative mythology as a discipline, and a substantial empirical infrastructure exists for addressing it systematically rather than impressionistically.

6.1 The Berezkin catalogue

Yuri Berezkin (Kunstkamera, St. Petersburg) has built and maintained an analytical catalogue of world mythology and folklore containing roughly 50,000 abstracted narrative texts, systematically coding the presence or absence of some 2,000 cosmological, etiological, and narrative motifs across nearly 1,000 cultural traditions worldwide. The catalogue was purpose-built as a tool for studying prehistoric migration and cultural interaction, and it explicitly treats motif transmission as capable of occurring both "vertically" (through ancestral inheritance) and "horizontally" (through contact and diffusion), independent of genetic relationship between the populations involved. This distinction is directly relevant to the handbag motif and to Jōmon–Valdivia: a shared motif does not require a shared population history, only some channel of contact or transmission, however limited.

Recent work (Thuillard, d'Huy, and Berezkin, and related genetic-mythological studies) has combined this motif database with ancient and modern genetic data to statistically separate population movement/replacement from pure cultural diffusion as explanations for present-day motif distribution, using a corpus of over 2,000 motifs recorded across roughly 40,000 myths and nearly 1,000 peoples worldwide. This is, in effect, exactly the kind of framework the handbag-motif question needs: a way to test whether the co-occurrence of a specific symbol across cultures is more consistent with independent invention, common inheritance, or contact-driven diffusion.

6.2 The Witzel–van Binsbergen debate

There is an active methodological disagreement worth being aware of when framing any transoceanic hypothesis. Michael Witzel (Harvard, comparative mythology) is generally skeptical of transcontinental mythological continuity as an explanatory framework. Wim van Binsbergen — a Dutch philosopher and comparative mythologist, co-founder of the International Association for Comparative Mythology — has argued the opposite position at length, proposing a transcontinental, multicentered, multidirectional model of global cultural history, and has specifically discussed circum-Pacific continuities (lunar motifs, dragon iconography) as candidate evidence of old-world/New-world contact via maritime routes. Being explicit about which side of this debate a given piece of evidence is meant to support — and being willing to state which specific motif comparisons would falsify rather than merely support the contact hypothesis — is likely to strengthen any argument built on this material, since it pre-empts the most obvious methodological objection (that transcontinental mythological comparison is inherently unfalsifiable).

6.3 Applying this to the handbag motif specifically

The Berezkin catalogue and related motif-mapping methods provide a concrete next step: checking whether a handled-container or offering-vessel motif already exists as a coded category in this database, and if so, examining its documented geographic distribution. If it clusters in a way that follows known or plausible maritime contact zones, that is meaningfully stronger evidence than visual resemblance alone. If it is broadly and evenly distributed worldwide, that would instead

support independent invention — handled containers being a functionally obvious object class likely to recur without any contact at all.

7. Documented Circum-Pacific Motifs as Precedent

Independent of the handbag motif, several other motifs have already been documented as having circum-Pacific distributions, and these serve as a useful precedent for what credible transoceanic transmission evidence looks like:

- **Dragon iconography** has been proposed as an indicator of Old World–North American continuity.
- **Lunar motifs** have similarly been proposed as indicators of circum-Pacific continuity.
- **The moon-frog/toad motif** is among the better-documented cases: it is attested in China as early as the Han dynasty and is also found, largely unchanged, on the northwest coast of North America — a specific, traceable narrative element spanning the Pacific.
- **Raven and trickster figures** cluster distinctively in circumpolar and Northwest Coast American mythology, with parallels noted in circum-Pacific traditions more broadly.
- **Earth-diver and "emergence from the underworld" cosmogonic motifs** show a documented distribution spanning sub-Saharan Africa, the Indo-Pacific borderlands, Australia, Melanesia, and the Americas — illustrating that motif distributions can be genuinely global and layered, not simply bilateral.

These cases matter for the current inquiry in two ways. First, they establish that circum-Pacific motif transmission is not a fringe proposition — it is an active area of mainstream comparative-mythology research with an existing evidentiary base. Second, they provide a template: each of these motifs is treated as a specific, narrow, traceable narrative or iconographic unit, not a vague thematic resemblance, and its distribution is mapped systematically rather than asserted. Any argument for the handbag motif's transmission would be strongest if built the same way.

8. Current Research on Maritime Contact Networks

Beyond comparative mythology, there is an active empirical research front specifically focused on maritime networks as agents of cultural transmission, generally treating prehistoric seas as connective corridors rather than barriers:

- **Helen Farr** (University of Southampton) works on the origins of seafaring, including how early populations crossed major sea barriers tens of thousands of years ago.
- **Johan Ling** (University of Gothenburg) leads the "Maritime Encounters" research program (2022–2027), which explicitly argues that prehistoric migration, trade, and technology transfer have been understudied relative to land-route models, and centers sea-based contact instead.
- **Loren G. Davis** is a leading proponent of the Pacific Coastal Migration Theory (early Americans moving south along the Pacific coast by boat), and has drawn connections to late-Paleolithic cultures in northern Japan (Hokkaido/Sakhalin region).
- **David B. Madsen** co-developed the formal articulation of the Pacific Coastal Migration Theory as an alternative to inland-route-only models of the peopling of the Americas.
- **Jacob L. Bongers and Lars Fehren-Schmitz** have used ancient DNA to demonstrate long-distance migration along the Pacific coast of Peru over hundreds of kilometers, well before the Inca period — establishing the Pacific coast as an active maritime corridor, independent of any Japan-specific claim.
- **Barry Cunliffe** has written extensively on the sea as a connector rather than a barrier in prehistory, primarily in the European/Atlantic context, but his framing is directly

transferable to Pacific-basin questions, and he is associated with the Maritime Encounters book series.

For the Jōmon–Valdivia question specifically, the next layer of researchers worth investigating are Japanese specialists in Jōmon seafaring, boat construction, and navigation — since the maritime-capability evidence (Section 4) is currently the thinnest part of the case and the most likely to move the argument in either direction.

9. Synthesis and Open Research Questions

Drawing the threads together, three linked but distinct claims are in play, and they should be evaluated separately rather than treated as a single hypothesis:

1. **The astrology–navigation claim:** that astrology as a symbolic system shares a technical root with celestial navigation. This is well supported at a general, cross-cultural level (Section 5) — the practical and symbolic uses of sky-knowledge appear to co-develop in multiple independent traditions — but has not yet been tied to a specific transmission claim.
2. **The Jōmon–Valdivia contact claim:** that a specific, limited maritime contact occurred between Pacific Japan and coastal Ecuador c. 3000–2000 BCE. This rests on real but narrow ceramic evidence, is compatible with (not contradicted by) local Valdivia origins, and is currently under-supported by maritime-technology and navigational evidence, which is the most promising place to look next.
3. **The handbag motif claim:** that a specific iconographic element recurs meaningfully across Moche, Göbekli Tepe, and Mesopotamian contexts. This is currently at the stage of visual observation and needs to be tested against a systematic motif database (Section 6) before it can support any claim about shared origin or transmission.

Suggested concrete next steps, in rough order of tractability:

- Check whether a handled-container/offering-vessel motif is coded in Berezkin's catalogue, and examine its distribution if so.
- Locate Japanese-language or specialist literature on Jōmon boat construction, fishing technology, and navigational practice, to address the evidentiary gap identified in Section 4.
- Read van Binsbergen's specific treatments of circum-Pacific lunar and dragon motifs to see whether his methodology (and his citations, e.g. von Heine Geldern, Hentze) offers a usable template for the handbag motif.
- Consider whether ritual symbolism tied specifically to navigation or sky-observation (rather than mythology in general) shows circum-Pacific patterning — this would most directly test the astrology–navigation–transmission chain as a single connected argument.

10. Bibliography and Researchers for Follow-Up

Jōmon–Valdivia hypothesis: Betty Meggers, Clifford Evans, Emilio Estrada (originators, 1960s).

Pacific coastal migration / maritime archaeology: Loren G. Davis, David B. Madsen, Jacob L. Bongers, Lars Fehren-Schmitz, Helen Farr, Johan Ling ("Maritime Encounters" program, 2022–2027), Barry Cunliffe.

Comparative mythology and motif diffusion: Yuri Berezkin (Analytical Catalogue of World Mythology and Folklore), Michael Witzel (skeptical of transcontinental continuity), Wim van Binsbergen (International Association for Comparative Mythology; proponent of transcontinental, multicentered diffusion), Julien d'Huy and Marc Thuillard (statistical/phylogenetic approaches to motif distribution), Eric Venbrux.

Foundational circum-Pacific motif studies (earlier 20th century, still cited as primary sources): Robert von Heine-Geldern, Carl Hentze, Gudmund Hatt, Katharine Luomala.

This document is a working synthesis for later research use, compiled from open-source academic and journalistic material as of July 2026. It is not a substitute for reading the primary sources listed above directly.