

A **RADIOCARBON** DATE ON A MIDEWIWIN SCROLL
FROM **BURNSIDE** LAKE, ONTARIO

Kenneth **E. Kidd**

ABSTRACT

Contrary to the earlier view that the Midewiwin Society among the central Algonkians postdates European contact, a radiocarbon date on a Midewiwin birchbark scroll suggests that this phenomenon may in fact date from the precontact period.

THE SCROLL

It will be of interest to students of ethnology in Canada that a radiocarbon age of 390 ± 70 B.P. or A.D. 1560 (GaK-1489; Kigoshi, Aizawa and Suzuki 1969: 320) has been obtained for a fragment of a birchbark scroll found in an archaeological context in Quetico Provincial Park, Ontario. It seems reasonable to assume that the other fragments found with the dated specimen are of the same provenience and age.

The fragments were found in a small cave, which the writer has described in some detail previously (Kidd 1963); the specimens were discussed in a subsequent article (Kidd 1965).

Briefly, the cave where the artifacts were found appeared to be undisturbed by human agency, although it is likely that wild animals such as bears and foxes had used it from time to time and that this activity would account satisfactorily for the scattered and broken condition of the scrolls. The cave was reported to members of the Parks Service by Mr. Bill Tateece of the Nequaquon Reserve and subsequently explored, first by Mr. W. T. Dalgetty and Mr. Bruce Littlejohn, and later by the present writer through the courtesy of the Parks Service. Three types of artifacts were found in the cave by Dalgetty and Littlejohn: (1) several worked pieces of wood, (2) some 200 fragments of birchbark, and (3) one more or less intact "scroll." Several of these are illustrated in Kidd 1965; the reader is urged to study them in order to comprehend the interpretations given below.

Probably six of the total number of fragments may be modern pieces of bark but the remainder are apparently of some antiquity. Of the 260 fragmentary pieces, 38 exhibit stitching holes suggesting that they had been bound either to one another or to sticks, and two bear such holes along two opposed edges; perforations occur in pairs and two pieces were still held together by such stitching. There was no etching or incising evident on any of the pieces, even under ultraviolet light, and it is suggested therefore that any design they may once have borne was done in pigment. The wooden specimens included splints or "binding sticks" such as modern Midewiwin scrolls employ to hold the

individual sheets of bark, and one round, rather heavy stick whose use is unknown. The sticks are piano-convex in section, and were doubtless used as in modern scrolls, i.e., one on each side of the sheet of bark, and both held by the watap wrapped around them and through the perforations on the sheet. This is borne out by the differential weathering which is visible on these specimens. To quote from the earlier description:

"The evidence that these artifacts -- the birchbark and the wands -- are part of one or more mide rolls is found in (1) the size and shape of the one specimen which provides dimensions in two directions; (2) the watap stitching; (3) the two conjoined examples; (4) the length of several pieces which are intact in one direction; (5) the special type of perforation present along the edges of two examples in which the perforations occur in groups of three (there are two groups in the one extant example); and (6) the split sticks or wands for winding the free ends. Negative evidence is the total lack of any trace of design, either painted or incised, on the surface of the bark" (Kidd 1965: 483).

In the event that there may be doubt that any of the cave specimens were for ritual use, it may be mentioned that there was one piece of birchbark, roughly triangular in outline and 20.4 inches long, which bore a bold, incised design of rectilinear style (Kidd 1965: Fig. 4). Also, the largest of the pieces of wood — one not used on scrolls in any way — bore traces of red paint. These items strongly suggest that certain of the cave objects were for ritual use, and this opens the possibility that so also were the other birchbark and wooden items. There seems to be no reason for doubting that most of the birchbark present was originally part of a Midewiwin scroll similar to, if not identical with, those with which anthropologists are familiar.

AGE OF THE MIDEWIWIN

Compared with such institutions as the League of the Five Nations, or the Sun Dance, the Midewiwin does not seem to have provoked much speculation as to its age. That it is old, there seems to be no question. Harold Hickerson (1970: 52) has said:

"As with other aspects of Great Lakes Indian culture, the Midewiwin has undergone changes since the beginning of its existence at about the turn of the eighteenth century; it survives in some reservation groups as a refuge organization for the most conservative tribal members, in others as a still vital force in community affairs, and has completely disappeared in some others."

In the following pages, Hickerson goes to some length to examine the history of the Midewiwin Society, utilizing early accounts, mostly of missionaries, who were impressed by the use of the cross in certain of the Society's ceremonies. He concludes:

"The cross was not that of the fourth degree of the Midewiwin, as Hoffman and Kinietz had suggested, but the Christian cross. My theory on the post-contact origin of the Midewiwin had held its ground, on positive and negative

evidence. The Midewiwin was in fact a nativistic movement, a reaction to contact with Europeans, and not aboriginal. The ceremonial represented and reflected new modes of organization, not ancient ones" (Hickerson 1970: 63).

The radiocarbon date of A.D. 1560 on the Burntside Lake scroll does not positively destroy Hickerson's argument, but gives the historian pause for thought. So far as is known, no European had been in contact with the central Algonkians by 1560, and therefore could not have been responsible for calling the Midewiwin into existence. If, however, the lowest figure expressed in the margin of error of the date is considered, it would throw the beginnings (or rather the existence) of the Society within the framework of European contact in the Great Lakes area. More radiocarbon tests should be run on this type of material before firm conclusions are reached. But as the evidence now stands, there is a strong case to be made for the precontact existence of the Midewiwin Society.

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Department of Anthropology
 Trent University
 Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7B8