

2.2 Ancient History of the Lower Ottawa River Valley

Dr Jean-Luc Pilon
Curator of Ontario Archaeology
Canadian Museum of Civilization

2.2.1 Archaeology in the Ottawa Valley

The following discussion surrounding the ancient history of the Ottawa Valley does not attempt to present a full picture of its lengthy past. The Ottawa Valley contains literally thousands of archaeological sites, and to date only a handful have been studied by archaeologists. Still fewer of these have been properly published. Consequently, any reconstruction of the region's ancient history is based on preliminary interpretations and a few more certain findings. The purpose of this summary is to provide a first blush of the richness of the Ottawa Valley's pre-contact past without labouring the discussion with details.

The history of archaeological investigation of the ancient history of the Ottawa River Valley, and in particular, the stretch of river downstream of the Mattawa River, has been influenced by several historical factors. For nearly 150 years, there has been a national historical institution located within the city of Ottawa. Paradoxically, since it is a national, and not regional institution, its scholars have generally worked outside of the region. Another factor which has affected the level of interest in the pre-contact ancient history of the region is the nature of the lifestyles of the peoples in the region who were relatively mobile hunter/gatherer groups, leaving few visible remains attesting to their life and times. However, as will be seen below, this situation is far from a hard fast rule.

2.2.2 The Champlain Sea and Early Ottawa River

It has been said that First Nations have been on this land ever since the beginning of time, when the world was created. At first glance, this might seem to contradict the archaeological theory that the First Nations that eventually came to populate the entire American continent originally crossed from an ancestral homeland(s) in northeastern Asia, crossing over the proverbial Bering Land Bridge anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000 or more years ago. This argument can certainly be supported with scientific data. However, new discoveries could re-open these discussions at any moment; such is the nature of archaeology.

Another way of looking at this question is to consider the retreat of the vast Laurentide Ice sheet from the valley, a process that began around 15,000 years ago. Immediately following the retreat of this ice sheet, salt waters from the Atlantic Ocean flooded the valley, forming the inland Champlain Sea. This sea supported a rich diversity of marine life, including some of the largest mammals on earth, such as the Bowhead Whale. A skeleton of a Bowhead Whale was found near Pembroke during the 1970s.

With time, the earth's crust adjusted from the removal of the immense weight of the glacier and the sea drained. This process ended about 10,000 years ago. For a while, the sea was replaced by an enlarged, but gradually diminishing version of the Ottawa River fed by fresh water from the Great Lakes. During this time, the land as we know it was being created. This process took several thousand years with waves of change as the climate improved and soils built up through successive vegetation types.

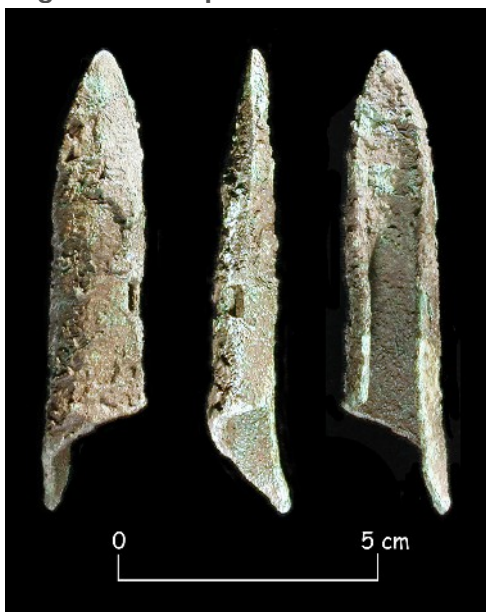
2.2.3 The Earliest Ottawa Valley Peoples

It is during this initial, dynamic appearance of the Ottawa Valley that tangible evidence of people first appeared. Archaeological evidence of this period is difficult to find, recognize and document, in part because of the nature of the items which were left behind as well as the more recent uses of the land, including farming and urban development. Another factor which makes the discovery of such early sites difficult is the fact that the shores of the Champlain Sea and of the early version of the Ottawa River were changing quite rapidly and did not leave clearly delineated beaches to guide the search for early sites. It is only in the last few years that archaeologists have been systematically searching out such locations and successfully identifying sites possibly contemporaneous with late Champlain Sea shorelines. Were people using the marine resources of the sea? Did they follow the herds of caribou and other game species which were also discovering the new land as conditions improved and allowed? Until good undisturbed sites of this period are found and carefully studied, we can only speculate. However, judging from what was occurring in regions further south and west, it is highly likely that as the first groups of hunter/gatherers entered the region, they would have had very flexible economies able to quickly adapt to the new and ever-changing conditions and exploit the available resources.

The best unequivocal information relating to the early peopling of the Valley is found in peripheral regions. Beautiful lanceolate points very similar to specimens dated to 8000-8500 years ago were found in islands in the St. Lawrence River near Cornwall, Ontario. A similar point with small notches near its base was found by a collector in the Perth region. It likely dates to that same time period or slightly later. These artefacts are reminiscent of projectile points (probably the tips of lances or spears in these instances, not arrowheads) that have been found along the south shore of the St. Lawrence Valley and westward in central and southern Ontario. In those regions evidence strongly suggests that caribou hunting was a major focus of hunting activities, but as with the earlier groups, they must have hunted a broad range of species in order to successfully adapt to the region. To date, we lack excavated sites capable of informing us on the exact nature of their subsistence activities.

2.2.4 The Pembroke Sites and Evidence of Early Trade Networks

Our understanding of ancient lifeways improves dramatically for the period beginning about 6000 years ago (Fig. 2.1 and 2.2). Two very important sites were found in the early 1960s on islands in the Ottawa River near Pembroke. The sites were strategically located at good fishing spots on the river, but also at important locations within the regional transportation / communication corridors. In fact, one of the most spectacular aspects of the artefacts left behind at these sites was the use of native copper, an ore found in nearly pure form that has been shown to have originated at the western end of Lake Superior. We can now better understand the scale of communication and trade networks in the Great Lakes region, networks in which the Ottawa Valley played a large part in the distant past. Archaeological research on other, later sites shows that these networks became increasingly complex right up until contact with Europeans in the 17th century.

Figure 2.1 Harpoon Head

Source: Canadian Museum of Civilization, artefact number BkGg-11-1046. Photo: Jean-Luc Pilon.

A harpoon head from the Allumette Island site near Pembroke, Ontario, manufactured approximately 6000 years ago from native copper originating in the area west of Lake Superior.

Figure 2.2 Copper Knife or Lance Head

Source: Canadian Museum of Civilization, artefact number BkGg-12-5665

A native copper knife or lance head from the 5500 year old Morrsson Island – 6 site near Pembroke, Ontario.

These two sites demonstrate strong links with archaeological sites documented much further south, and throughout northeastern North America. Projectile points were readily subjected to stylistic adaptation and modification, and the people in the Pembroke region between 5000 and 6000 years ago were full participants in the styles shared over a very wide area. These traits strongly demonstrate that groups were rarely isolated, and participated in extensive networks where goods, materials, ideas, and likely also people, moved freely and widely.

2.2.5 Adapting to Ecological Niches

Another set of sites has been documented more recently in the Pendleton area of the South Nation River drainage basin. There, a number of localities, apparently restricted in their distribution to the edge of a palaeo-delta left behind when the Ottawa River was much higher than it currently is, have been identified, and at least one has received more than just a cursory inspection. The sites appear restricted to the period between about 3500 and 3800 years ago (Fig. 2.3). There is remarkable homogeneity between these localities which are separated by several hundred meters. Additionally, the sampled site revealed a high number of pit features, some of which might have been hearths. Soils which made up these man-made features have been found to contain a rich diversity of macrofossils, including berry seeds, nutshell fragments, calcined and highly fragmented fish and possibly mammal bone and charred wood. The artefact collection was dominated by heavy working tools and projectile points. Preliminary analysis has only begun, but this data suggests that at this particular time period, people were seeking out very particular ecological niches which produced a wide range of animal and plant foods. If nothing else, these

Figure 2.3 Projectile Points

Source : Canadian Museum of Civilization, artefact numbers : top row (l to r) BfFs-2 :1, 16, 7, 9, 5; bottom row (l to r) BfFs-2 :11, 4, 13. Photo: Jean-Luc Pilon.

Projectile points or arrowheads found at the Lamoureux site (BfFs-2), located near Pendleton, Ontario, estimated at between 3500 and 3800 years old.

sites and many others within the Ottawa Valley show how intricate life in the past was. Clearly, people needed to possess an intimate knowledge of their environment and the changing seasonal availability of the land's resources in order to successfully live in the area.

2.2.6 Ottawa Valley Ceramics

Beginning around 2500 years ago, ceramics were introduced into the region from more southern areas where the history of modifying tempered clay in order to produce durable cooking and storage vessels was longer. The Ottawa Valley is particularly rich in ceramic bearing sites, where some spectacular finds having been made over the past four decades. For example, at Indian Point, on the north side of the Ottawa River, once again in the Pembroke area, one of the earliest styles of pots, known to archaeologists

Figure 2.4 Ceramic Container

Source : Canadian Museum of Civilization, artefact number BfGs-2 :36. Photo: Jean-Luc Pilon.

Point Peninsula type ceramic container dated to more than 2500 years ago, found at Constance Bay, Ontario.

as Vinette I, was recovered nearly complete. At Constance Bay, a very large Point Peninsula style pot (Fig. 2.4) was reconstructed following excavations in a cottage yard. It has an associated radiocarbon date on the order of 2500 years ago. At Lusville, three intact ceramic pots dating to the contact period were found in rock overhangs or eroding from streams.

These pots, along with thousands of fragments found at dozens of sites in the region, document a long-established Ottawa Valley ceramic tradition. Like other traditions, the Ottawa Valley ceramic style was influenced by neighbouring practices over a large area, and eventually evolved into a local expression of contemporary stylistic tendencies.

2.2.7 Wide Trade Networks Following the River Networks

At the mouth of the Gatineau River, an archaeological complex of nearly twenty sites documents the last 3000-3500 years of pre-contact history and has been extensively studied during the past decade. These sites show a continuous occupation by a local population as well as continued contacts with far-flung regions as attested by the presence of exotic raw materials coming from as far away as the tip of Labrador, southwestern Ontario and Lake Superior. Indeed, the area around the city of Ottawa is particularly well situated for water access to a vast region, being at the confluence of the Gatineau River, gateway to the interior of Québec, the Ottawa, leading to the upper Great Lakes or to the St. Lawrence, and the Rideau River, offering access to the upper St. Lawrence Valley and the lower Great Lakes (Figure 2.5).

2.2.8 Contact Period Algonquin Peoples

Samuel de Champlain was the first European to make a record of his observations in the Ottawa Valley, known at that time as the Grand River (*Kichi Sibi* in Algonquin) or the River of the Algonmequin. Many of the people that he met during that trip identified themselves with various locations or tributaries along the way. Today we group these apparently distinct bands into the entity known as the Algonquins. To date, little work has taken place to study the archaeological remains of contact period Algonquins, although their sites have been found (or at least contact period artefacts are often found at sites with remains from much older periods). In the lower part of the river, this search has been severely handicapped by the construction of the dam at Carillon. As a result, the later sites have either been submerged under the waters of the Ottawa or the artificial maintenance of high water levels throughout the summer has exposed low lying sites to erosion which they normally would not have experienced given the lower summertime flow of the river.

Summary

The Ottawa Valley contains thousands of archaeological sites, few of which have been studied in detail. The ancient history of the Ottawa Valley below Mattawa reaches back to when the Ottawa River was quite literally forming, and spans across millennia. During this time, the peoples of the Ottawa Valley developed an intimate relationship with the land and distinct cultural characteristics, including a rich ceramic tradition. At the same time, artefacts from the Ottawa Valley demonstrate wide trade and communication networks that existed up to 6000 years ago, enabled by the Ottawa River and its tributaries. Despite the relative lack of archaeological research in the Ottawa Valley, the data which we do possess provides brief but exciting glimpses into ways of life which have been constantly changing and adapting.

Figure 2.5
Ceremonial Knife



Ceremonial knife found at the Morrison Island – 2 site and manufactured from a type of stone only found in Ohio, USA.

Source: Canadian Museum of Civilization, artefact number BkGg-10-10. Photo: Jean-Luc Pilon.