

CERAMICS AND CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATE PREHISTORIC PERIOD: THE ABITIBI-TÉMISCAMINGUE CASE

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Abstract

For over ten years now, the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region in Quebec has benefited from a structured research programme. Ever since our research began in the area, the presence of a relatively large amount of ceramic sherds for a boreal region, along with other discoveries, has been a source of some surprise. The discovery of significant amounts of this medium, associated with other types of archaeological remains, enables us to define the chronology of occupations in recent prehistory and provides us with information concerning cultural affiliations or the direction in which goods and ideas circulated within influence networks.

In this presentation, we shall examine two phenomena observed mainly on the basis of ceramic collections. Twice in the archaeological record, the Algonkians who occupy the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region seem to have abandoned a specific ceramic tradition and, within a very short lapse of time, integrated another one which apparently originated outside the region. Several working hypotheses have been developed to explain these events.

Résumé

Depuis maintenant plus de 10 ans, la région de l’Abitibi-Témiscamingue, au Québec, bénéficie d’un programme structuré de recherches archéologiques. Parmi diverses découvertes, la présence relativement importante de vestiges céramiques pour une région boréale, ont été dès le début de nos recherches une source d’étonnement. En effet, la découverte de ce médium en importance, associé à d’autres types de vestiges archéologiques, nous permet de préciser la chronologie des occupations de la préhistoire récente et nous informe assez précisément sur les appartenances culturelles ou le sens de circulations de biens et d’idées à l’intérieur des réseaux d’influences.

Dans cette présentation, nous examinerons deux phénomènes constatés principalement grâce à l’observation des collections céramiques. À deux reprises, les Algonquiens qui occupent l’Abitibi-Témiscamingue ont, semble-t-il, abandonné une tradition céramique pour en intégrer une autre nous apparaissant extérieure à la région. Et ceci dans un très court laps de temps. Nous proposons quelques hypothèses de travail pour expliquer ces faits.

The eastern part of the Canadian Shield has been occupied by groups of hunter-gatherers since the beginning of human occupation. This fact has often led to the perception of these occupants as having attained a platform in their development: stable, unchanging and isolated. The multiplication of work in these little known regions during the 1980s and 1990s has permitted the accumulation of data available for the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, where the discovery of great amounts of ceramic sherds has shown that the occupants of this area did take part in different Woodland developments.

In an article published in 1998, Norman Clermont sums up current theories on these discoveries by proposing “Shield Woodland” as a term under which the episodes of Shield prehistory occurring between

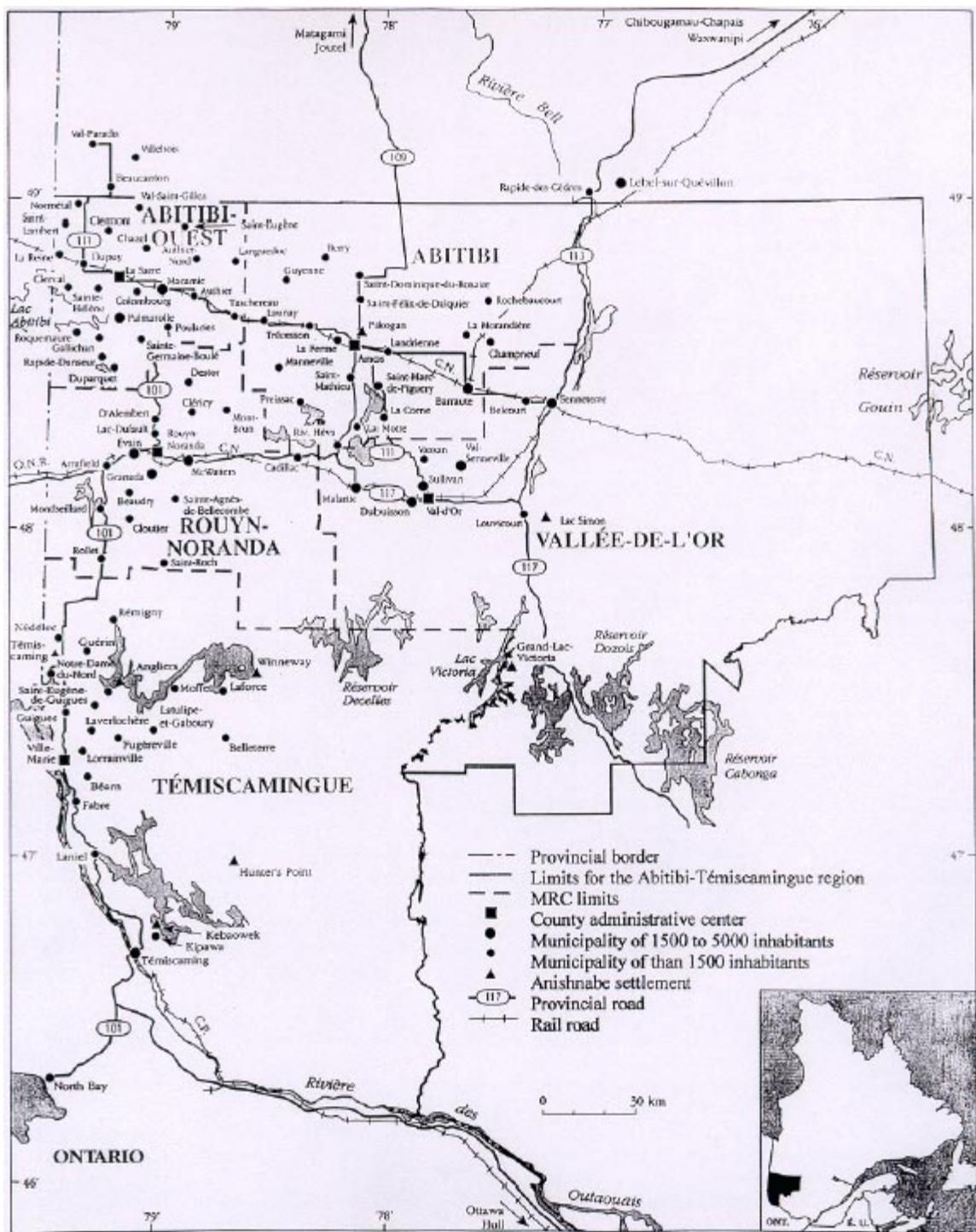


Figure 1. Map of Area.

1000 B.C and the moment of contact may conveniently be grouped (Clermont, 1998). This article had the effect of questioning many theoretical foundations on which Canadian Shield prehistory were built. We add to this reflection by proposing that the Algonkians to the west of the Lake Saint-Jean and to the south of the 50th parallel not only were integrated to the circle of pottery users but, at certain times, developed their own ceramic traditions. We shall consider here how we can integrate the different prehistoric developments of northwestern Quebec to the chronology of Northeastern North America and the Eastern Subarctic.



Figure 2. Initial Woodland Artifacts.

The Study Area

The Abitibi-Témiscamingue region is located in the western part of central Quebec, in the heart of the Canadian Shield and the Boreal forest (Fig. 1). In its most general traits, the region has the aspect of a vast continental plateau, without great variation in its relief. This plateau is gently inclined from the southeast to the northwest. More than 100,000 lakes cover the region, all interconnected by a web of rivers representing navigation routes that could be used by Native travellers. In Algonkian, Abitibi means “mid-waters” referring to the fact that the territory is divided in the middle by the height of land, separating the Saint-Lawrence and James Bay watershed. Since the 1970s, more than 200 archaeological sites have been identified and evaluated. Nine of these underwent extended excavations, revealing occupations of different periods and a wealth of archaeological finds.

The Laurel Episode

The first ceramic to appear in the region does so in a very limited way. There are only a few examples of Vinette-1 ceramic, found mostly on the site of Fort-Témiscamingue and on Lake Abitibi. These few vases, associated with Meadowood points, scrapers and cache blades must be studied further in order to elucidate the transition from Archaic to Woodland Period in this region (Fig. 2).

Ceramics seem to make a definitive entry in northwestern Quebec during the Middle Woodland period. In the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, at least 19 sites are known to contain this type of ceramic (Fig. 3). In eight sites which were partially excavated, this ceramic was found in an appreciable quantity, from about 10 vases per site up to 27 vases at the Bérubé site. The total extends to about 150 vases for the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. The use of coiling as a means of construction for these vases is similar to the techno-

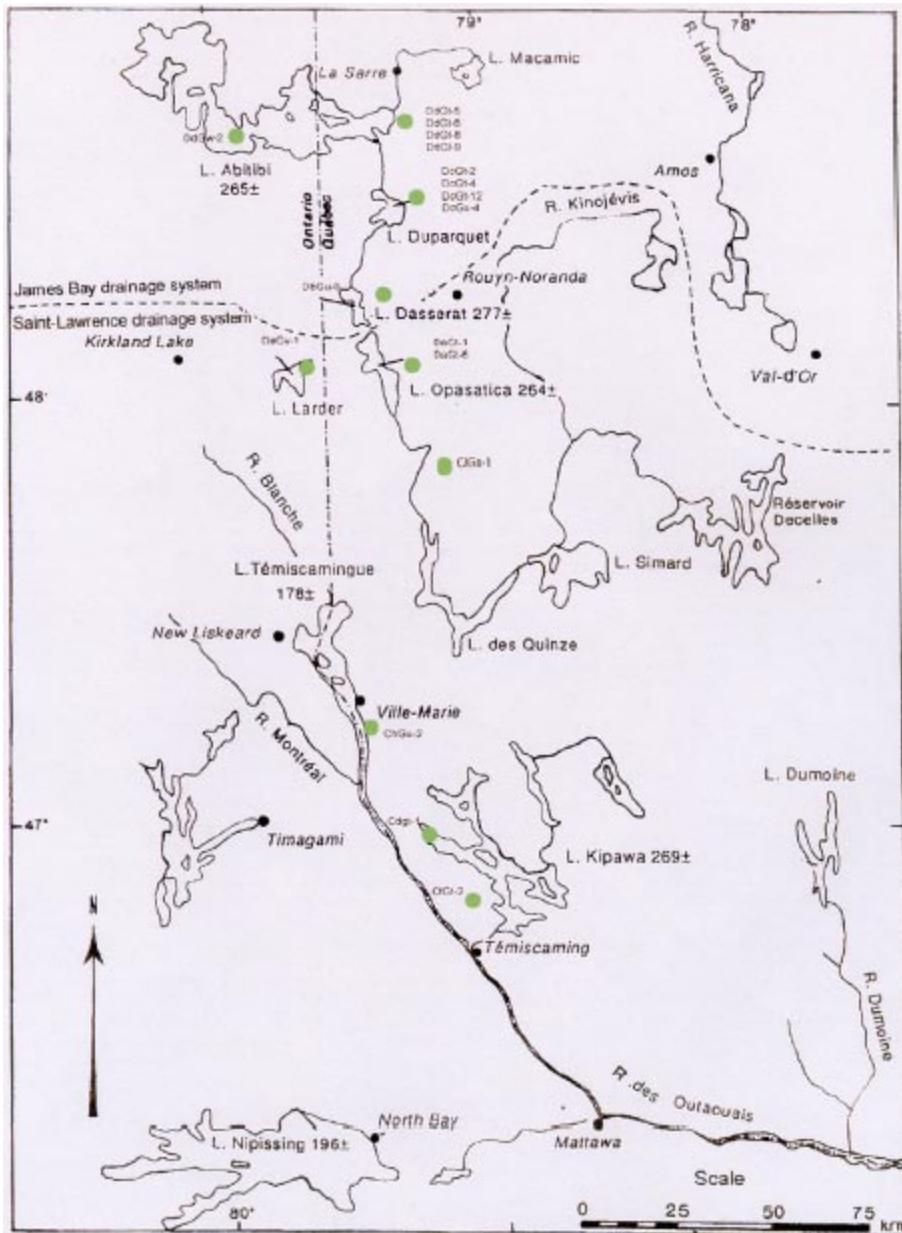


Figure 3. Distribution of Laurel Sites.

hereby propose to extend the concept of Eastern Laurel eastward to the edge of the Saguenay River. By encompassing the occupants of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region in the Laurel concept, we illustrate the fact that these people actively took part in a network of pottery users in the Boreal forest. The ceramic we find in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region resembles, but is also distinguishable from the ceramic we find to the south, east and west. The choice of the term Eastern Laurel is therefore not attributable to ceramic morpho-stylistic criteria alone, and should be seen as a proposal for greater unity among archaeological classifications when dealing with prehistory of the Shield, between the years A.D. 1 and A.D. 1000.

Four radiocarbon dates associated with Laurel occupations in four different sites are available in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue (Fig. 6). These dates show that the events referred to as Eastern Laurel occurred in the interval between A.D. 400 and 900, and therefore would be relatively recent. The absence of data prevents us from proposing a scenario explaining the beginnings of the Middle Woodland period (400 B.C. to A.D. 400). The data available at the Roger Marois site shows that the Laurel culture, which was thought

logical patterns observed in Northeastern North America during this period. Decoration consists essentially of pseudo-scallop shell and dentate imprints which may be applied as a dragged or rocker stamp and may be accentuated by a row of punctates. Decoration of the lip and the interior of the vases is also sometimes present (Figs. 4, 5).

The idea of a ceramic tradition for the Shield has been put forth since the Laurel concept was elaborated in 1941 (Wilford, 1941). This concept was generally used for an area to the north and to the northwest of Lake Superior. The Laurel concept was later subdivided to take spatial and temporal variations into consideration, thus allowing the concept of an Eastern Laurel for northeastern Ontario to be put forth (Pollock 1975; Reid and Rajnovich, 1991). In view of the discoveries in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, we



Figures 4 and 5. Laurel Sherds.

Site	Reference	Uncorrected Date	Corrected date	Sample number
Marois (DcGt-04)	Côté,1995	1170 ± 60	795 AD	Beta-61780
Baril (DcGu-4)	Côté,1991	1300 ± 70	685 AD	Beta-33896
Bérubé (DdGt-5)	Marois,1989	1600 ± 90	475 AD	Gak-3793
Margot (DdGt-6)	Marois,1989	1635 ± 50	425 AD	S-1149

Figure 6. Laurel C14 Dates.

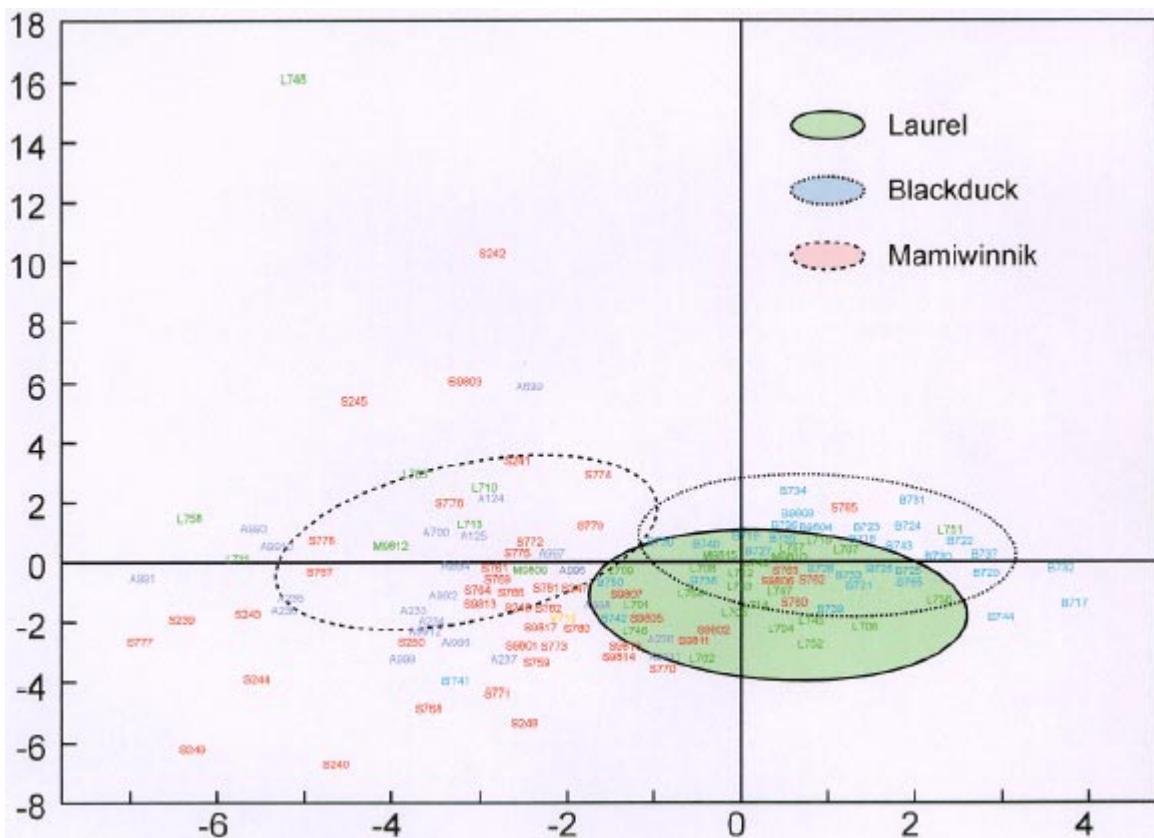


Figure 7. Neutron Activation Analysis Showing Results for Laurel Sherds.

to have disappeared from the Eastern Shield around A.D. 800, may in fact have persisted for a century longer.

Neutron activation analysis was undertaken on about 30 Laurel vases and different samples of clay from the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region (Fig. 7). The preliminary results clearly show that ceramic from this ensemble reacts as a chemically coherent group. Local manufacture remains a strong possibility. The recent discovery of clay waste in the Laurel occupation of the Arno site (DaGt-9), is an indication in this direction. Source studies are presently under way.

The Blackduck Episode

Around A.D. 900 or 1000, the Algonkians of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region suddenly abandoned Laurel pottery. In the space of a century, this tradition is entirely replaced by another. These changes bring



Figures 8 and 9. Blackduck Sherds.

about a new type of pottery, characteristic of Terminal Woodland. The age-old method of coiling is replaced by the paddle and anvil method of making vases. A whole new array of textures which resemble textiles appear on the exterior of the vases. Vase profiles are similar to the production found elsewhere at the beginning of Terminal Woodland period (Melocheville, Princess Point, Owasco, Glen Meyer), with a constricted neck and outflaring rim. Associated with this, the use of horizontal, oblique or V-shaped corded

impressions accompanied by punctates made with a cord-wrapped stick sometimes perforating the vase, is generalised (Figs. 8,9).

The events which took place in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region are very similar to those that one observes elsewhere in the Boreal forest and have therefore been linked to the Blackduck formation, present around Lake Superior and to the northwest of it. As in the case of the Laurel concept which could be subdivided into a series of spatial and temporal variants, it is possible that we are confronted with a local manifestation of Blackduck, which might be termed Eastern Blackduck. Present work on this matter is poorly advanced.

This transition between Laurel and Blackduck is not well understood in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. At the Roger Marois site (DcGt-4), the radiocarbon dates show that the Laurel and Blackduck occupations are separated by an interval ranging between 80 and 350 years (Fig. 10).

The period around the year A.D. 1000 is one of great agitation in North-Eastern North America. It is a period of instability where the identity of the different groups known at the time of contact will emerge from the archaeological record. The Iroquoians became sedentary and adopted horticulture, then agriculture, as a means of subsistence. Their populations increased, creating an added strain on the territory they occupied. In the periphery, the Algonkian groups were affected by these transformations. This is a period when diffusion networks realigned themselves. It is possible that a certain amount of movements of population took place. It should be mentioned that starting around A.D. 1000, the climate underwent an improvement which culminated around A.D. 1350. A richer environment could have made possible the integration of expanding populations from the south and the west. This expansion could have brought about the adoption of a new pottery. One should mention to this effect the arrival of a new simple triangular projectile point in the archaeological record, previously absent in the lithic assemblages. However, the hypothesis of this expansion is to be used with a great deal of prudence.

On the other hand, the perception of a drastic change may only be an illusion, due to our habit of considering ceramic as the main diagnostic element of an assemblage. Indeed, one has to admit that in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, a great deal of continuity seems to link subsistence and settlement strategies and that sites previously occupied by Laurel groups are reoccupied by Blackduck groups.

In this region, occupations associated with Blackduck have been found at Lake Duparquet (DcGt-4 ; DcGt-12 ; DcGt-10) ; at Fort-Témiscamingue (ChGu-2) and Lake Abitibi (DdGt-5 ; DcGt-9 ; DcGu-7) (Fig. 11). The period associated with Blackduck appears to be short, since around A.D. 1300, this episode seems to disappear completely from the archaeological record (Fig. 10).

Neutron activation analyses show a strong chemical resemblance between Laurel and Blackduck pottery. This would indicate that clay sources may be the same for the two types of ceramic. The number of sources seem especially low for Blackduck ceramic (Fig. 12).

The Mamiwinnik Episode

Late Woodland is characterized by the massive import of Iroquoian ceramics. This tendency starts very slowly at the end of the Blackduck episode between A.D. 1100 and 1250 when we see an intrusion of a few "Pickering" and "Uren" vases (Fig. 13). This new phenomenon seems at first to be anecdotal and reflects isolated exchanges, without great resemblance to the massive import of Ontario Iroquoian vases that will occur later on.

Site	Reference	Uncorrected date	Corrected date	Sample number
Marois (DcGt-4)	Côté, 1995	940 ± 90	1010 Ad.	Beta-61780
Marois (DcGl-4)	Côté, 1995	900 ± 50	1050 Ad.	Beta-33896
Lac Larder (DaGv-1)	Noble, 1982	950 ± 50	1005 Ad.	Gak-3793

Figure 10. Blackduck C14 Dates.

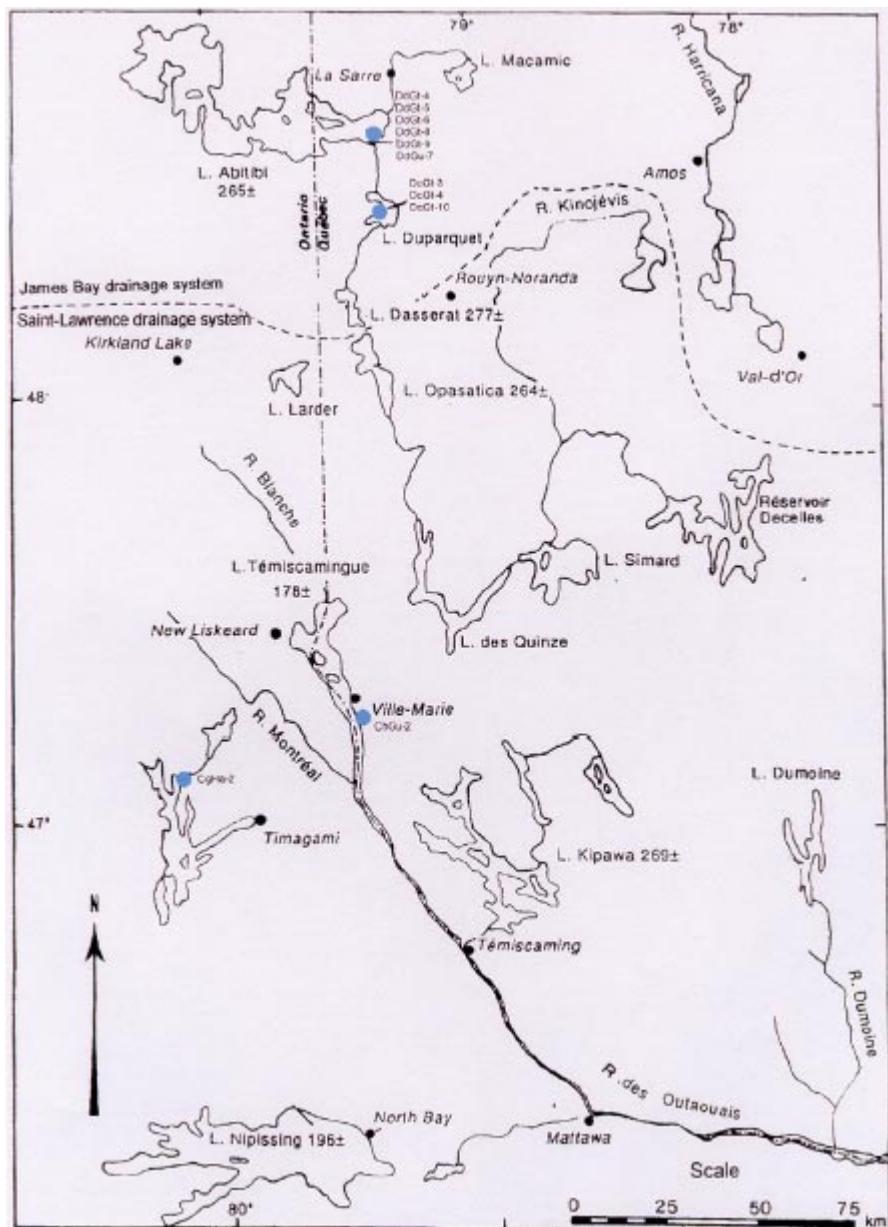


Figure 11. Distribution of Blackduck Sites.

No less than 60 archaeological sites have revealed Late Woodland occupations in this region, nine of which have been excavated (Fig. 14). The vases that have been recovered are all characteristic of the Huron-Wendat production and their ancestors, the Middleport and Black-Creek/Lalonde, located to the

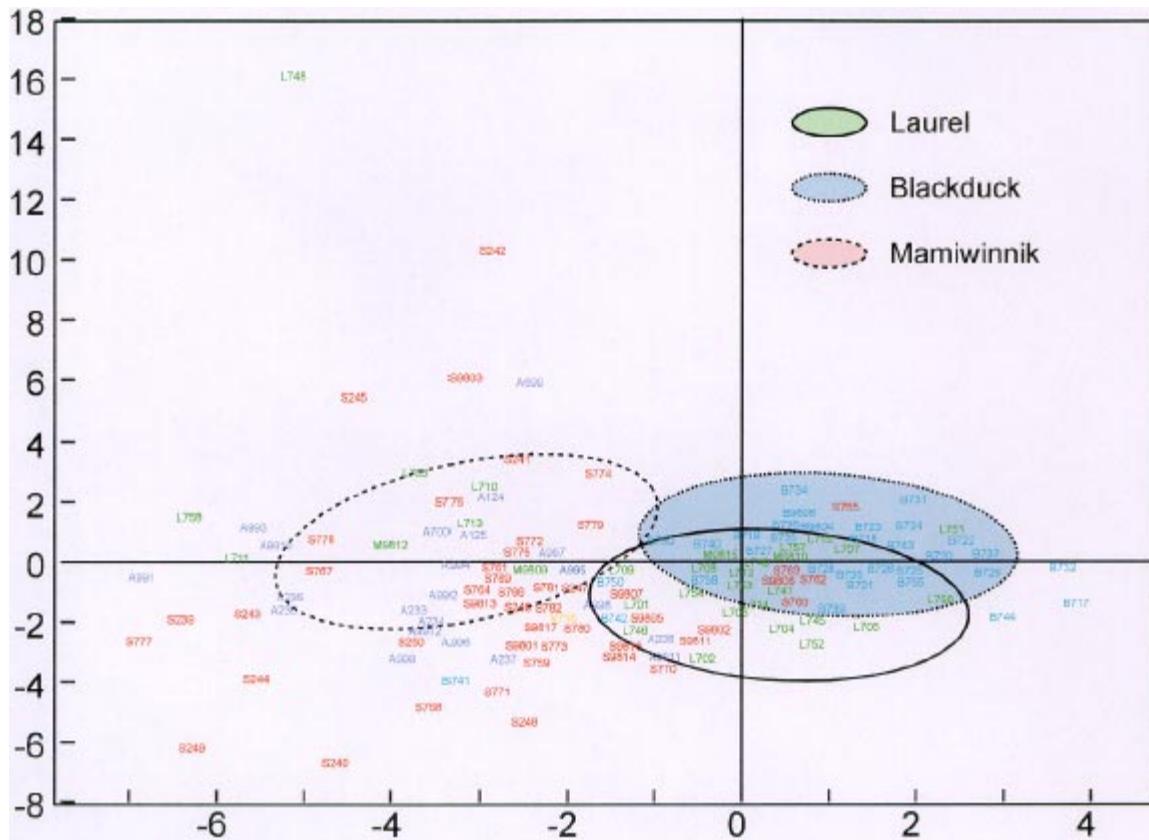


Figure 12. Neutron Activation Analysis Showing Results for Blackduck Sherds.

southeast of Georgian Bay in Ontario. The ceramic assemblages found on Late Woodland sites of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region vary synchronously with those in Huronia. This assertion is based on 10 radiocarbon dates associated with typical Late Woodland artifacts (Fig. 15). Besides ceramics, other objects indicating trade have been recovered like smoking pipes, stone and copper tools, some of these typically associated with Iroquoians (e.g. triangular points and grinding implements) (Fig. 16 - 19).

We shall add, and this fact is extremely important, that no Saint-Lawrence Iroquoian pottery has been recovered on any sites of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. In view of the fact that circulation is theoretically possible by way of the Ottawa River, we suggest that this absence reflects animosity between the Saint-Lawrence Iroquoians and the Algonkians from western Quebec. We conclude that the endemic conflicts observed by the Europeans in the seventeenth century had deep historic roots.

The use of neutron activation analyses tends to point to the same conclusions (Fig. 20). These analyses show that the clays used to make the “protohuron” vases originated outside the Abitibi region. These clays are chemically different from the clays found in the Saint-Lawrence valley. Their chemical profile dispersal tends to show that a greater number of sources were used than for the Laurel and Blackduck vases. These facts would be consistent with the hypothesis of an acquisition of vases through trade with the Ontario Iroquoians since the beginning of the Late Woodland period.

Between A.D. 1200 and 1600, the Algonkians of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region were subjected to a dumping of proto-huronic pottery, so intense that they abandoned their own traditions in the space of only a few generations. This fact is associated with the establishment of an economic network controlled by the Huron-Wendat and their allies, which was later used by the French for their trade after the dismemberment of Huronia in 1647.



Figure 13. Pickering and Uren Sherds.

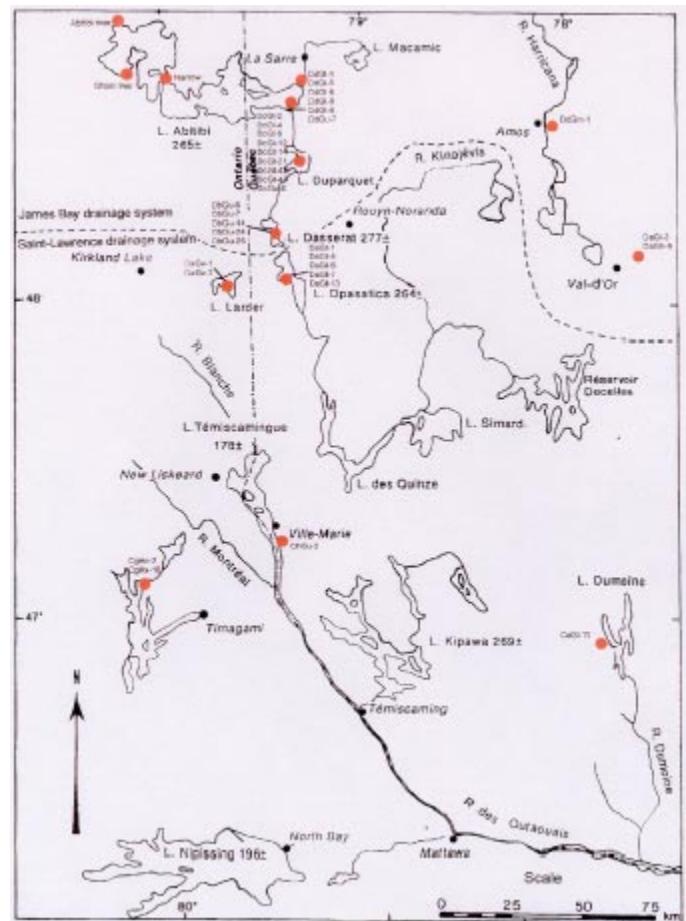


Figure 14. Distribution of Mamiwinnik Sites.

Site	Reference	Uncorrected/corrected date	Sample number	Phase
DaGt-1 (Struct.4)	Côté, 1989	480 ± 70 / 1436 AD	Beta-33897	Lalonde
DaGt-1 (Struct.2)	Côté, 1989	660 ± 60 / 1322 AD	Beta-33898	Middleport
DaGt-1 (Struct.8)	Côté, 1989	650 ± 80 / 1350 AD	Beta-33900	Middleport
DaGt-1 (Struct.12)	Côté, 1989	680 ± 70 / 1325 AD	Beta-33901	Middleport
DcGt-2	Marois, 1989	620 ± 45 / 1355 AD	???	Middleport
DdGt-4	Marois, 1989	465 ± 115 / 1450 AD	???	Lalonde
DdGt-5	Marois, 1989	265 ± 55 / 1650 AD	S-1151	Algonquin
DdGt-5	Marois, 1989	310 ± 60 / 1635 AD	S-1152	Algonquin
DdGt-5	Marois, 1989	535 ± 35 / 1413 AD	S-1050	Lalonde
DdGt-5	Marois, 1989	705 ± 85 / 1291 AD	S-1051	Middleport
ChGu-2	Côté, 1996	625 ± 95 / 1351 AD	???	Middleport
ChGu-2	Côté, 1996	730 ± 80 / 1286 AD	???	Middleport
CgHa-2	Carscallen, 1992	760 ± 60 / 1280 AD	T.O 4334	???

Figure 15. Mamiwinnik C14 Dates.



Figure 16. Late Woodland Artifacts.

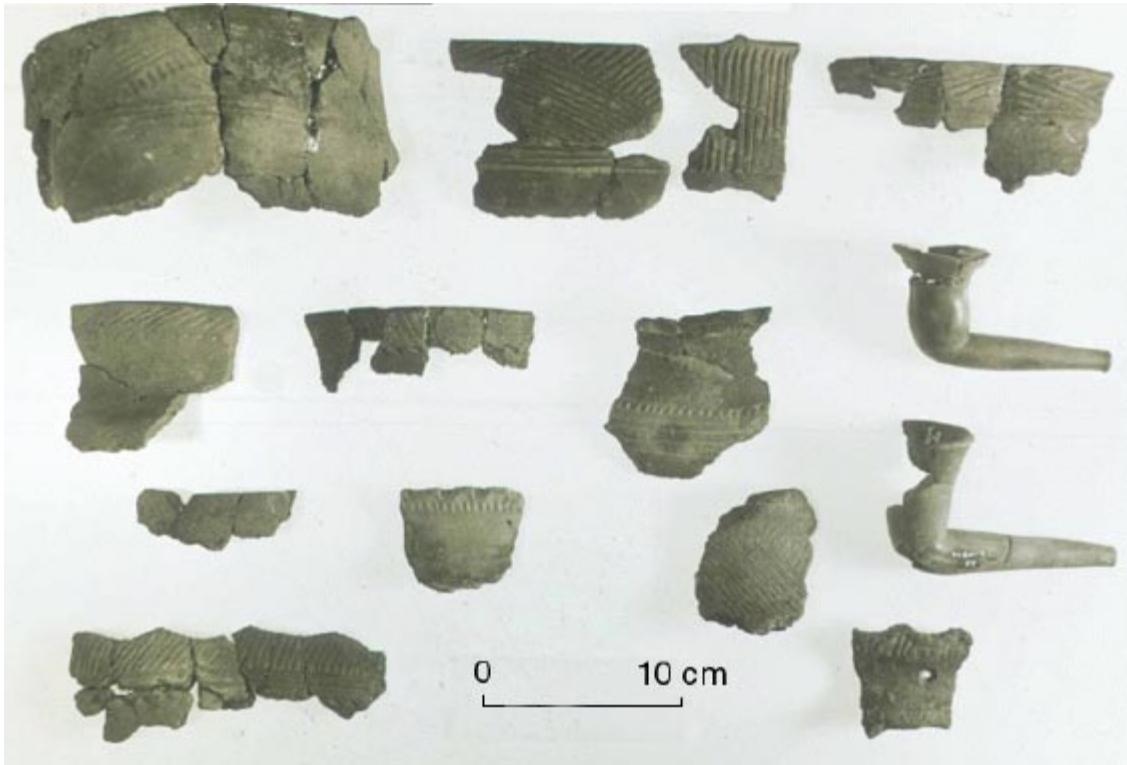


Figure 17. Mamiwinnick Pottery



Figures 18 and 19. Close up of a Mamiwinnik Vase.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the course of this short presentation, we have sought to illustrate the 10 last centuries of ceramic evolution as we perceive them on the basis of 13 years of archaeological work in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. A certain number of facts now appear before us. First of all, it would seem that the use of ceramic is not anecdotal. The development of this medium occurs in congruence with what one observes in neighbouring regions in the Boreal forest. However, this apparent continuity doesn't imply homogeneity.

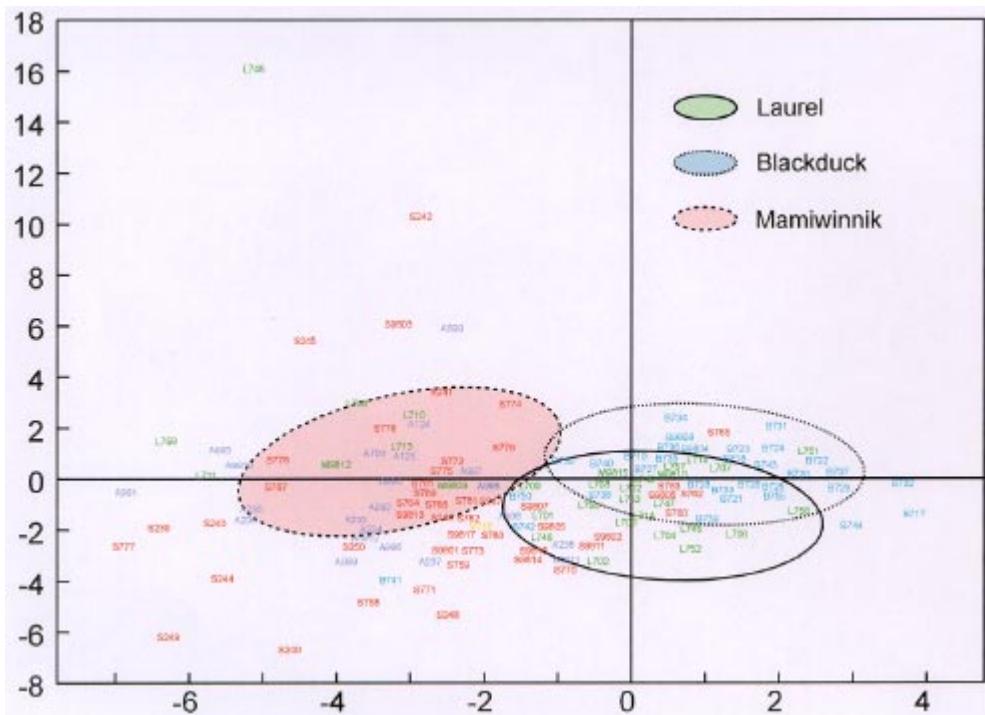


Figure 20. Neutron Activation Analysis Showing Results for Mamiwinnik Sherds.

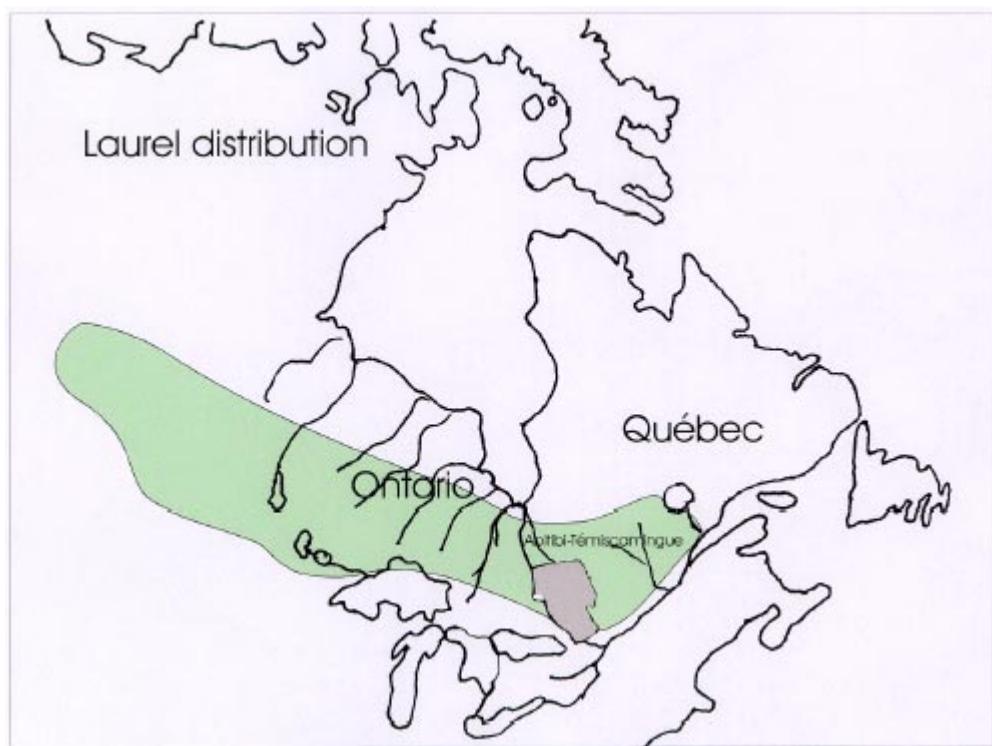


Figure 21. Laurel Distribution.

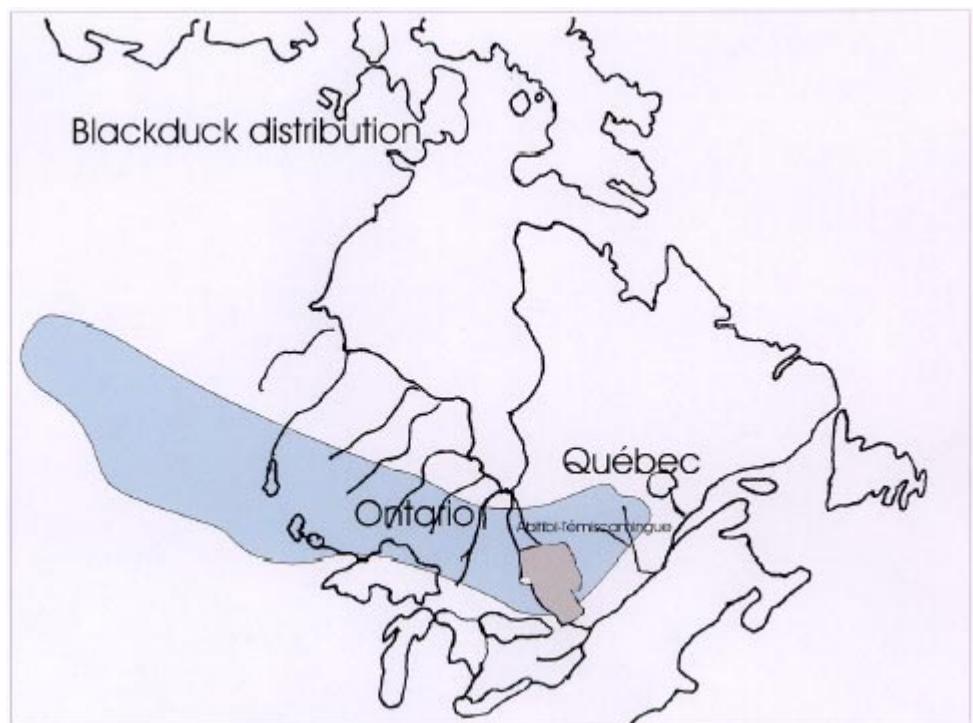


Figure 22. Blackduck Distribution.

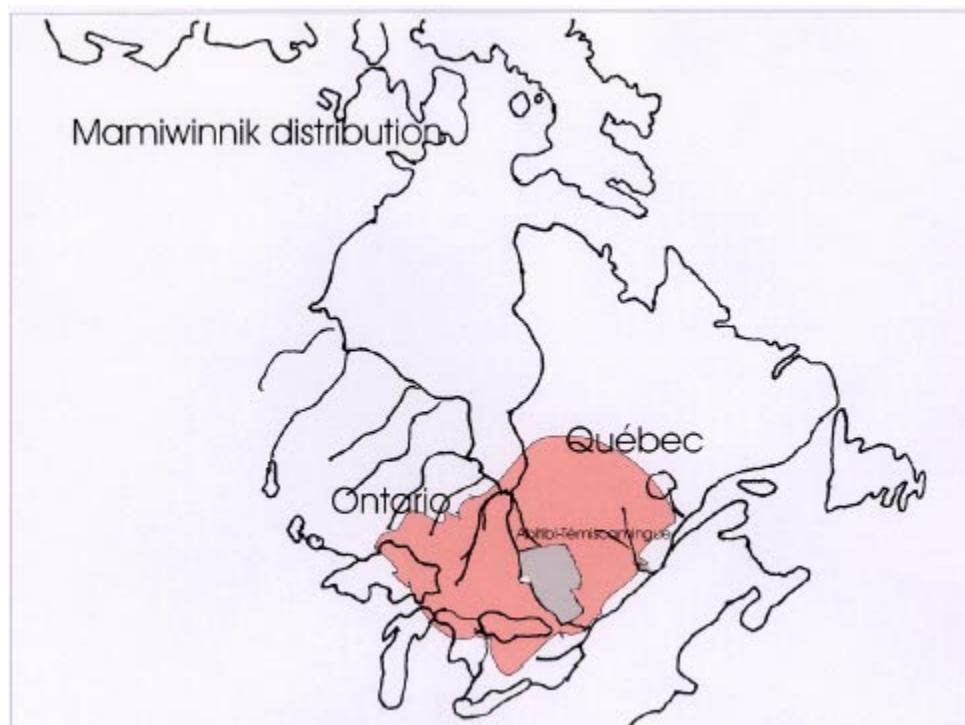


Figure 23. Mamiwinnik Distribution.

Indeed, in view of the vast geographic area covered by these episodes, much local variation is to be expected between Lake Superior and northwestern Quebec. Instead of emphasizing differences and multiplying the taxa, we have chosen to associate the manifestations visible in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region with the typically Algonkian traditions well known further west. However, by doing so, we adopt a terminology which allows the distinction of sub-groups, product of local variation. We believe that our modest contribution consists in a taxonomic proposition which will permit a stronger coherence in the terms and concepts used for the eastern part of the Shield.

The creation of the Eastern Laurel concept for a region of 200,000 km² spreading across the Ontario and Quebec border and to the south of the 50th parallel, is an example of this (Fig. 21). The archaeological finds characteristic of the Middle Woodland period are related to the developments found in the Shield, but are somewhat distinct to Laurel sites found around Lake Superior. Eastern Laurel would appear around A.D. 500 and last up to A.D. 900. The period preceding the appearance of Eastern Laurel, between 400 B.C. to A.D. 500 is still misunderstood, since we can't associate any site or particular assemblage to it.

Following the same logic, it seems to us that the same sort of effort of classification should be applied to Blackduck occupations. We believe that a certain coherence links the occupations to the East of Lake Superior in the Boreal forest between the end of Middle Woodland and the Early part of Late Woodland. However, this coherence does not imply homogeneity for this entire territory. As a consequence, we suggest the concept of Eastern Blackduck appearing directly after Eastern Laurel (Fig. 22).

Finally, we suggest "Mamiwinnik"(2) as a term under which the prehistoric events taking place between A.D.1300 and 1650 may conveniently be grouped. This new taxon serves the purpose of designating Algonkian identity in the archaeological finds and dissociates them from Iroquoian(3) ones (Fig. 23).

We hope that this taxonomic contribution for northwestern Quebec will serve to illustrate the dynamic role the occupants of the Boreal forest played in taking part in vast networks, linking them with surrounding groups. Never were these occupations isolated nor unchanging. They show both the development of local traditions and the adoption of surrounding ideas, the result of which adds to the complexity of the Woodland concept in the Boreal forest.

Endnotes

1. The Arno site, located on lake Opasatica, was excavated during the summer of 2000. The report will be available very shortly.

2. Term used by Algonquin peoples to designate themselves.

3. It should be mentioned that this new taxon does not exclude the use of a common terminology when designating chronological substages. For example, we could speak of the Middleport substage under the great Mamiwinnik stage, implying a clearly Algonkian development, synchronous to the Iroquoian development known as the Middleport substage of the Middle Ontario Iroquoian Stage, appearing between A.D. 1300 and 1400.

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