

Field Notes

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NORTH CENTRAL ONTARIO



PREHISTORIC CULTURES NORTH OF SUPERIOR



Ministry of Historical
Culture and Planning and
Recreation Research Branch

Hon. Reuben C. Baetz
Minister
Dr. Douglas Wright
Deputy Minister



The prehistory of North Central Ontario spans nearly 9000 years, from about 7000 BC to the 17th century AD. Archaeologists working in the area over the past 20 years have recorded over 1,000 sites belonging to the original inhabitants of Northern Ontario. Through their stone tools, broken pottery sherds, food remains, and other discarded items, the long forgotten lifeways of these prehistoric peoples are slowly and painstakingly being reconstructed.

OLD WORLD EVENTS	DATE	CULTURAL PERIOD	CULTURE
		HISTORIC	<i>European</i> <i>Ojibway</i> <i>Cree</i> <i>Assiniboine</i>
<i>Columbus Rediscovers America</i>	AD 1600	TERMINAL WOODLAND	<i>Blackduck</i> <i>Selkirk</i>
<i>Magna Carta</i>	AD 1492		
	AD 1215	INITIAL WOODLAND	<i>Laurel</i>
<i>Fall of Rome</i> <i>Birth of Christ</i>	AD 900		
<i>Stonehenge</i>	BC 500	ARCHAIC	<i>Shield Archaic</i> <i>Plains Archaic</i>
<i>Pyramids of Giza</i>	BC 5000		
<i>Origins of Agriculture in S.W. Asia</i>	BC 8000	PALAEO-INDIAN	<i>Plano</i>

Figure 2: *The Prehistoric Time Scale of Northern Ontario*

Figure 1 (Overleaf): *Boundaries of the North Central Region*

PALAEO-INDIAN PERIOD

POSTGLACIAL CARIBOU HUNTERS

Ten thousand years ago, the landscape of North-Central Ontario was far different from today. The Wisconsin glacier still covered the northern part of the province as far south as Lake Nipigon, and a large glacial lake, Minong, filled the Lake Superior basin. A second glacial lake, Lake Agassiz, inundated a large area from Atikokan west into Manitoba. Along the ice margins were expanses of open park land and tundra-like vegetation. Caribou and other species now found only in the far north ranged across the region.

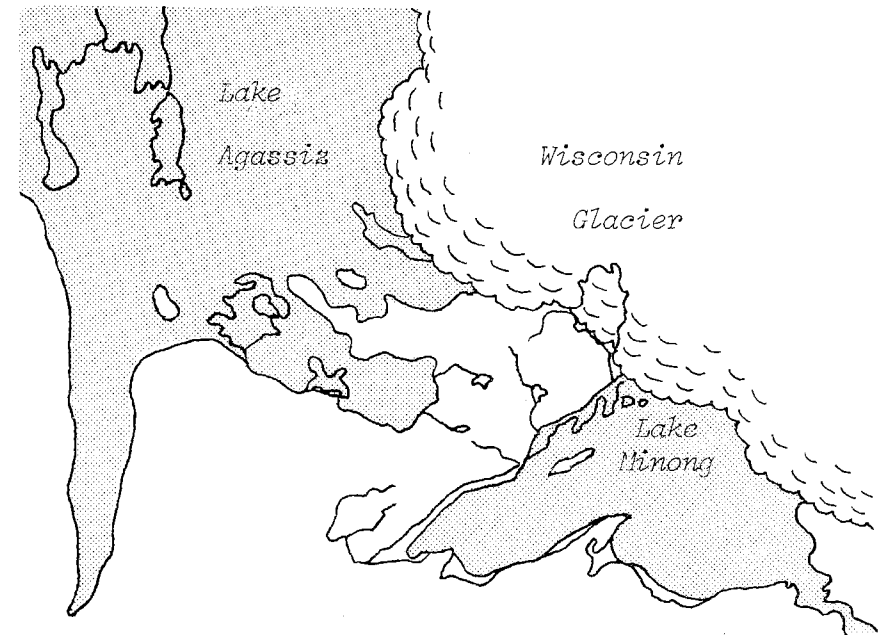


Figure 3: *The Lake Superior Region Ten Thousand Years Ago (after Prest 1976)*

Late Palaeo-Indian people of the Plano culture appear to have entered the Thunder Bay area from the south and west about 7000 BC. Unfortunately, little is yet known of these early people. Their campsites were located on the ancient strand lines of the glacial lakes, now many kilometres inland from the present shore. Their tool kit includes distinctive lanceolate points and large stone knives. It would appear that the Plano people were primarily hunters of large game, probably caribou, which they intercepted at crossing places on the shores of Lake Minong.



With the recession of the continental glacier came lowering lake levels, and the northward migration of the plant and animal communities upon which the Palaeo-Indians depended for their existence. This resulted in the decline of the caribou-hunting life style in the Lake Superior region, about 5000 BC.

Figure 4: A Palaeo-Indian Spear Point from a site near the MacKenzie River (from Fox 1976)

ARCHAIC PERIOD

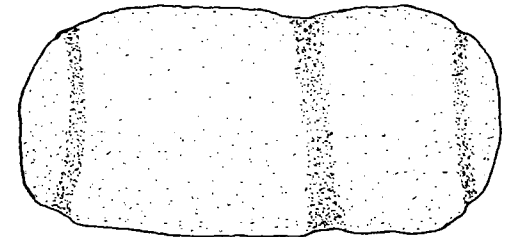
DIVERSIFICATION OF SUBSISTENCE TECHNOLOGY

Warmer, drier climatic conditions and changes in the distribution of large game and plant communities beginning about 5000 BC stimulated a shift in subsistence orientation to exploitation of small game and plant resources. Corresponding changes in the artifact assemblage included a reduction in the size of projectile points and the appearance of a fishing technology.



Two Archaic cultures have been recognized in Northern Ontario. The people of the Shield Archaic culture appear to be descended from the Plano people, and were indigenous to the boreal forest zone, north of Lake Superior. To the west, in the Lake of the Woods - Quetico area, there is evidence of a different culture more closely related to the Archaic cultures of the Plains. These Plains Archaic peoples appear to have entered the area in conjunction with an eastward movement of prairie-grasslands out of Manitoba and Minnesota.

Figure 5: An Archaic Projectile Point from a site on Dog Lake, and a Netsinker from a fishing station on the Lake Superior shore



Perhaps the most important development of the Archaic in the Lake Superior region was the appearance of a new industry: the production of tools from native copper found on the shores of Lake Superior. Although this represents some of the earliest metal-working in the world, the Archaic people of Lake Superior were not the earliest metallurgists in the true sense of the word. Their tools were manufactured by heating and hammering the copper into shape, not by casting as was done in other parts of the world. There is evidence that copper tools were being traded widely across eastern North America at this early period.

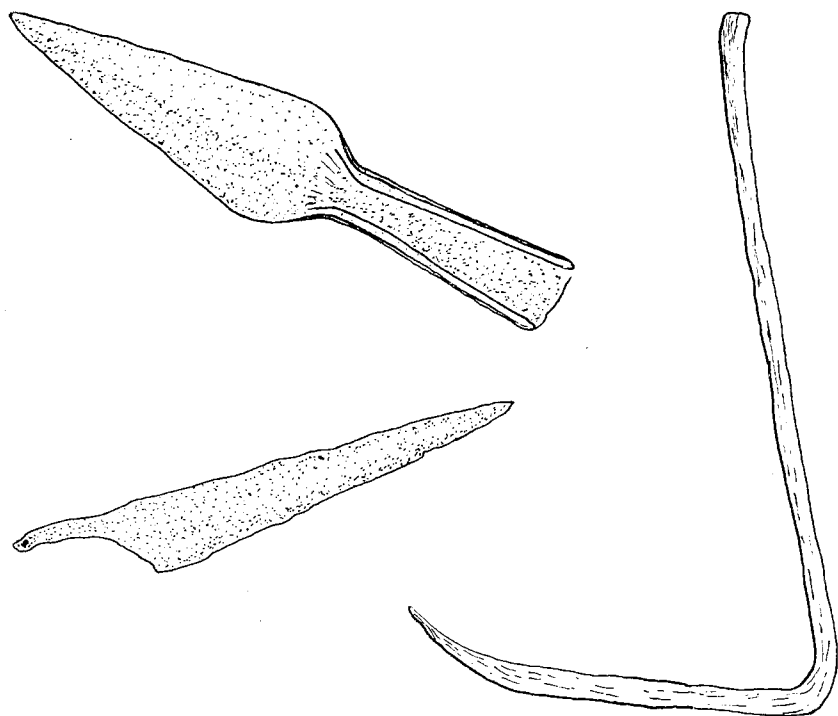


Figure 6: *Copper Artifacts - a socketed spear point and a tanged knife from sites on Dog Lake, and a gaff hook from the Sibley Peninsula.*

INITIAL WOODLAND PERIOD

TRADERS AND POTTERS

Ceramics first appear in the North Central region of Ontario about 500 BC. The earliest vessels were small pottery jars manufactured by the coil method. They had conical bases and distinctive impressed decoration executed with a toothed or sinuous-edged implement. These conical-base vessels are the identifying characteristic of the Laurel culture. The Laurel people practised a way of life similar to that of the Archaic people in the region: fishing, hunting, and collecting wild plants on the major waterways north of Superior.

There are two major theories concerning the origin of the Laurel culture in the area. One is that Laurel arose out of an Archaic base, and differed from it only in that pottery had been adopted. The other suggests that Laurel people moved into the area from the south and east, following the expansion of wild rice into the Upper Great Lakes area about 500 BC.

By the Initial Woodland period, extensive exchange networks had been established which stretched from the eastern seaboard to the Rocky Mountains. The Laurel people appear to have participated actively in this network. Artifacts made from Lake Superior copper have been found on sites throughout eastern North America, while such exotic items as marine shell beads from the Atlantic coast, stone tools of Knife River chalcedony from North Dakota, and obsidian from Yellowstone Park,

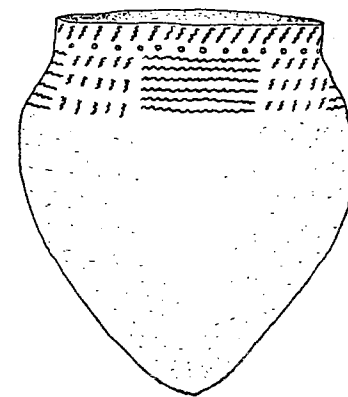


Figure 7: *Reconstructed Laurel Vessel from a site on the Albany River.*

Wyoming, have been found on Laurel sites in the Lake Superior region. Long distance trade was facilitated by the extensive system of waterways linking Lake Superior with the east, west, north, and south - the same transportation network which would be utilized by the fur traders over a thousand years later.

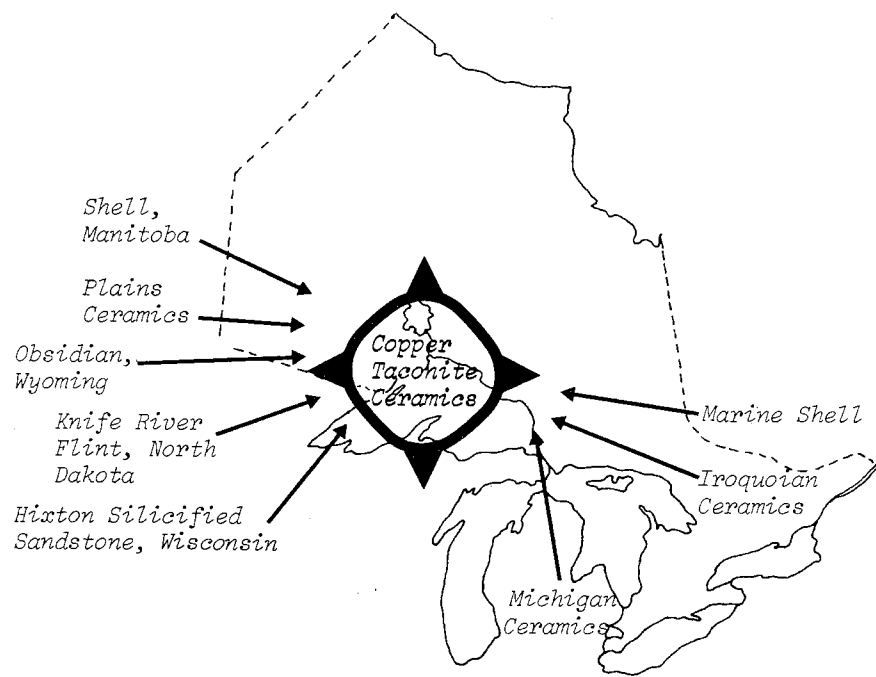


Figure 8: Evidence for Prehistoric Exchange Networks in North Central Ontario

TERMINAL WOODLAND PERIOD

LATE PREHISTORIC CULTURES IN THE LAKE SUPERIOR REGION

Two indigenous cultures, both of which appear to have developed from a Laurel cultural base and carried on similar ways of life, were present in the Terminal Woodland period. In the vicinity of Lake Superior are sites of the Blackduck culture. The Blackduck culture is characterized by globular pottery vessels, textured with a cord-wrapped paddle. To the north is the Selkirk culture, distinguished archaeologically by its fabric-impressed globular vessels.

The Selkirk culture is believed to be that of the pre-historic Cree. There is, however, considerable controversy over the ethnic identity of the Blackduck culture: some researchers believe Blackduck is pre-historic Assiniboine, due to the strong similarities in material culture with historic Siouan groups to the south; others have suggested that Algonkian-speaking people, historically identified as the Ojibway, produced the Blackduck culture; still others are of the opinion that, given our present state of knowledge, no direct correlation can be drawn between archaeological cultures and historically-identified linguistic groups.

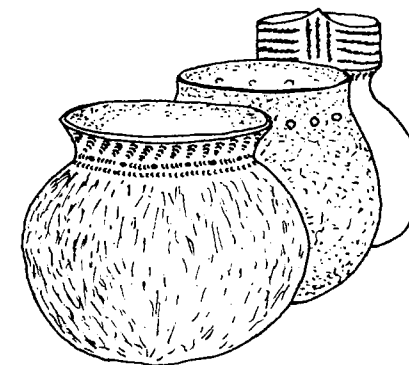
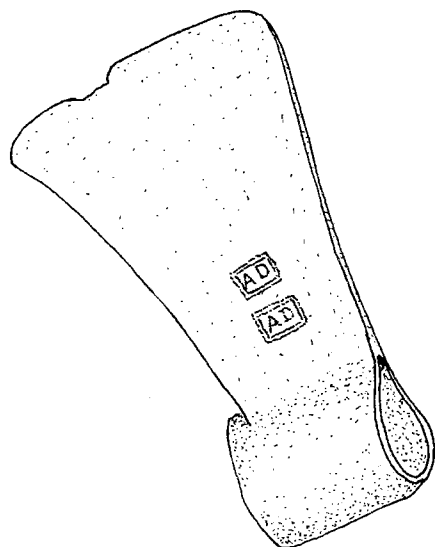


Figure 9: Representative Terminal Woodland Pottery - Blackduck, Selkirk, and Michigan Wares

Iroquoian pottery from Southern Ontario and Plains and Michigan-derived ceramics are occasionally found on late prehistoric sites in the North Central area. Whether these represent objects of trade, or the presence of small groups of non-local people in the area, has yet to be determined.



On sites dating to the latter part of the 17th century, glass beads, scraps of metal, thimbles, and other articles provide evidence of contact with another culture - that of the European fur traders. The influx of European trade goods in the late 1600's signals the beginning of the adoption of, and adaptation to, Western culture by the native peoples of North-Central Ontario.

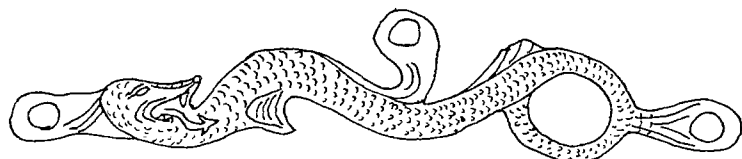


Figure 10: *Historic Artifacts - An Early French Trade Axe from a portage site on the Kaministiquia River, and a Dragon Sideplate from a musket found on Lake Nipigon*

The Historical Planning and Research Branch is dedicated to the conservation of Ontario's prehistoric and historic resources. We depend heavily on the public to help us in our search for Ontario's past. If you have ever found an arrowhead in your garden, have a collection of Indian pottery, or have seen Indian rock paintings in North Central Ontario, or if you would like further information concerning Northern Ontario's 9,000 year heritage, please contact:

William A. Ross
Regional Archaeologist

or

David W. Arthurs
Field Archaeologist

North Central Region
Historical Planning and Research Branch
Ministry of Culture and Recreation
1825 Arthur Street East
THUNDER BAY, Ontario
P7E 5N7

(807) 475-1447

Suggestions for further reading

Papers contributed to the Canadian Archaeological Association annual meeting, March 1975. Toronto: Historical Planning and Research Branch, Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation; 1975. (Archaeological Research Report 6).

Wright, James V. Ontario prehistory; an eleven-thousand year archaeological outline. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada; 1972. (Archaeological Survey of Canada).

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