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## Navigating ancestral landscapes in the Northern Iroquoian world

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## ABSTRACT

After the transition to settled village life ca. AD 1300, the Northern Iroquoian peoples of northeastern North America relocated their settlements every few decades or less. Frequent village location meant that, after less than 100 years, the landscape they inhabited would have contained more abandoned than occupied village sites. We draw upon ancestral Wendat site relocation sequences on the north shore of Lake Ontario, Ontario, Canada to explore factors influencing village relocation and how the continued abandonment of village sites created ancestral landscapes that included sites of pilgrimage, resource extraction, and ceremony. As communities of the dead, abandoned villages and associated ossuaries were part of a larger set of spiritual responsibilities to meaningful places in the landscape. As ancestral sites, these places were part of ongoing processes of emplacement through which Wendat communities laid claim to politically-defined territories.

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## 1. Introduction

As anthropologists, we are primarily concerned with the social dynamics of living human communities. Archaeologists likewise tend to concern themselves primarily with the creation of historical narratives in which the main agents are living peoples. In our reconstructions of settlement dynamics, we acknowledge the temporality of settlement patterns, including processes of construction, occupation, aggregation, or migration. Less often do we explicitly consider how actively occupied settlements relate to abandoned settlements and associated mortuary populations. How might we seek to understand the relationships between communities of the living and communities of the dead? In this paper, we wish to explore how processes of village construction, inhabitation, and abandonment created ancestral landscapes in which emergent Northern Iroquoian tribal nations and confederacies were culturally emplaced.

We begin with a consideration of how concepts of community and landscape may be mutually constitutive. We then provide a brief introduction to the archaeology of the ancestral Wendat, a field in which these ideas resonate. Processes of village relocation are explored, together with a consideration of how the formation of ancestral landscapes became settings for ceremony and resource

acquisition, and how communities of the living were recursively entangled with communities of the dead.

## 2. Communities and landscapes

In archaeology, most understandings of community have a socio-spatial basis (e.g., Flannery, 1976; Yaeger and Canuto, 2000). As an anthropological construct, the concept of the community has changed little since the time of Lewis Henry Morgan. It is generally taken to mean a group comprised of multiple nuclear families that forms a basic unit of production characterized by cohesiveness, solidarity, and self-identification (Bohannon, 2003 [1965]: xi; Morgan, 1965 [1881]). Positioned between domestic households and societies writ large, the village community is often the largest socio-political unit in non-state societies (Gerritsen, 2004; Williamson and Robertson, 1994).

Kolb and Snead (1997: 611) redefined the community as an archaeologically definable spatial setting for “human activity that incorporates social reproduction, subsistence production, and self-identification.” Other perspectives on archaeological communities acknowledge that they do not necessarily articulate neatly with the boundaries of archaeological sites (Isbell, 2000). Rather than reify communities as building blocks or scalar units in larger social systems, contemporary scholars have redefined the community concept in the context of the phenomena they seek to understand (e.g., Birch, 2013: 6; Boulware, 2011; Mac Sweeney, 2011). Acknowledging flexibility in the community concept permits the interrogation of multiple types of data and theory to

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explore relationships between settlement patterns, sociopolitical and economic practices, cooperation and competition, cultural production, and social reproduction.

In this paper, our conceptualization of Iroquoian communities sees them as dynamic loci for habitation and associated activities *and* active fields for the negotiation of social identity and collective memory (see also [Blitz, 2012](#); [Pauketat, 2007: 107](#)). This definition is flexible enough to include groups inhabiting individual settlements, clusters of affiliated settlements, as well as the living and deceased members of those groups. An active definition of community recognizes that individuals and groups negotiate community membership and community-based identities through both routinized and ritual practice. As discussed below, for the Wendat, burial in communal ossuaries with comingled remains was a practice which materialized and reinforced community membership and linked those communities to particular loci in the landscape.

The landscape in which a community is situated is an important component of cultural identity. Spiritual and cultural values link people to particular ancestral landscapes and associative cultural landscapes ([UNESCO, 2005](#)). Ancestral landscapes are not mutually exclusive of cultural landscapes, though the term more specifically links people and place through intangible ties established by genealogy, heritage, and history ([Kawharu, 2009](#)). Associative cultural landscapes are defined as large or small contiguous or non-contiguous areas, routes, or other linear landscapes embedded in a people's spirituality, cultural tradition and practice ([Australia ICOMOS, 1995](#)). The immediate as well as the distant past is often invoked and referenced in the interest of legitimating or reinforcing group membership. Throughout pre-contact North America, communities and their leaders used monumental forms of architecture such as Chacoan great houses ([Van Dyke, 2004](#)) or Woodland and Mississippian earthen mounds ([Milner, 2012](#)) to reinforce or legitimize community authority and group identity through processes of emplacement ([Cobb, 2005](#); [Rodning, 2009](#)). Monuments are frequently mobilized in archaeological narratives that link people to meaningful places in the landscape (e.g., [Thompson and Pluckhahn, 2012](#)). Yet, the materiality of the landscape includes also settlements (both occupied and abandoned), plants, animals, rivers, springs, and people (both living and dead) that are entangled ([Hodder, 2011](#)) or bundled ([Pauketat, 2012](#)) together in meaningful ways. Senses of belonging are linked to routinized passage through material settings, including buildings, palisades, fields, trails, and landscapes ([Bourdieu, 1977](#); [Joyce and Hendon, 2000](#); [Tilley, 1994](#)). These articulations serve to create new contexts in which social relations and cultural schemas ([Beck et al., 2007](#); [Sewell, 2005](#)) play out in meaningful ways. [Snead \(2008: 18, 85\)](#) argues that culturally constructed perceptions of the landscape combine complex arrays of natural and cultural features into landscapes of "contextual experience," where history and action are tied to cultural concepts of identity, legitimacy, and a sense of place. As archaeologists, we can fruitfully approach landscapes as meaningfully constituted phenomena that help us to explain the relationships between people and place. Ideas about the mutually constitutive relationships between people and landscapes have been most fully explored in phenomenological scholarship ([Gosden, 1994](#); [Thomas, 2008](#); [Tilley, 1994, 2010](#)). Though we do not take an explicitly phenomenological approach here, we recognize that, following [Tilley \(2010: 31\)](#), landscapes are not just passive stages for human action, "they also *do* things and have experiential effects in relations to persons." At the same time, non-phenomenological approaches to landscape have also been highly influential in conceptualizing the relationship between people and place. A number of landscape-oriented approaches to Northern Iroquoian archaeology have been rooted in Geographic Information Systems, cultural ecology, and how climatic, environmental, and social factors impact distributions of

settlement patterns over time ([Allen, 1996](#); [Hasenstab, 1996](#); [MacDonald, 2002](#)) and influence choices about site relocation ([Jones and Wood, 2012](#)). We acknowledge the value of this approach and do not view ecological and environmental variables as mutually exclusive of the symbolic, ritual, or ideological factors based further up [Hawkes' \(1954\)](#) ladder of inference, which are the focus of this paper.

### 3. Northern Iroquoian peoples

At the time of sustained European contact in the early 1600s, Northern Iroquoian speakers inhabited southern Ontario, southwestern Quebec, New York State, and the Susquehanna Valley ([Fig. 1](#)). They include the five nations of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois; Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk) in the Finger Lakes region and Hudson River Valley, the Neutral Confederacy, who formed a broad band of villages spanning the north shore of Lake Erie and west end of Lake Ontario, the Erie, occupying territory near the southeastern shore of Lake Erie, and the Wendat (Huron) and Tionontaté (Petun), who lived in settlements clustered below Georgian Bay on Lake Huron.

Northern Iroquoian economies involved a primary reliance on horticulture with settlements often surrounded by hundreds of acres of maize fields, beyond which were expansive watershed-based hunting territories necessary to secure necessary hides, fish, plants, and other natural resources ([Trigger, 1969](#)). Anthropological constructions of Northern Iroquoian societies include villages composed of matrilineal extended families inhabiting bark-covered longhouses, often surrounded by defensive palisades. Archaeological remains dating back to AD 900 which include Iroquoian cultural traits are thought to represent Iroquoian-speaking peoples—though the relationship between material culture, language, and ethnicity is far from clear, as is what constitutes early forms of longhouses, horticulture, or demonstrably Iroquoian socio-political organization (e.g., [Hart and Brumbach, 2003](#); [Engelbrecht, 2003](#); [Warrick, 2000](#)). Differential historical trajectories defined the development of various Northern Iroquoian communities and societies ([Birch, 2015](#); [Birch and Williamson, 2013a](#)) and their relationships to adjacent peoples (e.g., [Bradley, 2007](#); [Fox and Garrad, 2004](#)), with whom they shared certain cultural practices. The variable environmental context and physiography of each sub-region would have also resulted in different relationships to the landscape.

This paper focuses on the Wendat, the northernmost of the Iroquoians. Between ca. AD 1300 and 1600, the ancestors of the contemporary Huron-Wendat Nation inhabited the north shore of Lake Ontario, the Trent Valley and the peninsula between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay known as Wendake. Historically, their settlements clustered in the latter area having formed a political alliance known to historians as the Huron Confederacy. It consisted of four allied nations: the Attignawantan (Bear), Attigeneongnahac (Cord), Arendarhonon (Rock), and Tahontaenrat (Deer). The ethnohistoric record of Wendake suggests that initial Wendat alliance-building and confederacy formation occurred during the mid-fifteenth century between the Attignawantan and Attigeneongnahac, some 200 years before the arrival of Europeans; both groups had been resident in Wendake for at least 200 years ([Thwaites, 1896–1901 16: 227–229](#)). Later in-migrations to the confederacy were the Arendarhonon, who moved into Wendake ca. 1590 from the Trent Valley, and the Tahontaenrat, who joined ca. 1610 from the north shore of Lake Ontario region.

There is a rich seventeenth century documentary record of the lives of the Wendat, the three principal sources of which are the accounts of Samuel de Champlain, an experienced soldier and explorer who recorded his observations of a winter spent with the Wendat in 1615–16 ([Biggar, 1929](#)); the account of Gabriel

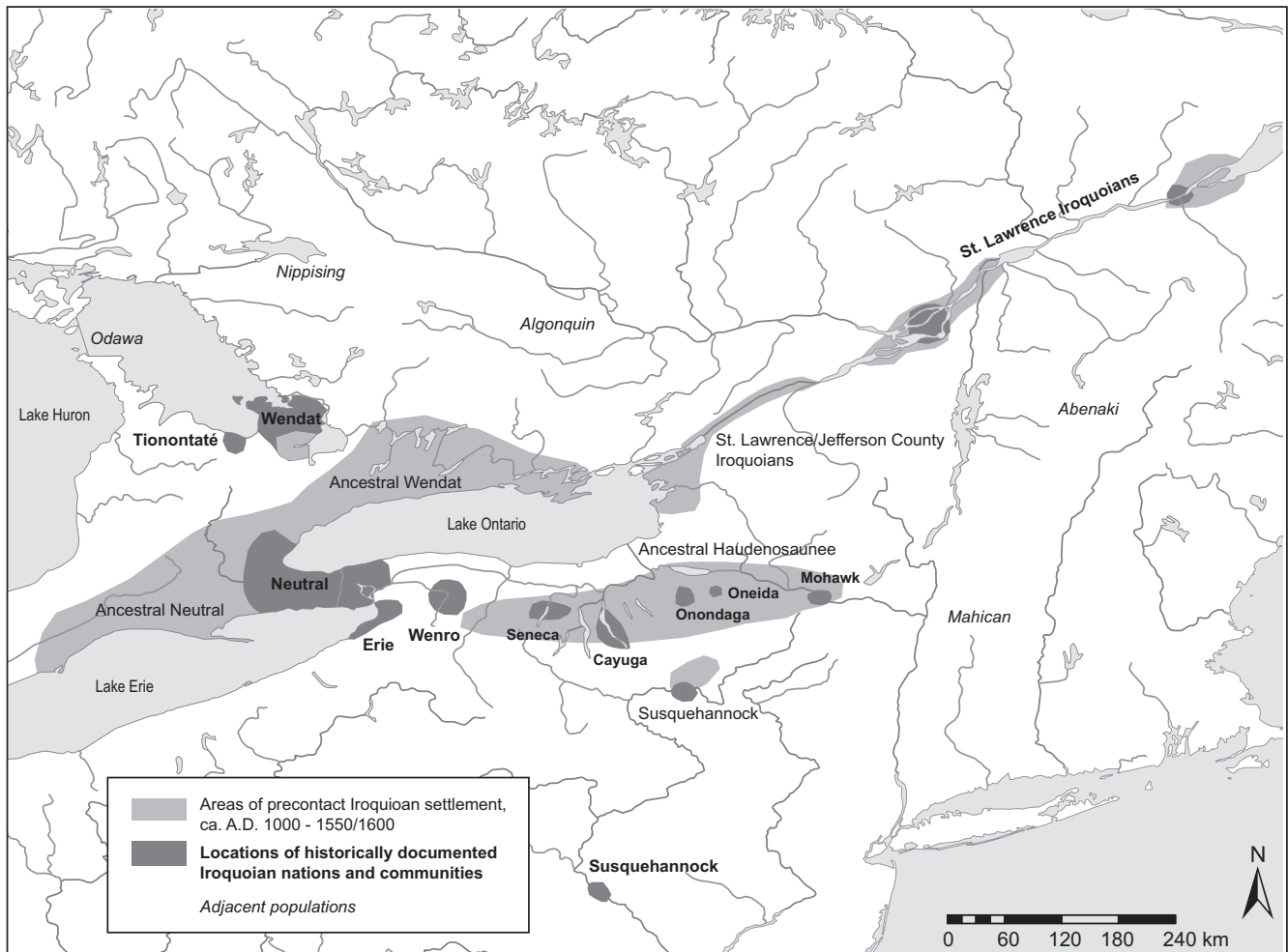


Fig. 1. Location of Northern Iroquoian and adjacent societies.

Sagard, a Recollet friar, who spent the winter of 1623–24 with the Wendat (Wrong, 1939); and the annual accounts of the Jesuit priests who lived among the Wendat from 1634 until 1650 (Thwaites, 1896–1901).

A series of epidemics between 1633 and 1639 resulted in catastrophic population loss for the Wendat, on the order of some 60% (Warrick, 2003). In 1650–1651, the remaining Wendat were dispersed from their homeland in the context of sustained attacks from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). A few hundred Wendat migrated east and established a settlement at Lorette, outside of Quebec City, some migrated west, eventually establishing themselves in the upper Michigan peninsula; others were incorporated into nations of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, both as captives and willing migrants (LaBelle, 2013a; Trigger, 1985).

In this paper, archaeological sites believed to have been occupied by groups whose descendants formed the confederacy and which date to earlier than ca. AD 1600 are referred to as ancestral Wendat. Since both their historic, seventeenth-century homeland in Ontario and the town in Quebec where the contemporary Huron-Wendat Nation resides are called Wendake, to avoid confusion, we refer to the seventeenth century Wendat homeland as historic Wendake.

#### 4. “Detaching from place” and village relocation

The temporal resolution of the archaeological record of Iroquoian peoples is ideally suited to exploring change over time within contiguous community groups. Although early Iroquoian

base camps may have been utilized for as long as a century (e.g., Fox, 1986; Timmins, 1997), after AD 1300 village sites were only occupied for approximately 10–30 years being relocated elsewhere (Warrick, 1988). Explanations for village relocation generally focus on depletion of arable land and firewood, although social and political factors also influenced decisions to relocate (Birch and Williamson, 2013a; Heidenreich, 1971; Trigger, 1976; see also Jones and Wood, 2012) New villages were usually constructed within 5 km of the previous site, often within the same drainage (e.g., Birch and Williamson, 2013a; Snow, 1995; Tuck, 1971), although longer migrations also took place (Ramsden, 1990; Sutton, 1996).

Processes of Wendat village relocation are central to the discussion presented herein. Village relocations were anticipated and meticulously planned. Each individual could expect to experience at least one such relocation within their lifetimes. These events were preceded by extensive discussion, negotiation, and planning, and once those plans were put into motion the relocation itself was both a laborious practice and an occasion for high ceremony (e.g., Trigger, 1969: 17; Wrong, 1939: 93). Village relocations were accompanied by socio-political transformations within communities. They offered groups the opportunity to recreate their built environment and materialize social relations through changes in the size and placement of households, as well as desires for, and designs of, the overall community plan (e.g., Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a).

While, on the one hand, some might point to former village sites as abandoned, we argue that these sites and landscapes can only be

partially abandoned. For Northern Iroquoians, “detaching from place” (McAnany and St.-Hilaire, 2013) created ancestral landscapes that included sites of pilgrimage, resource extraction, and religious practice. As communities of the dead, abandoned villages and their associated ossuaries were part of a larger set of continuing spiritual responsibilities to meaningful places in the landscape.

Between ca. AD 1300 and 1600, ancestral Wendat settlements evolved from small semi-sedentary bases around which maize was grown in small garden plots and from which household members journeyed regularly to harvest naturally occurring seasonal resources—to much larger and more sedentary communities where the contribution of maize to the diet reached upwards of 50% (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 25–44; Pfeiffer et al., 2014; Katzenberg et al., 1995).

The chronological placement of ancestral Wendat archaeological sites has been determined on the basis of (a) calibrated, radiocarbon dates (where available); (b) ceramic vessel seriation, in particular, the frequencies of Incising and Notching on vessel collars and decoration on the necks of ceramic vessels, the latter of which virtually disappear by the early sixteenth century in south-central Ontario (Birch et al., in press; Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 130); (c) the presence of various temporally sensitive ceramic pipe types (e.g., coronet types, which only appear at the beginning of the fifteenth century in any appreciable numbers in south-central Ontario [Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 140–142]); (d) recovery and varieties of objects of European origin, none of which pre-date AD 1500; (e) the settlement pattern of the site and its placement within the pre-coalescent to post-coalescent continuum (Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a); (f) the settlement sequencing within its river drainage and in particular, the number of post-coalescent sites present in a drainage before the community’s move north to join the Wendat confederacy around the end of the sixteenth century. For more detailed

discussions of Wendat site sequences see (Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 25–40; 157–159).

The archaeological record of ancestral Wendat occupation on the north-west shore of Lake Ontario is unambiguous on two things: village sites were never re-occupied and village relocations took place in a uniform, northward direction (Fig. 2). The general pattern of relocation was to move off the lakeshore sand plain at the end of the fourteenth century and onto the adjacent till plain and then continue to move northward along the drainages without reversing their direction of settlement. By the late thirteenth century, village relocations seem to have involved a search for more productive agricultural soils, in the context of increasing populations and a continuing reliance on horticulture, as communities relocated north off of the easily cultivated, yet drought-prone, soils of the Lake Iroquois Plain, and onto the drought-resistant loams of the South Slopes Till Plain (MacDonald, 2002).

Over the next century, the expansion and movement of those communities appear to have been defined by the hydrographic structure of the South Slopes watersheds, which generally consist of roughly parallel south-flowing streams that empty into estuaries along Lake Ontario. MacDonald (2002: 354) has argued upstream migration into the dendritic streams of these watersheds allowed for increasing east–west separation of communities, at a time when populations and therefore territorial needs for hunting and agriculture were increasing. A continuing reliance on the rich resources of the various estuary environments, which is evident in the faunal assemblages of fourteenth and fifteenth century communities, may have promoted inter-community competition. While communities still needed to access those rich environments, the middle and upper reaches of the watersheds provided an inexhaustible supply of arable farmland. MacDonald argues that the continuing exploitation of the lower reaches and estuaries within what were now ancestral landscapes stretched the community

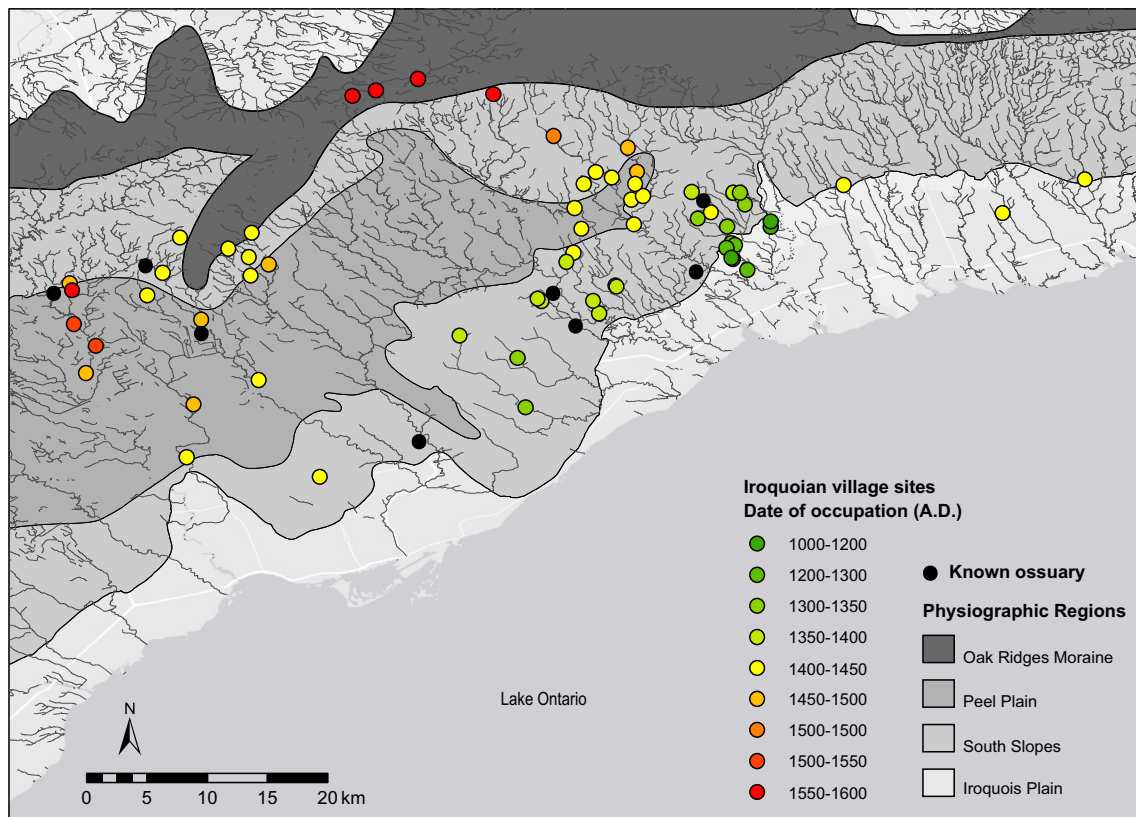


Fig. 2. Locations of known Iroquoian village sites and ossuaries on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario.

catchment areas into parallel linear polygons spreading northward and thereby limiting the east–west boundaries of community territories to their watersheds.

Having moved onto the south slopes region by the early fourteenth century, it is curious that communities chose not to recycle southward within those catchments. It is estimated that fields in south-central Ontario regain full fertility after approximately 60 years. By the early to mid-fifteenth century, thousands of acres of old agricultural fields should have regained their fertility and been covered in easy-to-clear early succession forest (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 99–101). There must have been significant reasons for populations on the north-west shore of Lake Ontario to not re-use former agricultural fields. Perhaps the fact that they would have been covered in easily accessible browse for deer precluded their clearance for agriculture and contributed to their preservation as hunting territories.

In the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, settlements throughout Iroquoia became fewer in number and larger in size. Among ancestral Wendat populations on the north shore of Lake Ontario and in the Trent Valley, there is ample evidence for the coalescence of multiple small village communities into four or five large settlements—a process the authors have explored in detail elsewhere (Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a). These communities are, without exception, surrounded by multiple-row palisades. Most late fifteenth century sites also contain direct evidence for violent conflict, including butchered and burned human bone in middens—interpreted as evidence for trophy-taking and prisoner sacrifice—and burials bearing signs of violent trauma (Williamson, 2007). Sites of this period also contain 70% of the artifacts made of human bone in the site record of Iroquoia (Jenkins, *in press*). This increase in violence is thought to have been driven in part by demographic growth (Warrick, 2008), social circumscription (LeBlanc, 2008), and possibly conflict over hunting territories between local populations (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 117–118). Whatever the cause, the deposition of scattered pieces of the bodies of enemies or artifacts made of their bones with refuse suggest a different deathway from that of cemetery or ossuary burial, one in which the soul attached to the bones had departed as a result of their purposeful fragmentation. The objects were without identity and rendered useless to both the living and dead (Jenkins, *in press*).

These large communities then underwent several subsequent village relocations until the late sixteenth and/or early seventeenth century when the north shore of Lake Ontario and the Trent Valley were abandoned—that is, they were no longer a place where permanent village settlements were located. However, Champlain's (Biggar, 1929) early seventeenth century accounts of travel through and hunting in that region suggests they remained essentially Wendat places until at least the 1620s. They may have, however, been places to travel through with caution after the Champlain period due to the threat of Iroquois attacks from the north shore. Early Europeans were well aware of the dangers in using the Humber carrying place between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe during the historic period. In describing his journey from Quebec to Huronia, Father Brébeuf wrote in 1635: "It is true the way is shorter by the Lake of the Hiroquois (Ontario); but the fear of enemies, and the few conveniences to be met with, cause that route to be unfrequented" (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 8: 75), a sentiment also echoed in later Relations (16: 227; 33: 65). The fear of the Humber trail was presumably due to the potential presence of Seneca while the Trent valley would have been unsafe due to the potential presence of eastern Haudenosaunee raiding parties.

It might be argued that the consistent northward relocation of ancestral Wendat villages was related to threats—real or perceived—of conflict from Haudenosaunee communities south of Lake Ontario. As we have discussed elsewhere, evidence for conflict

in southern Ontario peaks in the mid-fifteenth century and declines thereafter (Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 82–83, 160–161; Williamson, 2007) before picking up again in the late-sixteenth century when nations of the Haudenosaunee began their campaigns against neighbouring Iroquoian peoples. While it is unclear which specific communities were engaged in hostilities with one another during the mid-fifteenth century, there is some evidence that conflict was occurring among ancestral Wendat populations (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 161–162; Dupras and Pratte, 1998; Engelbrecht, 2003: 115), as opposed to between ancestral Wendat communities and those located farther afield. Indeed, the crystallization of tribal nations and alliance-building among ancestral Wendat communities appears to have been driven, in part, by processes of coalescence, and did not precede them (Birch, 2015). If we assume that warfare was not a factor in the directionality of settlement relocation until the late-sixteenth century, then other environmental or cultural factors assume a more prominent role in determining patterns of site relocation.

The most oft-cited explanations for settlement relocation is the exhaustion of agricultural fields, vulnerability of women in evermore distant fields, problems with pest infestations, and exhaustion of resources such as firewood in the immediate vicinity of settlements (Heidenreich, 1971: 213–216; Wrong, 1939: 92–93). The first European visitors to the region in the early seventeenth century claimed that Wendat fields became exhausted after twelve years at the most and usually after eight to ten years. A century earlier on the north shore, villages were likely occupied for at least twenty years. For late-fifteenth and early sixteenth century coalescent communities, contiguous field systems would have extended one and a half to two kilometers from the village in every direction after twenty years (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 99–100). Declining availability of locally-gathered resources and the accumulation of organic refuse within communities may have also driven the desire to relocate (Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 98–101). The situation was apparently the same for the Iroquois south of Lake Ontario. According to William Fenton's (1998: 23) description of Iroquois settlement relocation, the soil around a village would be exhausted and firewood would become scarce "about twice in a generation, although some towns persisted much longer." Jones and Wood's (2012) analysis of factors influencing settlement abandonment among Haudenosaunee suggested that population, as inferred from site size, was the single most important factor limiting village duration. The formation of very large, densely populated settlements in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries would have placed considerably more stress on local resources than did earlier populations, resulting in more frequent village relocations.

Social and political motivations would have also influenced community relocation (Heidenreich, 1971; Jones and Wood, 2012; Warrick, 1988). Given the logistics involved, we might assume that the decision to relocate would have been made at the community level, by members of a co-residential community as a whole. It is clear, however, that each household or clan segment was not bound to that decision, as village fission and records are common in both the archaeological and ethnohistoric periods (e.g., Birch and Williamson, 2013a: 78; Fenton, 1998: 59; Ramsden, 2009; Thwaites, 1896–1901: 8: 105). Planning and operationalizing relocation would have therefore occurred at both the community and household levels, and may have involved assistance from relations in other villages (Thwaites, 1896–1901: 8: 107). In some cases, the accumulation of midden deposits over abandoned houses makes it clear that some longhouses may have been abandoned and deconstructed while others continued to be occupied (e.g., Finlayson, 1985; Ramsden, 2009), and that village fission may have not occurred in an amicable fashion (Ramsden, 2009).

In the case of the Draper and Mantle sites, two of the most completely excavated and studied communities in ancestral Wendake (Birch, 2012; Birch and Williamson, 2013a; Finlayson, 1985) we see the social and spatial transformation of a community thought to have been inhabited by approximately 1800 people. When this group came together at the aggregated Draper village (Finlayson, 1985), it consisted of six newly-joined yet spatially separated clusters of houses; a village composed of smaller villages, perhaps retaining distinct political and economic functions. Two generations later, the spatial arrangement of the community was transformed into a more cohesive layout, which we have interpreted as materializing a socially integrated community identity and organizational structure.

These events would have been less complex prior to the mid-fifteenth century, when sites encompassed areas of approximately 1 ha and were occupied by 200–500 persons. Relocating a newly aggregated three-hectare village with a population of 1500–2000 would have been an enormous undertaking involving skilled planning and co-ordination—both in terms of construction and deconstruction—and a degree of organizational complexity that has perhaps not always been conferred upon Iroquoian peoples (Birch and Williamson, 2013b). The social complexities involved in village relocation would also have increased concomitantly with greater numbers of households and supra-household units, each of which may have pursued their own interests cooperatively or competitively. The “social work” involved in the maintenance of large, co-residential communities may have been particularly laborious during processes of relocation, when the chances of cleavage may have been heightened.

While the direction of movement seems to have been pre-determined—north-west along the major drainages—other factors considered in choosing the location for a new village would have included soil types, the proximity of trail systems and naturally-occurring resources, the hinterland of other communities, and culturally determinant factors such as dreams and omens (Engelbrecht, 2003; see also Jones and Wood, 2012). Recognizing that the village they were leaving was a wealth of resources, scheduling decisions would have been made about scavenging bark as well as house and palisade posts.

Among the Iroquois, removal was also a gradual process, one town going up while the other was decaying, a process commemorated in the place-name theme “New Town” and “Old Town” (Fenton, 1998: 23). Indeed, the temporal scale of abandonment would have to accommodate the land clearance for fields and to acquire the resources required for construction, even with the salvaging of 20–30% of the former village’s infrastructure. It would all have to be staged with advance construction parties, field planning and maintenance parties; and possibly involved part of the population staying at the old village until all of the fields had been harvested.

The relocation of villages from a region did not, however, signal an end to their territorial claim to the area surrounding that village and its associated hinterland. Iroquoian people’s attachment to the territories occupied by their ancestors was significant not just for economic reasons. The relationships between people and places were enmeshed in a cultural framework that viewed the landscape as being alive with Manitous, spirits associated with particular landscape features, and ancestors. As Tim Ingold (1993: 154) has suggested, landscape is both qualitative and heterogeneous. Landscapes are experienced, and as such they are constructed by culture as much as they are products of nature and ecology. This was never more evident in the case of the Wendat then when Gabriel Sagard (Wrong, 1939: 186) relays a story of having been prevented by members of a Wendat household from discarding the skin of a squirrel into a fire for fear that the fish nets in their longhouse would tell the fish. Startled, Sagard told them that nets

could see nothing; to which they replied that they could, and that they could also hear and eat. Similarly, Champlain recorded speeches, dances, and offerings made to waterfalls and whirlpools, from which it was clear that these gestures were made to beings capable of hearing, seeing, receiving, and protecting (Biggar, 1929: 802; Johnson, 2005: 12). Recent scholarship has recognized this perspective. Chris Watts, for example (2012), has argued that zoomorphic effigy pipes were fashioned by people as persons themselves with which relationships would be formed including the inhabiting of the represented animal’s body in order to assume its viewpoint.

In the remainder of the paper we discuss how ongoing perceptions of, and responsibilities to, ancestral village sites and mortuary populations underlay what might be construed as primarily economic motivations and claims to ancestral landscapes as hunting territories and areas for resource extraction.

## 5. Ceremony and village relocation

Village life was tied to continuous cycles of renewal. For example, the Midwinter Ceremonial involved the extinguishment of old fires and the rekindling of new ones (Tooker, 1970). The end of a village’s life would have meant the termination of such rituals. There may have been a village-closing ceremony echoing similar themes of regeneration. Such beliefs are widespread in the eastern Woodlands, and echoed, for example, in the burning and renewal of townhouses among the Cherokee (Rodning, 2009, 2013).

The most important event in the ceremonial calendar of the Wendat was the Feast of the Dead, held at the time of village relocation. While we really do not know how it was scheduled as part of the abandonment process, it involved the reburial of most of those who had died during a village’s tenure, the remains having been originally interred elsewhere or stored aboveground, in longhouses or on scaffolds, and removed for inclusion in an ossuary (Seeman, 2011; Williamson and Steiss, 2003).

Ossuaries are burial features which are typically 3–6 m in diameter and approximately 2 m deep (see Williamson and Steiss, 2003: Table 3.1). Human remains, in various states of decomposition, were co-mingled in the ossuary. On the basis of present evidence, the earliest true ossuaries appear to be the three eleventh to fourteenth century features at Serpent Mounds on Rice Lake, which combined, contained the remains of 69 individuals (Johnston, 1979: 92–93, 97). At the late twelfth-century Miller site, east of Toronto, a single feature containing the commingled remains of 13 individuals may have been oriented to an extended family (Kenyon, 1968: 21–23). The late thirteenth-early fourteenth century Moatfield ossuary contained at least 87 people and represents the earliest firmly documented ancestral Wendat community single-event ossuary. These sites, in their different ways, foreshadow the developments of fourteenth and fifteenth century ossuary burial that culminates with the Wendat Feast of the Dead. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that other basic aspects of the Wendat mortuary program and regard for sacred landscapes were taking shape at the same time.

By the early 14th century, the creation of ossuaries sometimes also involved the deceased of multiple allied villages in a joint burial ceremony such as those at Fairty and Tabor Hill (Williamson and Steiss, 2003), although it is noteworthy that some social distance may have been maintained on the basis of the presence of multiple pits for the dead. In south-central Ontario, the participating villages appear to belong to the same networks that shared drainage-based local territories and, in the next century, aggregated into large co-residential village communities (Birch, 2012). The fourteenth-century Hutchinson site is located across a small creek from the Staines Road ossuary, which contained the remains of 302 individuals from two or more nearby communities

(Williamson and Steiss, 2003: 102). The site consists of two long-houses and separate mortuary areas which led Robertson (2004) to suggest that relations of one or more communities were prepared for the Feast of the Dead at Hutchinson (Robertson, 2004). These would have been important events that served to cement alliances and re-establish ties of real and fictive kinship (LaBelle, 2013b; Trigger, 1976: 426–427).

However, it must be noted that the oft-cited description of the 1636 Feast of the Dead at Ossossané by Jean de Brébeuf took place in extraordinary times. This event involved the co-mingling of the remains of members of multiple communities from within the Attignawantan (Bear) Nation (LaBelle, 2013a,b; Thwaites, 1896–1902, 10: 279–285). This multi-community, possibly pan-confederacy Feast occurred in the midst of the smallpox epidemics of 1636–1640 which resulted in the catastrophic loss of some 60% of the Wendat population (Warrick, 2003). According to Warrick (2003: 266) “[m]any villages were abandoned after 1639 because they were no longer demographically or politically viable communities.” So, while traditional elements of the practice may have remained unchanged, this description must be understood in the context of depopulation, complex entanglements with Europeans and other Indigenous groups, and widespread disruption in the Wendat world.

This final burial released the souls of the dead and allowed them to travel westward to the land of the ancestors. In the seventeenth century, it was believed that this land contained villages of souls, each of which corresponded to each of the Nations, or major villages, of the Wendat (Trigger, 1976: 87). The ceremony in essence affirmed a community of the dead, sometimes numbering as many as five hundred individuals (Williamson and Steiss, 2003).

The relationship between individuals and ancestral landscapes can be explained, in part, by reference to beliefs about the body, the soul, and the resting place of each. The Wendat called the bones of the dead *Atisken*. When Brébeuf inquired what this meant of one of the Wendat “Captains:”

He gave me the best explanation he could, and I gathered from his conversation that many think we have two souls, both of them being divisible and material, and yet both reasonable; the one separates itself from the body at death, yet remains in the Cemetery until the feast of the Dead, - after which it either changes into a Turtledove, or, according to the most common belief, it goes away at once to the village of souls. The other is, as it were, bound to the body, and informs, so to speak, the corpse; it remains in the ditch of the dead after the feast, and never leaves it, unless some one bears it again as a child.

[Thwaites, 1896–1902, 10: 285]

That an individual's soul is tied to their corporeal remains is essential to understanding both the reverence with which human remains were treated after death and the abhorrence of grave disturbance among First Nations today.

According to ethnohistoric records, the soul's journey to the land of the dead included passage through a mixture of identifiable landscape features and mythological figures. The journey was dangerous. It involved passage by a 16 m tall standing rock called Ekarenniondi, located near present-day Collingwood, Ontario, where a spirit named Oscotarach (Pierce-head) would draw the brains out of the heads of the dead. While this seems like a gruesome act, if the memories of the dead were not removed, they would be tempted to linger in the land of the living. Beyond Ekarenniondi was a deep ravine into which souls might fall and be drowned. Because of the difficulties involved in reaching the land of the dead, the souls of children and of the very old who, for one reason or another, were unable to make the journey to the Land of the Dead were believed to remain in the abandoned

villages and planted their crops in the former clearings (cf. Hall, 1976: 363; Trigger, 1976: 87; von Gernet, 1994: 42–45). Given this worldview, it is likely that the places chosen for ossuaries were only decided upon after much deliberation rooted in the complex symbolic traditions of these communities.

The fact that some ossuaries contained the co-mingled dead of multiple communities may have meant that entire sections of the landscape populated by active settlements and ossuaries may have been perceived commonly as being inhabited by the living and the spirits of their ancestors.

In Wendat culture and among their close neighbours, the Odawa and other Anishinaabeg, there is a continuous relationship between the living and the dead. Johnston (2005: 6) has noted that it was “the obligation of the Living to ensure that their relatives were buried in the proper manner and in the proper place and to protect them from disturbance or desecration. Failure to perform this duty harms not only the Dead but also the Living.” The Dead, she noted (2005: 6), needed “to be sheltered and fed, to be visited and feasted.” Gabriel Sagard similarly observed in 1623, that Wendat women visited cemeteries to carefully attend to the souls of their deceased relatives whom they believed needed help from the living (Wright, 1939: 75). When Brébeuf witnessed a Feast of the Dead in 1636, he described a daughter of a prominent Chief combing the hair of her deceased father, handling his bones with affection and putting beside him his *Atsatonewai* or package of Council sticks, which were his records of the Country. She similarly cared for her dead children, placing on their arms bracelets of shell (wampum) and glass beads. In this way, the bonds between the living and the dead were reinforced (Thwaites, 1896–1901, 10: 293).

Sagard also recorded that the burial huts or shrines over graves might be surrounded by “a hedge of stakes . . . out of honour for the dead and to protect the burial house from dogs and wild animals” (Wright, 1939: 208). Death and burial were occasions for feasting, and public lamentation and bereaved spouses were expected to continue to follow a prescribed code of mourning behaviour for some time in order to demonstrate their grief over their loss. Women, in particular, would visit the cemetery frequently to mourn at the graves and memorial feasts were held on a regular basis (Thwaites, 1896–1901: 10: 269–275). The Jesuit Paul Lejeune similarly described coming upon a band of Wendat who were having a feast near the graves of their deceased relatives, to whom they gave the best part of the banquet by throwing food into the fire and explained their belief that the souls of the dead have the same needs as the bodies of the living (Thwaites, 1896–1901 8: 21–23). Erik Seeman (2011: 133–134) captures the essence of these behaviours when he observes that bones in particular and deathways more generally were crucial elements of Wendat identity and that as they fled the mainland from Iroquois attacks in 1649 for Gahendoe (Christian Island) during the final moments of the dispersal, the Wendat took little more than memories, the most powerful of which were the cemeteries and ossuaries that sanctified Wendake's landscape.

That the dead must be appropriately feasted, stores consumed, and gifts given is a critical component in understanding how the creation of communities of the dead created social memory among the living. The active participation of members of the relocating community was critical in this process of social and territorial emplacement. At the same time, invited visitors from other communities, some no doubt located on adjacent drainages, and perhaps visitors or trading partners from afar would have extended collective memories of emplaced ancestors and territorial associations. Furthermore, a successful feast of the dead, and those responsible for its performance, could enhance the status of the community and its prominent lineages. Receiving an invitation to a feast of the dead in a neighbouring community may have been

a powerful alliance-building act, and one that was likely enacted prior to the formation of the confederacy. As such, mortuary rituals may have served as venues for both the negotiation of political alliances and the more subtle establishment of territorial claims.

The belief that individuals were inhabited by multiple souls, one of which rests with the remains of the deceased, is essential to appreciating the responsibility to the ancestral landscapes in which the dead are located. LeJeune, speaking of his experience among the Montagnais, spoke of an old man who said that his soul had left him two or three years before, in order to be with his dead relatives and that all that was left within him was the soul of his own body—the soul that would go down into the grave with him, which the Wendat called the Soul of their Nation (Thwaites, 1896–1901 16: 191–3). This reference to “the Soul of the Nation” can be understood as connected to Anishinaabeg and Iroquoian origin traditions and the belief that human remains return to the earth with their essence intact, continuing the spiritual cycle of birth and rebirth.

## 6. Archaeological approaches to ossuaries

Ossuaries are essentially invisible in the modern landscape. Most of those that are known to archaeologists were first discovered as a result of land clearance in the nineteenth century. Several modern discoveries of ossuaries have also been documented, most the accidental result of large scale earth-moving or other construction activities, as occurred in the Moatfield soccer pitch in Toronto in 1997 (Williamson and Pfeiffer [eds.] 2003) or during the widening of Teston Road in the City of Vaughan (ASI, 2005).

In an effort to understand the geographic relationships between ossuaries and the villages with which they were associated, consideration of the ancestral Wendat archaeological record for Durham and York regional municipalities (including Toronto) was undertaken (ASI, 2012); the communities situated therein together formed a core area in the development of the populations that ultimately participated in the formation of Tahontaenrat (Deer) Nation within the historic Wendat Confederacy in Simcoe County.

It should be noted that like ossuaries, large primary, but temporary, cemeteries in direct association with villages as described in the seventeenth century French accounts do not seem to be regularly visible features of the archaeological record of south-central Ontario. The only published examples seem to be those noted

for the mid-fifteenth century Keffer village (Finlayson et al., 1987: 14), the turn of the sixteenth century Mackenzie-Woodbridge village (Saunders, 1986), and the early sixteenth century Mantle cemetery (Birch and Williamson, 2013a). Given the scale of village excavation within the past two decades, it would appear that while one or two individual burials might be found on the periphery of villages, these large primary cemeteries were not located immediately adjacent to the settlement compound, but at a greater distance, as the historical sources on the Wendat suggest. Gabriel Sagard noted that the village cemetery was usually located “an arquebus-shot” from its village (Wrong, 1939: 75), which Heidenreich (1971: 149) suggests a distance of 250–350 m. If this is indeed the case, then these cemeteries are also likely to remain largely invisible unless they happened to include an occupational component, as has been documented at the fourteenth-century Hutchinson site, discussed above (Robertson, 2006).

While dozens of village sites have been documented in York (including Toronto) and Durham Regions, only 18 ossuaries have been identified and the level of documentation for these is highly variable. While it would be possible to expand the sample by considering ossuary sites documented in other areas of southern Ontario, including Simcoe County (Wendake), they are situated in substantially different landscapes and are not likely to be relevant to this paper. The density of Late Woodland villages along the north shore of Lake Ontario, however, strongly suggests that a number of more as yet undetected ossuaries are present within the region. Unfortunately, there are only a small number of ossuary sites for which we have information of sufficient detail to be of use in understanding their landscape settings. Precise locational and site setting information is generally lacking and there are frequently uncertainties concerning the dates of specific ossuary sites and/or the identity or location of their associated village sites.

Indeed, of the eighteen confirmed ossuaries located in those regions, only nine, together with their potentially associated settlements, can be mapped with any degree of precision. No clear patterns of ossuary location relative to their presumably associated settlements are immediately evident on the basis of this limited information (Table 1). In two instances, the ossuary is located within or on the limits of the village, a characteristic of the early phase in the development of the ossuary burial tradition, reflecting the gradual transition from family to community burial ceremonies. Two others are located within 200 m from their associated villages while three others are located between 400 and 1000 m from their presumed settlements. In the other two cases, known

**Table 1**  
Attributes of ossuary location.

Ossuary	Ossuary date	Distance to water (m)	Ossuary elevation (MASL)	Associated settlement	Associated settlement elevation (mASL)	Distance from associated village (m)	Direction from associated village (m)	Elevation relative to associated village
Fairty (AlGt-3)	1350	200	177	Robb	168	1000	NNE	Higher
Tabor Hill (AkGt-5)	1300	600	162	Faraday	170	700	N	Higher
Staines Road (AkGt-55)	1250–1300	30	158	Thompson	165	1800	SE	Lower
				Hutchinson	155	280	SSE	Same
				Archie little 2	154	920	SW	Higher
Moatfield (AkGu-65)	1275–1325	70	135	Russell	152	1400	SE	Higher
Teston ossuary	1450	100	252	Moatfield	135	10	E	Same
Kleinburg (AlGv-1)	1580–1610	370	210	Teston site	252.5	150	SSW	Same
Keffer (AkGv-15)	1450–1500	110	162	Skandatut	219	870	W	Lower
				Keffer village	162	200	S	Same
Garland (AlGs-13)	1450	100	180	–	–	–	–	–
Pearse (AlGs-29)	1300–1400	260	250	Pearse	–	–	–	–
				Hoar	250	570	SE	Same
Uxbridge (BbGs-3)	1450	470	292	Balthazar/Harshaw	275	400	SSW	Higher



villages of a similar age have been documented more than 1000 m distant, but other nearer settlements were likely formerly present given the early date and greater degree of urban development, extensive landscape modification, and hydrographic alterations in their vicinities. Most of the ossuaries, where water resolution on available mapping is accurate, are also within close proximity to a water source.

In a few cases, ossuaries are located on higher ground than their potentially associated settlement or settlements but are more often located on terrain that is at roughly the same elevation. More rarely, the ossuary is on markedly lower ground. In terms of their relative orientation, the only orientation not encountered is that of an ossuary lying to the northwest of its associated settlement. Given the limited sample, however, this should not be considered meaningful.

While the constraints imposed by the limited sample and general lack of data are considerable, a reasonable level of confidence may be achieved by the suggestion that any ossuaries within the north shore of Lake Ontario region are most likely to occur within 1000 m of documented village sites and within 300 m of any current or former water source.

## 7. Ancestral landscapes and territoriality

Permanent settlement in villages, formal mechanisms for political organization, ossuary burial, and the unwillingness to re-occupy village sites, all appear in the archaeological record of the ancestral Wendat around ca. AD 1300, at least along the north-west shore of Lake Ontario. This may be when some aspects of the constellation of practices and beliefs described above came into being during the process of Iroquoian ethnogenesis. After AD 1300, the continual establishment, occupation, and abandonment of settlements marked the landscape with tangible referents to the presence of individuals and communities who, by the sixteenth century AD had coalesced, both physically and politically, into tribal nations.

The relationship between Iroquoian peoples and the landscapes they inhabited is reflected in endonyms that reference the landscape. For example, the *Arendarhonon* (Rock, ‘people at the rock’) originated in the Trent Valley, a landscape marked by outcrops of the southern Canadian Shield and Peterborough Drumlin Fields. The *Ataronchronon*, a group that does not appear to have been an independent member of the confederacy and were a division of the *Attignawantan* (Trigger, 1976: 30), were named for (Bog; ‘people of the swamp, mud, or clay’) as they occupied the swampy cedar lowlands surrounding the Wye River; references to landscape features or natural resources are also common among the *Haudenosaunee* (Hart and Engelbrecht, 2011: 335). *Wendat* is translated as meaning “dwellers on a peninsula” (Hodge, 1971 [1913], p. 24) or people of a drifting or floating island (Steckley, 2007, pp. 26–28). The historic *Huron-Wendat*, occupying the area between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay shared a common hunting territory that stretched across the north shore of Lake Ontario from the Toronto area east to the head of the St. Lawrence River, encompassing the total area of precontact ancestral *Wendat* settlement until the onset of Iroquois aggression in the early sixteenth century. Similarly, Tuck (1971: 216) noted that it is more than coincidence that the area of central New York claimed by the *Onondaga* in historic times corresponds almost exactly with the combined territories inhabited by their ancestors, extending back to as early as AD 1000.

We suggest that the turn of the fourteenth century involved significant cultural innovation associated with the development of permanent village-based communities which included long-standing beliefs and traditions in the Eastern Woodlands as well as rapid

and innovative forms of agency (Pauketat, 2005: 205–208). John Blitz, writing about the Mississippian Southeast has noted that such innovation can be a hinge point that “punctuates and alters incremental practice” and facilitates “rapid makeovers of landscape to remake memory” (2010: 16). Through at least two distinct processes of cultural transformation, ancestral *Wendat* populations engaged, intentionally or not, in a process of culture-making that created landscapes inhabited by the living and the dead which defined ancestral territories for spiritually-, economically-, and politically-invested groups.

The initiation of the practice of ossuary burial by a community around the turn of the fourteenth century may have, initially, been a practice that integrated previously distinct groups and served to reinforce community-based identities within a landscape of similar, autonomous groups (Williamson and Steiss, 2003). Over the next century-and-a-half, the continued creation of ossuaries near abandoned village sites, and in some cases, the participation of multiple communities in joint mortuary rites, extended and connected social groups to the landscapes they inhabited. At the same time, continued village relocation in a north-westerly direction expanded and demarcated ancestral territories along catchments defined by the watersheds.

Later, the coalescence of multiple village-communities into large aggregated towns and formative tribal nations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries once again punctuated the relationship between regional groups and the landscapes they inhabited. When previously distinct communities came together, their members brought with them ties to their ancestral places. Shared connections to contiguous landscapes helped to unite newly-formed co-residential communities and, in turn, reinforced new, communal identities. The formation of tribal nations and political confederacies transformed ancestral landscapes, into politically charged, territorial claims. The fact that claimed ancestral territories were not actively occupied does not preclude their being claimed as political territories and cultural landscapes in which social memory, economic rights, and group identities were emplaced and negotiated.

A thesis advanced by Kujit (2008) to explain the mortuary practices of pre-pottery Neolithic farmers in the Levant may bear on this argument. In discussing the plastered skulls found in deposits at sites such as Jerhico and ‘Ain Ghazal, Kujit (2008: 174) suggests that when skulls were retrieved from graves and plastered with life-like features, they were still remembered as known or named individuals whose presence or influence had been experienced by living community members. However, after two to three generations, the memories of these individuals became depersonalized and abstract. Rather than being conceptualized as actual persons, they became referential, and associated with homogenized, collective entities. This approach requires an explicitly historical, genealogical approach to the creation and re-creation of social memory.

A framework which contrasts experiential versus referential memory (Kujit, 2008; Hodder, 1990) allows us to move beyond simple references to ancestors and develop a theoretical framework about how abandoned village sites, mortuary communities, and their enclosing territories became part of the social memories and identities of later communities. If individuals took part in one or two village relocations and feasts of the dead within their lifetimes, their experiential memory would have extended out to an equivalent number of former village sites.

Following Snead (2008: 83), in the late fifteenth century, as an individual left their village, travelling south towards the shore of Lake Ontario they would have first encountered extensive field systems, planted in maize and perhaps beans and squash, followed by territories that included former field systems, villages of the familiar dead, which would have perhaps included kin to be grieved over and who still loomed large in experiential memory. These

territories may have also been landscapes for resource extraction, the gathering of plants and fruits, and the hunting of small mammals and deer that came to browse in the succession forests of abandoned fields. Beyond those sites, along the north shore of Lake Ontario, would exist a landscape of referential memory, including villages of the dead who were depersonalized, part of an extended ancestral territory which referenced the community or nation, as opposed to remembered individuals who could be identified as kin. During the process of nation-building in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Birch, 2015), ancestral landscapes may have been thought of as political territories with fluid boundaries, overlapping with the territories used and claimed by other nations, through which men travelled to trade and wage war with enemies among the Haudenosaunee across the 'great water' of Lake Ontario (Biggar, 1929). To the north, the cultural landscape may have been less defined by territorial claims, and may have presented a landscape into which expansion was possible, and into which groups eventually extended their territories before relocating north to join the Huron confederacy, after which time the entire north lakeshore may have been perceived as a landscape defined and claimed by the social memories of multiple allied nations. By conceptualizing the historical development of Iroquoian cultural landscapes in this way, we can envision how processes of village relocation, the interment of the dead, and the continued passage through the landscape served to emplace peoples and nations within it.

## 8. Conclusions

Whatever the environmental and socio-political influences there were on relocation patterns along the north-west shore of Lake Ontario, it is clear from the archaeological and documentary record that the Wendat considered their cemeteries and ossuaries to be "living" places that required visitation and maintenance. It is likely that, they considered the actual villages that had been associated with these places to assume a new status as villages of the dead and treated in a way consistent with the cemeteries.

The temporal, spatial, and cognitive distances between communities of the living, communities of the dead, and their constituent parts, created landscapes of contextual experience (Snead, 2008) in which individuals and communities situated themselves vis-à-vis emplaced ancestors of the recent and more distant past, and a shifting tapestry of allies, trading partners, and enemies.

In this way, the Wendat negotiated complex social and environmental landscapes both within village communities and between them, manifested archaeologically in sequences of village relocations. Within that landscape, with the practice of ossuary burial, the living laid claim to those landscapes by emplacing the souls of their ancestors within them. Together, this constitutes an ongoing process of place-making which inscribed the identities of communities, nations and confederacies onto a landscape that was not, and has never been, abandoned. Today, members of the Huron-Wendat Nation are actively seeking a greater role in decisions about the management and investigation of their sacred and ancestral sites. They are continuing the practices of their ancestors in defining how the cultural landscape is perceived and constructed by both the living and the dead.

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