THE INTERMENT OF INFANTS OF THE ONTARIO IROQUOIS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper a previously unreported interment practice will be described and discussed for the Ontario Iroquois. The practice involves the interment of infants inside longhouses and is reported on sites of the Middle to Historic Periods of the Ontario Iroquois. A variation of this interment practice, that of interring infants in vessels and placing the interment on the periphery of the village or in an ossuary, will also be described. Ethnographic and archaeological data will be utilized to clarify and interpret the practice.

INTRODUCTION

The death rate of infants in aboriginal societies is high due to the difficulties of birth and the stress of the natal and post-natal environments (Acasdi and Nemeskeri, 1970). The prehistoric agriculturalists of Ontario, the Iroquois, were no exception to this statement. The Jesuits commented on the high mortality rate—"scarcely one infant in thirty survives until youth" (JR1:257). However, the known burials of this age group are not as numerous as one would expect in light of this statement.

In ossuary collections the numbers of infants discovered are very small, especially when compared to the estimated infant mortality for the population studied (e.g., Tabor Hill, Churcher, and Kenyon, 1960, and the Kleinberg ossuary, Melbye, personal communication). The fragile quality of the infant bones makes their preservation in ossuary collections very difficult; this factor may explain their low representation. An alternative solution to the few infant interments in ossuaries is that they were buried elsewhere, either on the periphery of the site or on the site proper. An example of this alternative is found in the description of the interment of an infant by Father Brébuf:

> … for little children who die less than a month or two old; they …inter them on the road, in order that, they say, if some woman passes that way, they may secretly enter into her womb, and that she may give them life again, and bring them forth (JR10:273).

In the archaeological reports there are no references to the discovery of such interments. This, however, is not difficult to understand since excavation is directed to the habitation area of the village proper and not the periphery of the site. Where then were the infants buried? During recent work in Ontario infant burials have been discovered in pits inside longhouses; there are sufficient numbers of these interments to postulate an alternative interment practice to that recorded by Brébuf. This practice will be described and discussed in the text of this paper.

The scope of the paper covers the Middle Prehistoric to Historic Period of the Ontario Iroquois as defined by Wright (1966). This range was chosen since it is the period of the development and elaboration of the ossuary interment ritual (Noble, 1968). On the basis of this statement the burials of the infants outside the ossuary deviate from the normal practice and thus require explanation and further study. Ethnographic and archaeological data will be utilized to clarify this burial practice.

ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA

When searching the *Jesuit Relations* for information on birth rituals it is apparent that there is a paucity of data. Perhaps birth rituals of the Iroquois forbade the presence of men at parturition due to the concept of uncleanliness which would bring bad luck to the men, similar to that associated with the menses. Sagard noted that the accouchements of the women were easy (JR3:fn. p. 298), but Brébuf states that a woman endured 24 hours of labour only to give birth to a baby that died a few hours later. The discovery of a woman in the bottom of the ossuary pit at Tabor Hill with an infant in the pelvic region may be indirect evidence of the difficulties of childbirth (Churcher and Kenyon, 1960). There are no comments concerning premature birth in the literature; this was an occurrence which the archaeological data will demonstrate did occur. There is no specific information on the treatment of the infant at birth, or death.

The rituals at death of both young and old are better documented. Apparently the Huron did not fear death, they "went to an afterlife that was not too different from that of the living" (JR 10:267). A basic tenet of their belief system was that souls would be reborn after death. Each person was thought to have two souls, one went to the Village of Souls, the other remained in the ossuary pit awaiting rebirth (JR10:287). The souls of old persons and little children who could not make the trip to the Village of Souls due to weakness of limbs, remained in a spiritual village located in the land of the living (JR10:143). The second soul of these individuals remained near the burial awaiting rebirth. The concept of rebirth is stressed in Brébuf's observation of infants interred along paths. Apparently, the location of the disposition of these individuals was calculated to encourage rebirth of the souls. For this reason the path was chosen, and as the data will demonstrate, it can be interpreted that the longhouse was also a preferred location.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The specific instances of infant burials will now be described. For the analysis the following general age categories were utilized: foetal (prenatal), infant (birth to 24 months), and child (24 months to adolescence). The burials that were available for study were aged according to Johnston (1962) and Redfield (1910). It was not possible to age some burials since the remains were not available for study; where possible the burials were examined in person.

There are twenty cases of infant burials and child burials located in longhouses, plus ten burials located in the general village area from a total of nine sites (see Table 1).

At the Crawford Lake site (see Map 1), a Middleport component, a child (approximately two years old) was interred in a pit inside a longhouse. The child's remains were scattered throughout the pit. There were no grave goods. A cremated adult was found in the same pit. Also found during the excavation of the site was a six-year-old child interred in the area of a housewall. It was not certain whether this burial predated or postdated the construction of the house (Finlayson and Matson, 1974).

Several sites of the Southern Division Iroquois have revealed the remains of infants buried inside houses. At the White site burials were excavated from interior house pits. In one of the houses an infant was interred in a pit, adjacent to an adult female. It was interpreted that this infant was the child of the female (Tripp, 1975). The scattered remains of one infant were discovered in the middens, but no discrete burial was recognized (Burns, ms.).
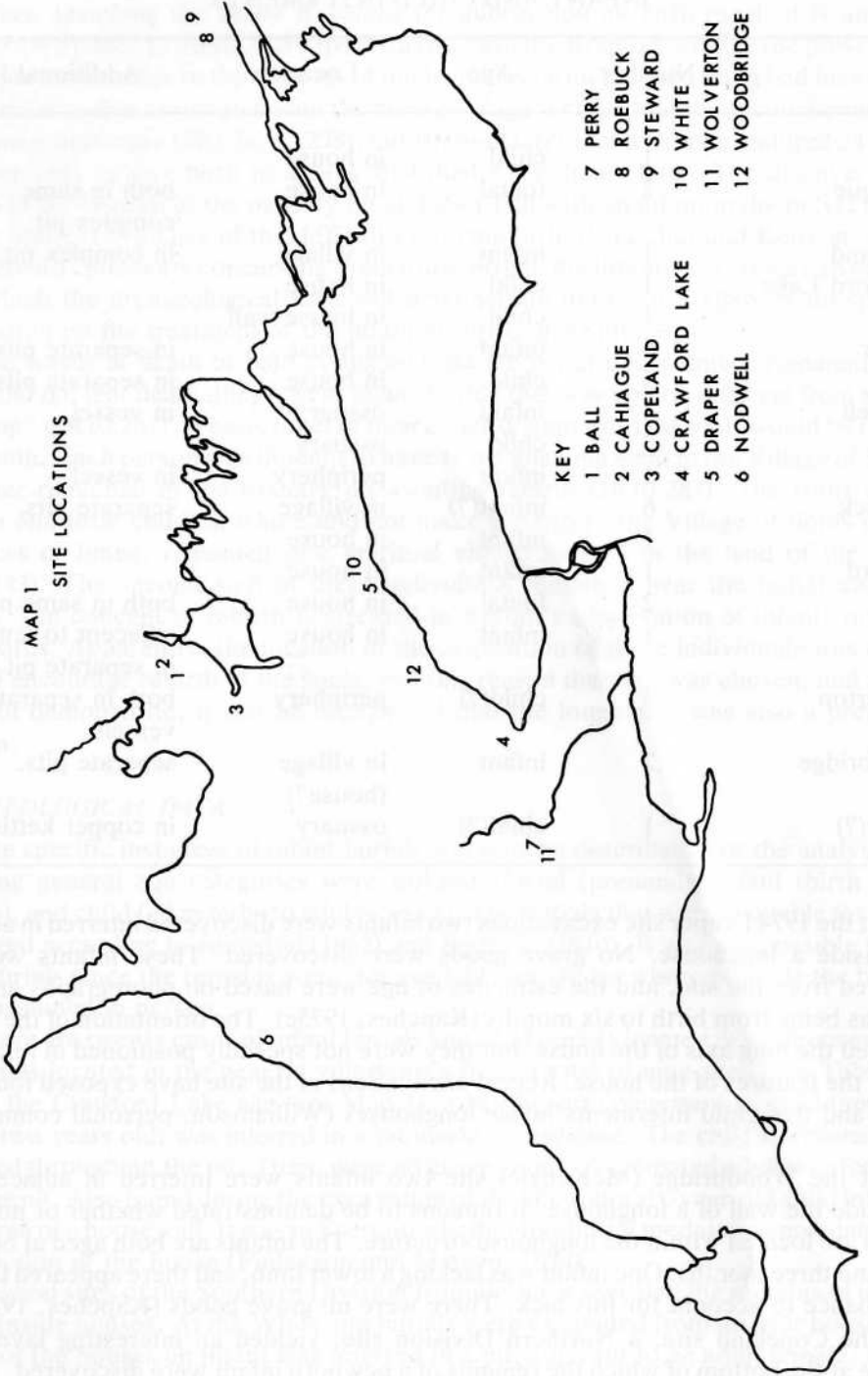
TABLE 1
INFANT AND CHILD INTERMENTS

Site	Number	Age	Location	Additional Data
Ball	1	child	in house	
Cahiague	2	foetal	in house	both in same complex pit.
Copeland	1	infant	in village	in complex pit.
Crawford Lake	1	child	in house	
	1	child	in house wall	
Draper	6	infant	in house	in separate pits.
	5	child	in house	in separate pits.
Nodwell	1	infant	ossuary	in vessel.
	3	child	ossuary	
Perry	1	infant	periphery	in vessel
Roebuck	6	infant(?)	in village	separate pits.
	1	infant	in house	
Steward	1	infant	in house	
	2	foetal	in house	both in same pit.
White	1	infant	in house	adjacent to female in separate pit.
Wolverton	3	child(?)	periphery	both in separate vessels.
Woodbridge	2	infant	in village (house?)	separate pits.
Huron(?)	1	child(?)	ossuary	in copper kettle.

At the 1974 Draper site excavations two infants were discovered interred in adjacent pits inside a longhouse. No grave goods were discovered. These infants were not removed from the site, and the estimates of age were based on photographs and field notes as being from birth to six months (Kapches, 1975c). The orientation of the burials followed the long axis of the house, but they were not specially positioned in relation to any of the features of the house. Recent excavations at the site have exposed four more infant and five child interments inside longhouses (Williamson, personal communication).

At the Woodbridge (McKenzie) site two infants were interred in adjacent pits alongside the wall of a longhouse. It remains to be demonstrated whether or not these burials are located within the longhouse structure. The infants are both aged at between birth and three months. One infant was lacking a lower limb, and there appeared to be no disturbance to account for this lack. There were no grave goods (Kapches, 1975a).

The Copeland site, a Northern Division site, yielded an interesting layered pit feature at the bottom of which the remains of a newborn infant were discovered. The pit was not located inside a longhouse, but it was situated in the area of the village. No other human bone was excavated at the site (Channen and Clark, 1965).

MAP 1
SITE LOCATIONS

KEY

1	BALL	7	PERRY
2	CAHIAGUE	8	ROEBUCK
3	COPELAND	9	STEWARD
4	CRAWFORD LAKE	10	WHITE
5	DRAPER	11	WOLVERTON
6	NODWELL	12	WOODBRIDGE

At the *Cahiague* site, historic Huron, two infants were interred in a complex pit feature inside one of the longhouses. The infants lay one on top of the other beneath a layer of rocks, similar to the Copeland interment. The soil matrix of the pit contained charred vegetal material including corn. A charred bark basket appeared to surround the infants. Pottery and fish remains were in the fill of the pit (Tyyska, personal communication). Neither skeleton was complete due to poor preservation, but it was possible to estimate the age of the infants as between seven to nine foetal months at death. The similarity of age and the contemporaneity of the deposition has led to the assumption that the infants are twins (Kapches, 1975a).

Sites of the St. Lawrence Iroquois that have infant burials are the Roebuck and Steward sites. At the Steward site three infants were interred inside the same longhouse (Wright, 1972). One newborn infant (personal observation) was placed in a small pit. Two infants were buried together in a small pit (seven inches diameter, by eleven inches depth) in the same house (Wright, personal communication). These infants were in poor condition, but it was possible to estimate that both were foetal (personal observation). As with the *Cahiague* infants the simultaneous interment and the similarity of age of these infants suggests that they are twins. The pits of these burials were located adjacent to one another in the center of the longhouse with no apparent alignment to the internal features of the house. There was no special orientation noted for the burials.

At the Roebuck site six infants were discovered by Wintemberg (1972) in the general area of the village. However, none was associated with a recognized longhouse. It is possible that Wintemberg did not recognize all the features at the site, and it may be possible that some of these interments did occur inside longhouses. Subsequent excavation at Roebuck has revealed an infant interment inside a longhouse (Wright, personal communication). The infant, aged between 14-17 months, was placed flexed face down, in an ovate pit.

At the Ball site, historic Huron, a young child (aged six years, personal observation) was buried in a bell-shaped pit inside a longhouse. The house was of unusual shape compared to the others discovered at the site and it may represent a ceremonial structure (Knight, personal communication). There were no grave goods accompanying the burial.

A variation to the interment in the village practice has been noted in the discovery of a few cases of infants (and children of unknown age) in vessels either on the periphery of the village or in an ossuary. Six cases of this practice have been reported from four sites (see Table 1).

At the Perry site, a Middleport component, an infant was interred on the edge of the village habitation area. The infant (aged 3-6 months) was inside a pottery vessel. There were no grave goods *per se,* however, a polished baculum of a river otter was included with the burial (Kapches, 1975c).

There were no infant burials at the Nodwell site, also a Middleport component (Wright, 1974), however, at an ossuary associated with the site the remains of an infant were discovered inside a pottery vessel (Wright, personal communication). This ossuary is of additional interest since of the five individuals represented in the pit only one was an adult (a male). The other four individuals were all less than six years of age. They were all disarticulated in the usual ossuary interment pattern.

Other finds of a similar nature were reported by Wintemberg (1899). Three pottery vessels were found on the periphery of the same Iroquoian site (the Wolverton site) (Woolfrey and Chitwood, personal communication). Each vessel contained the remains

of a child (it is impossible to estimate age on the basis of Wintemberg's observations). The Wolverton site is situated near the Perry site. An example of a child in an ossuary was reported by Hunter (1900). This child (also of unknown age) was wrapped in a fur inside a copper kettle, and was placed in the center of the ossuary. This Huron ossuary was located in Tay Township, Simcoe County.

DISCUSSION

In all, there are six instances of interments of infants or children in vessels (see Table 2). Four of these were located on the periphery of a site, the remaining two were found in ossuaries. The possibility of a bark basket surrounding the infants at *Cahiague,* leads to the supposition that other interments may have been similarly encased, but due to poor preservation the vessels have not survived.

TABLE 2
DIFFERENT LOCATIONS OF THE INTERMENTS

	In-House	In-Village*	Periphery	Ossuary
Foetal	4			
Infant	9	9	(1)**	(1)
Child	7	1	(3)	3;(1)
	20	10	4	5

* When location in a house was questionable, the interment was considered to be in the village.
** The brackets indicate the interments found in vessels.

There is no evidence that infants in the vessels were involved in cannabalistic rituals. In fact infant burial within a vessel may be interpreted as a symbolic Feast of the Dead interment. The allegorial use of the term "kettle" for the Feast of the Dead, and the placement of the infants inside vessels of various construction is perhaps not coincidental. The use of the term "kettle" instead of "Feast of the Dead" was described by Brébuf who stated "the Feast of the Dead is hardly ever mentioned, even in the most important councils, except under the name of the "kettle" (JR10:279).

The incidence of young children (n. 7) and infants (including foetal) (n. 13) interred inside longhouses is high compared to that of infants and children found in vessels. This discrepancy is probably due in part to differential excavation priorities (specifically the village area contrasted with the periphery). In all there are twenty interments definitely buried inside a longhouse: the two infants at the Woodbridge site may be outside the house, and one of the interments at the Crawford Lake site may predate the construction of the house. The Copeland infant was in the village area proper, but was not associated with a structure. The six infants from Roebuck found in the village area by Wintemberg are not included in these figures since they cannot be related to any specific structures. Only one infant is assumed to be related to an adult female burial—this is at the White site. However, it is not possible to demonstrate the validity of this assumption since the burials were discrete.

The data suggests that more infants (n. 18) than young children (n. 8) were accorded burial in the village proper. It appears that the interment practice was extended to infants more often than young children.

Drawing upon the data presented in the previous discussions of the ethnographic reports, it is suggested that burial of an infant inside a house would insure rebirth because of the location of the interment. This is similar to the rationale suggested by Brébuf in his observation of burial along the path.

The interments of two infants together at the Steward and *Cahiague* sites suggests the probability of twins. These infants are foetal, and apparent death at the same time, with burial in the same pit makes this inference most probable. Considering the high incidence of prenatal and natal mortality of twins in modern societies (Koch, 1966), one would expect a similar occurrence in the Iroquoian samples. Twins were not unknown for Iroquoian groups. The Jesuits comment on a Petun brother and sister who were twins (JR21:183). Twins had a special ritual significance for the Iroquois. The creation myth commenced with the birth of twin brothers, *Iousekha* and *Tawiscaron.* The exploits of these brothers form the basis of much mythology (Tooker, 1964). The treatment of the infants at *Cahiague ,* interred in a complex pit feature, suggests that special rituals were followed at the death of twins. However, in contrast, the disposition of the Steward infants in what Wright (personal communication) considers to be a post-mold, argues against a ceremony at death. Obviously, a larger comparative sample is necessary to interpret the significance of twins and twins' deaths for the Ontario Iroquois.

Thus far the occurrences of infant and child burials on Iroquoian sites have been discussed; as a result of this selective presentation it would appear that only one specific age group was buried on the site proper. This is not so. There are reports of adult burials on Iroquoian sites; these illustrate the variety of village interments.

An adult female was found in a pit on the Crawford Lake site. The nature of the interment led to the assumption that she was a torture victim (Finlayson, personal communication). At the White site an adult female, an adult male, and an adolescent were interred in pits inside houses. The adolescent was missing both feet, but there was no other evidence of unique treatment of these burials (Tripp, 1975). At Roebuck several adult and juvenile burials were found distributed over the entire site (Wintemberg, 1972). Information from sites not yet referenced in this report add additional data to this list. At the Mclvor site, a St. Lawrence Iroquois site, an elderly female was buried in the habitation area (Pendergast, personal communication). An elderly female was found in the village area of the Crystal Rock (St. Lawrence Iroquois) site (Pendergast, 1962; Noble, 1968). At the Quackenbush site several individuals were interred in a mass grave in a manner that suggests they were executed (MacLeod, personal communication). This may be similar to the presumed war dead described by Noble (1968) at *Contarrea, a* Huron village destroyed by the League Iroquois in 1641. At the Robitaille site two adult torture victims were interred in pits inside the same longhouse (Tyyska, 1969). Two adults were buried at the Draper site inside longhouses; both of these adults exhibit unique treatment. One may represent a war victim while the other was interred in a complex pit feature indicating an unusual ritual at death. These instances will be de-scribed by Williamson (personal communication) in the final report on the site.

These are the reported interments of juveniles and adults located in the area of habitation of village sites during the time period being studied in this paper. Some cases represent the treatment of the remains of torture victims (e.g., Crawford Lake and

Robitaille). Some examples represent deaths which may represent war victims (e.g., *Contarrea,* Draper, and Quackenbush). There is a fine line between the interpretation of war death versus torture death, but this paper will do no more than echo the comments of the principal investigators. What explanations can be offered for the other interments of adults and juveniles on these sites? These persons may have been buried in house pits during the winter season when frozen ground prohibited interment outside. When the ground thawed these remains were exhumed and reburied prior to the Feast of the Dead. For some reasons the occurrences reported above were not reburied in the ossuary. Therefore some examples (e.g., White) may have been individuals who were over-looked, however, in the case of sites of the St. Lawrence Iroquois (e.g., Mclvor, Crystal Rock and Roebuck) it appears that an alternative burial practice was followed.

At Roebuck village interment in the habitation area was common, and the interments do not exhibit the alteration of the torture deaths. Burial in the village area for members of all age groups may have been the usual interment practice for the St. Lawrence Iroquois (Noble, 1969). The burials at McIvor and Crystal Rock, also St. Lawrence Iroquois sites. give additional weight to this statement.

It appears that the Huron, proto-Huron and Middleport groups in Ontario buried most of their dead in ossuaries. The exceptions to this general practice have been described and discussed above. The Neutral apparently buried their dead in small ossuaries or solitary graves located about the periphery of the site (Ridley, 1961). The published references on habitation sites do not indicate burials of the nature discussed in this paper, and Noble's (personal communication) excavations at four Neutral villages (Cleveland, Christianson, Walker and Hamilton) have not brought to light any such interments. However, one might expect to find village interments or scattered in-village remains, in view of comments made by Lalement: "the dead bodies often remain during the entire winter in their cabins. . . . [Only] at the very latest moment possible when decomposition had rendered them insupportable [were they taken to the cemetary]" (JR21:199).

The number of adult interments in the village (ten cases, plus others at Roebuck, Quackenbush and Contarrea) is limited when compared to that of infants and children (thirty cases). There is a high frequency of the occurrence of burials according to the age category of infants in the village area. I argue that these burials of young deaths are not simply burials that were not exhumed for ossuary reburial; rather they are indicative of a distinct ritual interment practice. Moreover, the probability of an interment ritual for twin deaths is highly probable in light of the discovery of the dual foetal infants interred in the same pits at *Cahiague* and Steward.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper a previously unreported interment practice was described and discuss-ed. The practice accorded infants interment inside the longhouse. There are usually no grave goods accompanying the burial, and there does not appear to be any special placement of the infants in relation to features in the house. The child at the Ball site is the only example of an interment in what is considered to be a unique structure in comparison to the other houses at the site. The significance of this interment cannot be evaluated until the analysis of the site is complete. Twins are thought to be present at the Steward and *Cahiague* sites. These burials are significant in light of the conceptual importance of twins for the Iroquois, and from the fact that such burials have not been previously

reported in the literature. The major factor for interpreting the significance of these interments would appear to be the emphasis on the location of the interment, for as the Jesuits report the location of the interment was thought to be an important factor in determining the rebirth of the soul. Thus, in the house, as well as on the path, the soul of the deceased infant could be reborn.

A minor burial practice, a variation of that described by Brébuf, involved the interment of the deceased infant (or child) in a vessel of pottery or copper. This practice appears at sites of Middleport and Historic Huron affiliation. The in-house interment practice is present throughout the Middle Ontario Iroquois to the Historic period and is geographically dispersed from Southwestern to Southeastern Ontario. The significance of the geographical and temporal expression of the interment practice is that it apparently continued as a discrete burial practice accorded a specific age group throughout the period of the ossuary interment ritual.

In conclusion, the interment of infants inside houses is an alternative burial practice from that of the interment of infants on the periphery of the village as described by Brébuf. The elucidation of this burial practice is hampered at the moment due to the small size of the sample studied (n. 20). However, as archaeological investigations are directed to total site excavation as well as testing beyond the site boundaries, it is expected that the details of this ritual and the one described by Brébuf will be clarified.

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