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A consideration of participants in Huron-Wendat subsistence strategies across the pre-contact and early colonization periods

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ABSTRACT

Survey and excavation at the Huron-Wendat site known as Ellery (BdGx-8) revealed two components separated by approximately 150 years. The later component represents a time when Wendat communities were suffering from major epidemics from European-introduced illnesses. Differences in the composition of the zooarchaeological samples include higher proportions of perch, rabbits, and passenger pigeon in the later, post-epidemic component. We suggest that the nature of the fauna and the technology needed to obtain it indicates increased involvement by 'legitimate peripheral participants' in subsistence activities compared with earlier times.

1. Introduction

The Huron-Wendat¹ are an Iroquoian-speaking people who lived in southern Ontario, Canada at the time of direct European contact in the early 17th century (Sioui, 1999). As significant players in trade in the Northeast prior to this time and people who practiced a semi-sedentary mixed hunting and horticultural subsistence, they quickly developed alliances with French explorers, traders and missionaries (Trigger, 1976). This led to a sustained effort at conversion, in which the Wendat welcomed the French into their homeland, villages and houses. The first European explorers arrived in the region in about 1615 CE, and by the 1630s European-introduced disease began spreading through Wendat communities (Trigger, 1976). While estimates of the Wendat population vary, it is clear that between 1634 and 1640 the population declined by an estimated 60–70% (Warrick, 2003).

Since 2008, with the consent of the Huron-Wendat Nation, Laurentian University archaeology field schools have been conducted at Ellery (BdGx-8), a Wendat site (Fig. 1). The location is unusual because it was the site of two different villages, occupied approximately 150 years apart. The Wendat settlement system of the 17th century and earlier involved relocation of villages every 10 to 25 years, when the surrounding wood supplies had been depleted and soil fertility had declined (Heidenreich, 1971: 213; Tooker, 1991). It has been argued that for spiritual or ideological reasons, Wendat people did not

reoccupy the same villages (Birch and Williamson, 2015). In this case, however, radiocarbon dates, pottery and stone point typology, and European trade goods clearly indicate two occupations (Hawkins et al., 2016). An early 'Lalonde' village dates to the early to mid-16th century, before direct European contact, and a later, mid-17th century village dates to the time of the height of Wendat-French contact (Fig. 2).

Although known since the nineteenth century (Hunter, 1906: 35), and tested briefly in 1972 (Ridley, 1972), the Ellery site was not subject to systematic work until 1993 (Archaeological Services Inc., 1993). Test pitting and surface collection of a once-ploughed field, in addition to examination of old reports, led the authors of the 1993 report to conclude that the site is five to six acres in size (Archaeological Services Inc., 1993). It lies on two sides of a small road, and on at least three different properties, only one of which was tested in 1993 (Archaeological Services Inc., 1993). Infrastructure Ontario now owns this property and the bulk of the site (Fig. 2), and made this accessible for research and teaching in recent years. In 2008, Laurentian University began holding biennial field courses there, focussing on student learning and employing a minimally invasive strategy of investigation (e.g., Glencross et al., 2017). Field school excavations rapidly determined that two smaller villages, each perhaps 2 ha in size or less, were represented, not a single 5–6 ha site (Hawkins, 2013; Simmons, 2014).

To date, Laurentian University fieldwork at the site has included

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¹ "Wendat" is the term that these people traditionally used to describe themselves (Sioui, 1999), while "Huron" is a disparaging term used by French traders and missionaries and is roughly translated as "like a boar". It was also apparently applied to people that the French considered uncultured (Ramsden, 1990). The term "Huron" has been used widely by archaeologists and anthropologists. In Canada, the descendants of these people form the Huron-Wendat Nation, in the United States, they are the Wyandot(te). In this paper, the term Huron-Wendat is used initially for orientation, and when referring to the modern Nation; elsewhere the term Wendat is preferred.

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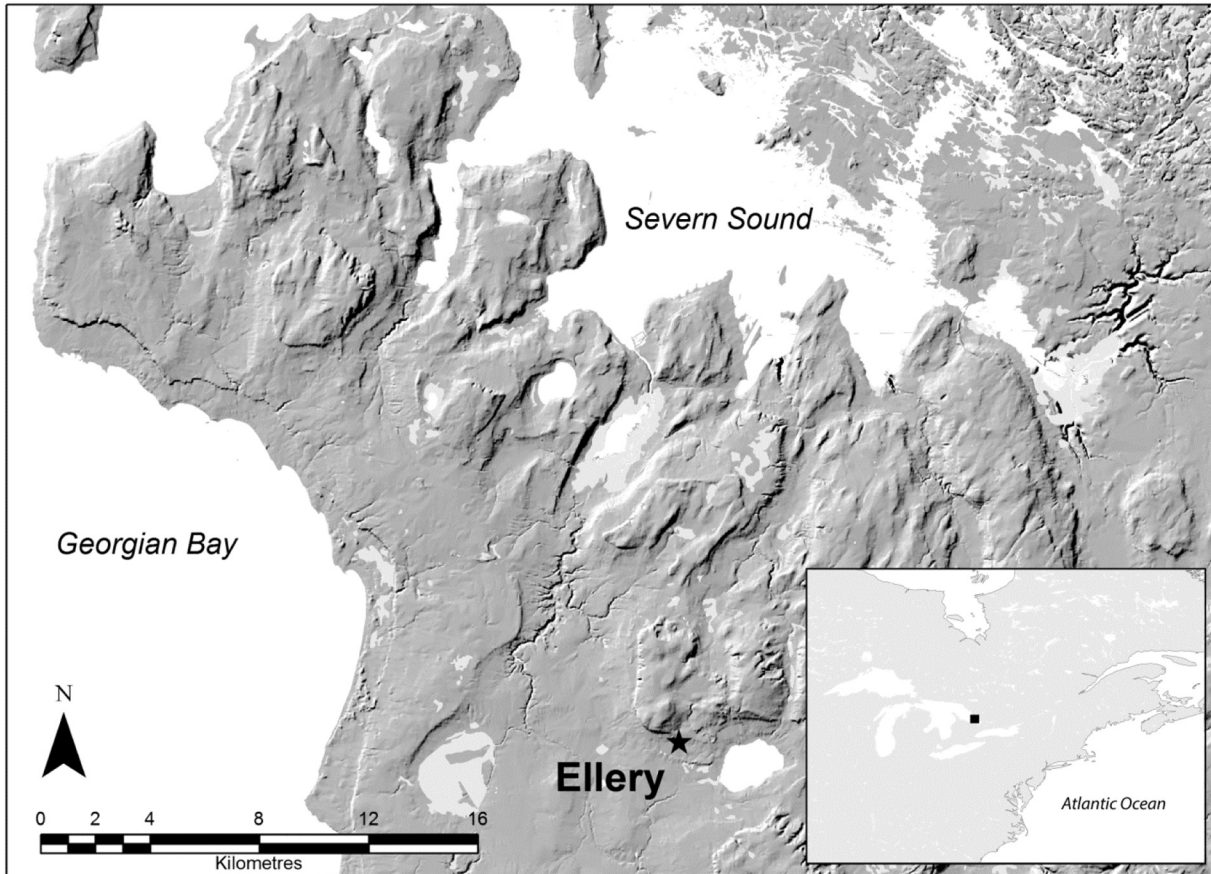


Fig. 1. Location of the Ellery site.

Map data from Natural Resources Canada (2014) and Ontario Natural Resources and Forestry (2013).

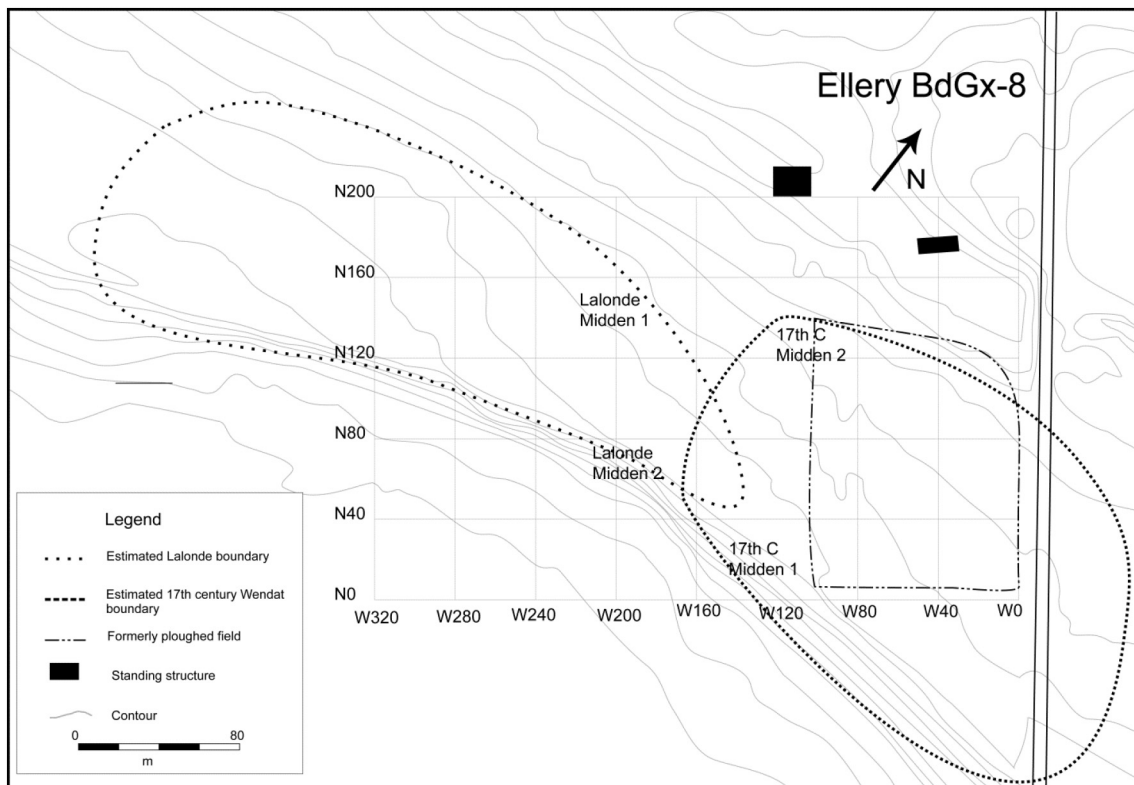


Fig. 2. Approximate size and relative locations of the Lalonde and 17th century villages at the Ellery site.

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