

## EDITORIAL: REVISITING SITES AND MEALS

Alexander von Gernet

It seems we will never run out of archaeological sites since the process of creating them does not cease as long as humans continue to utilize non-perishables in their cultural adaptations. Nevertheless, the number of sites dating to the Prehistoric period is theoretically finite since a terminal date is built into the definition. Hence, it is conceivable that at some time in the future (but certainly not during our generation) we will run out of "new" Prehistoric sites to explore — a predicament that will compel us to revisit what little remains of previously-investigated sites until, eventually, we do all our digging in cyberspace.

For the time being, the main impetus for revisiting does not seem to be a paucity of new sites. Nor is intellectual curiosity or the pursuit of scientific corroboration commonly involved. More often than not, revisiting is prompted by the requirements of cultural resource management — an activity that, at least in Ontario, has led to significant and lasting contributions to knowledge. Whatever the motivations, excavating a site already dug by someone else does not merely add new field or "raw" information to an existing database, but affords an opportunity to completely reconstitute a site as an archaeological entity. In most cases there are changes in the formal, spatial, relational and frequency dimensions of artifact and feature variability. In some cases even temporal assignments are modified.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if our understanding of the Draper Site (AIGt-2) had depended solely on the results of limited investigations conducted in 1953 by the OAS, in the 1960s by Peter Ramsden, in 1972 by Marti Latta, or in 1973 by Brian Hayden, rather than on the extensive excavations directed by Bill Finlayson in 1975 and 1978. A comparison between the 1973 and 1975/78 excavations is particularly instructive. By now, most have probably forgotten Hayden's (1979: 25) pardonable identification of a set of palisade posts as part of a latrine; after all, he has left Ontario to make valuable contributions in other parts of North America. Yet, his 1973

excavations serve as a lingering reminder of how overly-ambitious analyses of limited data and premature conclusions can prove to be embarrassingly erroneous. Finlayson (1985:31-34), who attributed Hayden's failures to flaws in the problem-oriented approach of the New Archaeology, accumulated enough new evidence to confidently declare that all of Hayden's interpretations were invalid. Similarly, my analysis of the over 4,000 pipe fragments recovered during the 1975/78 Draper excavations demonstrated that David Arthurs' (1979:84-89) conclusions about the 55 fragments retrieved during the 1973 investigations were entirely unfounded (von Gernet 1985).

The first two papers published in this number of Ontario *Archaeology* involve studies of sites that have been re-excavated and freshly interpreted. The first describes the 1984 excavations and analysis of an area first dug by W. J. Wintemberg in 1935 and by Peter Reid in 1978. The second outlines the 1990 excavations and analysis of a site originally dug by Ontario Ministry of Transportation archaeologists in 1983. Coincidentally, the same researcher (Lennox) who, in the first article, offers a reassessment of the work of previous investigators, has his own work (at a different site) scrutinized in the second paper. The results are certainly not as dramatic as in the Draper case. Among other things, the excavators who originally dug the sites were not overly-ambitious in their interpretations and did not needlessly expose themselves to criticism.

Paul Lennox and J. Eldon Molto describe and interpret the materials recovered at the E.C. Row Site. Interestingly, the excavators uncovered rectangular features with nearly vertical sides and flat bottoms, which are interpreted as Wintemberg's excavation trenches. There was, however, some difficulty matching extant field notes with the conditions encountered. This once again illustrates the importance of accurate record-keeping. Wintemberg's meticulous site reports were state-of-the-art, but even he may not have envisioned that his backdirt would be screened a half century into

the future and that his own excavations would become part of the Historic component of the site.

The new interpretations have a bearing on the contentious issue of whether the Western Basin Tradition peoples were "Iroquoian" or "Algonquian". I suspect that part of the problem is in the appellations themselves. The term "Iroquoian" is a theoretical abstraction appropriated from other usage and has never been adequately defined as an archaeological manifestation (von Gernet 1994). More importantly, the recognition of "Iroquoians" and "Algonquians" in terms of pre-defined traits (e.g., settlement patterns or subsistence) involves recourse to an inherently circular argument and has a tendency to ignore crucial similarities. Lennox and Molto's interpretations of the archaeological evidence raise even more questions and, hopefully, will fuel further debate. More persuasive, perhaps, is their discussion of the physical anthropology. Differences in the prevalence of tympanic dehiscence among "Iroquoian" populations and the individuals interred at E.C. Row and Lucier lead the researchers to suggest that there is a "distinct biological separation of the Western Basin and the Ontario Iroquoian samples at circa A.D. 1400."

In the second paper, David Robertson et al. politely conclude that, for the most part, their study is consistent with earlier findings. Nevertheless, their excavations demonstrate that the Wiacek Site has a cluster of aligned houses, rather than a disordered settlement pattern. Furthermore, the augmented assemblage changes the relative percentages of certain vessel types. Given the traditional emphases on village plans and ceramic seriation in Iroquoian archaeological research, such revisions are by no means immaterial. If the site has changed, and the site had a prior role in our understanding of Ontario's prehistory, the entire edifice is affected. Periodically micro-revisions at the site level reach a critical mass and necessitate radical changes in our construction of the past. Wiacek may not be the butterfly wing that causes the hurricane, but it is worth reminding ourselves that much of the prehistory of Ontario is comprised of Wiaceks.

During the process of editing these papers, I was struck by the variety of means by which different researchers manipulate data for the

purpose of making comparisons. Lennox and Molto's Table 5, for instance, provides figures on the incidence of corn at various sites, including Wiacek; this was apparently done to show that the dependence on this cultigen was less at E.C. Row than among Iroquoians. In their Table 10, Robertson et al. provide an entirely different figure for Wiacek, based on the number of corn kernels rather than on the number of fragments of kernels. If the quantification of plant remains is to inform us about the relative reliance on various foods (and I am not convinced that this is possible in the absence of detailed studies of site formation processes), then researchers must at least come to some agreement on what categories of data are suitable for comparison.

A similar issue in faunal analysis is raised by the author of our third paper. Suzanne Needs-Howarth outlines how four distinct quantification methods led to different faunal abundance estimates and suggests using those which are more biologically justifiable". It remains unclear how *any* manipulation of the "raw" data will be of help to archaeologists who are interested in reconstructing diet (a cultural preference) from an abundance measure that is a biological variable. At the end of the day, Needs-Howarth wisely concedes that even the methods she prefers provide a "distorted quantification of what the inhabitants of the Coleman site actually ate."

It is my hope that all three papers will stimulate discussion. Although room could not be found in this already delayed number for comments and responses, these will be solicited for publication in OA #61 which is currently being finalized.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Arthurs, D.  
1979 Draper Site Ceramic Analysis: Structure 2. In *Settlement Patterns of the Draper and White Sites: 1973 Excavations*, edited by B. Hayden, pp. 63-91. Simon Fraser University, Department of Archaeology Publication 6. Burnaby, B.C.

Finlayson, W. D.

- 1985 *The 1975 and 1978 Rescue Excavations at the Draper Site: Introduction and Settlement Patterns*. National Museum of Man Mercury Series. Archaeological Survey of Canada Paper 130. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.

Hayden, B. (editor)

- 1979 *Settlement Patterns of the Draper and White Sites: 1973 Excavations*. Simon Fraser University, Department of Archaeology Publication 6. Burnaby, B.C.

von Gernet, A.

- 1985 *Analysis of Intrasite Artifact Spatial Distributions: The Draper Site Smoking Pipes*. Museum of Indian Archaeology Research Report 16. University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario.

von Gernet, A.

- 1994 The Date of Time Immemorial: Politics and Iroquoian Origins. In *Origins of the People of the Longhouse*, edited by A. Beckerman and G. Warrick, pp. 119-128. Ontario Archaeological Society, Toronto.

---

Alexander von Gernet

Dept. of Anthropology, University of Toronto (Erindale),  
3359 Mississauga Rd. N., Mississauga, Ontario L5L 106