THE EXCAVATION AND HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION OF A HURON OSSUARY*

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THE UNUSUAL OPPORTUNITY of excavating a Huron ossuary presented itself to the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology in 1946. The fact that probably less than a half dozen such sites still remain, coupled with the possibility that the ossuary in question was the one which the French Jesuit, Jean de Brebeuf, saw in use in 1636, led the Museum to decide upon excavation. A special grant from the Province to the Museum for archaeological purposes enabled work to begin.**

The site was situated on a small sandy plain about one hundred acres in extent (Fig. 115), on the farm of Mr. Charles Daoust, in the north half of lot 14, concession 7, Tiny township, Simcoe county. The nearest stream is one-half mile to the west. Remains of historic Huron villages lie one mile north and one and one-half miles northwest of the site. When first seen by the writer, the ossuary was visible as a broad, saucer-shaped depression in the ground, whose maximum depth was about two feet, with a slightly elevated rim marking its borders. The owner said that he had long known the place for what it was, since he had once attempted to bury a sheep in it, but he believed it had not previously been disturbed. After finding human bones, and recovering them, he had not again touched the pit (Fig. 116).

The purpose of this paper is to present briefly data on the nature of the ossuary itself, together with an account of its grave furniture and its possible historical connection. While such information was relatively easy to glean, the case is far different with the osteological material. This great mass — perhaps the largest amount of its kind ever to be recovered in eastern North America — presents a multitude of problems, the solution of which will require many years of labor. Reports upon this aspect of the research will, it is hoped, be published from time to time as soon as they are prepared. Meanwhile, it seems desirable to place before interested readers without further delay those details of the ossuary which are already known so that its archaeological and historical position will be assimilated.[1]

Beyond those having to do with surveying, handling tools properly and taking the customary care of specimens, the usual procedures for excavation do not altogether apply when it comes to excavating an ossuary. Work upon this one was begun by laying out the surrounding half acre in five foot squares. Contours were noted and excavation by 3 inch levels was begun. Photographs, profiles and square plans were made wherever necessary; the locations of artifacts were accurately noted, and the objects removed with all possible care, cleaned, catalogued, and packed for shipping. The skeletal material, however, was subject to no rules. Long bones, for instance, lay in all positions and at all angles; a single femur, standing on end might traverse five levels, while crania occupied at least two or three levels. Furthermore, because of interlocking, material frequently could not be extricated until several days' work had been done to release it, thus making the maintenance of levels difficult or impossible (Fig. 117, *a-c*). The only consistently applicable procedure to follow under the circumstances was to proceed with

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** In the early summer of 1947 the Museum began the task, under the direction of the writer, and with the assistance of a number of students from the University of Toronto. The town of Midland supplied a truck and living accommodations for one season. Frank Ridley, the discoverer of the site and Gerald Fair, then of Alliance Paper Mills, lent invaluable help. In 1948 the work was carried to a successful conclusion with Museum funds and with the generous assistance of a gift from David Walker, Esq., K. C. The aid of all those who helped with the work, although they cannot each be mentioned individually, is gratefully acknowledged.

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The proportion of European to native artifacts was rather large, but again the range was limited. Ornaments, of course, were numerous, consisting chiefly of glass beads of various sorts, bracelets and rings. Utility goods were represented chiefly by copper kettles and iron knives; such heavy types as axes were entirely absent. Novelties like the burning glass and the wineglass stem were rare.

Remains of two or three copper kettles came to light. None was even moderately well preserved and only one was in any sense complete. Two consisted of mere scraps sufficient to indicate diameters and one had part of the rim intact. The largest specimen was about two-thirds complete, including the bottom and parts of the sides (Fig. 127). It had been placed near the center of the pit on top of a few bones close to the floor. Since the rim, which is generally an iron hoop, was not to be found, it appears that the kettle was damaged when the burial occurred. Whether complete or not, the entire specimen had been wrapped in beaver skins, both inside and out, large areas of which were well preserved through contact with the copper. At the time of its discovery, the kettle contained the usual assortment of bones, and perhaps one bundle. On the bottom were the remains of the birch bark basket already described. The estimated diameter of the largest kettle is fifty-one centimeters. A smaller specimen, represented by part of the bottom, lay elsewhere on the floor of the pit, and was one of the last objects to be found in excavation.

There were an estimated twenty-five iron knives of a variety of types, such as table knives, butcher knives and jackknives. All but two were too badly corroded for details to be ascertained. The best preserved specimen was a butcher knife (Fig. 128, *c*) with three rivets to fasten the wooden handle-sheathing. Several of the table knives, which closely resembled some of their modern descendants, also retained portions of the wooden sheathing. The jackknife blade bore a mark now too worn

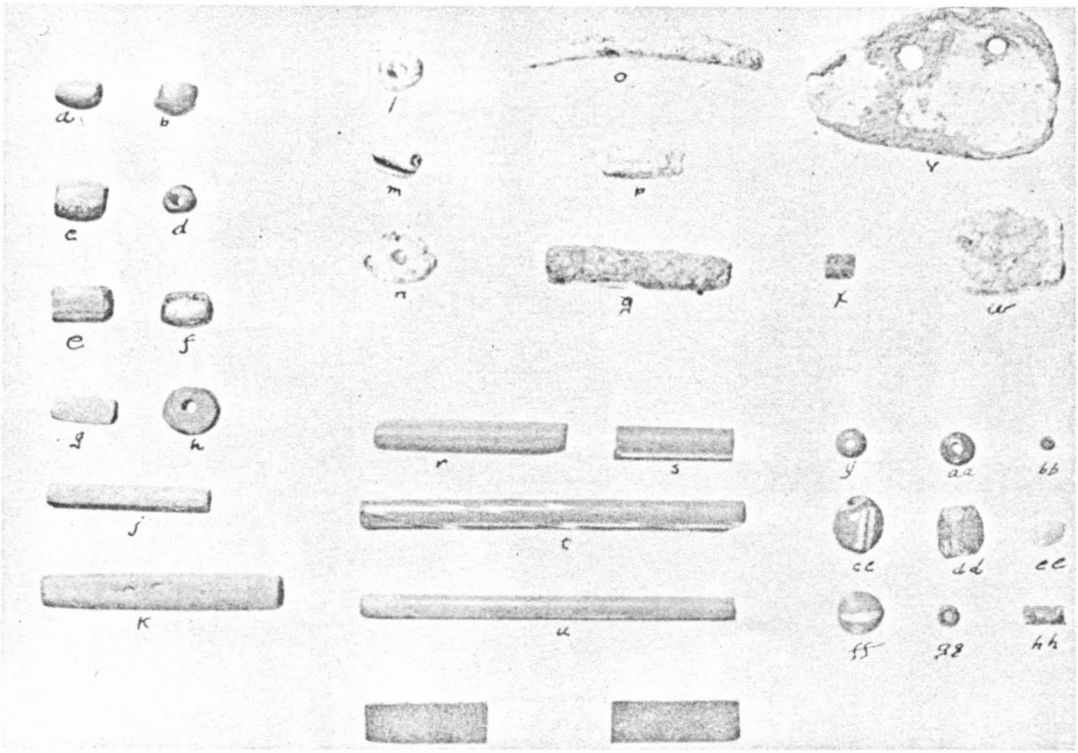

FIG. 123. Ornaments. *a-k*, slate beads; *l*, *n*, discoidal shell beads; *m*, *Olivella* shell; *o*, imitation elk tooth (?) of shell; *p*, *q*, tubular shell beads; *r-u*, long glass beads; *v*, shell pendant; *w*, heavy shell bead; *x*, wampum-style shell bead; *y-gg*, small glass beads; *hh*, copper bead. The scale is in inches.

to be decipherable, but which was probably the maker's name. Other iron objects deposited in the pit were scissors, which differed in no essential way from our own; awls, a key and bracelets (Fig. 128, *b*, *a*, *d*, *e*). The awls were of the common sort, i.e. slender pieces of metal, square in section and tapering towards one end, with an offset crook at the center. The end of one specimen was still sheathed in its bone handle, merely a piece of the wing bone of a bird and obviously fitted by the Indians. Another specimen lacked a handle. The key could hardly have had any but prestige value. Bracelets were of various sizes, but all were simple affairs. Some were made from heavy bands of iron, others from sheet metal. The arm bones of one individual retained a set of six of the iron type. At least fifteen ornaments of this sort were found in the grave. Several lengths of iron bands used in the rims of kettles indicated the diameter of the original specimens. Except for an iron hook, the remaining iron objects were too corroded to yield any useful information, and most seem to have been merely scraps.

Apart from the beads described below, only two glass objects were found. The more important was a burning glass of low magnification and now much corroded (Fig. 128, *f*). The other was undoubtedly part of the stem of a wineglass, light greenish in color, and molded in two parts (Fig. 125, *g*). The body is almost square, with a corded rim and tapers to a pointed bottom, while the sides bear molded lion-masks on two sides. Extremely close

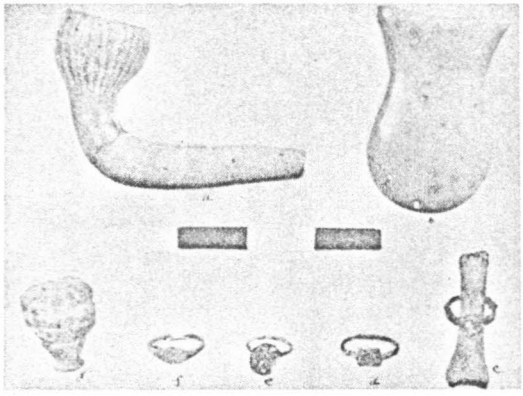

FIG. 125. Pipes and ornaments. *a*, clay pipe; *b*, pipe of serpentine; *c*, ring on finger bone; *d-f*, finger rings with bezels; *g*, part of wineglass stem. The scale is in inches.

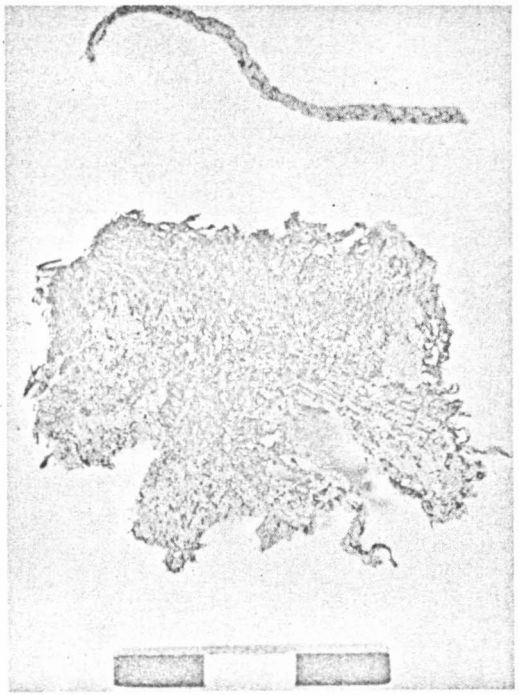

FIG. 126. *a*, Length of braided rope; *b*, fragment of textile. The scale is in inches.

parallels were excavated in 1940 in London and are now in the Guildhall Museum. Their origin is thought to be either England or the Low Countries and to date from 1630-1660 (Oswald and Phillips, 1949, Figs. IV left, and IX right).

Red, blue, white and polychrome glass beads lay in most parts of the ossuary, in some cases in groups which would suggest that they had been strung together (Fig. 123, *r-u*; *y-gg*). All but the polychrome existed in a variety of shapes, such as round, tubular, and twisted beads, some of them in solid colors, others with cores of a color different from the exterior, and a few with stripes of contrasting hue. The polychrome were chiefly of the well-known "candy" type. Out of a total of 467 specimens, the largest single class consisted of red beads of round and ring shapes. One of the most interesting groups was that which imitated the red slate beads of the Huron; the glass was a dull red which could only be distinguished from the slate on a fractured surface, and the forms into which it had been blown included the tubular, square and triangular beads of the native styles (Fig. 123, *s*, *u*).

Summary

If the evidence for the identity of this ossuary is not one hundred per cent conclusive, it is nevertheless convincing. Minor details revealed in the excavation agree, for the most part, with the description given by Brebeuf as do also its general location and relationship to village ruins nearby. The three kettles would have offered the most conclusive proof, but since Brebeuf states that they were in an extremely bad condition when deposited, it is not to be wondered at that their remains were fragmentary and unsatisfactory when found. No serious disturbance had occurred in this ossuary, and reports that kettles had been removed from it should be considered in the light of local traditions and of the fact that the witnesses were very old men whose memories may not have been clear. There seems to be almost no doubt that this is the ossuary visited by Brebeuf during the Feast of Pentecost, 1636, and the one in which the Huron of Ossossane village deposited the remains of their kindred at that time.

Since this is the first ossuary in the Georgian Bay region to have been completely excavated by modern methods, it occupies a unique place in the archaeology of the Northeast. Data upon its location, size and contents throw new light upon one of the most highly elaborated culture traits of this branch of the Iroquois peoples. Its excavation yielded a large amount of skeletal material which will ultimately be of great value in assessing the physical, dental and pathological conditions of this tribe, and their mortality rate. If our identification and dating are correct, the material was deposited prior to the great smallpox epidemic of 1639 and to the adoption of the Wenro about the same time. In other words, the remains can be taken confidently to be those of the western branch of the Huron, known as the Bear clan, and of persons who died between *ca.* 1624-1636. Thus, the people and the date are known with unusual accuracy. Cultural remains from the ossuary, likewise accurately datable, throw an equally illuminating light upon the material condition of the Huron at this time, and upon the processes of acculturation as they were working themselves out amongst them.

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