

## ST LAWRENCE IROQUOIAN BURIAL PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

The paucity of graves on the Roebuck prehistoric St Lawrence Iroquoian village, relative to the estimated peak population of approximately 2,000 over a 12 to 20 year life span, is noted. The preponderance of females in the adult grave population is examined and explanations are suggested to account for the very few adult male graves present.

### INTRODUCTION

The 85 graves excavated at the Roebuck village site which are described by Wintemberg (1936:114) and Knowles (1937) constitute the largest body of data available on St Lawrence Iroquoian burials. Certain implications arising from these data invite a discussion of St Lawrence Iroquoian burial practices.

### THE VILLAGE

The Roebuck village site occupies approximately 3 hectares or 8 acres (Wintemberg 1936:2). Premised on two families sharing a hearth Wright (1979:68-69) has estimated that some 30 longhouses accommodated a peak population of approximately 2,000 people. This estimate compares well with Tooker's (1964:40) interpretation of the *Jesuit Relations* regarding Huron villages. By linear extrapolation it also compares well with the 1,200 population for 6 acres suggested by Heidenreich (1971:133) for Huron villages and the 1,500 to 2,000 range proposed by Trigger (1976:32) for large Huron villages. Noble has indicated to Heidenreich that Neutral villages were roughly the same size as the Huron (Heidenreich 1971:126). Heidenreich has also compared Huron villages with Mohawk, Oneida and Seneca villages for which ethnohistoric data are available and in part concludes that "New York Iroquois villages lie within the size range of Huron villages" (1971:126-127). Because Roebuck remains the only St Lawrence Iroquoian village excavated extensively data are not available on which to premise St Lawrence village area/population ranges for comparison. Although a significant portion of the Roebuck site within the earthworks recorded by Guest (1856) during his visit in 1854 remains unexcavated, Wright's estimate of the Roebuck population remains realistic. It is noteworthy that the earthworks recorded by Guest have not yet been revealed by excavation.

### THE HUMAN REMAINS EXCAVATED

Wintemberg (1936:118-119) excavated 85 skeletons at Roebuck. Knowles (1937:1) describes 84. Most of these are from individual interments although a few are multiple (Wintemberg 1936:114; Knowles 1937:8). Knowles (1937:2) states: "The skeletal remains from the graves are undoubtedly remains of the people who inhabited the site." These graves do not pertain to the cannibalized, disarticulated and fragmentary human bone

excavated in the refuse which Knowles (1937:4) estimates to represent as many as 35 additional individuals. Wintemberg (1936:120) believes these cannibalized bones "may have been people of the site but it is more likely that most of them are the bones of enemies who had been roasted and eaten." Knowles (1937:5) indicates 31 of these 35 individuals were young men and he too believes they are the bones of captives (1937:2).

Knowles (1937:8) states that 43 of the 84 villagers buried in graves are adult and 41 are non-adults "comprising children and those individuals who has not attained their full growth." Thirty-nine of the adults are women of which "7 were young, eight under middle-age, 11 were middle age or over and thirteen elderly and aged" Knowles (1937:10). Only 4 are adult males. Two of these were over middle age and 2 were "probably of young middle age" (Knowles 1937:10). Knowles's detailed descriptions of these male skeletons indicate that 2 present pathological conditions. The face of one of the over middle age individuals (Cat. no. XIII. F. 17) "is of somewhat unusual type: the malar bones are small for an Indian and do not project to the same extent as is usual." He notes that he "has noticed the not unusual occurrence among Iroquoian crania of this comparatively slight-faced type." One young middle age individual (Cat. no. XIII. F. 251) has "a large, rough, bony growth on the interior of the occipital bone. The outer surface at this point the bone is porous and there is present a small inflammatory patch." Aside from these there are no anomalies in the 4 male skeletons. The 41 non-adult burials include 7 infants, 6 older individuals to age two years, 7 older individuals to age five years, 12 older individuals to age ten years and 5 older individuals to age fifteen years (Knowles 1937:8). The sex of these individuals is doubtful. Of the 4 remaining non-adults Knowles describes between ages fifteen and nineteen years, 3 are females and 1 is a male. Hereafter in this paper this nineteen-year-old male 'non-adult' will be considered a young warrior.

### *THE VILLAGE LIFE-SPAN*

It would be difficult to attribute with certainty a specific number of years to the life-span of the Roebuck village site. However the extent and depth of the refuse, the number and distribution of the longhouses and the extent of the palisades makes it reasonable to postulate a mid-term or late position in the 12 to 20 years usually attributed to an Iroquoian village (Tooker 1964:42). While he does not suggest a specific life-span for the Roebuck settlement, Wintemberg's remarks (1936:124) generally support this estimate.

### *THE PROBLEM*

These data raise the question: Can the 85 (84) individuals excavated at Roebuck represent the majority, let alone all, of the dead of a population which at one time during a 12 to 20 year period peaked at 2,000?

### *A RECONSTRUCTED VILLAGE POPULATION*

Before attempting to reply to this question it would be appropriate to examine the circumstances which attended the collection of the human remains at Roebuck (Wintemberg 1936:114-120; Knowles 1937). By scaling from Wintemberg's excavation map it has been calculated that 0.77 hectares (1.89 acres) were excavated in 1912 and 1915. In 1970 Wright (personal communication 1983) excavated 0.04 hectares (0.1 acres). In all 1.99 acres or approximately one-quarter of the 8 acre site have been excavated. It can be claimed with some validity that an assessment of total village mortality requires that there be data

available on the total village grave population. It is proposed to examine this thesis using an arithmetical extrapolation of the available data on the premise that the incidence and nature of the burials in the unexcavated portion of the site are the same as that revealed in the excavated portion.

On this basis, using Knowles's data (84 graves, 83 plus one nineteen-year-old 'non-adult' male here judged to be a young warrior) the village total of adult graves would be 336. Fifty-two percent of Knowles's graves were adults; hence of the 336 total 176 would be adults. Eleven percent of Knowles's adults were males; hence 37 of the 336 calculated total might be expected to be male adults. Using Wintemberg's data (85 graves, 35 of which were adults) the total village adult grave population would be 340 and the total number of adult graves, 41%, would be 139. Twenty-six percent of Wintemberg's adults were male; hence 88 of the 340 graves would be male adults.

These data, although somewhat artificial and subjective, permit the question to be rephrased: Can 340 (336) individuals represent the majority of the dead of a population which, over a 20 year period, peaked at 2,000?

#### *VILLAGE MORTALITY*

Dr. Jerome S. Cybulski, Physical Anthropologist, Archaeological Survey of Canada, National Museum of Man, when discussing the Wintemberg/Knowles data noted that demographic calculations premised on a population of 2,000 with an average prehistoric mortality rate of 4% per annum would yield nearly 1,600 dead over a period of 20-years; assuming a stable population annually over that period and a comparable fertility rate. Churcher and Kenyon (1960) in their paper on the Tabor Hill Ossuaries have suggested a 2.4 to 3% mortality rate. Using the mid-point 2.7 percent mortality rate to avoid inflating the grave population which would create a greater disparity than has been noted, the Roebuck dead over a 20 year period would be 1,080. The figures derived from these estimates are significantly higher than the 340/336 calculated total village grave population and the 85/84 population excavated by Wintemberg.

While it is possible that village movement could have resulted in there being a sizeable population on the Roebuck site from the outset, it is inappropriate to assume that the peak population of 2,000 prevailed over the whole of the village life-span. As a basis for further comparison it will be assumed that the average annual population over a 20-year village life-span was 1,000. In this case, using the lower 2.7 percent mortality rate, 540 dead might be expected. This too is significantly higher than the Wintemberg archaeological sample (85/84) and the calculated total village grave population (340/336).

#### *THE PAUCITY OF MALE GRAVES*

Even without involving technical demographic data, the relative incidence of males and females at Roebuck is anomalous and the distribution of adult males by age groups is abnormal. Knowles (1937:9) states that only 4 of the 43 adult skeletons are males. By accepting the likelihood that the one male in Knowles's 'non-adult' category between ages fifteen and nineteen years was a young male warrior, Knowles's adult male total rises to 5 or 11%. Wintemberg (1936:118-119) indicates that 9 of the 35 adult burials are males. This prompts a second question: Where are the graves of the adult male villagers? Corollary questions concerning the reasons for the separation of the male graves and the nature of the social customs on which the separation of the males might be premised hurry to mind.

### DISCUSSION

Knowles (1937:10) recognizing this incongruity speculated: "Possibly in the unsettled state of existence at that time, as is evidenced by the skeletal remains in the refuse deposits, the men of the tribe during the occupancy of this site may have usually met their end when engaged in forays, for as we have already seen from the survey of the scattered bones among the ashes, the majority of the individuals represented by these remains were young men in the prime of life." However it was the Huron practice to return the bones of those who died outside Huronia to their village for burial (Tooker 1964:132). Knowles goes on: "If this theory is untenable, it must be concluded that there was some other method of burial in use, one applicable only to the men, although the presence of a few male skeletons among the burials and the fact that they include men of various ages, seems to render this unlikely."

It is interesting if not wholly germane to note that a paucity of adult male burials has been noted among the Washington-Boro Basin Susquehannock (Heisey and Witmer 1962:104). There "the ratio of female to male skeletons in the cemetery (Blue Rock) is too high in relation to the probable ratio in the population. This also seems to be true in other known Susquehannock cemeteries." It is suggested that there too males who died on hunting or raiding expeditions were not returned for burial in the village cemetery. This contrasts sharply with modern Iroquoian burial practices which strongly favour the body being brought home for burial (Tooker 1964:132).

The Roebuck burials can also be examined in the light of the burial pattern observed at the Beckstead site on the basis of burial 'find places' (Pendergast n.d.a: Table 57). There the human remains found in the palisade/embankment works were disarticulated and fragmented. Disarticulated concentrations of human bone were also found in pits and postholes in the houses. They are believed to be discarded slain enemy. Intact graves in the houses, including a mother and child, children and adolescents, and a cluster of adult graves between the houses and in an open village area are believed to be those of the villagers buried with care. Generally there was the impression at Beckstead that the villagers were buried in the houses or in the village in cemetery areas while slain enemy were discarded to be covered by the accumulation of village debris. Or if they were fragmented, they were 'thrown out in the garbage.'

At Roebuck Wintemberg's excavations were largely in the middens and in the palisade works which he traced around three sides of the site. On the basis of the generalization which arose from observations at Beckstead all of the Roebuck human remains, less burials 53-75, having been found in or under middens or in the palisade works could be attributed to slain enemy. But the intact flexed burials described by Wintemberg (1936: 114-119) as having been found in those locations do not reflect the treatment accorded slain enemy. Burials 1-13 in or under Midden 1 immediately outside the south side palisade are "in a nearly straight row across the bottom of the hill and at nearly regular intervals." These are the graves of children, multiple children and mother and child. Their arrangement is reminiscent of burial in an emotion-charged cemetery. Burials 79-80 in the palisade works are likely mother and child. Burial 28 in Midden 1 and in close proximity to the palisade is believed to have been in a grave house. These are but examples of a number of graves in middens or in the palisade works which are not compatible with the treatment usually accorded a slain enemy. Graves 23, 29, 63 and 75 are examples of human finds which being disarticulated or in ash dumps are likely to be slain enemy. Further, if the Beckstead generalities were to be applied to the Roebuck burials those in the village area are likely to be villagers buried with care in cemetery areas. But that is not the case at Roebuck. Graves 71-73 which are located in

the village area are disarticulated mutilations in keeping with the fate met by an Iroquoian enemy. In addition Dawson's description of the burials on the Dawson site (Hochelega?) (Pendergast and Trigger 1972: 155) indicating that they were "Around the outskirts of the town, and in some cases within its limits ..." suggests burials occurred significantly beyond the palisade line.

Questions regarding the paucity of burials on the Roebuck site relative to the estimated, or the calculated, village population and life-span and the near absence of males evoke a common response. The graves must be elsewhere. Or the St Lawrence Iroquoians did not practise burial in the ground to the extent believed heretofore. Certainly the respect shown friendly dead by the Iroquoians (Tooker 1964: 128-140) would not support a model in which village dead were discarded to be destroyed by scavengers. Knowles's suggestion notwithstanding, it seems unlikely that over a span of 12 to 20 years only 5 male warriors would survive to be buried in the village. And warfare would not explain the absence of adult male and female burials in the quantities that might be expected to accumulate over the village life-span from causes other than war. Neither would it explain the absence of an accumulation of adult female graves that might be expected regardless of why the males died or where and how they were buried. Possibly the 4 middle-aged males were interred in the village apart from their peers because they held, or did not hold, a special or particular social, military, religious or political status. Williamson (1978:19) raises the possibility of Huron individuals being accorded a special status burial. Apart from special infant burial practices (Kapches 1976) certain adult Huron were buried apart from their peers and in a particular manner different from that accorded the remainder of the community. Those who died a violent death, from cold, in war, or shipwreck were burned, or buried immediately not to be exhumed later for ceremonial ossuary burial (Tooker 1964:132).

The season of the year seems likely to have dictated the manner and the location used to dispose of the dead. In winter with the ground frozen solid to a considerable depth for a prolonged period it would have been difficult, even impossible, to bury the dead. Melbye (1978:25), has suggested that this may have been a deciding factor as to whether the dead were cremated or buried in the Archaic period in the Great Lakes region. Pendergast (n.d.a.: 53) has speculated that the inability to bury the dead in winter led the St Lawrence Iroquoians to inter some children, adolescents and mothers with infants preferentially inside the longhouse, where the ground was less frozen, to avoid the hazards of a surface burial. Regrettably insufficient St Lawrence Iroquoian graves have been excavated to test the incidence of longhouse burials relative to the total village grave population.

In the event the remainder of the dead at Roebuck, particularly males, are buried elsewhere, are they buried in cemeteries? This was frequently the practice of the Iroquois in New York State. There cemeteries "seem often to be located quite a distance from the village ..." (Ritchie 1965:323). On the other hand, Huron cemeteries, which represent their initial scaffold burial practice, were "nearby" the village (Trigger 1976:51), sufficiently so as to be threatened should the village catch fire. Or are they in an ossuary apart from the village as was the Huron practice? Although they have not been excavated during this century, 'bone pits' are reported in Jefferson County, New York State, in close proximity to a large cluster of St Lawrence Iroquoian sites (Squire 1851; Hough 1854). Beauchamp (1892:80) notes: "As Cusick (1825:30) states the Iroquois changed burial systems from time to time ..." then having explained that ossuary burial was not a custom among the eastern Iroquois (Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk) he remarks "Except in Jefferson County bone pits hardly occur as far east as Onondaga." Regrettably details on these 'bone pits' are still lacking. One of these pits is described as ". . . ten to twelve feet square by perhaps four feet

deep in which are promiscuously heaped together a large number of human skeletons" (Squire 1851:25). Another was ". . . a pit about six feet square and four feet deep . . . filled with human bones all well preserved but in fragments. Upwards of forty pairs of patella were counted . . . all the bones are those of adults . . . no relics of any kind were found with them ..." (Squire 1851:25). A number of large stones were heaped on this pit. Beauchamp (1886) in a paper read to the Jefferson County Historical Society remarked "One thing of special interest in Jefferson County is the occurrence of bone pits, which suggest the ossuaries of Canada (with which he was familiar) but on a smaller scale." There is the possibility of an ossuary in connection with the late prehistoric St Lawrence Iroquoian Glenbrook site (Pendergast 1981:29).

It may be that scaffold burial near, but outside the village, was practised by the St Lawrence Iroquoian either as an interim or a terminal interment. The Huron used scaffold burial as an interim interment during the years between Feast of the Dead ossuary burials (Trigger 1976:85). Primary scaffold burial and/or terminal ossuary burial may have been introduced at the same time, and possibly for the same reasons, that other Huron traits appear on late prehistoric St Lawrence Iroquoian sites in eastern Ontario and Jefferson County, New York State. Tooker (1964:131) quotes a number of references to scaffold burial among the Five Nation Iroquois.

There remains the possibility that the paucity of graves at Roebuck is evidence of there being a smaller village population than has been estimated. Estimating Iroquoian village population is a tenuous art. Although it is unlikely that all houses excavated on a site are contemporaneous, the allocation of houses to specific time periods over the life of the site is uncertain in all but very special circumstances. In addition there is ample evidence that not all structures in the village were houses. Sagard (Wrong 1939:115, 149, 152, 161, 178) mentions some of these. There are also the problems which arise as a result of there being but one family to a hearth in some houses. This is indicated by there being a bunkline on only one wall in some St Lawrence Iroquoian longhouses (Wright 1972:83; Barre et Girouard 1978:48; Pendergast n.d.a.).

### CONCLUSION

The implications of burial pattern observed at Roebuck are significant. If quantities of skeletons can not be found in association with the St Lawrence Iroquoian village sites which are in keeping with current population estimates, (say within 5 to 10% although that may be too high), or satisfactory reasons be given to explain their absence, then consideration must be given to accepting a compensatory decrease in current population estimates or village life-spans — possibly both. In the meantime it would seem prudent to avoid generalizing that St Lawrence Iroquoian burial practices are limited to an 'in-the-ground/in-the-village' mode. Their mortuary customs and associated social customs appear to be more complex than has been appreciated. Clearly there is a need to excavate large areas of St Lawrence Iroquoian village sites to clarify the problems which arise as a result of the burial practices observed to date at Roebuck.

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