CHEMICAL ANALYSIS OF COPPER AND BRASS SAMPLES FROM CHRISTIAN ISLAND, GEORGIAN BAY, ONTARIO


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(Received March 1, 1995)

One hundred and eighty-seven metal samples, recovered from the fortified mission of Ste. Marie Il and nearby villages on Christian Island, include 3 samples of native copper, 22 samples of European copper, 19 samples of brassy copper (~8% Zn), 141 brass samples and 2 samples of lead. The European copper samples form 5 distinct chemical groups, possibly coming from 5 different copper kettles. The brassy copper samples are more difficult to group. When the brass samples are sorted by Ag and As, they form 2 major groupings: group 1 with high Ag and low As contents; group 2 with similar Ag and As contents through to low Ag and high As contents. Group 1 consisted of 11 chemical sub-groups and 6 outliers, while group 2 contributed 14 sub-groups and 14 outliers. This combines to give a total of 45 potentially unrelated brass chemistries, and leads to the possibility of as few as 20 different brass trading items (mainly kettles) from which the samples were cut. The small sub-sets of samples from the sites away from Ste. Marie Il tended to fit within chemical groups found there, suggesting some possible inter-site contemporaneity.

When the first Europeans arrived in south-central Ontario in the early 17th century, the area was occupied by the Hurons, a confederacy of four tribes of Iroquoian speaking peoples, who built longhouses and lived in villages, which were often palisaded. The Hurons were slash and burn horticulturalists who grew corn, beans and squash.

After earlier documented visits by explorers like Samuel de Champlain (1616), and the Recollet priests, the Jesuits established themselves in Huronia in 1634. In 1639, they created a centralized mission at the site of Ste. Marie I, on the bank of the Wye River near present day Midland, Ontario. This mission flourished until the mid 1640's when, traditional warfare between the Huron and the League of Five Nations Iroquois, who lived south of Lake Ontario, began to intensify. Following a series of Iroquoian raids that had devastating effects on both the economy and morale, the Huron confederacy as a social and political entity began to disintegrate.

In 1648, the Jesuits reported that they had set up a mission in a Huron village, whose occupants had recently moved to Christian Island to escape the attacks of the Iroquois. The following spring, Father Chaumonot and a number of huron refugees from Ossossone arrived at Christian Island.

0236-5731/95/$ 9.50
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In June of 1649, the decision was made to abandon Ste. Marie I. Discussions between the Huron chiefs and the Jesuits about a new permanent location for the mission finally resulted in the choice of Christian Island (see figure 1) in southern Georgian Bay rather than the more distant and climatically less favourable, but safer, Manitoulin Island. Ste. Marie I was stripped of usable goods and materials, which were subsequently transported to Christian Island on a large raft. Ste. Marie I was burned to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Iroquois.

A new fortified mission with a secure water supply, Ste. Marie II, was built on the lee shore of Christian Island to house the Jesuits and their lay assistants. A large Huron village was established adjacent to the mission. Historical evidence suggests that this village may have comprised up to 100 structures. Estimates suggest a total population on the island of up to 8,000 individuals in the fall and winter of 1649-50.

The Huron refugees had not been able to bring adequate food supplies with them to the island. Consequently, during the winter, thousands of Hurons died of starvation and disease. In June of 1650, the Jesuits and their assistants and about 300 Hurons left Christian Island and took refuge in Quebec while another 300 Hurons stayed on the island. In 1651, some of the latter sought refuge on Manitoulin Island while the remainder were taken captive by the Iroquois, or fled.

Today, Christian Island is the home of the Beausoleil First Nation, a population of mostly Ojibwa and a few Potowatomi.

Archaeological Investigations: Ste. Marie II was first investigated in the late 19th century. The first modern archaeological excavations were conducted within the stone walled fort in 1965. In 1967 and 1968, excavations were conducted in the village north of the fort.