

6-15-2011

The Symbolic Role of Lithic Materials as Evinced Through The Smoking Pipes of the Early Historic Iroquoians

Trevor Fowler

The University of Western Ontario

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fowler, Trevor (2007) "The Symbolic Role of Lithic Materials as Evinced Through The Smoking Pipes of the Early Historic Iroquoians," *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol15/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsha1@uwo.ca.

The Symbolic Role of Lithic Materials as Evinced Through The Smoking Pipes of the Early Historic Iroquoians

Keywords

lithics, smoking pipes, historic Iroquois, Great Lakes region, symbolism

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

The Symbolic Role of Lithic Materials as Evinced Through The Smoking Pipes of the Early Historic Iroquoians

Trevor Fowler

Introduction

This paper proposes that early Historic period Iroquoian pipe assemblages in the Great Lakes region show evidence of material-based symbolic differentiation and calls for a greater examination of material usage in determining the personal and societal value placed on smoking pipes. This paper will attempt to delineate broad trends as opposed to small-scale particulars for two reasons; 1) the evidence of stylistic commonalities throughout the early Historic Iroquoian interaction sphere allows for it, and 2) the current paucity of site data examining pipe material requires that an initial broader perspective must first be made plausible in order to generate a valid framework for subsequent examination of pipe meaning. As such, this paper will examine wider trends in the role of materials in pipe production and usage, and will be coupled with currently available site data.

Background

Establishing the existence of broad trends in early Historic Iroquoian pipe assemblages requires an examination of numerous and varying groups in geographically segregated regions. It is not my intent to homogenize the great variety that exists within these distinct cultures, but rather to establish that trade and stylistic trends overlapped to such an extent as to allow for broader-scale comparisons to be made in pipe production. Several archaeologists have commented on the material and stylistic

similarities found in pipe assemblages of disparate groups of Great Lakes Iroquoians. Research by King (1977) and Kuhn (2004) has demonstrated that the majority of Iroquoian pipe styles in the early Historic period were not contained to a particular group or locality. In Kuhn's (2004: 153) words, "unlike pottery, most pipe styles were pan-Iroquoian in distribution."

Wonderley (2005: 211) found that the dominant early Historic pipe form "throughout the Iroquoian world" was a one-piece pipe of approximately 15 centimetres long and made of fired clay; the dispersion of this style was precipitated by contact and trade. In fact, Wonderley (2005: 211) continues by stating that the commonalities of material and form reflect the formation of a pre-contact Iroquoian confederacy. That Wonderley proposes the idea of an inter-tribal confederacy based on the archaeological record certainly implies the presence of broad stylistic trends, which would include pipes. Taken together, this information justifies an examination of early Historic pan-Iroquoian smoking pipe trends.

Symbolism in Non-Pipe Lithics

Using the broader geographical perspective outlined above, this paper will now proceed to establish the importance of lithics to the Iroquoians by examining its use beyond simple raw material. It will be shown that the early Historic Iroquoians used lithic material itself as a vehicle for symbolic meaning.

Lithic material is an integral part of the Iroquoian Oneida origin story. The appearance of a 4000 pound oblong stone appeared to two brothers who were told that this stone would be

the altar around which their rituals would be based (Canfield 1902: 188). The stone followed the brothers from camp to camp, becoming the 'bedrock' of their identity; the brothers and their descendants came to call themselves the Oneida or, "people of the upright stone" (Canfield 1902: 188). The importance of an origin story in establishing a people's symbolic relationship with the world cannot be delved into in detail here, but neither can it be understated. Canfield (1902:191) notes that the 4000 pound rock was still in existence at the time of writing, indicating not only the monumental importance of the stone itself, but also its continuation as a source of symbolic power through to the present day. Ethnographic studies of Iroquoian stone carvers confirms the continued importance of stone as a material source; contemporary carvers still employ steatite, a popular material for creating lithic smoking pipes during the early Historic Iroquoian world (Dinniwell 1984: 88). The carvers speak of seeing a form within the stone, which can be seen as demonstrative of the continuation of Iroquoian animism forwarded by Boyle (1900: 265) in early historical accounts of the Great Lakes Iroquoians.

To further the notion of the animistic nature of stone, Tooker (1967: 81) identifies appeasement rituals in which the Huron burned tobacco on a large stone boulder believed to be imbued with a discontented spirit of a man turned to stone. Beyond possible ritual uses of tobacco among the Iroquoians, it is important to note here is that this ritual required the stone boulder for the Iroquoians to engage in symbolic activity. This clearly demonstrates the notion of lithic material as a potential and potent source of symbolic activity (Tooker 1967: 81).

It is at this point necessary to go beyond particular instances of the symbolic usage of lithics and establish such usage in a broader context. The symbolic power of lithics is not limited to large boulders; I will demonstrate that decorative, and thus not wholly utilitarian, ornaments including lithic gorgets and pendants are prevalent in early historic Iroquoian mortuary artifact assemblages. This does not imply that all mortuary sites contained gorgets in every grave; this fact only adds to the symbolic potentiality of the gorgets, as their unequal distribution among individual grave assemblages may be conceived as an indication of individual status differences.

According to Bradley (1987: 69), gorgets and other charms were created by first finding an appropriately-shaped stone. That the form of the stone is in some way expressive of its symbolic value can be contrasted with the potential utilization of clay as an ornament; though clay could likely be easily and elaborately decorated with more complex shapes and imagery, I have found no evidence of whole or fragmentary Iroquoian ceramic gorgets in Great Lakes artifact assemblages. It should be noted that gorgets made of other non-lithic materials (notably marine shell) are found in the Iroquoian artifact assemblage; what is of importance to this paper is the pervasive presence of lithic ornamental artifacts and the apparent absence of recognizable ceramic ones.

Pipes as Vehicles of Symbol

The intention of this paper is to discern the differences between lithic and ceramic material in the interpretation of symbolism in pipe

assemblages. It may seem odd then, that I should begin with exploring the similarities that exist between lithic and ceramic pipes; however, knowledge of the similarities will only serve to highlight the differences between the two materials, and the unique place of lithics as pipe material will become evident.

The pan-Iroquoian stylistic similarities touched upon earlier can be extended to the styles of various effigy pipes found in ceramic and lithic assemblages of early Historic Iroquoians in the Great Lakes region. Effigy pipes are widely accepted to be imbued with stylistic symbolism, as the various human, animal, and hybrid effigies depicted do not seem to serve a strictly utilitarian purpose and the imagery on them have long been thought to be used in shamanistic ritual (Sempowski 2004: 263; Wonderley 2005: 215). Though study of non-effigy pipe styles may yield fruitful data, this paper focuses mainly on effigy pipes. Because the nature of effigy pipe symbolism is widely accepted, it serves as a useful diagnostic for elucidating differences between lithic and clay pipe symbolism.

Mathews (1981: 34-42), one of the few Great Lakes archaeologists to have examined the Iroquoian effigy pipe in detail, provides a useful overview of ceramic and lithic effigy pipe research done by various Great Lakes archaeologists: Noble (1992), Kenyon (1982) and Boyle (1900). Summarizing Mathew's pipe assemblage data, two broad trends emerge:

1. Ceramic pipes outnumber lithic pipes by a great volume
2. Various animal and human effigies appear on both lithic and ceramic pipes. (Mathews 1981: 34-42)

Given these trends, the presence of an effigy alone cannot be considered uniquely diagnostic of lithic pipes but neither can it be diagnostic of ceramic pipes. Though the raw number of ceramic effigies outweighs lithic forms, the dominant overall pipe form is, as mentioned above, ceramic. I will examine the relative proportions of lithic and ceramic pipes in the next section.

Chapdelaine's (1992: 33-35) study of the Mandeville site, which contained a large smoking pipe collection, revealed that pipe size and discard behaviour appeared to have no relation to the presence of an effigy on a pipe, illustrating that a pipe's 'value' may not be related to the presence or absence of symbolic imagery. Although the focus of the symbolic value of smoking pipes has been on effigy pipes, it bears noting that evidence of symbolic importance can be seen in behaviours applied to both effigy and non-effigy Iroquoian pipes alike; many non-effigy pipes appear to have been ritually broken and could therefore be considered sacred (Mathews 1980:303).

Variance Between Clay and Lithic Pipes

Given the premises that a) lithic materials hold a unique place in the ideology of the early historic Iroquoians versus ceramic and b) smoking pipes can be vessels of symbolic value, I will now explore the role of lithics in the symbolism of Iroquoian pipes.

First, examining the actual process of smoking a pipe reveals differing trends between lithic and ceramic pipe usage. Historical documents of early European and

Iroquoian contact reveal that smoking the one-piece clay pipe was largely an individual enterprise, whereas the separated-stemmed lithic pipe was used for communal gatherings, in which the pipe was passed around to each member present (Paper 1992: 164). It will suffice now to note this difference; possible interpretations will be discussed later.

A valid method for attempting to discern differences between lithic and ceramic pipe usage is to examine the grave goods of various early Historic Iroquoian sites because, as Noble (2004: 186) notes, the presence of Iroquoian grave goods was firmly entrenched by that time. The overall paucity of pipe material data in Iroquoian grave goods makes it more difficult to ascertain if there are any significant differences between material usages. While the presence and number of pipes is recorded, little attention is paid to the material; indeed, some site reports fail to mention pipe material at all. Table 1 is a summary of early Historic sites that contain data on pipe material:

Site	Date	Ceramic pipes	Lithic pipes
Christianson	A.D. 1615-1630	181	5
Thorold	A.D. 1615-1630	57	1
Grimsby	A.D. 1630-1645	28	3
Walker	A.D. 1610-1646	142	12
Hamilton	A.D. 1630-1651	422	16

Table 1: Number of Pipes found at Historic Sites (Noble 1992:42)

This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list. As stated, there is a general lack of pipe material data and, taken by themselves, these numbers do not tell us much about possible differences.

However, work by Noble (1992: 42) reveals that, while ceramic pipe production outweighs the number of lithic pipes produced, the grave goods at the Grimsby and Walker burial sites exhibit a proportionally higher percentage of lithic pipes than those found in occupation sites, averaging 9.4% and 7.7% of pipe quantity, respectively. Of the occupation sites studied, lithic pipe percentages range between 1.7% and 3.6% (Noble 1992: 42). The high percentage of lithic pipes in grave goods supports the notion that they had greater personal value than ceramic pipes. While many different reasons as to *why* lithic pipes are found more in grave goods can be posited, it cannot be denied that a significant difference does indeed exist. Unfortunately, Noble does not distinguish between effigy and non-effigy pipes in this instance; however, it has been shown that pipe morphology is not the determinant feature through which symbolic value is expressed.

Adopting a strictly utilitarian standpoint, one can understand the high number of ceramic pipes present in the above data, but one must then consider why stone pipe production continued at all. In an experiment in which a wooden drill and fine abrasive sand on steatite was used to construct a stone smoking tube, which is relatively simple when one considers the morphology of an effigy pipe, William Fowler found that he averaged 0.625 to 0.1875 inches per hour and that the process represented up to four days of labour working during daylight hours to complete (Rutsch 1973: 65). While it is true that Fowler was an unskilled driller, the molding and firing of a comparable ceramic tube would

undoubtedly require less effort. I propose that the extra effort required to create a stone smoking device is indicative of the lithic pipe's greater non-utilitarian value. As discussed earlier, the permanency of stone may have been what gave the lithic pipe its greater symbolic value. Evidence shows that the edges of some stone pipes were worn smooth, leading archaeologist Edward Rutsch (1973: 66) to posit that they have been reused, perhaps beyond their utility. In this light, lithic pipes can, like gorgets, be seen as symbolic heirlooms.

I have challenged any significant connection between effigy pipe imagery and material; however, Fox's (2004: 292-294) examination of Iroquoian mythical imagery, which I shall crudely call *fantastical effigies*, reveals a distinct correlation between lithics and representations of the 'underwater panther' and 'thunderbird'. Though it was not the purpose of Fox's paper, almost every fantastical effigy examined was found on lithic material (Fox 2004: 292-294). The sole instance of a ceramic fantastical effigy identified by Fox was an underwater panther from the Lawson site (Fox 2004: 284). The lithic form of the underwater panther was found in pipe (and disc) form at the Pearson site, the Ripley site, and the Historic Neutral Hamilton Village, as well as in the regions of Hunters Point ON, Carlisle ON, and Thunder Bay MI (Fox 2004: 292-294). The thunderbird form was represented in unprovenienced Ontario and Ohio stone pipes, the Otter Creek drainage basin, and the Peace Bridge and Sealey Historic Neutral Village sites (Fox 2004: 284-294). I do not suggest that there are no ceramic thunderbird representations, but it should be pointed out that Fox makes no reference to a ceramic-based thunderbird image. Working with the assumption that

mythical figures such as the underwater panther and thunderbird have symbolic or cosmological meaning, it is important to note that, while Fox's work should not be considered exhaustive, the tendency for these forms to be represented on lithic pipes as opposed to ceramic warrants a closer examination of material usage in conveying pipe meaning. As a further caveat, one must be careful not to presumptuously inflate the importance of such seemingly fantastic imagery.

Discussion

Early Historic Iroquoian pipe assemblages evince a definite symbolic component. As has been shown, stone was, and is, a part of Iroquoian ideology beyond basic utilitarian usage; for certain Iroquoian groups, origin stories and ritual practices employed the symbolic use of lithic sources. The widespread use of lithic gorgets and the apparent absence of ceramic gorgets strengthen the notion that lithic materials carry symbolic value. This symbolic value extended to the lithic pipes of the Iroquoians, as it has been shown that the high percentage of lithic pipes represented in grave goods and in fantastical effigies illustrate the importance of lithics in Iroquoian ideology.

The importance of lithics as demonstrated through Iroquoian smoking pipes can perhaps best be related through an examination of their use during early European contact. As stated earlier, the two-pieced lithic smoking pipe was used in communal ritual, whereas the ceramic pipe was considered a more personal item. Though a ceramic pipe could have

been constructed and employed in communal activity, the frequent use of the stone pipe in establishing political and social alliances (Trubowitz 1992: 107) offers further confirmation of the high valuation placed on the lithic pipe.

The European settlers brought with them fired clay pipes that were used in trade, and these quickly outnumbered the stone pipes of the Iroquoians (Trubowitz 1992: 107). Again, from a strictly utilitarian notion of pipe construction and use, one would expect the Iroquoians to adopt the ubiquitous ceramic pipes of the Europeans; however, examples like Turnbaugh's (1992:119), concerning the 17th century Narragansett, indicate that the Iroquoians preferred to smoke their own pipes. In fact, though the early historic period saw an overall reduction in the production of Native-made ceramic pipes, lithic objects bearing ritual or symbolic imagery remained consistent (Bradley 1987: 63). Kenyon (1982: 226) states that the introduction of European goods did not cause the Iroquoian to abandon their cultural attitudes; one can conceivably construe the introduction of the European pipe as affecting a greater importance on the 'traditional' material source of lithics, demonstrated through the contrast of lithic pipes with the clay European variety.

Conclusion

The early historic period was a time of rapid change for the Iroquoian people, yet the continued importance of lithic material is manifest in the pipe assemblages of the time. Lithics as a material source was a part of the ideology of the Iroquoians and I have argued that this importance is reflected in differences found between lithic and ceramic smoking pipes.

Ultimately, this paper calls for a closer examination of artifact material

source in determining the personal and social value of artifacts. The Iroquoian smoking pipe is demonstrative of the relationship between material and meaning. We must extend our examination of value beyond the study of the symbolism of structure by examining the material itself.

Works Cited

- Boyle, David 1900. On the Paganism of the Civilised Iroquois of Ontario. *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*. 30:263-273.
- Bradley, James W. 1987. *Evolution of the Onandaga Iroquois: Accommodating Change, 1500 - 1655*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP.
- Canfield, William W. 1902. *The Legends of the Iroquois*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company.
- Chapdelaine, Claude 1992. The Mandeville Site: A Small Iroquoian Village and a Large Smoking-Pipe Collection - An Interpretation. *In Proceedings of the 1989 Smoking Pipe Conference: Selected Papers*. Hayes, (ed.). pp. 31-40. Rochester: Research Division of the Rochester Museum & Science Center.
- Dinniwell, Norma Mae 1984. *Transformations in Stone: A Study of the Social and Cultural Significance of the Stone Sculptures by*

- the Iroquoian Artists on the Six Nations Reserve*. M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario, London, ON.
- Fox, William A. 2004. Horned Panthers and Erie Associates. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 283-304. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Kenyon, W.A. 1982. *The Grimsby Site: A Historic Neutral Cemetery*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.
- Kuhn, Robert D. 2004. Reconstructing Patterns of Interaction and Warfare Between the Mohawk and Northern Iroquoians. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 145-166. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Mathews, Zena Pearlstone 1980. Of Man and Beast: The Chronology of Effigy Pipes Among Ontario Iroquoians. *Ethnohistory*. 27(4):295-307.
- Mathews, Zena Pearlstone 1981. The Identification of Animals on Ontario Iroquoian Pipes. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*. 5:31-48.
- Noble, William C. 1992. Neutral Iroquois Smoking Pipes. *In Proceedings of the 1989 Smoking Pipe Conference: Selected Papers*. Hayes, (ed.). pp. 41-49. Rochester: Research Division of the Rochester Museum & Science Center.
- Noble, William C. 2004. The Protohistoric Period Revisited. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 179-191. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Paper, Jordan 1992. Iroquoian and Pan-Indian Sacred Pipes: Comparative Ritual and Symbolism. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 163-169. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Rutsch, Edward S. 1973. *Smoking Technology of the Aborigines of the Iroquois Area of New York State*. New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc.
- Sempowski, Martha L. 2004. Spiritual Transformation as Reflected in Late Prehistoric Human Effigy Pipes from Western New York. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 263-281. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Tooker, Elisabeth 1967. *Ethnography Of the Huron Indians: 1615-1649*. Midland: Huronia Historical Development Council.

- Trubowitz, Neal L. 1992. Thanks, But We Prefer To Smoke Our Own: Pipes in the Great Lakes-Riverine Region During the Eighteenth Century. *In A Passion for the Past: Papers in Honour of James F. Pendergast*. Wright and Pilon, (eds.). pp. 97- 112. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- Turnbaugh, William A. 1992. Post Contact Smoking Pipe Development: The Narragansett Example. *In Proceedings of the 1989 Smoking Pipe Conference: Selected Papers*. Hayes, (ed.). pp. 113-124. Rochester: Research Division of the Rochester Museum & Science Center.
- Wonderley, Anthony 2005. Effigy Pipes, Diplomacy, and Myth: Exploring Interaction Between St. Lawrence Iroquoians and Eastern Iroquois in New York State. *American Antiquity*. 70(2):211-240.