

RARE ONEOTA PIPES FROM THE WHITEFISH ISLAND SITE  
IN SAULT STE. MARIE, ONTARIO

by Thor Conway

The Whitefish Island Site, located beside the rapids of the St. Mary's River in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario is one of the largest prehistoric and historic Ojibwa villages preserved in the upper Great Lakes. In the 1970's a series of test excavations was made on Whitefish Island to sample various components. Extensive evidence of trade contacts occurs among the huge artifact inventory. This is not surprising considering Whitefish Island's central position between Lake Huron, Lake Michigan and Lake Superior. Two stone pipe fragments, which were found in an early historic context, add to our understanding of ancient ties to the western Lake Michigan Oneota people who resided in present day Wisconsin.

The Artifacts and Their Cultural Context

Whitefish Island has yielded one of the largest samples of aboriginal pipes from Late Woodland and Early Historic components anywhere on eastern Lake Superior and northern Lake Huron. Most of these pipes are fired clay specimens representing an external Iroquois pipe tradition and an indigenous Ojibwa pipe making tradition. Since Whitefish Island was abandoned around 1650 AD, the later growth of catlinite, "Micmac" and lead inlay stone pipes that occurs during the French regime doesn't appear among the archaeological remains.

Disc-Shaped Pipes

Disc-shaped catlinite pipes belong to the Oneota tradition of eastern Wisconsin especially in the historic era (Hamilton 1967; Mason, 1981:369).

Two pieces of Oneota disc-shaped pipes showed up in excavation area L operation on Whitefish Island. A characteristic flat, wide lip portion of a bowl (catalogue #CdIc-2-210)(Figure 1A), and a tapered rectangular stem fragment (catalogue #CdIc-2-210)(Figure 1B), allow reconstruction based on identical examples from Wisconsin (Figure 1C).

The flat bowl piece belonged to a classic Oneota pipe. It shows the characteristic wide lip area. Catlinite pipestone from Minnesota was used for the pipe represented by the bowl fragment. The pipe bowl piece has been deliberately cut into a crescent in a manner identical to numerous Oneota disc pipes from Missouri (Hamilton, 1967:29&30). During its manufacture, a thin line was cut into the narrow side of the lip. It completely encircles the flat lip edge. Later scratch marks or light cut marks cover the broad, flat lip area.

The side of the stem fragment is decorated with a low angled zigzag line. It is made from a siltstone found near Sault Ste. Marie. The stem is rectangular in cross-section with a tiny portion of the lip being preserved at one end.

Oneota Artifacts in the Lake Superior Area

Oneota people who represent the archaeological predecessors of the Siouan speaking Winnebago, developed trade ties with the Ojibwa of Lake Superior and the upper peninsula of Michigan. Distinctive Oneota everted pottery, with its crushed shell tempering, appears at main coastal Ojibwa villages like Pic River (Fox, 1975), Sinclair Cove, and Whitefish Island (Conway, 1977), in the Lake

Superior area, and at Juntunen in straits of Mackinac (McPherson, 1967:118-121). It demonstrates the movement of goods from southwest of Lake Michigan (present day Wisconsin) into Ojibwa country in the early historic period.

The two disc pipes from Whitefish Island provide added evidence of this trade route. They are the first examples recovered from an excavated context in Ontario. A few disc pipes occur in surface collections from sites in southwestern Ontario.

Each of the known Oneota pots and/or pipes that have been found in Ontario dates to the Early Historic period. Prehistoric antecedents of this trade connection may be indicated by the rare finds of Ramey Incised style pottery at the large Ojibwa villages known as the Juntunen site (McPherson 1967:116-118) and Whitefish Island site (Conway, 1977:25).

#### Indian Pipe Artifact Patterns

As research progresses in the upper Great Lakes, we are increasingly able to distinguish regional artifact patterns that often correlate with different tribes of Indians. Clay pipes first appeared in northern Lake Huron and eastern Lake Superior around 1450 AD. They arrived as well-made Iroquoian products. Immediately, the resident Ojibwa responded by creating less well-made clay pipes with non-Iroquois designs. Both groups of pipes continued to be used until the historic era when stone pipes replace the clay ones.

The Sault Ste. Marie area Ojibwa appear to have used a thick cone-shaped pipe in the historic era while the Oneota were smoking the disc pipes. By the 1700's there is a growth in stone pipe styles which includes various catlinite pipes, Micmac style pipes and many other forms which spread with the French traders and their metal files. Cultural distinctions become blurred with reference to stone pipes as the historic era progresses.

The Oneota pipes and pottery provide solid clues to early historic trade between the Ojibwa and Siouan speaking Winnebago formerly of the Green Bay, Wisconsin area. As research continues, more can be learned about trade patterns in the Great Lakes. We are learning that the early French traders didn't set up trade networks as they are often credited. Rather, they made use of well established Indian trade networks complete with middlemen in some instances.

#### Acknowledgements

My wife Julia made the drawings of the pipe fragments. Bill Fox, provincial archaeologist for southwestern Ontario, identified the pipestone. The Whitefish Island excavations were done by the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture several years ago. Chuck Cleland of Michigan State University provided important comparative references for the pipes.

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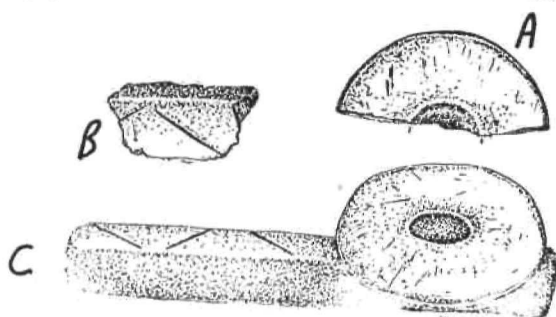


Figure 1

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