

Ojibwa Pictography: The Origins of Writing and the Rise of Social Complexity

Joan M. Vastokas

Epigraphers tracing the origins of writing in human history have traditionally identified alphabetical systems as the only form of “true writing” and pictorial systems as an entirely separate category on the basis that the former communicated the precision of speech while the latter communicated meaning in only a general way without the intervention of spoken language. An investigation of Ojibwa pictography argues against any clear separation between word and image and validates the argument of some recent epigraphers that pictorial and other “semasiographic” systems should be recognized as forms of writing. This paper distinguishes the iconic imagery of rock art from the more structured narrative imagery of the bark scrolls. The latter functioned as narrative texts and were used, stored, read, and cherished by the Ojibwa in much the same way as the holy books of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This paper argues for a continuum in the history of writing between pictorial and phonetic writing and a parallelism between the emergence of social complexity and the origins of alphabetical systems.

Résumé à la fin de l'article.

Epigraphers do not generally consider Ojibwa pictography a form of “true writing.” The designation “writing” is applied by them only to alphabetical writing systems whose symbolic devices represent the vocalized sounds of speech. In the archaeological record, furthermore, the appearance of alphabetical writing systems is generally equated with the rise of “civilizations,” that is, with complex societies exhibiting simultaneously such other traits as hierarchical sociopolitical organization, organized religion and priesthood, monumental architecture and sculpture, craft specialization, and mathematics. More recently, however, some epigraphers and archaeologists have begun to question such black-and-white distinctions, emphasizing instead the tremendous variability among the world’s civilizations in the first place and diversity in their systems of communication and record-keeping in the second. For example, in his recent opus, *Understanding Early Civilizations* (2003:43), Bruce Trigger writes that the long-standing equation between “civilization” and the presence of alphabetical writing can no longer be sustained. While in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and among the Maya, scripts were developed that recorded speech, Trigger notes that in highland

Mexico, Peru, and West Africa, alphabetical writing did not develop, even though there was no major difference in their degree of social, economic, and political complexity. In Peru, for example, a complex system of knotted strings, known as *khipu*, was the only system of record-keeping known to the Inka empire (Urton 2003). The Peruvian *khipu*, along with such other non-alphabetical forms of record-keeping as pictographs in other societies, are classified by epigraphers as semasiographic systems. Such systems appear throughout the world in a variety of forms, and include the pictorial manuscripts of the Mixtecs and Aztecs of Mexico as well as the pictography of the Ojibwa and other North American peoples.

Semasiographic systems, which communicate meanings and ideas independently of spoken language, are distinguished from glottographic (or phonographic) systems, which represent the sounds of actual speech (Gelb 1963:11, Sampson 1985:29). While Trigger (2003:587) and the majority of archaeologists and epigraphers do not consider, in any way, semasiographic systems to be a form of writing, Elizabeth Hill Boone and an increasing number of scholars would disagree. For Pre-Columbian America, for example, she

argues that pictorial and other semasiographic systems should be classified within in a much wider conception of “writing.” In Mesoamerica, in fact, she states that “art and writing are largely the same thing.” For the Maya, the same word is used for both “to write” and “to paint” (Reents-Budet 1994:8), as is also the case among the Aztecs (Boone 1994:3). Among the Ojibwa, too, popular usage of the term for “writing” refers both to European alphabetical systems as well as to pictographs, particularly in reference to those engraved on sheets of birch bark.

While Trigger (2003: 587) views pictographs and alphabetical writing as separate systems, he nevertheless acknowledges that, in some early civilizations, pictorial systems were transformed into “true writing.” He therefore admits there could be a continuum between semasiography and writing, making the boundary separating them fuzzy and arbitrary. Trigger’s somewhat conflicted views of the subject may be resolved by applying his own term to the situation—that of a “continuum” rather than “separation.” Archaeologists have begun to question the rigid classificatory and evolutionary terms applied in the past to human history, in this case the distinction between so-called “true writing” and all other forms of visual communication, including pictorial works of so-called “art.” For what we are actually dealing with is an extremely variable continuum in the development of writing as a system of graphic signs, from its origins in Upper Palaeolithic caves and on portable bone and antler engravings, to the pictographic records of innumerable early societies, to the alphabetical and semasiographic systems of the present day, which include such iconic forms as those used in mathematics and traffic signs. One may cite here the well-known work of Alexander Marshack (1972, 1977), who detected symbolic notations and conventionalized signs in Upper Palaeolithic caves and on portable engraved objects. However, Marshack was not the first to see the origins of writing in the Upper Palaeolithic. Already in 1908, Arthur J. Evans (1908:10-13) described “pictographic figures and signs” in the Palaeolithic caves as “alphabetiforms,” suggesting, to him, a form of “picture-writing.” While a detailed demonstration of that

lengthy and variable continuum from its origins to the present day would require many volumes and years of work, the case of pictography among the Ojibwa people of North America may suffice to make my point, which is that so-called “true writing” has more in common with pictography and certain forms of so-called “art” than most archaeologists and epigraphers are wont to believe and that a continuum of increasing socioeconomic complexity is related directly to the emergence of writing as we know it today.

What was often termed “picture-writing” by nineteenth century writers, such as Johann Kohl (1956 [1860]), Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1851-1857), and Garrick Mallery (1886:13-17, 1893) and by some in the twentieth century as well, such as Albert Reagan (1927) and Frances Densmore (1929:174-175), was a well-documented practice of the widespread Algonquian-speaking peoples of North America (e.g., Kintietz 1940:38) and, in particular, of the postcontact Ojibwa (Chippewa/Anishnabe) of the upper Great Lakes area. The Ojibwa and their immediate Algonquian ancestors employed pictorial images in a variety of media and for a variety of communicative and recording purposes. Pictographs were painted (Figure 1) or engraved (Figure 2) on natural rock surfaces. They were inscribed on blazed trees as messages for hunters and travelers. They were drawn, painted, or carved as records of personal visions and dreams, on rocks, cliffs or, during the postcontact era, on paper, as was this drawing of a personal vision by Catherine Wabose, an Ojibwa medicine woman of the early nineteenth century (Figure 3). Most famously, elaborately, and abundantly, however, the Ojibwa employed a system of pictography on prepared sheets of birch bark in various sizes, from several inches to over several feet in length (Figures 4 and 5). These scrolls served for the recording and teaching of oral traditions connected with the Midewiwin, or Grand Medicine Society (Warren 1984 [1885]; Hoffman 1891; Densmore 1910, 1929; Landes 1968; Blessing 1963, 1977; Dewdney 1975; Vennum 1978; Vastokas 1996).

While some Ojibwa pictographic practices are dated to the precontact era—the painted pictographs and carved petroglyphs on natural rock



Figure 1. Pictographs, Picture Lake, Ontario. Photo by author.



Figure 2. Petroglyphs, Petroglyphs Provincial Park, Ontario. Photo by R. Vastokas.

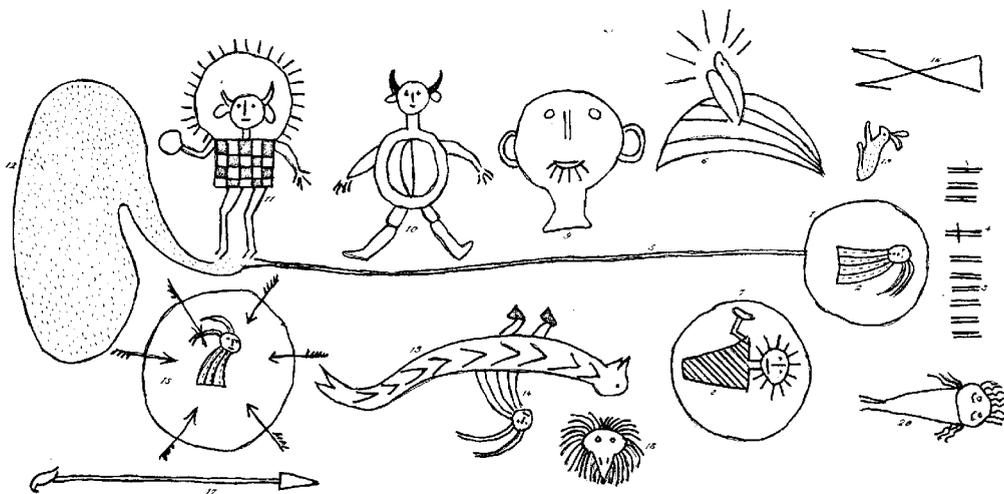


Figure 3. Vision drawing by Catherine Wabose, Ojibwa, early nineteenth century (Schoolcraft 1851-1857:Plate 55).

surfaces, for example—the birch bark records associated with the Midewiwin are believed by most scholars to have emerged and developed in complexity after contact and to have flourished in the eighteenth century (Hickerson 1970:57; Stone and Chaput 1978:605; Vecsey 1983). Mide teachers themselves, however, insist that the Midewiwin was given to the Ojibwa “at a much earlier period

while [they] resided near ... the Atlantic Ocean” (Blessing 1977:117, 122). While the Midewiwin may have developed in complexity and flourished primarily after European contact, it is acknowledged by most scholars that the organization grew out of more ancient and widespread Algonquian beliefs and ritual practices (Stone and Chaput 1978:605-606), just as the Mide masters have

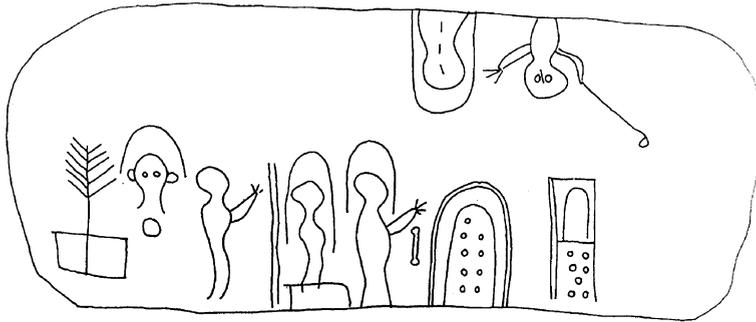


Figure 4. *Song scroll, Ojibwa. Canadian Museum of Civilization III-G-91. Tracing by author.*

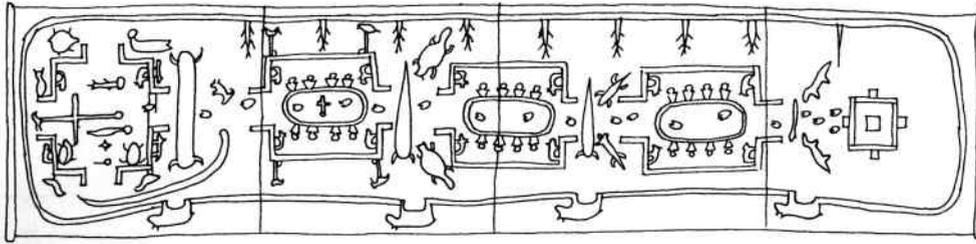


Figure 5. *Midewiwin origin and ritual scroll (Vastokas (1996:Figure 4).*

always claimed. In fact it could be demonstrated that the tradition of Algonquian pictography extends backward historically in time and appears to have been linked to a widespread practice of pictography throughout the circumboreal and circumpolar zone, as evidenced especially in an abundance of surviving rock art and other forms of pictography across Eurasia and North America. Indeed, the use of pictography on birch bark is also recorded for healing rites conducted among Siberian peoples, the Bear in particular being a central figure in the ceremonial rites of northern peoples (Hallowell 1926).

As known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Midewiwin was a highly complex association of initiates, often referred to as “priests” in the literature, with its membership ranked in at least four degrees of power and status. The society was devoted primarily to curing, but members were also charged with the maintenance of Ojibwa history, its origins, migrations, rituals, songs, and other historical and religious teachings. This was done with the aid of the pictorial birch bark manuscripts, which functioned in a manner akin to the use of religious texts in Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

Indeed, in form, content, and function, the Midewiwin bark scrolls are more closely related than other forms of Ojibwa pictography to practices of “writing” and “reading” familiar to those other “people of the book,” that is, to users of the Bible and the Koran. As described by Albert B. Reagan (1927:81), for example, “one old medicine man at Nett Lake, Minnesota, has over forty song birch bark parchments, and in singing from them he holds them before him much as we do a book.” In fact, Blessing (1977:126) reports further that Mide holy men “spent much time contemplating their scrolls especially during the evening and when inclement weather curtailed outdoor activities.” Frances Densmore (1910:17), moreover, tells of a Mide woman who sang her medicine song with the help of a bark scroll. “In singing this song the woman pointed to one portion of the picture after another, tapping the birch bark lightly as she sang and traversing the row of dots, the horizontal line, the outline of the necklace [on the figure] and the torches, then beginning again at the row of dots.” The Mide woman’s tapping of the pictographs as she sang is strongly reminiscent of how a rabbi reads the Torah, tapping the words as he narrates,

not with his finger, however, but with an elaborate metal pointer. It is noteworthy that our own project of microscopic examination of Ojibwa scrolls in the Glenbow Museum some years ago revealed tiny punctates clustered mainly in the vicinity of key pictographs, as first noted by my then assistant, Brian Molyneaux. The museum collection of Ojibwa materials, in fact, was found to contain pointed wooden sticks some six inches in length, which possibly served as pointers in the "reading" of birch bark manuscripts.

Among the vast archive of surviving Ojibwa pictographs, a few (Figure 6) have already been recognized as conventional signs in both form and meaning, capable of being read in uniform manner by all Midewiwin initiates (Blessing 1977:117; Densmore 1910:16-18; Kinietz 1940:38; Mallery 1886:15-16; Vennum 1978). Many other pictographs, however, are arbitrary and idiosyncratic, meaning one thing in one context and another in a different context (Hoffman 1891:184-185). Some are even "public" and widely understood, such as the convention of "upside-down" rendering of an image, as seen on grave-posts with the totem of the deceased so rendered (Figure 7). Still other pictographs are "private" or "secret," their meaning known only to those who have memorized their accompanying oral text (Densmore 1910:16, 1929:175-176; Landes 1968:66; Vennum 1978:789). Further, more rigorous research may, however, expand the roster of conventional pictorial signs.

But the inscribed images in Ojibwa and Algonquian pictography in general do not function in isolation as disembodied signs. They are imbedded contextually in various kinds of "compositions" in particular kinds of objects and materials and are employed at particular times and places, their meaning dependent on all of these variables as well as their social and historical contexts of use. Aspects of pictorial organization, format, frames, boundaries, surface or "field," as well as their positioning, sequence, and directionality of the pictorial configuration and the object as a whole manifest a deeper, second level of meaning (see Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:3; Vastokas 2005). These formal elements are non-representational (i.e., non-mimetic) traits, more familiar to

	earthworld & centre of world
	sky
	earth surface
	tree
	mountain
	whirlpool (placename) Walpole Island, Lake St. Clair
	rapids (placename) Sault Ste. Marie
	"migis" shell

Figure 6. Table of conventional Ojibwa signs.

art historical methods of analysis than to those of archaeologists or ethnologists. Some of these compositions manifest space-time relationships between and among the individual figurative images. They operate at an implicit rather than explicit level, yet are crucial to meaning and to the "reading" of the pictorial whole and require parsing, as in the case of alphabetical texts. Following

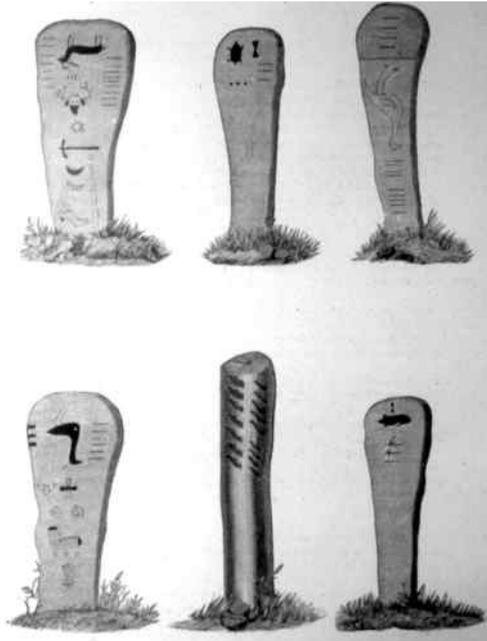


Figure 7. Ojibwa grave markers (Schoolcraft 1851:1:Figure 46).

the “pan-semiotic,” widely inclusive tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce (Noth 1990:41), I suggest that these non-representational elements and features of organization also have iconic sign value and, for reasons stated later, are likely culturally determined and may be even less arbitrary than the individual pictographs themselves.

Theorists of pictorial interpretation now uniformly emphasize the pre-eminent importance of context, broadly defined in the widest sense, for purposes of pictorial interpretation, whether Upper

Palaeolithic or modern European (e.g., Bal and Bryson 1991; Bouissac 1994; Conkey 1997; Lewis-Williams 2002:168-170; Schapiro 1969; Soffer and Conkey 1997; Sonesson 1994; Tomaskova 1997). It is not enough to interpret the meaning of single images, or icons, against a known text or oral tradition in Panofsky’s sense of iconographic interpretation (Panofsky 1955:26-41). Yet almost all existing analyses of the various forms of Ojibwa and Algonquian pictography (e.g., Hoffman 1891; Mallery 1886), including those aspiring to a more recent semiotic approach, such as Fulford (1989) and Rajnovich (1994), have been concerned primarily with the interpretation of images in isolation, as evident in Vennum (1978) or, earlier, in Hoffman (1891) (see Figure 8).

Among visual semioticians, in particular, there is increasing recognition of these non-mimetic aspects of representational systems having iconic sign value. As stated by Goran Sonesson (1994:273), for example: “Iconicity is often wrongly taken to be that which is peculiar to pictures ... there may also be visual, iconic signs which are not pictures.” Meaning is seen to reside not only explicitly in the isolated pictographs but in the implicit pattern of their relationships to each other on a given surface and the relation of the specific pictographs and their configuration as a whole to their physical ground, to their environmental setting, and to their socio-cultural context of use (e.g., Schapiro 1969, 1996; Uspensky 1973, 1975, 1976; see also Kubler 1967).



Ki-no'-na-wi'-in mani'-i-dō-ye-win.

I rock you, you that are a spirit.

[A midē’s head, the lines denoting voice or speech—i.e., singing of sacred things, as the loops or circles at the ends of each line indicate.]



Ki-zhik-ki-win'-da-mūn'.

The sky I tell you.

[The otter skin medicine sack, and arm reaching to procure something therefrom.]



O-wo-nen', hwin'.

Who is it, who?

[The mi'gis shell, the sacred emblem of the Midē wiwin.]

Figure 8. Ojibwa pictographs (Hoffman (1891:193).

Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim (1969, 1974) has been very influential upon the field of pictorial semiotics. He has long argued for the recognition of shapes, patterns, and configurations as meaningful signs. According to Arnheim (1974:65), “all shape is the form of some content.” Describing spatio-temporal orientation, abstract schema, and cosmic order among the northern Ojibwa (Saulteaux), A. Irving Hallowell (1955) would, however, attribute the formation and recognition of Arnheim’s visual shapes and patterns to cultural, rather than narrowly psychological, factors and would argue that these are based instead upon the everyday, experiential “Lifeworld” of a people (see also Ihde 1990:21-41; Johnson 1987). These abstract patterns of organization—implicit rather than explicitly articulated in most cultural contexts—are acquired and reproduced, Hallowell (1955:187) writes, “through symbolic mediation” such as that afforded by the spoken or written word or by means of graphic representation.

Before the postcontact differentiation of Great Lakes area Algonquian peoples into Ojibwa, Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Menominee around A.D. 1600 (Hoffman 1891:150), precontact pictography (e.g., Vastokas and Vastokas 1973), as well as much of the early postcontact pictography of the area (e.g., Dewdney and Kidd 1962) was in many ways similar in formal, organiza-

tional properties to that described for most of the Upper Palaeolithic caves by Margaret Conkey (1982) (see Figures 9 and 10). They both consist of juxtaposed and frequently superimposed images inscribed upon natural rock surfaces without the use of artificial frames or boundaries of any sort and without any pictorial elements that would suggest either a spatial context or temporal movement through space, such as that so often afforded by explicit groundlines, or by any sense of directionality other than profile positioning suggestive of rightward or leftward movement. Any sense of a bounded pictorial field differentiating the space of the observer from that of the pictorial representation is absent. In Upper Palaeolithic cave art and in precontact Algonquian rock art, we have, instead, a physical continuity between the images and the natural features of the rock itself (Figure 11). This continuity suggests, to use Conkey’s (2001:122) terms, a conceptual continuum between the domain of nature and that of culture (see also Schapiro 1969). As we noted even earlier in connection with the Peterborough area petroglyphs (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:139-141), “the relationship between the artist and his medium revealed at this site is one of total cooperation between man and nature; the artist works with, rather than imposes himself upon, the natural environment, a fact that discloses a great deal



Figure 9. Ontario pictographs, Cuttle Lake. Photo by R. Vastokas.



Figure 10. *Ontario petroglyphs, Petroglyphs Provincial Park. Photo by R. Vastokas.*

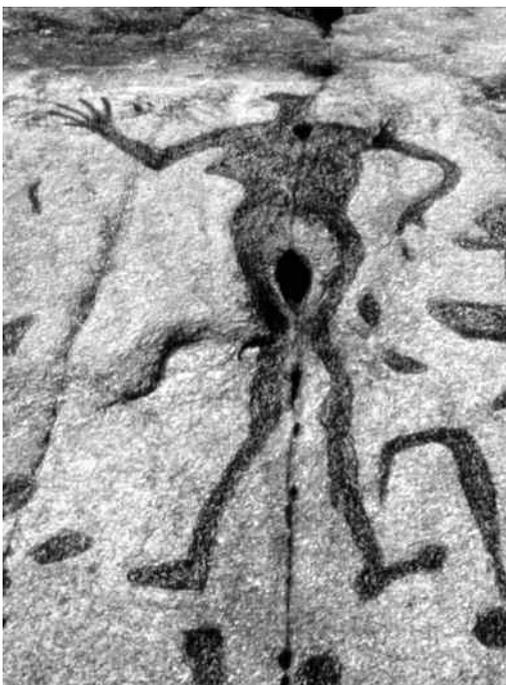


Figure 11. *Female figure, Petroglyphs Provincial Park. Photo by R. Vastokas.*

about the artist's culture, about Algonkian world view and mythology" (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:141).

In contrast to the mainly static, juxtaposed, and superimposed Algonkian pictographs of so-

called "rock art," the Midewiwin birch bark scrolls are highly structured and framed pictorial narratives (Vastokas 1984, 1988, 1996), in which movement through time and space are communicated by various formal means. They are intended as memory aids in the singing of songs, the recitation of oral narratives, and for ritual procedure. Oval and rectangular frames (Figures 4 and 5, respectively) establish a pictorial field and define spatial boundaries. Ground lines and directionality are evident. Left/right directions and upper/lower domains are established. And frontal/profile figural representations are not arbitrary but play a role in the narrative sequence. Both the smaller song scrolls and the larger Midewiwin scrolls exhibit sequential space-time properties intrinsic to narrativity, in which individual images and other non-mimetic abstract signs participate in an overall compositional arrangement devised to tell a story.

The shift that has occurred over time in Algonkian pictography, as evinced in precontact rock art compared to the pictography of the Midewiwin scrolls, is crucial. It is a shift from an "iconic" to a "narrative" mode of depiction, from clusterings of isolated, discrete images that frequently overlap, to pictographs that are composed in deliberate order and sequence to tell a story (see also Vastokas 1984, 1996 for further

icon and narrative distinctions). Mide scrolls function as visual narratives, their structure approximating, in principle, the structure of sentences and of written texts. Unlike rock art, the bark scrolls manifest logical and sequential relationships between and among their individual pictographs. In fact, the key compositional principle in the Midewiwin scrolls is that of either an explicit or implicit line or path (Figure 5), which constitutes, as well, the key principle of experiential and cognitive order in traditional Ojibwa culture. Importance of the line is manifest in the spatio-temporal orientations of daily life, in mental mapping, in travel by foot or canoe, on the trap-line, and in Ojibwa ethical belief as embodied in the “path of life” concept (Figure 12). As described by Hallowell (1955), the Ojibwa “always move from one point to another...this step by step procedure emerges in certain mythological narratives where...the protagonist is directed from point to point...nodal points in a geographical progression in space.”

As an organized “priesthood,” the Midewiwin was a fraternal, closed society of initiated members who paid substantial fees for instruction and initiation into the four to (sometimes) eight hierarchical degrees of Midewiwin “power.” Instruction was a lengthy process in which the pictorial birch bark scrolls played a central teaching and mnemonic role. A wide variety of scrolls was produced. Among these, ovoid “song scrolls,” some 18 by 6 inches in size, served as records of the numerous songs required at various intervals throughout the elaborate Mide rituals. Larger, rectangular sheets of bark, often several pieces sewn together, and measuring up to eight and ten feet in length by two feet in width, recorded lengthy oral narratives. Song scrolls were owned individually, were highly variable, and could be “read” only by those previously taught the particular song and its

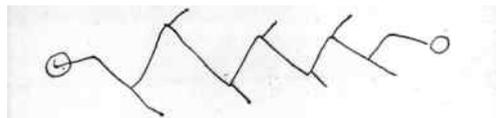


Figure 12. Ojibwa “path of life” (Densmore 1910:Figure 3).

lyrics. The narrative content of many of the larger, so-called “instruction,” “ritual,” and “master” scrolls (Blessing 1963:94, 110-111), however, could be inferred by all initiated members (Blessing 1977:117, 121, 126, 162). This was because they recorded shared Ojibwa traditions about the creation of the world, the origin of the Midewiwin, the migration route of the Ojibwa people from the vicinity of the Atlantic Ocean to the upper Great Lakes area by way of Sault Ste. Marie, their eventual settlement around Lake Superior, and detailed renderings of proper Midewiwin ritual procedures. Scrolls recording World Creation (Figure 13), for example, could be distinguished by the regular presence of circular forms; Migration Legend scrolls (Figure 14) by irregular shapes suggestive of lakes and rivers; and Midewiwin origin and ritual scrolls (Figure 5) by the presence of one to four or more rectangular forms, the outline of the Midewiwin ceremonial lodge from a bird’s-eye perspective. Conventional pictorial elements served as visual aids in moving the story along, most notably the use of bear-paw prints in sequence (Figure 15), indicating the ceremonial pathway of the initiate, re-enacting the role of Bear in the Midewiwin origin myth. However, as in all oral traditions, subject to change and variation over time and space, both readings and accompanying pictorial representations, which were copied and recopied by initiates from their teachers’ scrolls, varied considerably. Sources report that reading of the scrolls could be from left to right or from right to left, without any apparent consistency (e.g., Kinietz 1940:39),

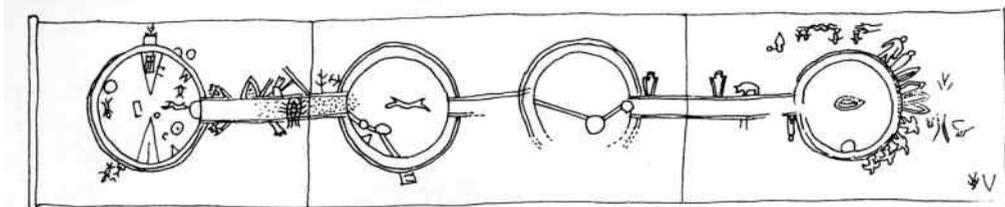


Figure 13. Midewiwin scroll, James Redsky’s World Creation (Vastokas 1996: Figure 5).

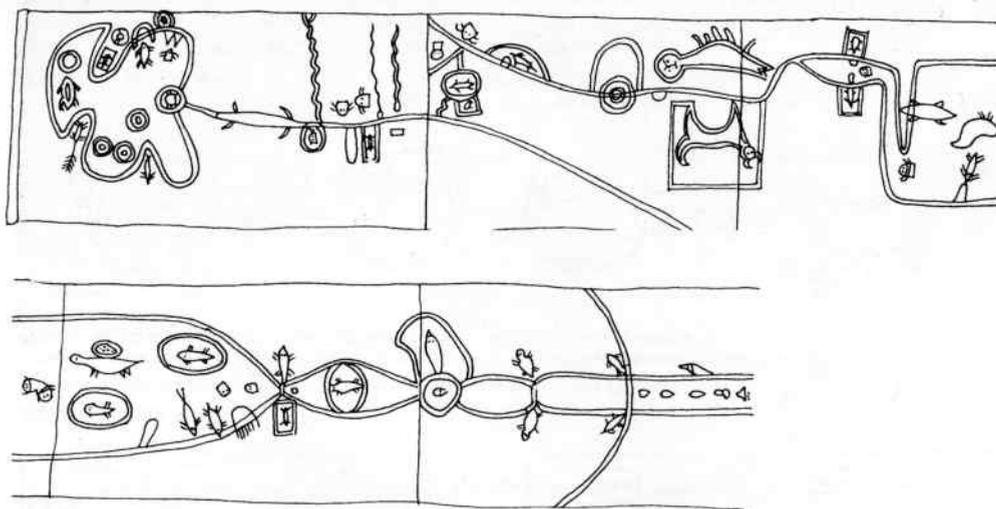


Figure 14. Midewiwin scroll, James Redsky's Ojibwa Migration (Vastokas 1996: Figure 6).

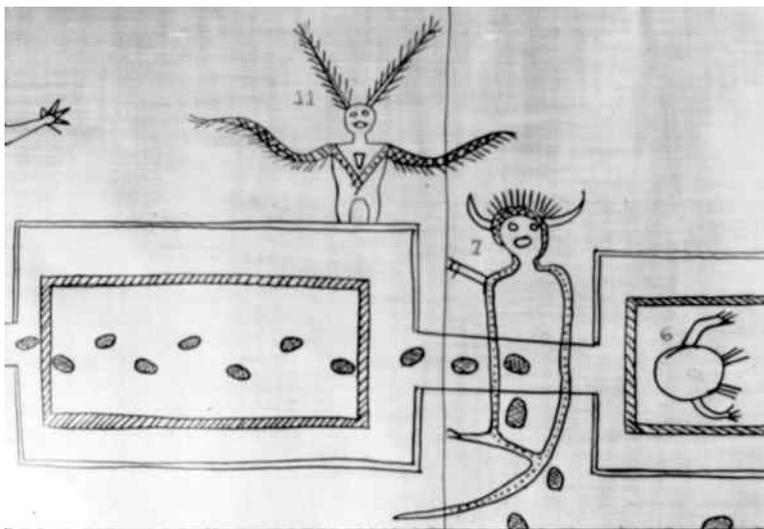


Figure 15. Midewiwin scroll detail showing bear paw prints. Canadian Museum of Civilization III-G-279. Tracing by author.

although Migration scrolls read normally from right to left, that is, from east to west (Vennum 1978: 761). Readings of the scrolls in instruction or at ceremonies were not normally fixed and could be very detailed or merely sketched out, depending upon context and the narrator's wishes. As noted by Richard Brilliant (1984:16) in his study of Roman visual narratives, unlike words in a written text, "visual images have an almost infinite capacity for verbal extension." Or contraction, one might add, considering reported Ojibwa Mide practice.

Ojibwa pictography was described in evolutionary terms, by Gelb (1963:13-15, 191), as a form of "primitive semasiography," in which pictorial images served primarily as mnemonic aids without any correspondence to spoken language, and as a "forerunner" of "true" alphabetical writing. More recently, Sampson (1985:26-27, 30, 35) has suggested that such semasiographic systems also count as a form of writing, provided writing is defined as the communication of "relatively specific ideas by means of permanent, visible marks" and not necessarily as a "system for

representing spoken language.” Yet, even without extensive research into the matter, I hope to have shown that some fundamental, structural elements of narrativity are shared by both pictorial and textual narratives, the element of sequential ordering being a particularly important feature. The pictography of the Ojibwa bark scrolls thus appears to fit Sampson’s definition of “writing” (Vigneux 1991:23), also one in which a “generalization of form was steadily taking place” (Blessing 1977:162; also Vennum 1978:788-789) and in which many individual pictographs were becoming increasingly uniform and conventional during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Midewiwin has often been interpreted as a nativistic movement (e.g., Hickerson 1963:75-82, 1970:51-63), a response to the socio-cultural stressors and change brought about by European contact, involving a westward migration from a more easterly geographical location, by the influence of Christian missionaries, and by the relocation of formerly small-scale bands reliant on hunting, fishing, and gathering into larger, settled village communities heavily dependent on the fur trade, mainly in Wisconsin and Minnesota. It is this postcontact, socio-economic transformation and geographical relocation of the Ojibwa, resulting in a greater concentration of population, the beginning of rivalries and economic competition for furs, and the emergence of individual leaders fulfilling the role of “chiefs” that I believe accounts not only for the emergence of the Midewiwin as an increasingly organized religious society but also for the transformation and elaboration of traditional Algonquian pictography into the more structured, narrative, and increasingly conventionalized forms evident in the Midewiwin birch bark scrolls. This is not to say that the Midewiwin itself, or its birch bark narrative scrolls, were directly influenced by organized Christianity, Christian ritual, or Christian texts, as claimed by Hickerson (1963) and others. Instead, I would argue that the Ojibwa birch bark scrolls developed out of indigenous ancient traditions and evolved in tandem with socio-economic change and increasing cultural complexity.¹ As reported by Blessing (1977:122), the Mide priests, themselves, taught that the Great Spirit “in the beginning gave the Indian a simple form of scroll which was further

developed as the population grew and its religion expanded.” Indeed, that development also signified a transformation of the more ancient beliefs and practices of individualistic shamanism into the collective, Midewiwin form of priesthood, even though shamans continued to practice independently among the southern Ojibwa and still prevailed among the northern Ojibwa well into the twentieth century. Albeit at an incipient level, Ojibwa pictography, as evidenced in the Mide scrolls, provides us with yet another example of a distinct correlation between the rise of social complexity with its “new modes of organization” (Hickerson 1970:63) and the emergence of writing systems.

Note

¹A separate paper would be required to demonstrate, theoretically, the correlation between socio-cultural and material-culture patterns of formal organization. It may suffice for present purposes to cite a number of sources, grounded in structuralism and semiotics which help to make that case (e.g., Burnham [1973]; Nodelman [1970]; Vastokas [1978]; and, of course, Levi-Strauss [1963], especially pp. 245-268).

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Lors des études pour retracer les origines de l'écriture humaine, les épigraphistes ont traditionnellement identifié les systèmes alphabétiques comme l'unique forme « d'écriture véritable » et les systèmes pictoriaux comme une catégorie complètement séparée, à partir du principe que les premiers communiquaient la précision de la parole alors que les derniers communiquaient la signification seulement de façon générale sans l'intervention d'une langue parlée. Un examen de la pictographie ojibway conteste toute séparation claire entre le mot et l'image, et entérine l'argument récent de certains épigraphistes à savoir que la pictographie et d'autres systèmes « sémasiographiques » devraient être reconnus comme des formes d'écriture. Cet essai fait une distinction entre l'image iconographique des peintures rupestres et l'imagerie narratives structurée des rouleaux en écorce. Cette dernière fonctionne comme des textes narratifs qui ont été utilisés, entreposés, lus et choyés par les Ojibway à l'égal les textes sacrés du Judaïsme, de la Chrétienté et de l'Islam. Cet essai perçoit une continuité dans l'histoire de l'écriture entre l'écriture pictoriale et l'écriture phonétique, et un parallélisme entre l'émergence d'une société complexe et les origines des systèmes alphabétiques.

Joan M. Vastokas
Trent University Archaeological Research Centre
Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada K9J 7B8
joan.vastokas@sympatico.ca