THE BEACHRIDGE SITE:
A Middle Woodland Encampment Within the Sydenham River Drainage

Robert H. Pihl
Archaeological Services Inc.
London, Ontario, CANADA

ABSTRACT

The Beachridge site (AfHj-68) is a small, undisturbed Middle Woodland encampment that was completely excavated prior to the construction of an Ontario Hydro transmission line west of London. Located on a prominent sandy ridge over 500 m from a minor channelized tributary of the Sydenham River, the site is characterized by concentrations of lithic debitage and unfired lumps of clay associated with a living floor, a small circular pit, an abundance of fire-cracked rock, and an artifact assemblage featuring the mid-portion of a single ceramic vessel and a few informal stone tools. The site function is interpreted, and the importance of this site type within the regional Middle Woodland settlement pattem is discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Le site Beachridge (AfHj-68) est un petit gisement du Sylvicole moyen qui a été complètement fouillé avant la construction d'une ligne de transmission d'Hydro Ontario à l'ouest de la ville de London. Il est situé sur une crête sablonneuse à plus de 500 mètres d'un petit tributaire canalisé de la rivière Sydenham. Le site est caractérisé par des concentrations de déchets lithiques, des résidus de pâtes d'argile associés à des planchers d'occupation, une petite fosse circulaire, une abondance de pierres éclatées par le feu et un inventaire d'artefacts qui inclut une partie substantielle d'un vaisseau de céramique ainsi que quelques outils lithiques amorphes. Dans le présent article, on discute l'interprétation du site et l'importance de ce genre de gisement dans le contexte des schèmes d'établissement régionaux pendant la période moyenne du Sylvicole.

INTRODUCTION

For the past fifteen years, an incredible amount of CRM-based archaeology has been undertaken in Ontario, and, while the pace has slowed considerably in the 1990s, CRM still manages to sponsor the majority of all new fieldwork done annually in this province. One of the benefactors of this fieldwork is the discovery and investigation of the so-called "small site" which in the past was often overlooked by more problem oriented research programs. While not normally the focus of academic research, these sites are ubiquitous across the landscape but are often ignored or considered insignificant due to their small sizes, sparse deposits and/or limited artifact assemblages. Nevertheless, at least one conference has previously been devoted to this site type in an effort to better understand them. At the "Small Sites Conference" held at the University of Arizona in 1976, the participants defined small sites as " ... (sites) whose size and artifactual assemblage suggest a limited temporal occupation by a small group of people, gathered

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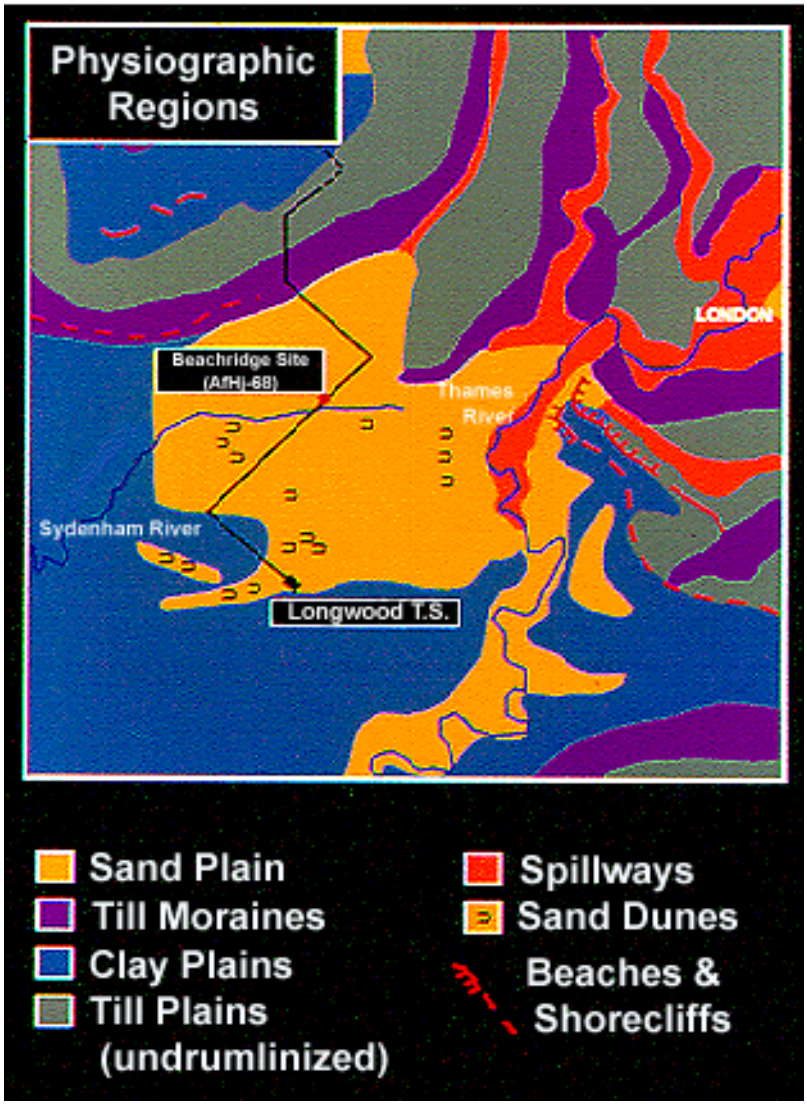

Figure 1 Location of the Beachridge site within the local physiographic regions.

Figure 2 Location of the Beachridge site in the Ontario Hydro corridor.

at the locality to carry out a specific, seasonally oriented set of activities" (Pilles and Wilcox 1978:1). Although the conference focussed on the American Southwest, many of the problems and issues tackled at the conference apply to our region, *i.e.* the need to: develop optimal survey and excavation strategies, use relational or ethnographic analogy to make functional interpretations, make behavioural inferences from the sites, understand space, time, and cultural variability, and understand the relationship between small sites and larger settlement-subsistence systems (*ibid.*:1-2).

Even a casual perusal of the recent Ontario archaeological literature will show a growing number of articles reporting on small special-purpose sites, *i.e.* those focussing on quarrying and caching activities and resource extraction, the isolated burial of the dead, personal dream quests, and other ceremonials, etc. With the value of small site archaeology thus becoming more evident and recognized, this symposium serves as a welcome and convenient vehicle for us to further promote and discuss these kinds of sites.

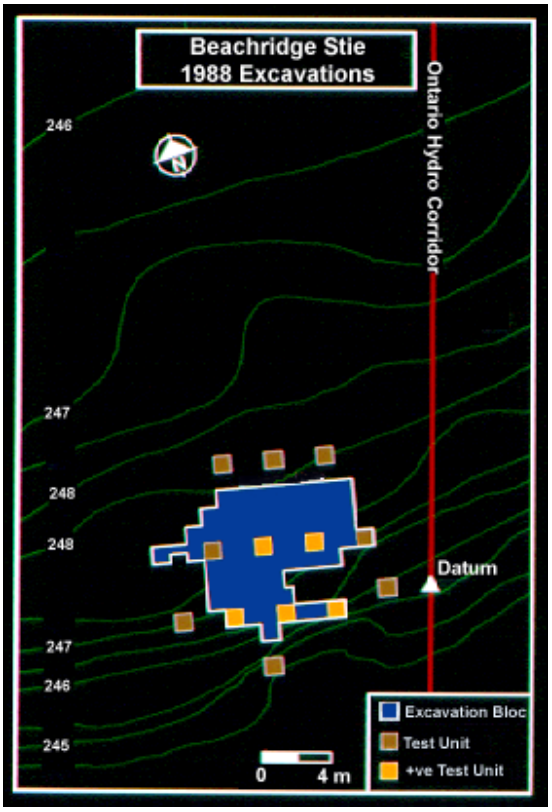

Figure 3 1988 Excavations at the Beachridge site.

THE BEACHRIDGE SITE (AfHj-68)

My contribution features a site investigation that was originally undertaken by the former consulting firm of *Mayer Pihl Poulton and Associates Incorporated* as part of a massive Ontario Hydro transmission line construction project in southwestern Ontario in the late 1980s. The Beachridge site was discovered in the fall of 1987 during a routine Stage 2 assessment of the southern half of a 500 kV transmission line right-of way from the Bruce NPD to the new Longwood TS just west of London. The site lay within the ROW, approximately 10.5 km north of the TS site, and was situated within the Caradoc Sand Plain (Figure 1). The historic vegetation in the vicinity of the site consisted of beech-maple forest, but willow swamps were located immediately north and south (Williamson 1985:Figure 12).

During a 5 m interval test-pit survey through a large woodlot, a series of four screened test-pits yielded two chert flakes, a fragment of bone, and two fire-cracked rock (FCR) fragments. The test-pits were distributed on a south-facing slope, and near the top of a prominent

Figure 4 Excavating at the Beachridge site.

sandy ridge, but the site was well away from water; approximately 580 m north of a channelized minor tributary of the Sydenham River (Figure 2) (Mayer, Pihl and Poulton 1988a).

Based on the preliminary recoveries and because the finds were situated within a tower and access road construction area, a series of 1 m^2 units were excavated in the vicinity of the positive test-pits (Figure 3). Of 13 units excavated, it is notable that only five produced artifacts, but they were tightly clustered and contained an assortment of chert debris, unfired lumps of clay, and FCR, with artifact counts ranging from 3 to 54 (Mayer, Pihl and Poulton 1988b). Given the results, it was recommended to Ontario Hydro that the site be completely mitigated.

Figure 5 A feature exposed during excavations.

In late spring of 1988, an additional 58 m^2 of the site was shovel-excavated by removing the undisturbed A and B horizons as one unit (Figure 4). The limit of excavation was defined when either sterile or adjacent squares with low artifact counts were encountered. The C horizon was carefully hand-trowelled, and two cultural features were delineated. Feature 1 (Figure 5) consisted of a faint irregularly-shaped stain, measuring 2.6 m long by 1.6 m wide, which was very shallow and largely defined by the presence of chert flakes; this is interpreted to be a small living floor. Feature 2 (Figure 6) was a nearly circular pit, measuring 80 cm long by 70 cm wide, with a basin shaped profile and a depth of 20 cm. The dark-stained sandy fill contained a few chert flakes, and some carbonized plant remains and charcoal. Five post moulds, averaging 6.6 cm in diameter and 10.6 cm deep, were clustered along the northern end of Feature 1.

The artifact assemblage (Table 1) is dominated by lithic and ceramic waste. Ninety-nine percent of the chipped lithics consist of chert debris, most of which was densely concentrated in

Table 1 Artifact sample from the Beachridge site

Artifact Class	#	Weight (gm)
Chipped Lithics		
Utilized Flakes	7	
Chert Debris	822	530.4
Ground / Rough Stone		
Ground Stone Debris	2	
Ceramics		
Neck / Shoulder Sherds	1	
Body Sherds	10	
Fragmentary Sherds	4	
Unfired Clay Lumps	548	1080.0
Bone		2.8
Charcoal / Carbonized Plant Remains		2.9
Fire-cracked Rock		7650.0
		2.8
Total	1394	

Table 2 Inventory of chert debitage from the Beachridge site.

Flake Type	#	%	%
Primary Reduction	2	0.2	0.5
Secondary Reduction	69	8.4	19.7
Thinning	214	26.0	61.1
Biface Trimming	65	7.9	18.6
	350		100.00
Flake Fragments	461	56.1	
Shatter	11	1.3	
Total	822	100.00	
Burnt Flakes	74	5.7	

Figure 6 Sectioning of Feature 2.

No formal tools were found. Seven flakes, however, have traces of use or edge damage, but this was only incidental in nature; none of the worked edges were retouched (Figure 8).

The ceramic sample is dominated by small unfired lumps of clay which account for 97% of the total and weigh over a kilogram (Figure 9). The material varies from smooth, rounded nodules to angular, irregular chunks with eroded edges and uniformly untempered. An impressive amount (over 95% by weight), however, have been modified: many are either moulded or shaped; flat or concave surfaces have been wiped or striated; and surfaces or edges have been impressed or notched with a variety of materials, possibly grass, cord or other coarse, organic-like material; the treatments suggest its use as clay lining, packing, or chinking.

the vicinity of Feature 1 (Figure 7). An analysis of the 822 flakes and flake fragments indicates that no core or primary reduction took place on the site, since there are few core or primary reduction flakes and virtually no shatter (Table 2). On the other hand, preform and biface reduction (or tool manufacturing) is strongly inferred by the large quantity of secondary reduction, thinning and biface trimming flakes present on the site; most of the flake fragments probably derived from thinning flakes. Two core fragments were recovered, both distal ends of preforms.

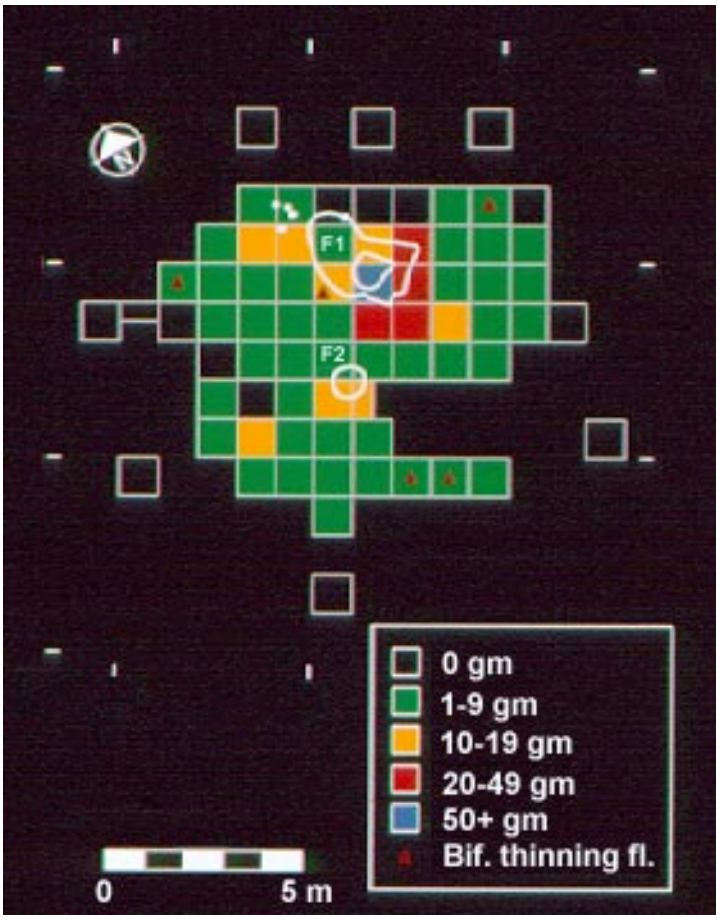

Figure 7 Distribution of debitage by weight (gm).

The unfired clay was found throughout the site but was concentrated in the vicinity of both features (Figure 10). It is noteworthy, however, that this material has also been found on other investigated sites in the area. For instance, it was recovered from five prehistoric sites that were tested or mitigated within the Longwood TS project area (AfHj-38, 40, 43, 51, 52, 54) (Mayer, Pihl and Poulton 1989a; Mayer, Poulton and Associates 1989a, 1989b). At the early Late Woodland Bancroft site (AfHj-38), three clustered features produced most of the recovered material including one large, thick fragment with a grass-impressed surface; and at the Early Woodland Willow site (AfHj-54), a large concentration was associated with FCR and possible post moulds, and interpreted to be a living floor. Although it is conceivable that these clay lumps result from natural processes peculiar to the sand plain (R. MacDonald pers.comm.), I favour a cultural origin.

Figure 8 Edge damaged or used flakes.

Figure 9 Unfired lumps of clay.

A small sample of neck, shoulder and body sherds was also recovered from an area adjacent to Feature 2, and these were reconstructed into the mid-section of a single ceramic vessel (Figure 11). Surface treatment consisted of a wiped interior and smoothed-over cord-marked exterior. Although the interior was not decorated, the exterior neck and shoulder area has bands of vertical rocker dentate impressions, at least two of which are separated by a single trailed line. Random combing is superimposed over a portion of the design. The paste, surface treatment and exterior decoration of this vessel favourably compares to similar Middle Woodland ceramics from the Saugeen and middle Thames River localities where researchers place rocker-dentate ceramics at *ca.* A.D. 1-500 (Finlayson 1977; Wilson 1990).

Finally, over 7.6 kg of FCR was recovered during excavation, and while it was distributed over most of the site, the highest concentration occurred in the general vicinity of Feature 2 (Figure 12). Unfortunately, no associated hearth was discovered despite the extensive excavation.

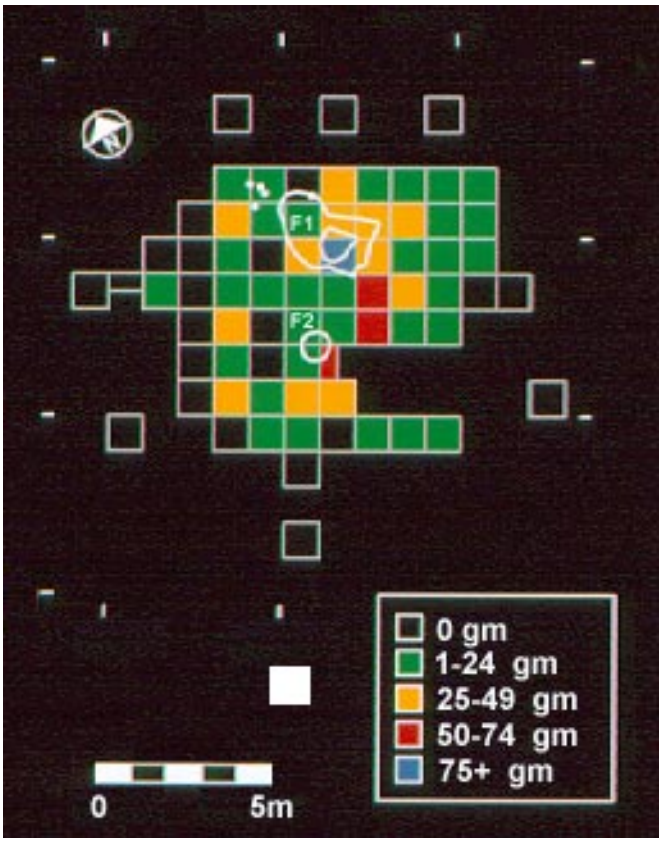

Figure 10 Distribution of clay lumps by weight (gm).

Several lines of evidence suggest a short-term occupation for this site: the small size (72 m^2), the small and limited artifact assemblage (only 7 slightly used flakes and one vessel), the remote location away from potable water, and the lack of dense storage pits or hearths. Aside from calling this a temporary encampment, however, the function of the site remains unclear. In the following schematic of the site plan, the settlement pattern and the densest concentrations of chert debris, unfired clay lumps and FCR (Figure 13) are depicted: the heaviest flint-knapping occurs within and adjacent to the living floor (Feature 1), while the bulk of the FCR is clustered around Feature 2 (although no FCR occurred in the pit fill); and the unfired clay is distributed between the features but overlaps the densest chert concentration. The primary activity area incorporates the features and intervening space, and this is where most of the utilized flakes were found; a single occupation is thus inferred.

Without faunal and floral data, it is not possible to establish seasonality, but given the site's location near the top of a prominent ridge, a winter occupation might be ruled out. A warm weather occupation, however, can be postulated. Below the Beachridge site (Figure 14), and also within the Hydro ROW, is the Ivory Hill site (AfHj-9) with early Palaeo-Indian, Late Archaic, Middle Woodland, and early Late Woodland. This is a large site with a diverse artifact assemblage representing hunting, food processing and chert processing activities and is located within 150 m of a channelized minor

Figure 11 Reconstructed vessel mid-section.

tributary which once drained a nearby swamp. Although not yet systematically investigated, the site is tentatively considered to be a base camp. In 1983, a cache of Middle Woodland preforms was excavated at the site, and several more were surface-collected during a more recent survey of the corridor (Mayer, Pihl and Poulton 1988b, 1988c). It seems plausible, then, to link the preform and biface reduction activities at the Beachridge site to this find: preforms or biface blanks were carried to the site and manufactured into tools. But why was the remote ridge-top location used? Perhaps it served as a short-term camp for harvesting forest resources such as maple sap in the spring or nuts in the fall; the unfired clay might have been used to line some kind of fabric or woven storage container. Alternatively, the ridge top could have been used as a travel corridor during wetter times of the year, with the site serving as a temporary over-night camp. It is clear, however, that the small Beachridge site was part of a much larger Middle Woodland settlement-subsistence system.

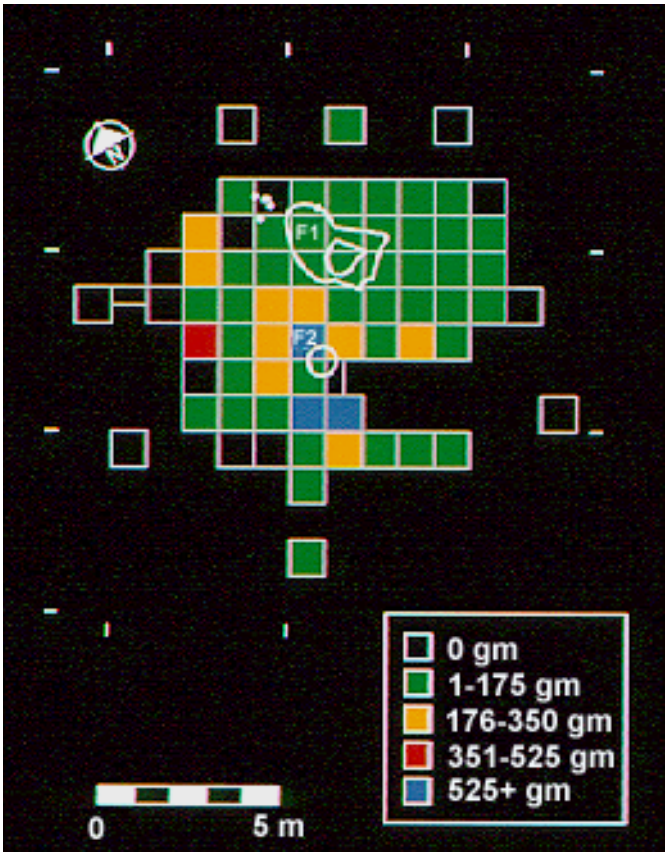

Figure 12 Distribution of fire-cracked rock by weight (gm).

SMALL SITES IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

Middle Woodland sites in the London area have usually been classified as Saugeen by making ceramic and other comparisons to the well investigated, northern components along the Saugeen River. The same classification has been applied to Middle Woodland site complexes throughout southwestern Ontario (Figure 15). Until recently, the settlement-subsistence pattern defined by Bill Finlayson for the Saugeen River components–one based on spring-early summer riverine macro-band settlements, followed by late summer-early fall lakeshore microband camps–was characteristically adopted for these sites. Although it was assumed that winter micro-band camps would be established, none have been investigated. Based on his extensive excavations at the Borasma site near Delaware and on his systematic survey of a portion of the middle Thames River drainage, Jim Wilson has recently concluded that there was much more

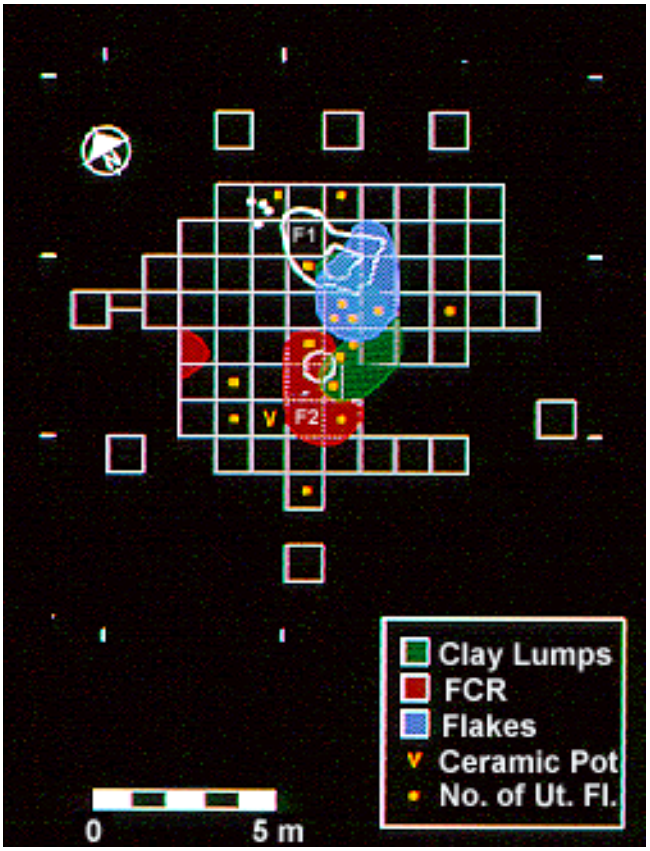

Figure 13 Artifact Concentrations.

this dramatize the fact that the Saugeen culture classification is now over-extended and should be restricted to the original drainage basin. A model of local complexes, centred along the major drainages, is perhaps more applicable, one in which each complex is "...only marginally different from its neighbours but more easily distinguishable from its more distant contemporarie" (Spence *et al*. 1990:143). Such a complex could be identified according to its primary drainage basin, *i.e.* the middle Thames Middle Woodland" (Wilson 1990:121), or the "Middle Sydenham Middle Woodland"' which would include sites residential stability for Middle Woodland groups along the middle Thames River drainage than the traditional settlement-subsistence model granted (1990, 1991b). The large riverine sites served as base camps which were occupied on and off throughout the entire year. Instead of establishing distant lakeshore micro-band camps, inland special-purpose camps were utilized. Indeed, over the past ten years, this Middle Woodland site type has increasingly been investigated in southwestern Ontario. Sites such as Fitz and Dingman Creek (Lennox 1986, 1994), East and West Bog (Pearce 1990), Butler's Woods (Timmins 1989), Kittmer (Wilson 1991a) among others, have been interpreted to be limited duration encampments, often occupied during the winter, which focussed on hunting and/or food processing activities.

Incidentally, regional settlement-subsistence pattern investigations such as

Figure 14 The Beachridge Site After ROW Preparation.

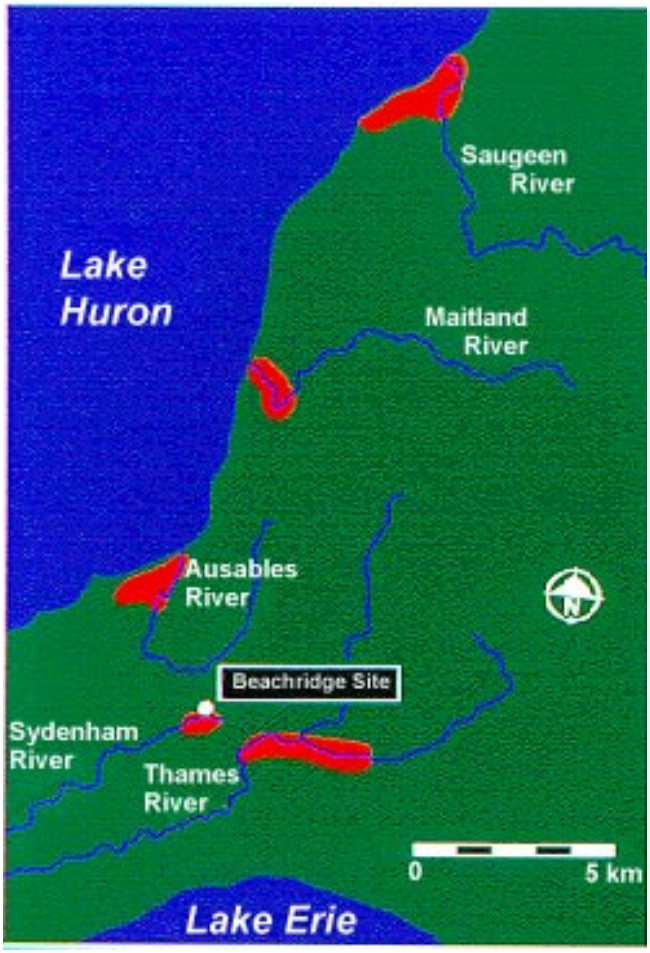

Figure 15 Distribution of Southwestern Ontario Middle Woodland Complexes.

like Beachridge and Ivory Hill, and the recently investigated Duncan McGugan site (Ellis and Wilson 1992). But archaeological linkages within and between complexes such as these and others (*e.g.* the Ausable Middle Woodland or Saugeen Middle Woodland) need to be demonstrated, not assumed. I believe we need to rethink the rationale for classifying Middle Woodland sites in Ontario (and the Great Lakes/Northeast) to one that better reflects our understanding of semi-sedentary, hunter-gatherer-fisher societies, and the kind of interaction that occurs between them. The 1997 joint symposium, "Taming the Taxonomy: Toward a New Understanding of Great Lakes Archaeology", between the OAS and the Midwestern Archaeological Conference will undoubtedly provide thought-provoking discussion and opinion on the general subject.

CONCLUSION

The Beachridge site is a small Middle Woodland camp within the Sydenham drainage that was occupied for a short duration. Although concentrated chert debris suggests that preform and/or biface reduction took place on the site, a large quantity of unfired clay wastage and fire-cracked rock also suggest that other activities, such as food processing were done.

The site is one of numerous small sites in the London area contributing to a greater understanding of the regional settlement-subsistence pattern during the Middle Woodland period.

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