Comment on Spence's "Mortuary Programmes of the Early Ontario Iroquoians"

Shelley R. Saunders

I welcome this paper by Michael Spence with enthusiasm because he has undertaken to review information on a diversity of burial sites from a poorly known period in Ontario Iroquoian prehistory. Data from most of the sites discussed in this paper have not been published before, and this new material further enhances Spence's contribution. It is not surprising to me that he observes a great deal of variability in mortuary practices from the period; in fact, I feel this is an important point that requires the strong emphasis that he gives it. I also endorse his caution to avoid making too many interpretations about the meanings behind varied burial practices.

What follows are a few comments stimulated by certain discussions in his text. In examining the difficulty of actually distinguishing between fundamental differences in mortuary programmes Spence refers to the confusion associated with descriptions of ossuary burial. He notes that ossuaries should be defined on the basis of the burial practices performed to create them, including secondary burial of large numbers of dismembered individuals mixed into burial pits. I think it is important to clarify that the term ossuary has been appropriated from its Latin-based, Old World origins, where it meant "a cave, charnel house or receptacle for the bones of the dead" (Onions 1973), and applied to curious grave sites in eastern North America described by nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars. While the Huron Feast of the Dead was observed and recounted by seventeenth-century explorers and missionaries, similar grave sites and mortuary practices have been examined from the southeastern and mid-Atlantic United States. Ubelaker (1974) provides an informative survey of these studies. He also offers a definition of North American prehistoric ossuary burial as "the collective, secondary deposit of skeletal material representing individuals initially stored elsewhere" (Ubelaker 1974:8). This definition neglects the details of mortuary practice, such as mixing, which Spence would like to include. We are, however, forced to accept the broader definition, once it is recognized that even the mortuary practices for ossuary burial in the Protohistoric and Early Historic periods in southern Ontario were probably quite variable (Sutton 1988).

Spence says that it will be important to eventually consider the numerous sites lacking burials if mortuary programmes are to be properly understood in terms of community change. This is an important point; we often neglect to consider negative evidence and its meaning. However, I would suggest that a proper investigation of this topic will necessarily involve consideration of excavation bias, problems of preservation, and the difficulties involved in tracing sequences of community occupations and migrations. I believe that more comparisons of Ontario archaeological situations and patterns with other world regions are warranted. In addition, conclusive information on even Late Ontario Iroquoian period burials and burial practices is still sadly lacking. Consider the fact that there has not been a contemporary excavation of an entire Late Ontario Iroquoian village with an associated ossuary.

Finally, I would question Spence's assertion that Ontario Iroquoians (recalling the modern political definition of "Ontario") seem to have assigned burial practices a key role in sociopolitical integration. How do we know this? What is the evidence and can it be thoroughly evaluated?

These comments serve only to clarify issues or stimulate discussion of Spence's paper which I feel is a significant contribution to the literature in Ontario archaeology.

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Shelley R. Saunders
Dept. of Anthropology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4L9

Comment on Spence's "Mortuary Programmes of the Early Ontario Iroquoians"

J.V. Wright

The thrust of Mike Spence's article is to demonstrate that Early Ontario Iroquoian mortuary practices, when viewed from a programmatic rather than typological perspective, exhibit "...no uniform set of practices...". This is believed to cast doubt upon the reality of the Glen Meyer and Pickering cultural constructs. If, of course, Glen Meyer and Pickering never existed but "...represent artificially segregated points in a spatial continuum..." then the conquest of the former by the latter could never have taken place.

I have a number of reservations with certain aspects of this otherwise good paper. First, no cultural construct can be either validated or demolished by focusing upon a single cultural system such as mortuary practices. For most anthropological purposes the utility of archaeologically derived cultural constructs depends upon the interrelation of all of the cultural systems available to archaeological study such as technology, settlement patterns, subsistence, and cosmology.

Second, as is recognized by the author of the article but rarely acted upon, the data base pertaining to Early Ontario Iroquoian mortuary practices is flawed. Many of the sites used in the study lack demonstrable cultural contexts and skeletal remains are simply assumed to pertain to Early Ontario Iroquoians on the grounds of general geographical proximity (e.g., Afhi-57 and 78, AhGx-265, A1Gh-62, and AkGt-5) or appropriate time ranges of radiocarbon dates (e.g., AfHh-28, AgHb-131, and AhGv-3). In the case of a multi-component site like AdHc-5, the mortuary evidence almost certainly pertains to the Middleport substage occupation. Finally, there are questionable cultural assignments such as relating the AiGw-124 site to late Glen Meyer rather than the Pickering-Uren continuum.

Third, the proposed mortuary programmes involving the annual settlement-subsistence rounds in the Norfolk Sand Plain area and the more complex burial features of the Grand River region all pertain to Glen Meyer and not Pickering.

Fourth, there are errors in categorization such as equating the MacAllan site with a Glen Meyer village when the single aberrant longhouse associated with burial pits appears to pertain to a charnel house in an isolated place of burial (see Woodley 1993:42). The Rogers Ossuary is also removed from any known habitation site.

Fifth, when viewed from typological and geographical perspectives there are significant differences between the mortuary practices of Glen Meyer and Pickering. Major burial sites removed from any village are more characteristic of Glen Meyer than Pickering. Examples are the Rogers Ossuary, Zamboni, and MacAllan sites. The only similarly isolated burials known for Pickering are the ossuary pits at the Serpent Mounds site on Rice Lake. Here, however, the practice appears to represent the continuance of a thousand-year-old burial tradition at a sacred place. Despite the more extensive excavations of Glen Meyer sites, burials within or adjacent to villages are more typical of Pickering and more individuals are generally interred. The relative scarcity of village burials in Glen Meyer suggests that the final burial places were isolated special purpose sites like Zamboni and MacAllan. On the other hand, burials in seasonal campsites occur in Glen Meyer but, to date, have not been reported for Pickering. The foregoing does not deny that variability existed in both Glen Meyer and Pickering mortuary practices.

The isolated burial sites of Glen Meyer bear a close resemblance to those of Western Basin culture, formerly the Younge Tradition. There are also numerous correspondences in Glen Meyer and Western Basin technologies. In light of a possible cultural relationship with sites in extreme western Southern Ontario and adjacent Ohio and Michigan, a potentially useful

physical anthropological research project would be to apply a range of morphological and metrical statistical measurements to Glen Meyer, Pickering, Uren, and Western Basin skeletal samples in order to determine possible genetic relationships.

While the paper in question makes available new evidence pertinent to the Early Ontario Iroquoians, and provides insightful and innovative ways of looking at the evidence, it does nothing to alter my views regarding either the classificatory validity of the Glen Meyer and Pickering dichotomy or the use of conquest as an explanatory theory of cultural change during the late thirteenth century in the Ontario Iroquois Tradition. Unlike the majority of the critics of aspects of the Ontario Iroquois Tradition, Mike Spence has provided new evidence and clearly identified the substantive base underlying his conclusions. Classificatory tools like the Ontario Iroquois Tradition are not sacrosanct and should be replaced and/or modified in light of new evidence and innovative ways of looking at the evidence. It is unreasonable, however, to expect compliance with modifications to the Ontario Iroquois Tradition that are based upon unsubstantiated rhetoric or appeals to some form of Chaos Theory that are long on chaos and short on theory. If the Ontario Iroquois Tradition is to be changed or discarded it should be through the introduction of some other classificatory scheme or explanation that better accommodates the facts. Such change can only be accomplished by demonstration and not by assertion.

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J. V. Wright
Canadian Museum of Civilization, 100 Laurier Street, P.O. Box 3100, Station B, Hull, Quebec
J8X 4H2

Reply to Saunders' and Wright's Comments

Michael W. Spence

Shelley Saunders may be correct in insisting that we are bound by precedent to a rather generous definition of "ossuary". Nevertheless, it is clear that we are dealing with a variety of features, representing quite different burial practices. If we are to lump them all together under one term, we had then better come up with a set of qualifying adjectives to express these important distinctions.

Jim Wright suggests that I have overemphasized the significance of mortuary practices, and that the evidence of one cultural system alone cannot refute the existence of cultural units defined on the basis of a much broader array of evidence. However, I do believe that we should assign a certain degree of primacy to the mortuary data. My concern here is not only with the reality of Glen Meyer and Pickering as cultural constructs, but also with their degree of social cohesion. Did either have the social potential for the sort of sustained cooperative effort necessary to conquer and absorb the other? I see mortuary practices as a key indicator of the social networks of these early village communities and, hence, of particular importance in resolving these questions.

This approach, of course, rests on the assumption that mortuary practices did indeed play such a critical role in Ontario Iroquoian society - an assumption questioned by Saunders. Certainly there is ample evidence that the Historic period Huron used ossuary burial as a public expression of the relevant social universe (Ramsden 1990:175; Sutton 1988:44-45). Various categories of people (e.g., Algonquins, French, war casualties, infants) were included or excluded on the basis of their perceived contribution to the well-being and perpetuation of the community, whether it be the community of the living or its equivalent among the dead. Also, inequalities in wealth and status introduced through the fur trade were levelled by the destruction and redistribution of goods in the attendant ceremonies, and by the consignment of large quantities of material to the ossuary with little regard for the individual identities of the decedents (Ramsden 1981).

The archaeological evidence suggests to me that these egalitarian and communal principles also governed earlier Late Woodland mortuary programmes. Early Ontario Iroquoian burials are generally multiple and secondary, with little concern shown for the differentiation of individuals. Although the bones of individuals may not have been deliberately mixed, as they were at Ossossane, neither were any special pains taken to keep them separate. Grave goods were very rare.

Following this logic, it would seem that the social fields represented in most Early Ontario Iroquoian burials were rather limited, probably encompassing no more than one or two communities. Those cases in which the numbers of individuals included in the burial were larger, like Rogers Ossuary and the Serpent Mounds pits, were more probably the result of a longer spacing between burial episodes than a broader participation in them.

Furthermore, no common set of burial procedures can be identified for either Glen Meyer or Pickering. Wright maintains that burials in or near the village are not common in Glen Meyer, and that final burial usually took place in isolated special mortuary sites like Rogers Ossuary and Macallan. However, multiple secondary burials are frequently associated with Glen Meyer villages (e.g., Praying Mantis, Boisclair, and Force). Also, Macallan may have been a village, not just a special burial site with a charnal house. The longhouse, although not as densely packed with features as some other Glen Meyer houses, still had two hearths and some posts in the interior and an extension at one end, suggesting to me a habitation structure (Woodley 1994). There may also have been part of a second longhouse exposed in the excavation, and traces of occupation extended some 60 m along the road. Although Pickering burial practices are less well known, they seem to have been at least as variable as those of Glen Meyer.

Some of this variability may simply be the result of local circumstances. The aberrant pattern at Bennett, for example, may have

been due to an unexpected interruption in the normal progression of the community's burial sequence. However, much of the variation reflects more profound cultural differences - differences in the mortuary programmes themselves. It seems unlikely that differences in such an important sphere of culture, one that was used to express the social verities of these early Iroquoian communities, would persist within otherwise cohesive and well defined cultures, particularly if those cultures were in a state of confrontation.

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Michael W. Spence
Dept. of Anthropology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6A 5C2