

Iroquoians in the St. Lawrence River Valley before European Contact

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At the time of contact with the first Europeans, the St. Lawrence Iroquoians occupied a territory that extended from the mouth of Lake Ontario to the Cap Tourmente area, near Quebec City, with a southward extension to the northern tip of Lake Champlain, as well as seasonal extensions into the estuary and the gulf of St. Lawrence. Decades of archaeological research on this large territory have documented an Iroquoian and proto-Iroquoian presence that appears to have been continuous from at least 1,500 years ago until the arrival of the first Europeans during the sixteenth century. This precontact occupation history of the St. Lawrence River valley is also characterized by a variety of local adaptations in terms of material culture, settlement patterns, and subsistence, as well as a series of complex and changing relations with neighbouring populations. This paper presents a brief overview of this rich and complex occupation history.

Introduction

The papers in this volume explore the relationships between the Huron-Wendat and the St. Lawrence Iroquoians around the time of contact with the first Europeans in northeastern North America. However, a deeper time frame is necessary to understand the origins and transformations of these interactions. Therefore, I propose to present an overview of the precontact occupation of the St. Lawrence River valley, beginning ca. 1500 years before present, with a focus on the Quebec portion of the valley. Many archaeologists believe that this territory has been occupied continuously by St. Lawrence Iroquoians and their ancestors since at least that point in time. This idea is in accordance with the widely accepted hypothesis of an in situ origin and development of all Northern Iroquoian populations, although opinions vary regarding the precise date of this emergence (Byers 1959; Chapdelaine 1980, 1989, 1995a; Clermont 1996; Clermont and Chapdelaine 1982; Crawford and Smith 1996; Gates St-Pierre 2001a, 2004, 2006; Griffin 1944; Hart 2001; Hart and Brumbach

2005; Lenig 2000; MacNeish 1952, 1976; Martin 2008; Pendergast 1975; Smith 1997; Smith and Crawford 1995; Starna and Funk 1994; Tuck 1977; Wright 1984, 2004). This explanation stands in sharp contrast to the much-disputed alternative hypothesis of a recent migration to explain the origins of these people, as suggested by Snow (1992, 1995, 1996, 2013) and others (Burse 1995; Fiedel 1990, 1991, 1999).

The notion that this territory has been occupied continuously by St. Lawrence Iroquoians and their ancestors does not imply, however, that the St. Lawrence Iroquoian identity remained static and unchanged over the course of the centuries. After all, ethnicity is a self-defined, multilevel, fluid, and changing phenomena; it is hazardous to equate ethnicity with a specific archaeological culture, as many archaeologists of the culture history school of thought have done in the past, perhaps excessively and uncritically so (see, for example, Chrisomalis and Trigger 2004; Curta 2014; Insoll 2007; Jones 1997, 2008; Lucy 2005). The opposite position would assert that it

is simply impossible to determine the ethnicity of past populations, whatever the place, time period, or type of data considered, but as Curta (2014:2508) mentions: “at the root of this skepticism verging on nihilism seems to be a theoretical malaise and a profound misunderstanding of what ethnicity is and how it works.” Between these two extremes lies a moderate yet heterogeneous stance for those who believe that ethnicity can be identified archaeologically under certain circumstances (Chrisomalis and Trigger 2004; Clermont 1999; Emberling 1997; Hodder 1982; Washburn 1989; Tremblay 1999b). If we accept the premise that artifact styles are not random and that ethnicity can be (but is not always) expressed through assertive styles of material culture (Braun 1991; Chrisomalis and Trigger 2004; Curta 2014; David et al. 1988; Hodder 1982; Shennan 1989; Sterner 1989; Wiessner 1983; Wobst 1977, 1999; see also Carr and Neitzel 1995; Conkey and Hastorf 1990), then the identification of past identities is not a chimera but a possible enterprise, despite the methodological caution necessary and the interpretive obstacles and pitfalls that can be encountered. After all, “ethnic identity cannot be conceived without the manipulation of material culture” (Curta 2014:2509). This statement holds true for the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, who can be archaeologically identified and differentiated from other Iroquoian nations in the past using various lines of material culture evidence (see Abel 2002; Chapdelaine 1989, 1991, 1992; Gates St-Pierre 2004; Gaudreau 2014; Jamieson 1990a; Pendergast 1991, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Pendergast and Trigger 1972; Plourde 1999; Tremblay 1999b, 1999c, 2006; Trigger 1966, 1968; Trigger and Pendergast 1978; Wright 2004, among many others).

Exactly when the St. Lawrence Iroquoians emerged as a distinct ethnic entity is highly debatable. In line with the assumptions presented above, I have proposed that the point of origin be situated sometime around A.D. 500, based on a number of continuities in land use, settlement and subsistence patterns, social organization, ceramic styles, among others (Gates St-Pierre 2004, 2006). This suggestion is only a hypothesis that still needs

to be fully demonstrated, but it also constitutes a starting point for discussion. This hypothesis does not imply that the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence River valley necessarily called themselves and defined themselves the exact same way over the centuries, but only that they apparently shared common threads of developmental history, and more so than with other groups in other areas. The following pages will illustrate the continuities and changes that are informative of the ways St. Lawrence Iroquoians and their possible ancestors or predecessors occupied the territory and interacted with their neighbours, especially the Huron-Wendat and the New York Iroquois. Although I have my own views on what it all means, readers can make up their own minds regarding the significance of these continuities and changes in terms of identity, cultural development, and social interactions.

1,500 to 1,000 RCYBP

About 1,500 years ago, the lowlands of the Montreal area were inhabited by groups of the Melocheville tradition (Clermont and Chapdelaine 1982, 1986; Gates St-Pierre 2004, 2006). Although they relied heavily on hunting, fishing, and gathering for their subsistence, a recent analysis of the charred food residue-encrusted on Melocheville pottery fragments has revealed the presence of maize phytoliths (microfossils), which were radiocarbon dated to between 2,400 and 1,200 RCYBP (Gates St-Pierre and Thompson 2015). The presence of these phytoliths suggests that the Melochville people were gradually experiencing and integrating the culture of domesticated plants into their food habits, a process that is shown by the radiocarbon dates to have begun much earlier than previously thought and that may have fostered the development of a more sedentary way of life. Henceforth, various groups gathered every year in large numbers at prime fishing locations, such as Pointe-du-Buisson, near Montreal (Figure 1), where they stayed every year from mid-spring to mid-fall, thus becoming “seasonally sedentary” (Clermont and Cosette 1991; Cosette 1996, 1997, 2000). Moreover, the same phytolith



Figure 1. Location of the sites mentioned in the text and figures. The dotted lines delineate the St. Lawrence Iroquoian provinces as defined by Chapdelaine (1995b).

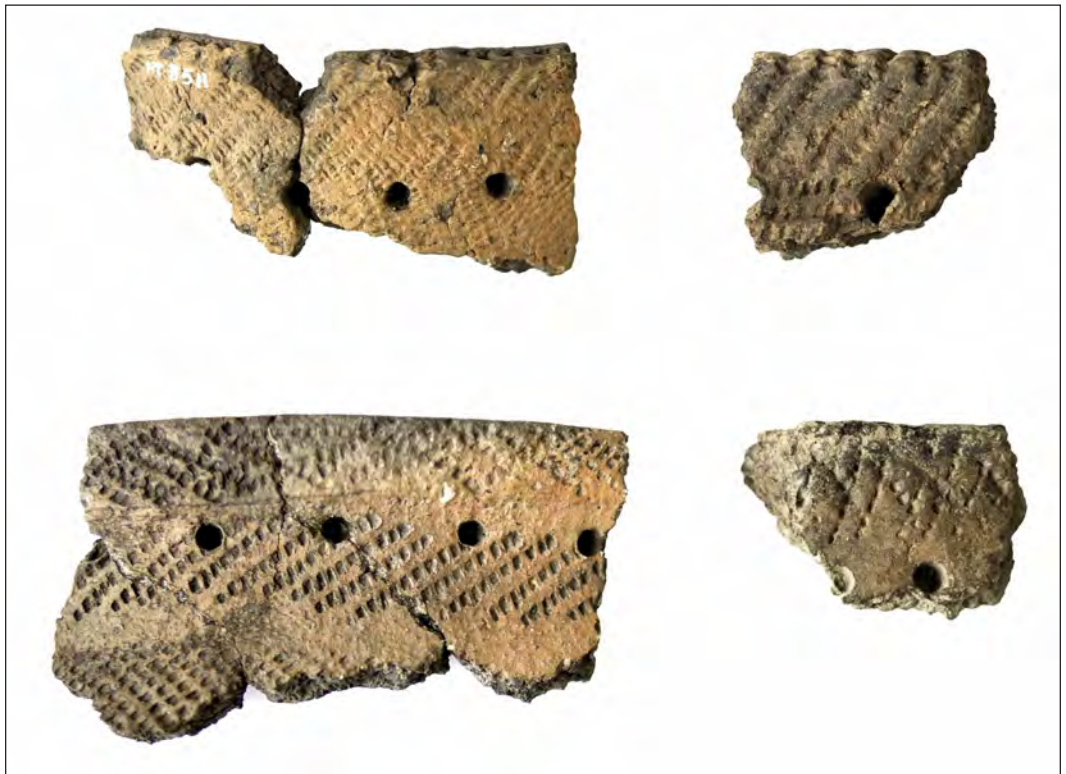


Figure 2. Melochville ceramics from the Hector-Trudel site (Pointe-du-Buisson, Quebec), with punctations on cord-wrapped stick impressions (upper row) or dentate stampings (lower row). Photo by Christian Gates St-Pierre.



Figure 3. Jack's Reef Corner-notched points (two upper rows) and Levanna points (two lower rows) from the Hector-Trudel site. Photo by Claude Chapdelaine, Université de Montréal.

analysis indicates morphological similarities between the maize lineages found on Melocheville ceramics and modern lineages from the Midwest, as well as with an ancient lineage from central New York State. This evidence may be suggestive of contacts and trade routes with people to the south and southwest of the St. Lawrence River valley at that time.

Melocheville pottery is often decorated with cord-wrapped stick impressions and dentate stamping, almost systematically accompanied by deep, circular exterior punctates producing bosses on the inner surface of the vessel (Figure 2). Although the same characteristics can be found on ceramic productions of neighbouring groups, their respective popularity varies widely among regions. For example, potters of the Princess Point complex in southwestern Ontario and those of the Blackduck Culture to the north never decorated their pottery with dentate stamping, while ceramics of the Point Peninsula tradition in New York State and New England rarely display circular punctates. Stylistic similarities are especially strong with ceramic productions from the Winooski area in northwestern Vermont (Petersen 1980; Petersen and Power 1985) and the Sandbanks tradition in southeastern Ontario (Daechsel and Wright 1988; Smith 1981, 1987).

The two most common types of projectile point in the St. Lawrence River valley during that time period were Jack's Reef and Levanna, both widely distributed throughout the Northeast, the Midwest, and beyond (Figure 3). Interestingly, Onondaga chert from the Niagara area was the preferred raw material (Gates St-Pierre and Chapdelaine 2013), which is again indicative of contacts with people to the southwest, although it cannot be determined whether this chert travelled via trading routes to the south or to the north of Lake Ontario, or perhaps both.

1,000 to 800 RCYBP

About a thousand years ago, a new ceramic tradition appeared in the middle St. Lawrence River valley: the St. Maurice tradition (Morin 1999, 2001). People of this tradition continued to occupy large-size summer camps, but it is possible

that such sites as Bourassa, near Trois-Rivières, represent the first sedentary villages in the valley, although the undisputed remains of housing structures have yet to be found there (Clermont et al. 1986).

St. Maurice ceramics are mostly decorated with cord-wrapped stick impressions, but the cord is thinner and the impressions are more closely spaced than before (Figure 4). This pottery style is very similar to the Owasco pottery found in New York State, and it has often been described as "owascoïd" or "owasco-like" (Chapdelaine 1995a; Clermont 1995). This similarity is suggestive of continued relationships with more southerly populations. Contacts with people living in southern Ontario appear to have been more tenuous during this time period, although one can note the occasional presence of Pickering pottery sherds on sites located along the St. Lawrence River valley, as far east as the Tadoussac-Escoumins area (Gates St-Pierre 2010a). The Pickering style originates from southeastern Ontario and is characterized by the presence of punctates which produce bosses on the outer surface of the vessels (see Kapches 1987; Kenyon 1968; Williamson 1990; Wright 1966).

800 to 650 RCYBP

Sometime between 800 and 650 RCYBP, if not earlier, a distinctive settlement pattern emerged in the eastern portion of the St. Lawrence River valley. Iroquoians from the Quebec City area developed a form of transhumance, in which segments of the population temporarily left their villages and settled on the shores of the estuary during the latter half of the winter (Chapdelaine 1993a, 1995b). This seasonal extension of their hunting territory allowed them to take advantage of the abundant marine resources of the estuary, such as harbour seals and belugas, but especially harp seals, a large-size migrating species present in the area from mid-January to mid-April (Banfield 1974; Lavigne et al. 1993). This time was a period of the year when the food reserves in the villages were probably at their lowest and when land mammals were at their leanest. With their thick layer of fat and their habit of congregating in

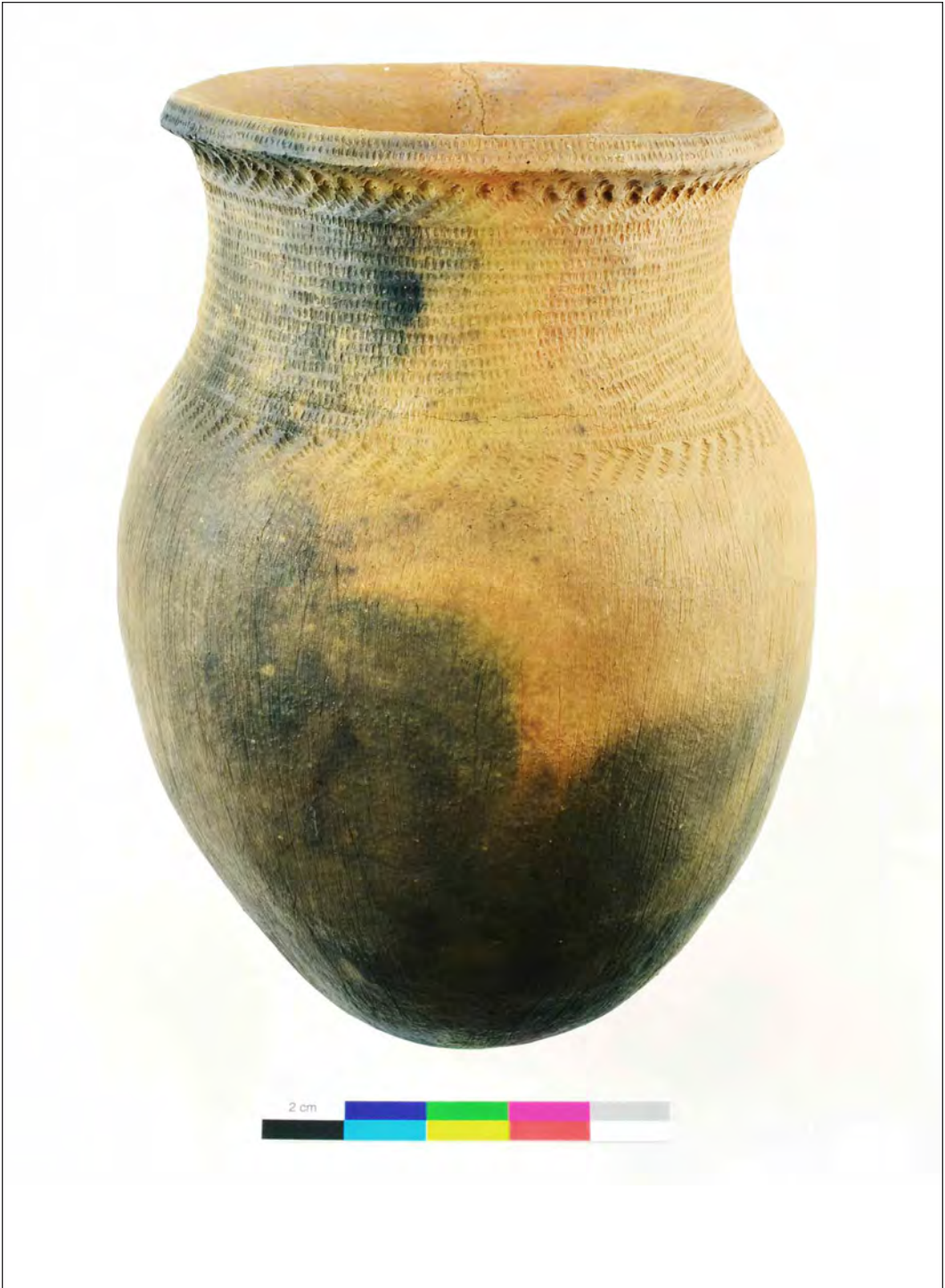


Figure 4. Early Late Woodland ceramic vessel found in Lake Memphremagog, Quebec. Photo by Aurélie Desgens, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec.

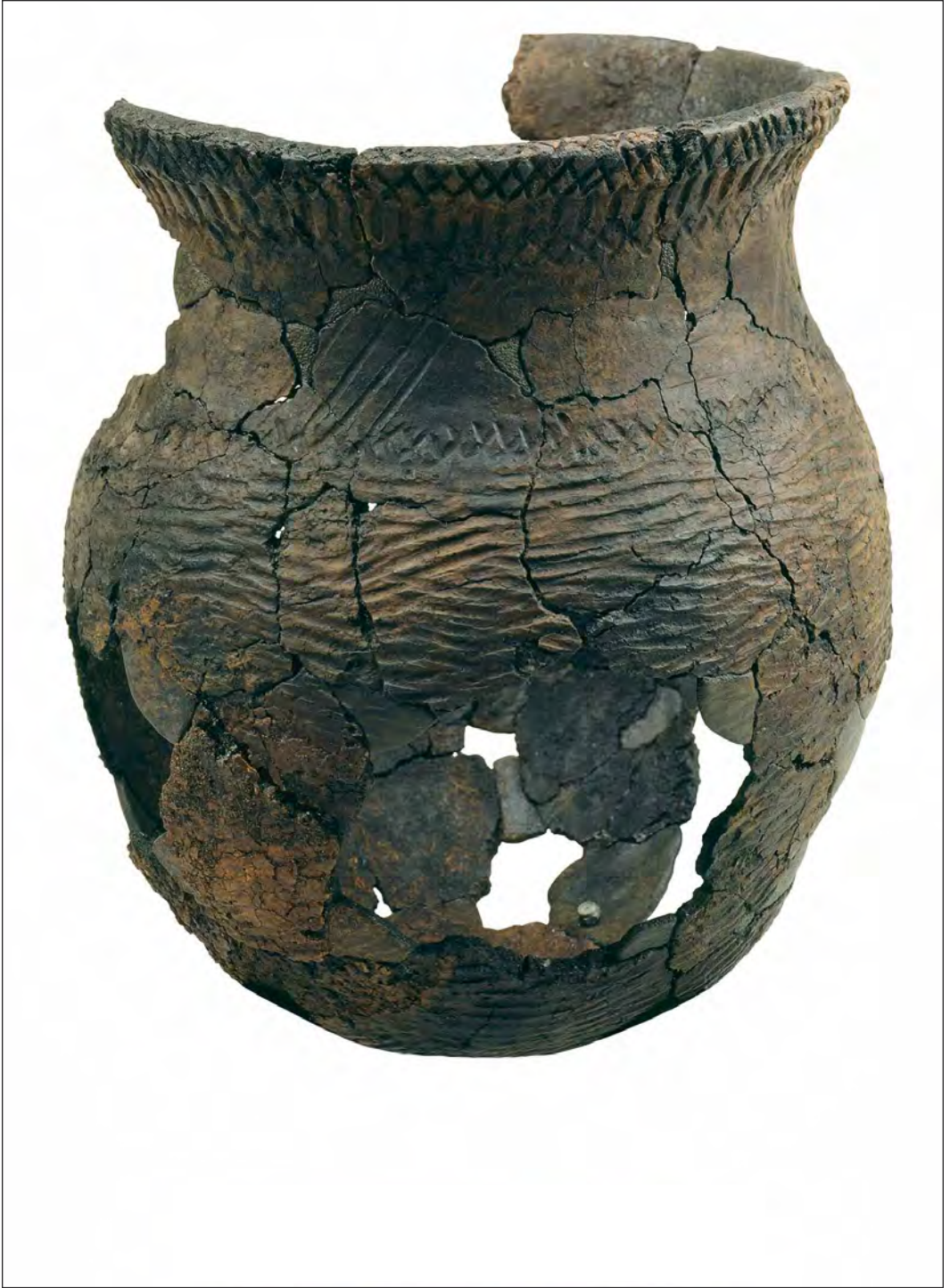


Figure 5. Ceramic vessel typical of the Saguenay Phase, from the Levasseur site (Île Verte, Quebec). Photo by the Ministère de la Culture et des Communications du Québec.

great numbers, harp seals represented a perfect solution. St. Lawrence Iroquoians occupied the shores of this area when the Innu (also known as the Montagnais) were inland hunting for moose. The Innu would move to the coast during the summer time, where they would fish for salmon and hunt harbour seals. In other words, there was a seasonal sharing of the territory and its resources by two culturally distinct populations, a phenomenon rarely documented by archaeologists (Plourde 2012; Plourde and Gates St-Pierre 2003; Rioux and Tremblay 1998; Tremblay 1993). This pattern persisted until the dispersal of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians shortly after the first Europeans arrived in the St. Lawrence River valley, and it is only after the latter established trading posts on the shores of the river that the Innu settled there permanently to trade furs for European goods (Castonguay 1989, 2003; Charest 2003; Dufour 1996).

The ceramic vessels of this period, also known as the Saguenay phase (Tremblay 1998, 1999a), are primarily characterized by low collars with notches at their base and with linear impressions forming horizontal, oblique, or criss-cross motifs (Figure 5). This pottery is very similar to the pottery of the Middleport phase in Ontario, and it could represent a single ceramic horizon that was distributed over many regions. In comparison, similarities with the pottery of the contemporaneous Oak Hill Phase in New York State are much less developed. This represents a change in the orientation of relationships, from north–south to east–west. We do not know the cause of this change, but we do know that these east–west relationships persisted until the arrival of the first Europeans.

650 to 450 RCYBP

At the time of contact with European explorers, St. Lawrence Iroquoians occupied a territory that some archaeologists divide into provinces or clusters (Figure 1), a division that is again mostly based on the comparative analysis of the pottery styles (Chapdelaine 1989, 1995b; Jamieson 1990a; Tremblay 2006). This clustering can be interpreted as a reflection of a sociopolitical

organization that is becoming more complex, or as a result of communities experiencing higher demographic densities, spread out over a remarkably long stretch of territory. The communities forming each cluster may have constituted a single and large cultural entity, but they may also have formed a confederation of related tribes, perhaps similar to the Huron-Wendat or Iroquois confederacies, which emerged during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries A.D. The writings of the French explorer Jacques Cartier, the only European to have left us with a written account of his encounter with the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, suggest that Stadacona, the dominant village in the province of Canada (Quebec City area) was subordinated to the inhabitants of the still larger and more prominent village of Hochelaga, located on the Island of Montreal (Chapdelaine 1989; Tremblay 2006; Trigger 1984; Trigger and Pendergast 1978; Wright 2004). Was this political hierarchy apparent or real? If it was real, and not a misinterpretation by Cartier, was it imposed by some or agreed upon by all? Was it a prelude to a more formal confederacy? A more complex society? Cartier also mentions the distrust between Stadaconans and Hochelagans, apparently resulting from competition over access to the Europeans and their trade goods. It is even possible that Stadaconians participated in the dispersal of the Hochelagans initiated by the Five Nations Iroquois/Haudenosaunee (Chapdelaine 2004; Pendergast 1993; Tremblay 2006, 2015). Current research at the McDonald, Droulers, and Mailhot-Curran sites in the Saint-Anicet area suggests a gradual move away from the shores of the St. Lawrence River, as well as a sequence of community coalescence, probably resulting from conflict with neighbouring populations (Chapdelaine 2015; Clermont and Gagné 2004).

Despite the methodological and epistemological difficulties in, and pitfalls of, interpreting the cultural identity, political organization, and internal and external relations of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, the archaeological data available suggest that they represented an entity distinct from both the Huron-Wendat and the Five Nations Iroquois. For example, their



Figure 6. Ceramic vessel from the Masson site (Quebec) decorated with corn ear motifs all around the rim. Photo by Claude Chapdelaine, Université de Montréal.

pottery style was quite distinctive, being characterized by the use of emblematic features, such as corn ear motifs (Figure 6), ladder plait motifs, and annular punctates (Figure 7), among other traits (Chapdelaine 1989, 1991; Le Moine 2016). Another peculiarity is the scarcity of stone tools on St. Lawrence Iroquoian village sites. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of this phenomenon, but the scarcity of high-quality lithic raw materials in the St. Lawrence River valley, especially in its western portion, should be considered. Concomitant to this is the possibility that the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, as they became more sedentary, less mobile, and more involved in a horticultural mode of subsistence, experienced a reduced need for stone tools normally used in hunting and butchering activities. It is also conceivable that they preferred the use of bone for the production of tools and weapons (Engelbrecht and Jamieson, this volume).

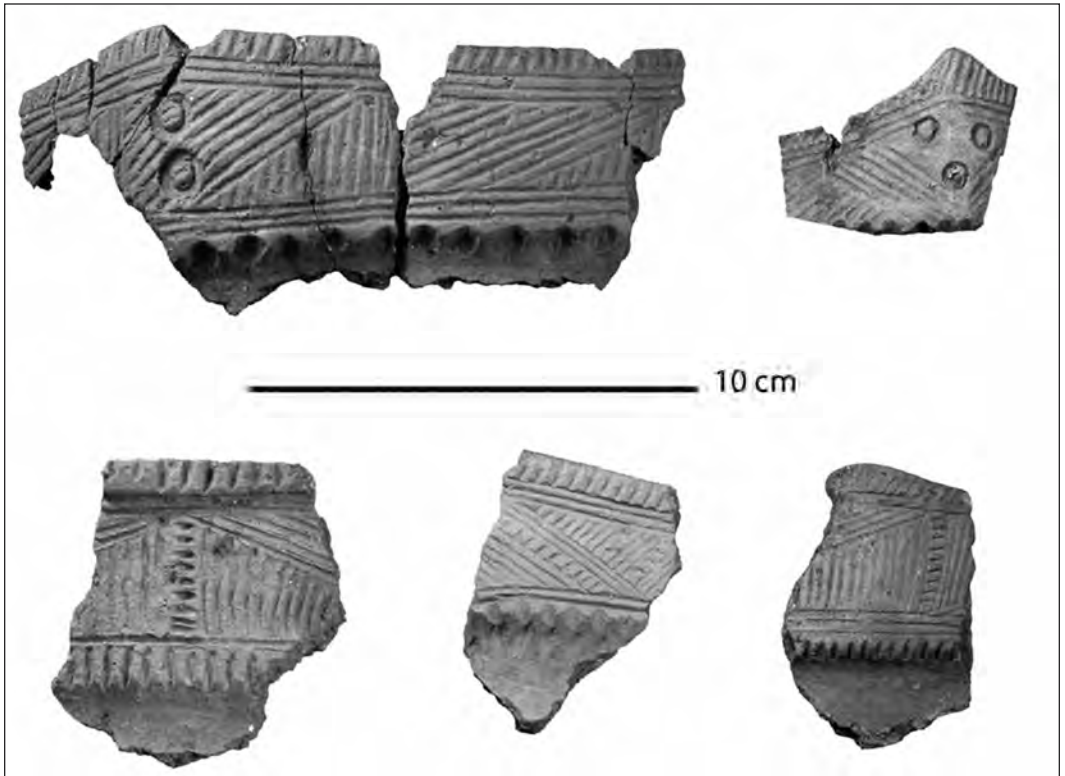


Figure 7. Pottery sherds from the Mailhot-Curran site, decorated with complex motifs, including annular punctations (upper row) and ladder-plait motifs (lower row).

Bone tools made and used by the St. Lawrence Iroquoians were diversified, sophisticated, and abundant. As a matter of fact, many stone artifacts had their functional equivalent in bone, such as arrowheads, awls,

flakers, beads, and pendants, among other examples (Gates St-Pierre 2001b, 2010b). The geographic variability among St. Lawrence Iroquoian components must again be underlined, as bone tool assemblages are rich and diversified



Figure 8. *Bevelled bone points from the Droulers (upper row) and Roebuck (lower row) sites. Photos by Christian Gates St-Pierre.*

in the western portion of the valley (Gates St-Pierre 2001b, 2010b; Gates St-Pierre and Boisvert 2015; Jamieson 1993), rare and less diversified in the central portion – at village sites like Lanoraie (Clermont et al. 1983), Mandeville (Chapdelaine 1989), or Masson (Benmouyal 1990), for example – and somewhat specialized towards the exploitation of marine resources in the eastern portion (Chapdelaine 1993b; Plourde 2012; Plourde and Gates St-Pierre 2003; Tremblay 1993). Interestingly, one particular type of bone projectile point, the bevelled conical point (Figure 8), is apparently unique to the St. Lawrence Iroquoians (Gates St-Pierre 2015). These points can sometimes be found on late Huron-Wendat sites, probably brought or made there by St. Lawrence Iroquoian captives or refugees, or perhaps as a result of intermarriages or intercultural coalescence. They are much less frequent in New York Iroquois collections of artifacts (Gates St-Pierre 2015). Similarly, Jamieson (1990a, 1993) considers the deer scapula pipe as a type of artifact unique to St. Lawrence Iroquoians.

A brief look at the food habits reveals that fish were a very important part of the Huron-Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquoian subsistence base, while mammals were of greater importance in other Iroquoian populations, such as the Five Nations Iroquois and Neutral (see Clermont 1984; Cossette 1993; Gates St-Pierre 2014; Needs-Howarth 1999; Prevec and Noble 1983; Recht 1997; Stewart 1999). Moreover, there is a striking similarity in the way yellow perch often represents the main targeted species in both Huron-Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquoian faunal assemblages (Gates St-Pierre 2014; Gates St-Pierre et al. 2014; Hawkins and Needs-Howarth 2014; Malleau and Hawkins 2014; St-Germain & Courtemanche 2015; Stewart 1999). This focus might again be suggestive of a closer relationship between the St. Lawrence Iroquoian and Huron-Wendat ways of life before European contact.

Conclusion

Summarizing a thousand years in the occupation history of the St. Lawrence River valley in a very few pages is a difficult, perilous, and thankless enterprise. Consequently, this overview will certainly appear superficial, over-simplified, and incomplete to some. Nevertheless, I hope it will allow readers, and especially those who are not archaeologists, to capture the complexity, variability, and continuities in the ways St. Lawrence Iroquoian communities and their ancestors inhabited a vast and heterogeneous territory, as well as the changing nature of their relationships with their neighbours during the centuries preceding the first contacts with Europeans. Although the review of the evidence presented here highlights the cultural differences between St. Lawrence Iroquoians, the Huron-Wendat, and their respective predecessors, it is also clear that the two nations had developed a long-lasting and privileged history of relationships over the centuries. While these relations continued, they became even more complex and troubled during the dark times that saw the dispersal of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians at the end of the sixteenth century. This century represents another chapter in the fascinating occupation history of the St. Lawrence River valley (see Chapdelaine 2004; Engelbrecht 1995; Jamieson 1990b; Pendergast 1993; Tremblay 2006).

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À l'époque des contacts avec les premiers Européens, les Iroquoiens du Saint-Laurent occupaient un territoire qui s'étendait de l'embouchure du lac Ontario jusqu'à la région du Cap Tourmente, près de la ville de Québec, en s'étendant aussi vers le sud jusqu'à la pointe nord du lac Champlain et en s'étendant de façon saisonnière jusqu'à l'estuaire et le golfe du Saint-Laurent. Des décennies de recherches archéologiques sur ce vaste territoire ont documenté une présence iroquoise et iroquoise primitive qui semble avoir été continue depuis au moins 1 500 ans passés jusqu'à l'arrivée des premiers Européens au court du seizième siècle. Cette histoire d'occupation précontact de la vallée du fleuve Saint-Laurent est aussi caractérisée par une variété de changements locaux quant au matériel culturel, aux configurations d'établissement et aux subsistances. De plus, il y a eu une série de changements relationnels complexes avec les populations avoisinantes. Cet article présente un aperçu de cette histoire d'occupation riche et complexe.

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