

CANADIAN DAKOTAS

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“Tell me, good Weyuha, a legend of your father’s country,’ I said to him one evening, for I knew the country which is now known as North Dakota and Southern Manitoba was their ancient hunting ground.”

Charles Eastman, Wahpeton (Santee) Dakota, 1902

The above quote exemplifies the Canadian Dakotas’ perception of an important part of their history. They maintain that southern Manitoba was part of their ancestral territory long before the advent of the Europeans and the “Indian Wars” in the United States.

The Canadian government’s take on the same subject is markedly different: the Feds maintain that the Dakota now living in Canada are actually American Indians whose forebears came to Canada as refugees from Minnesota in the early 1860s. Hence, the Canadian Dakota aren’t true Canadian Aboriginals from Ottawa’s standpoint, and therefore they don’t legally qualify for Canadian treaty status. The Dakota claim that the government has used this perception as an excuse to deny them treaty rights to which they feel they’re entitled.

Obviously, this debate isn’t just academic as far as Dakota history is concerned. The question is, which understanding of that history is likely to be the correct one, and what can archaeologists do, if anything, toward resolving the impasse? To address this question, I’m going to apply a variation on the direct historical approach to reconstructing the past.

First of all, what is the “direct historical approach”? The direct historical approach is a method that is based on the premise that documented ethnicity of post-contact historical periods within a certain area can be traced directly back into earlier times via archaeologically-found material. It involves taking an archaeological site that has historical accounts relating to recent periods of its occupation, and then excavating it to try and establish artifactual and ethnic continuity back to when the local demographics were entirely Indigenous. For our purposes here, we’re not dealing with a particular archaeological site as such; rather, we want to trace ethnicity back in time through the use of linguistic considerations and common logic.

To start, let’s note that if there’s debate as to how long “Dakotas” have been in southern Manitoba, there’s no question that “Assiniboins” have lived here for as long as Europeans have been keeping records locally, beginning with La Vérendrye in the 1730s. The name “Assiniboin” is of Algonquian, not Siouan, origin, and in that sense it is, like “Sioux,” artificial. So what was the term with which the “Assiniboins” identified themselves while everyone else was calling them “Assiniboins”?

The stock answer to that question is “Nakota,” but this begs the question: what is the relationship, if any, between “Nakota” and “Dakota”?

“Nakota” is actually a *dialect*¹ of a hypothesized ancestral Siouan language that linguists call *Central Siouan*. Within the past 2000 years or so, at least three dialects – Dakota, Lakota and Nakota – developed from the presumed Central Siouan language, and the speakers of these three dialects came to identify themselves by these names.

One hypothesis has it that a “Proto-Siouan”² language apparently had developed far to the south in and around the central Mississippi River valley by 2,500 RCYBP, and it was around that time that it began to split into sub-groups, one of which was *Proto-Central-Siouan* that gave rise to *Central Siouan*. This Central group is of particular interest here, because the people we know as “Assiniboins” trace their origins back to the Central Siouans. From Central Siouan evolved *Proto-Dakota* and then Dakota, the immediate ancestor of the “Assiniboine”/Nakota.

Now let’s reverse this progression in the manner of the direct historical approach. From latest to earliest, we can minimally trace the line of language evolution as it concerns the Nakota *backwards* in time as follows:



The main thing to note here is that the so-called “Assiniboins,” a.k.a. Nakota, *can be traced back to speakers of the early Dakota language as it existed **before** the division of Dakota into its various dialects.*

While all this language change was going on, people were at least periodically on the move. Out-migration from the central Mississippi River homeland to the northwest over the course of many generations culminated in the occupation of the prairies, parklands and southern boreal forest of Manitoba well before the advent of Europeans. Legend has it, that in what archaeologists call Late Woodland times, a serious feud broke out among the Dakotas and a sizeable group broke away as a consequence; so originated the “Assiniboins” who at the time held the northern flank of the Dakota territories. Some linguists guesstimate that the Nakota dialect originated sometime around 1500 CE (Figure 1).

¹ A “dialect” is a variant of a language that is distinguished from its parent language, or from other variants/dialects of the same or parent language, by features of phonology, grammar and vocabulary. Its users are a group whose speech is typically set off from the other variants/dialects of the language geographically or socially.

² The prefix “Proto” refers to the first, the earliest form, or the original expression, of the thing that follows it. Thus, the implications are that if there was a “Central Siouan” language, there must have been a “Proto-Central Siouan” predecessor. And, if there was a “Proto-Central Siouan” language, there must have been a “Central Siouan” successor.

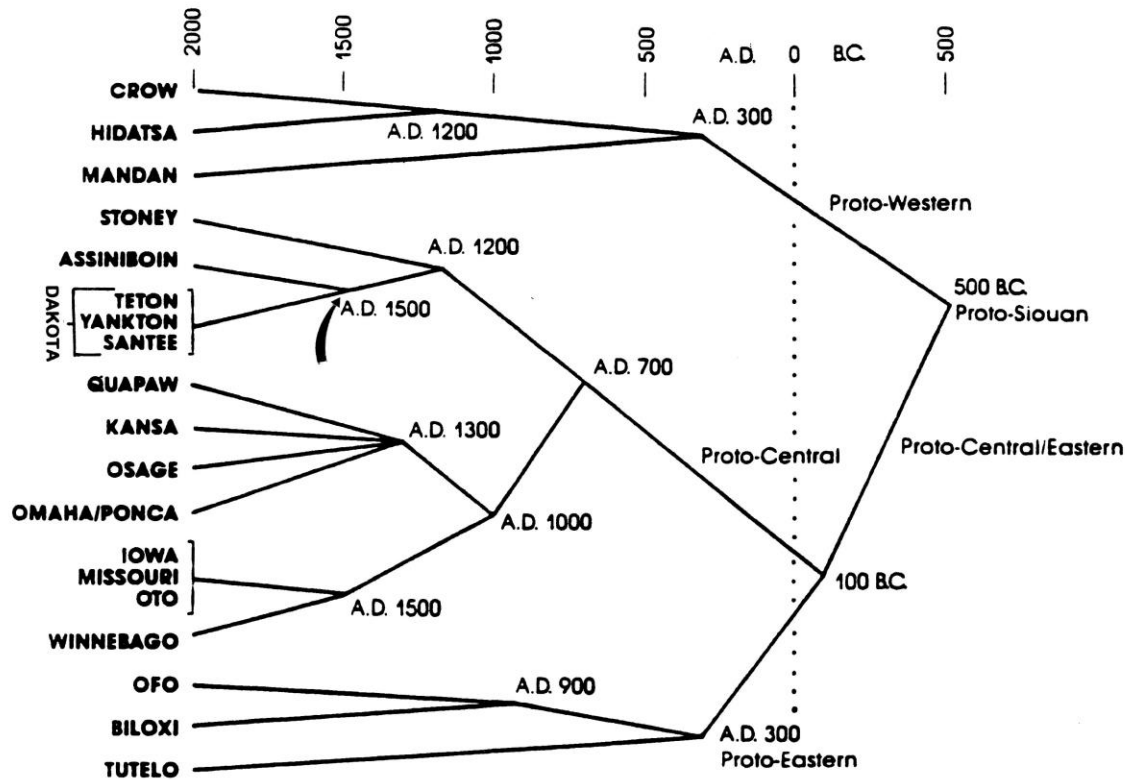


Fig. 1. One interpretation of the Siouan language evolutionary tree, published in its original version by James Springer and Stanley Witkowski in 1982. The disconnect that eventually gave rise to the “Assiniboin”/Nakota dialect is shown to have occurred around 1500 CE (arrow).

Note that according to this model -- originally propounded by early Manitoba historian George Bryce -- the Dakota people who have come to be known to outsiders as “Assiniboins” were already living in southern Manitoba by the time the schism took place. Hence, the falling-out involved drawing a socio-political boundary *within* the existing Dakota acumen, rather than a territorial enlargement by way of out-migration of a breakaway group into adjacent territory, as is commonly believed. The breakaways were Dakotas before they were “Assiniboins”/Nakota and, if George Bryce is correct, *their immediate forebears were living in southern Manitoba when they were still Dakota-speakers.*

Some writers identify the Santee as the direct “Assiniboine” progenitors, while others look to the Yanktonai as the group of origin. I’m not particularly concerned about who the immediate ancestors of the proto-“Assiniboins” -- Yankton, Yanktonai, or Santee (Figure 2) -- might have been. They were all Dakota-speakers. I find it hard to believe that inter-marriage didn’t take place in pre-schism times across the entire Dakota demographic spectrum in response to incest taboos. Where better to find a spouse than among “friends” and “allies,” which is what the umbrella word “Dakota” means. To repeat, at the time the “Assiniboins” broke away, they were Dakota-speakers because the

parent group among whom they originated were Dakota-speakers. It would have taken a generation or so before they developed a dialect of their own.

HISTORICAL DIVISIONS WITHIN THE GREATER DAKOTA CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC COMMUNITY			
Ethno-geography ▶	WESTERN	MIDDLE	EASTERN
Ethnicity ▶	TETON	YANKTON-YANKTONAI	SANTEE
Dialect ▶	LAKOTA	DAKOTA	DAKOTA
		↓	
		"ASSINIBOIN"/ NAKOTA	

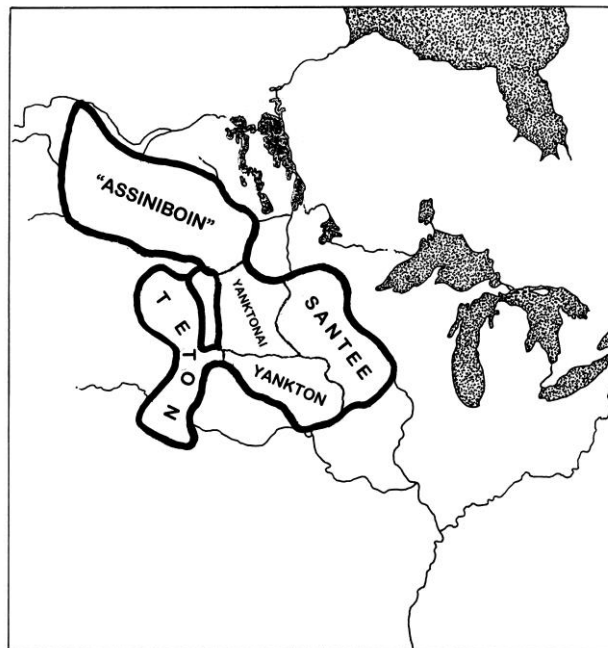


Fig. 2. Above – Correlation of cultural and geographical variables of the northerly postcontact Siouan divisions; Below – Territorial distribution of postcontact-era Siouan peoples. Adapted and amalgamated from maps by Harold E. Driver 1961 and Arthur J. Ray 1974.

It's the language history, then, that binds everybody together, in the sense that the Eastern Dakota (Santee), Middle Dakota (Yankton-Yanktonai), Western Dakota (Teton), and "Assiniboin" all speak dialects of the Dakota language, and the speakers were all descendant from common forebears who spoke an early Dakota language. From this historical perspective, generations of ancestral "Assiniboins"/Nakotas were Dakota-speakers, i.e., they were Dakotas before they became "Assiniboins"/Nakotas. So when the Santee historian Charles Eastman referred to southern Manitoba as "their ancient hunting ground," he was surely referring to people whose ancestral language was Dakota – and that includes the "Assiniboins."

Anthropologist Gordon Hewes, writing back in 1948, did something that is highly unusual if not unique: he called the Nakota-speakers "Dakota-Assiniboin." This appellation is noteworthy in that it serves to remind us of the "Assiniboins'" Dakota roots. It's all well and good to refer to the northernmost Siouans in Manitoba as "Assiniboin" and "Nakota" so long as the lines aren't drawn so heavily that their *historical* connections, pre-schism inter-group relationships, and identities are obscured in the process. Sometimes I wonder if the emphasis we place on the word "Assiniboin" doesn't end up hiding the forest from the trees.

Now then, where does archaeology fit into all of this? This is where we have to link up archaeologically-found materials with known ethno-geographic populations. Quite a few archaeologists equate the Psinomani culture and its Sandy Lake pottery ware with the "Assiniboins." It is generally understood that artifact styles don't necessarily correlate one-to-one with ethnic or language groups. But the fact is, all material culture (in this case, Sandy Lake ceramic ware) was invariably manufactured by human beings, so *somebody* must have made it ... why not the "Assiniboins," especially since the known distribution of Sandy Lake ware and the early postcontact "Assiniboin" ethno-geography substantially overlap (Figures 3-5)? Is there any particular reason why an "Assiniboin"-Psinomani-Sandy Lake ware correlation cannot and should not be entertained?

I must point out that not all archaeologists restrict the authorship of Sandy Lake ware to the "Assiniboins;" others have attributed at least some of it to the Santee. In fact, the earliest and latest archaeological components found to contain this pottery are in Minnesota and Wisconsin – traditional Eastern Dakota territory. To me, this simply demonstrates cultural continuities among the northern-tier Siouan-speakers over several centuries, even if they all weren't on the best of terms with each other politically. Just because the "Assiniboins" developed a distinctive language dialect doesn't mean that they had to change their pottery stylistics too.

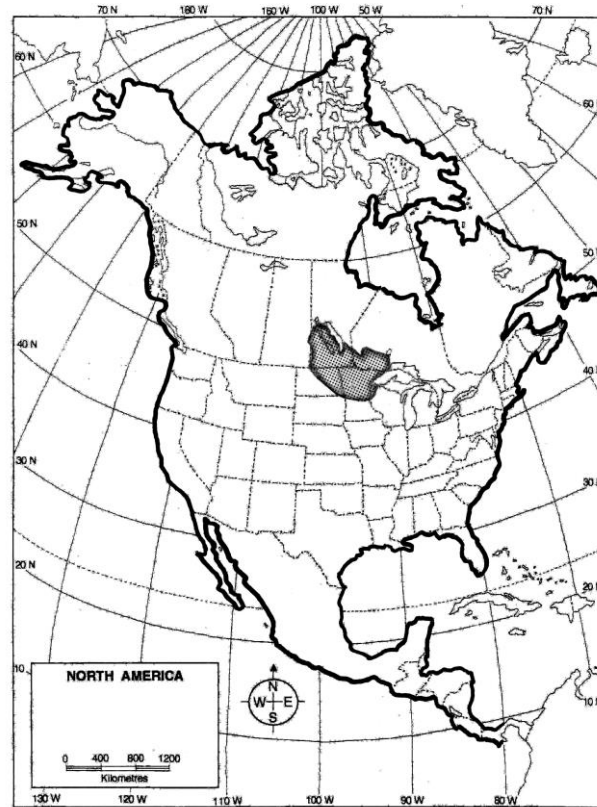


Fig. 3. Geographic extent of Sandy Lake ware, based on a map prepared by Jill Taylor-Hollings in 1999.

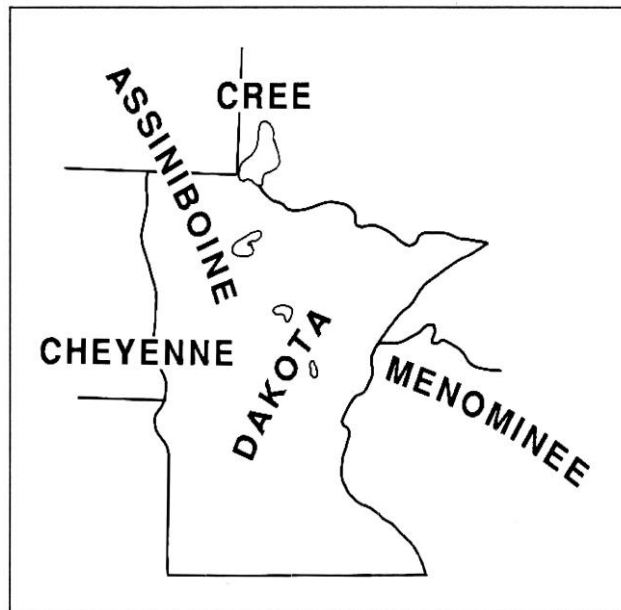


Fig. 4. A portion of Guy Gibbon's 1500 CE tribal distribution map, showing the "Assiniboin" territory straddling the 49th parallel of latitude.

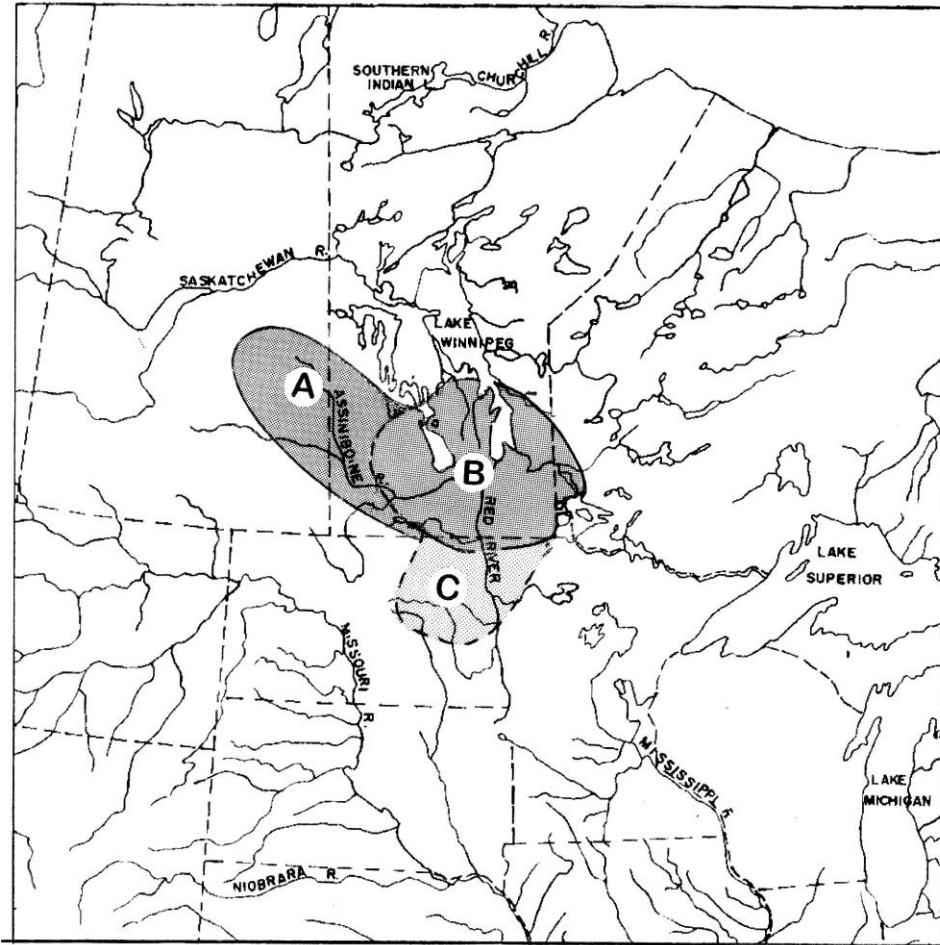


Fig. 5. Territory presumably occupied by the “Assiniboin” during the latter half of the 17th Century CE: A - western extension of the core area according to Meyer & Russell, 2006; B - core area according to Historical Atlas of Canada, Volume I, Plate 37, 1987; C -- seasonally utilized territory (ibid.)

To return to our opening topic: if you connect enough dots, and if you connect the right ones, through time and space, you should be able to effectively argue that ancestors of modern-day Canadian Dakotas lived in southern Manitoba. And if I were among the Dakota claimants to Canadian treaty rights, I wouldn't distance myself too far from the so-called “Assiniboins” and their history!