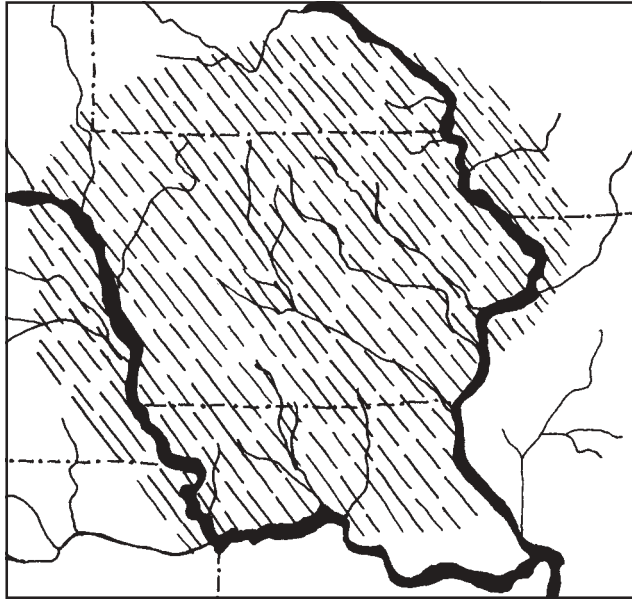


ONEOTA



Distribution of Oneota sites in Iowa and surrounding states.

BETWEEN AD 1200 and about AD 1700 people of the Oneota Culture inhabited most parts of Iowa. Oneota sites have been identified across a broad area of the Midwest including the states of Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota.

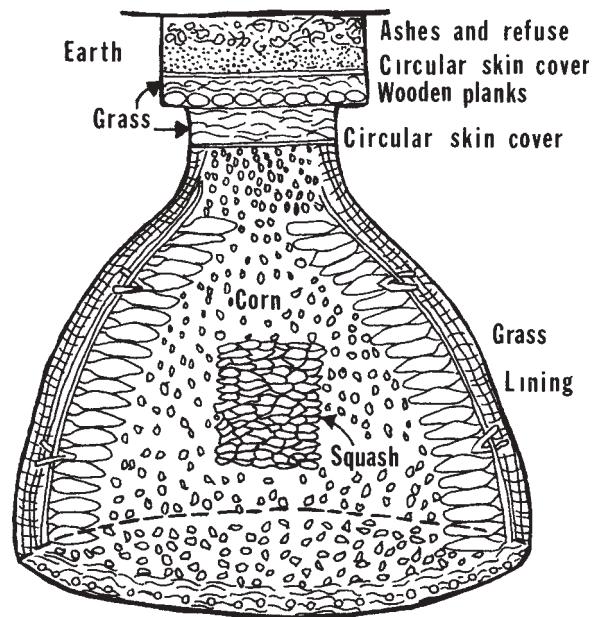
One of the most puzzling questions in Midwestern archaeology is the origin of Oneota. We know that by AD 1050–1100 many Midwestern groups were being influenced by a great political and religious center known as Cahokia. The site of Cahokia represents an urban complex in the central Mississippi Valley in the vicinity of St. Louis, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois. At its height, it had a population estimated at 10,000–15,000. For reasons yet to be explained, Cahokia began to decline as an important center beginning about AD 1150. Some archaeologists believe that it was in the migration of people outward from Cahokia that we can find the origin of Oneota. Others suggest that Oneota and Cahokia were distinct entities, but that they derived from a common Woodland cultural ancestor. Still others believe that Oneota Culture essentially evolved from indigenous Woodland cultures in the Upper Mississippi Valley with some influences from Mississippian groups. There is as yet no solution to this problem, and until additional evidence is forthcoming, it is likely to remain unresolved.

Most Oneota sites in Iowa are large villages, sometimes covering 100 acres or more, and typically located along large rivers and their tributaries. Cemeteries and occasionally burial mounds occur within the vicinity of the village. Along the Upper Iowa River in the northeastern part of the state we find

Oneota sites such as the Elephant Cemetery, the O'Reagan Cemetery, the Flynn Cemetery, and the Lane site. Northwestern Iowa Oneota sites include Burr Oak, Bastian, Correctionville, Dixon, Gillett Grove, and Blood Run found along the Missouri, Big and Little Sioux rivers, and Mill Creek. The Mississippi River and its tributaries in southeastern Iowa have produced the remains of Oneota sites such as Kingston, Wever, Kelley, and McKinney. Finally, the earliest Oneota sites such as Cribs Crib, Christenson, Clarkson, and Mohler Farm occur in central Iowa north of Des Moines. While contact is known to have occurred between Oneota and the Nebraska Culture of southwestern Iowa, there are no identified Oneota sites in this region.

Unfortunately, we have very little idea of the type of house that Oneota people occupied since few actual structures have been excavated in Iowa. Sites elsewhere suggest that the house form was a long rectangle or rectangle with rounded corners. The most characteristic features found at Oneota sites are occasional hearths and hundreds of bowl or bell-shaped trash and cache pits. Cache pits were dug into the house floor or between houses to allow for the storage of food, particularly corn, and other items. At the Cribs Crib site a separate area of the village contained dozens of these storage pits.

Oneota people buried their dead in an extended position and placed with them a variety of artifacts. For instance, at the Flynn Cemetery in northern Allamakee County, 17 individuals were found accompanied by artifacts such as bone whistles, pottery, chert flakes, numerous copper and brass bracelets, and beads. In one grave, the skull of a raven had been placed with the deceased. In the eye socket of the raven's skull was found a bone disc bead. We do not know the function or meaning of the raven to Oneota people, but to many native North American groups this bird had special significance, and perhaps this is the case with the Oneota as well.



Cross section of a historic Hidatsa cache pit (after Wilson, 1917).



This bear claw necklace is believed to have come from an Oneota site in Jones County, Iowa.

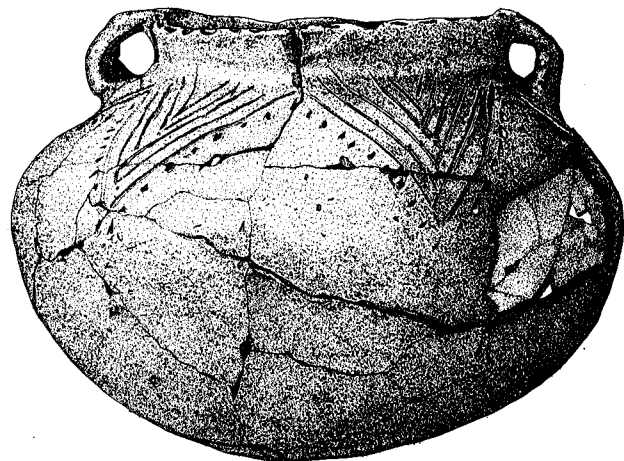
The most distinctive artifacts of Oneota peoples are ceramics. These are usually elliptical, globular-shaped vessels with a rounded base and wide strap or narrow loop handles. Burned and ground clam shell was added to the wet clay as a tempering agent. The size of vessels range from miniature jars to those capable of holding several gallons. Decoration is most often found on the rim, shoulder, or handle of the vessel and consists of wide trailed lines (trailing refers to the formation of lines wider than they are deep), trailed designs, and bosses (raised bumps).

Other Oneota artifacts tend to be less distinctive than the pottery and include items common to contemporary Plains and Prairie cultures. Chipped stone types include many tiny triangular-shaped projectile points which suggest the use of the bow and arrow as the principal weapon. Arrowheads were also fashioned from pieces of antler. A variety of stone tools such as scrapers, knives, drills, and abraders reflect the preparation of meat and the working of hides. Ground stone manos and metates were used to grind and crush seeds and nuts as well as to powder various minerals used in paint pigments. The bone of deer and bison was frequently worked into a variety of objects. Bone awls and hoes, made from the scapula (shoulder blade) of deer or bison, were common items.

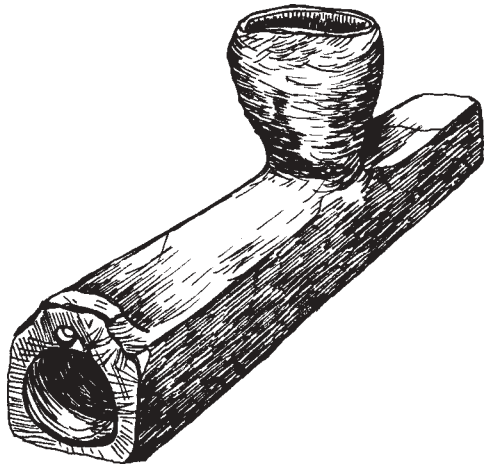
One of the outstanding features of Oneota culture was the use of red pipestone, called catlinite, obtained from a source in southwestern Minnesota. Oneota people worked catlinite into pipes and small plaques. As far as we can tell, these pipes were used for smoking during ceremonial occa-

sions. Catlinite plaques found at the Blood Run site in Cherokee County, had been illustrated with drawings of hooved animals and decorative motifs.

During their early history, Oneota people seem to have spent an equal portion of their time engaged in horticulture and hunting. Corn, squash, beans, and tobacco were important crops sown in gardens on the soft river floodplains where the ground was easiest to till. Wild animals such as bison and deer seem to have been important hunted forms. Fishing and the collection of wild nuts and seeds would have supplemented this diet. To carry on this lifestyle, people would probably have lived a semisedentary existence, residing in permanent villages during certain times of the year, but moving away for the summer and winter bison hunt.

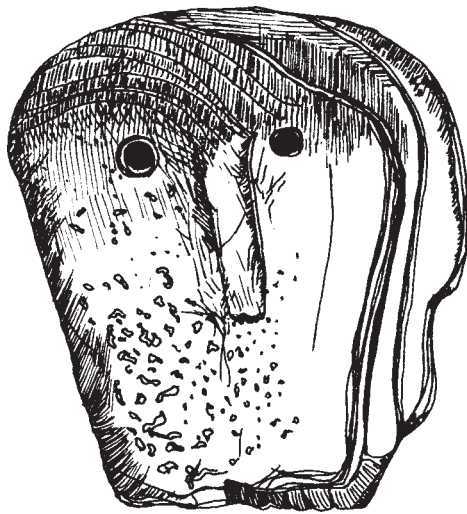


Oneota pottery is characterized by shell tempering. On most examples this appears as white, plate-like particles on the surface and in the cross section of the sherd. Wide strap handles, loop handles, and decorative trailing are two other distinctive Oneota ceramic traits.



A catlinite pipe.

Later Oneota sites are found further upstream and are located at higher elevations above the river. The numerous hunting tools from these later sites and the abundance of bison bone suggests that hunting, particularly of bison, became more important as time went by. Oneota people who interacted with early Euroamericans were probably acquiring fur-bearing animals for the hide and pelt trade.

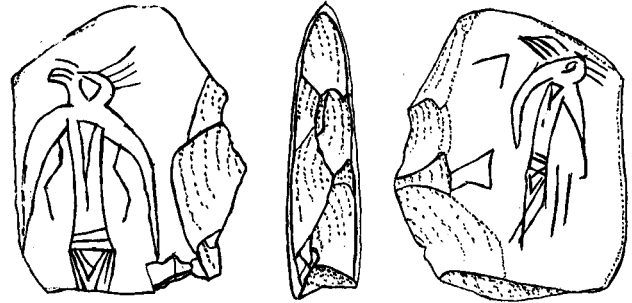


A piece of engraved marine shell, possibly representing the human face, is believed to be the work of an Oneota craftsman.

Oneota sites such as Dixon, Correctionville, and Gothier have been grouped with sites of the Blue Earth River region in south central Minnesota into what is called the Correctionville-Blue Earth Phase. Related sites are distributed over a broad area which includes locations in southeastern Nebraska, eastern Wisconsin, the Chariton River region of Kansas, and southeastern Iowa.

Later sites are represented by localities on the Iowa River and its tributaries in northeastern Iowa. These include sites like the Lane site, Malone II site, and the Elephant Cemetery. These appear to be related to northwest Iowa sites such as

Harriman and Gillett Grove, to the southeastern McKinney Village near Toolesboro, and to sites in adjacent states. The northeast Iowa sites have been included in what is referred to as the Orr Phase. Orr Phase materials also appear to be present at the Blood Run site in Lyon County.



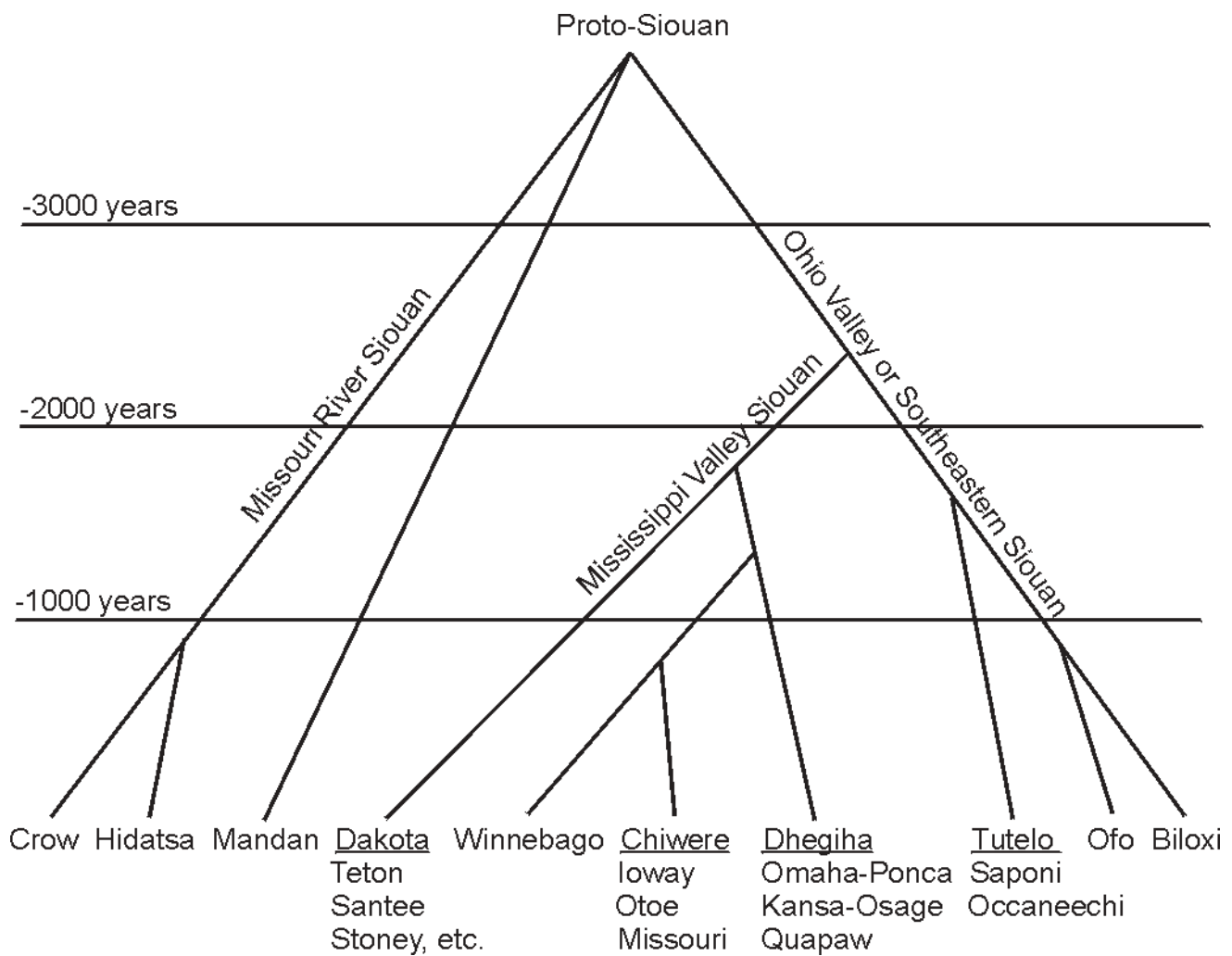
Unnaerivira motif on a nephrite tablet, McKinney Oneota site.

The Bastian site in Cherokee County would seem to be intermediate in time between Correctionville-Blue Earth phase sites and Orr phase sites, and thus serves to link these early and late Oneota phases. Orr phase sites date well within the late prehistoric and early historic period, and many are believed to be the remains of villages and cemeteries of historic Siouan-speaking groups in Iowa such as the Oto and Ioway and possibly the Winnebago, Missouriia, and Kansa. Late Oneota sites may also represent settlements of other Siouan speakers such as the Omaha. The presence of European trade goods such as glass beads, copper and brass jewelry, Jesuit trade rings, and cooking utensils in late Oneota sites point to contact between Siouan speakers and early Euroamericans in the Midwest. The first known contact between the French and Ioway in northeastern Iowa in 1676 probably took place at an Orr phase Oneota site.



Small, unnotched triangular points are a typical Oneota artifact.

Lynn Marie Alex, Revised 2002
 Illustrations by Mary Slattery and David Crawford
 Layout by Valerie Johnson



Late Oneota sites are thought to represent the remains of historic Siouan speakers such as the Iowa and Oto. There are many divisions of the Siouan language family, and not everyone who speaks a Siouan tongue can necessarily understand another Siouan speaker. In the same way, neither can speakers of Norwegian, Persian, or English necessarily understand one another although each of these languages belongs to one Indo-European language family.