

## **Becoming Wendat: Negotiating a New Identity around Balsam Lake in the Late Sixteenth Century**

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*In the late sixteenth century, people of four different ethnic groups came to inhabit the area of Balsam Lake, in the Upper Trent River valley: two groups of ancestral Huron-Wendat with different geographical origins, some St. Lawrence Iroquoians who had found refuge with them, and ancestral Algonquians with ties to the Canadian Shield to the north and to the Ottawa River valley. These people came to live together in the same communities and households, and in spite of conflicts and tensions, they forged a common identity as a new group of Huron-Wendat.*

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### **Introduction**

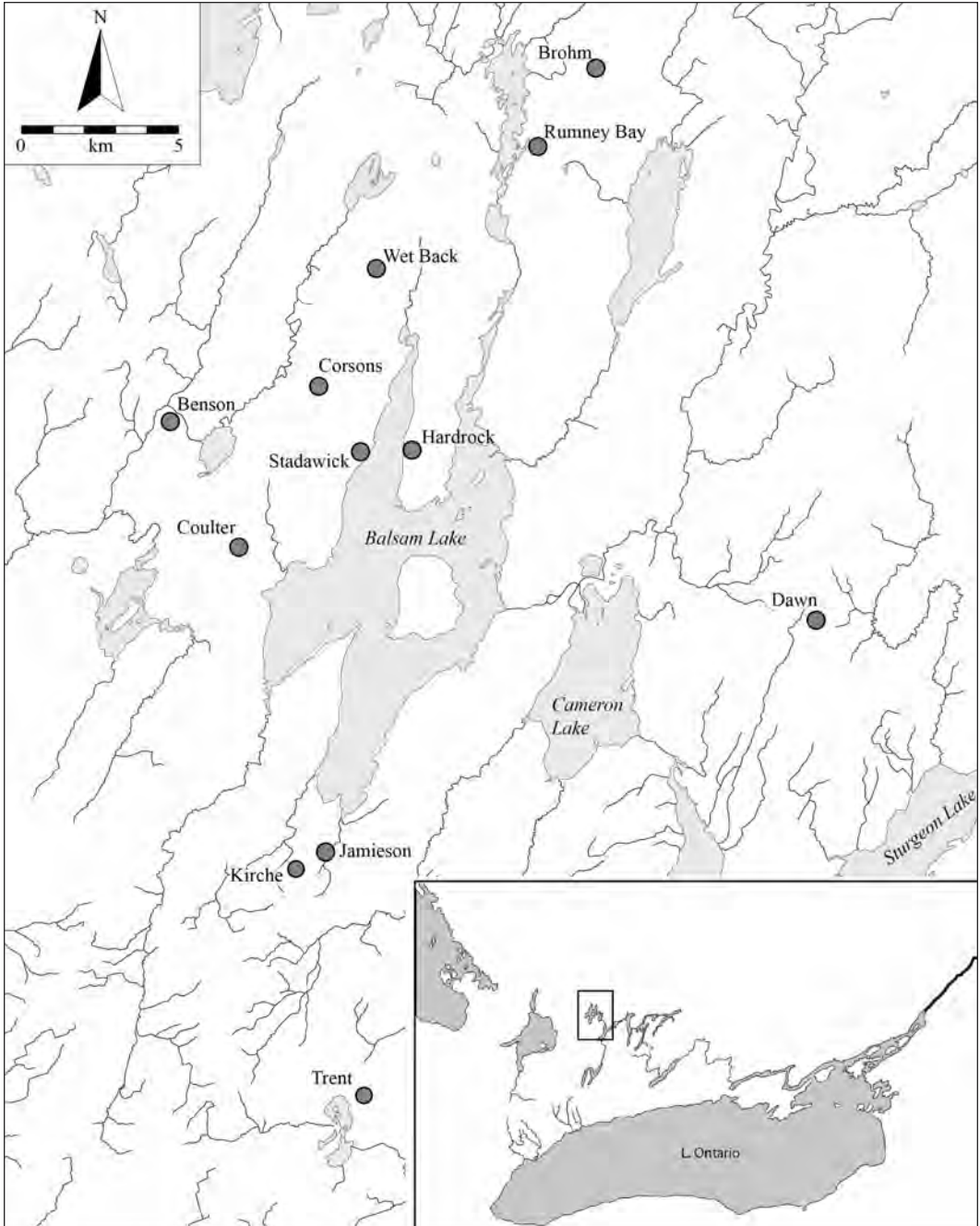
The area around Balsam Lake, in the upper Trent River valley (Figure 1), was the backdrop for the formation, during the sixteenth century, of a group of Huron-Wendat out of three or four diverse cultural groups who moved into the area over the course of a century or more. It is likely that after they had finally abandoned this area at the end of the sixteenth century, these people moved westwards to the region of present-day Orillia, where shortly thereafter they became known to Champlain as La Nation de la Roche, a translation of the Wendat name Arendahronon, meaning something like people from the rocks, people from the rocky place, or people of rock (Roy Wright, personal communication 2015). Their name is usually rendered in English as The Rock Nation.

### **The Peopling of the Balsam Lake Area: A.D. 1450–1550**

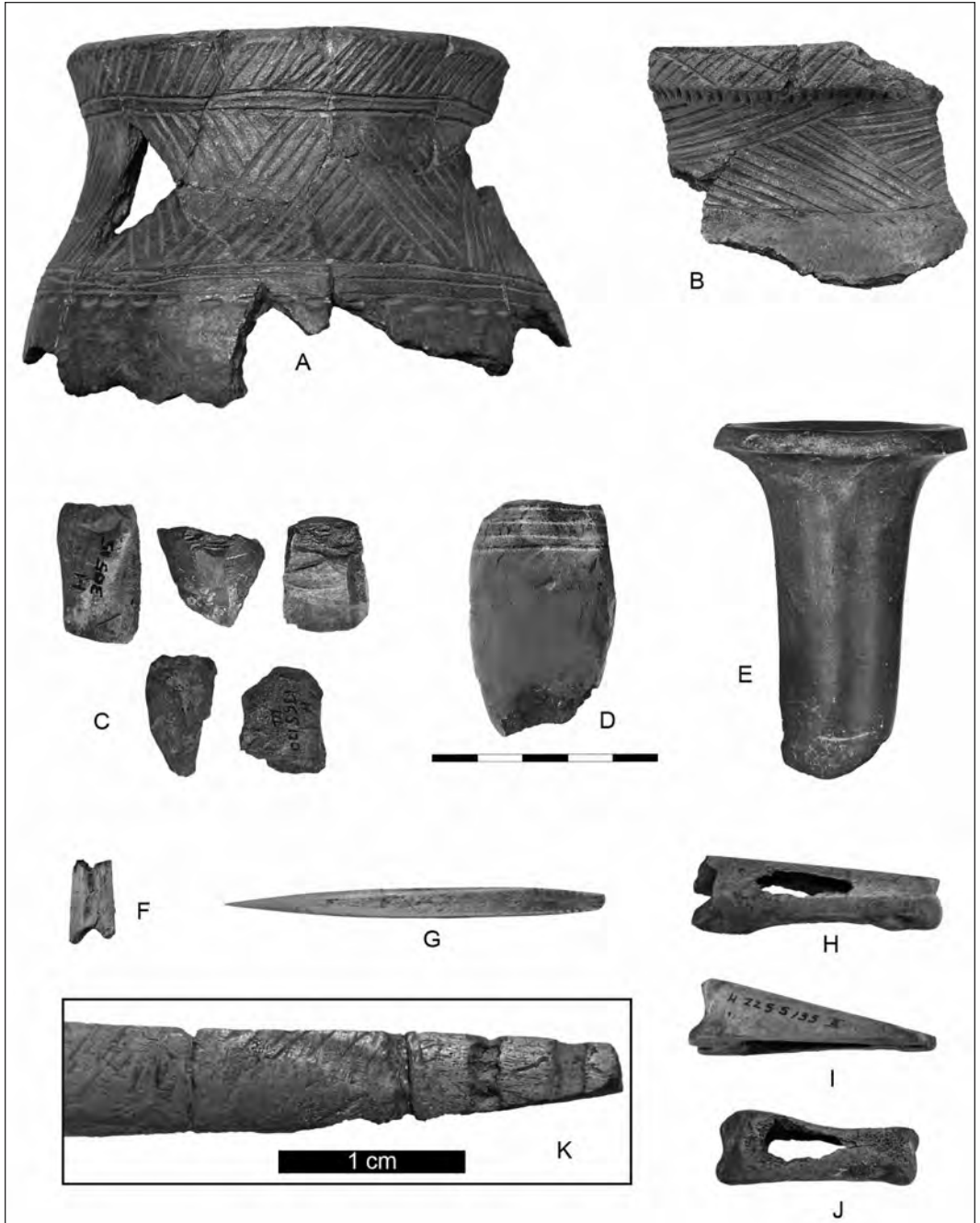
#### *The First Arrivals*

Except for one very brief experiment in the Middle Archaic period, ca. 5,000 RCYBP, this region has little archaeological evidence of

occupation throughout most of the long span of human history in southern Ontario, and it may simply have been used occasionally by neighbouring people as a common hunting and fishing area (Ramsden 1998a). Then, in the mid- or late fifteenth century, two different groups of people took up year-round residence here. One was a group of ancestral Algonquian people with ties to the north, in Haliburton; to the northeast, in the Ottawa River valley; and ultimately to the St. Lawrence River valley (Ramsden 2016a). They are best known from a summer village on Indian Point in Balsam Lake known as the Hardrock site (Emerson 1954) (Figure 2), but they had other seasonal sites adjacent to the northern part of the lake, such as Stadawick, a tiny winter-to-early spring camp, and north of the lake, such as the summer-to-fall fish processing station at Rumney Bay (Figure 1). The other people to move into the area at the same time were a small group of ancestral Huron-Wendat who probably moved here from farther down the Trent River system. They occupied one or two small, year-round villages adjacent to the southern part of Balsam Lake, such as the Jamieson site, but they probably



**Figure 1.** Map of the Balsam Lake area showing the principal sites mentioned in the text and (inset) the location of the area in southern Ontario.



**Figure 2.** Artifacts from the Hardrock site. (a, b) ceramic rim sections; (c) chert wedges (*pièces esquillées*); (d, e) ceramic pipe bowl fragments; (f) proximal fragment of concave-based conical antler projectile point; (g) bone awl with notches on proximal edges; (h–j) modified deer phalanges; (k) (inset) detail of carved decoration on the end of a bone bead fragment.

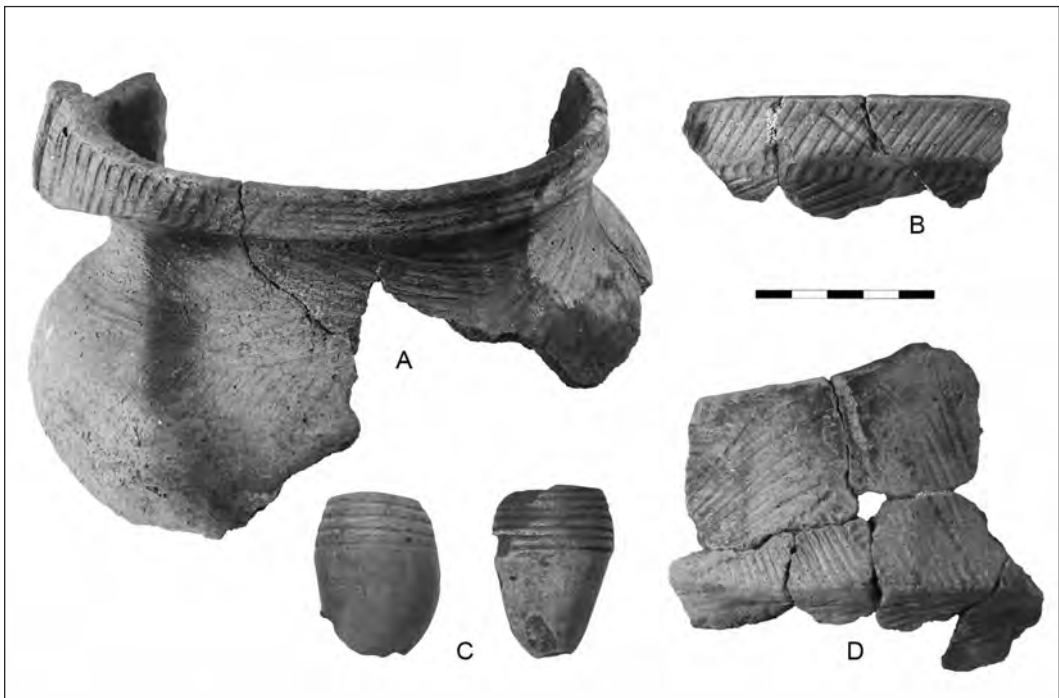
also had small fishing camps on the southern shores of the lake (Figure 1, Figure 3).

Inferring ethnicity from archaeological materials is both difficult and hotly debated (e.g. Hu 2013, Jones 1997). My ethnic identification of Balsam Lake assemblages is based on several lines of evidence. The identification of ancestral Huron-Wendat village sites is based on the similarity of settlement patterns and material culture to documented Wendat sites in historic Huronia and throughout the ancestral Huron-Wendat area (Ramsden 1977). Sites I have identified as ancestral Algonquian differ in several ways: they display distinctive site locations, near lake shores or springs rather than streams; small size (less than one hectare) and lack of palisades; a high frequency of chipped lithics (6 to 10 times that found on Huron-Wendat sites); a high frequency of quartzite and other lithic raw materials from the Shield to the north; larger numbers of wedges and bipolar cores, also characteristic of sites in the Shield; and ceramics with a tendency for the inner and outer surfaces to split apart, again characteristic of Shield

Algonquian sites (Wright 1981). The similarities to sites in the Canadian Shield give me confidence that these sites were occupied by ancestral Algonquians rather than ancestral Huron-Wendat. Similarly, my identification (below) of ceramics and other artifacts as being St. Lawrence Iroquoian is based on their similarity to artifacts from Iroquoian sites in the St. Lawrence River valley, and the lack of similarity to Huron-Wendat artifacts. St. Lawrence Iroquoian ceramics, for example, have distinctive motifs and a precise technique of motif execution, which are easy to distinguish from the simpler motifs and more casual style found on Huron-Wendat ceramics.

#### *The Later Arrivals*

In the early to mid-sixteenth century, a second group of ancestral Huron-Wendat began to move into the area (Figure 4), this time from the southwest, near Lake Scugog (see Donaldson 1963), and probably ultimately from the north shore of Lake Ontario (see Ramsden 1977). The new immigrants were more numerous than the earlier Huron-Wendat, and the number and size of



**Figure 3.** Artifacts from the Jamieson site. (a, b, d) rim sherds; (c) pipe bowl fragments.



**Figure 4.** *Artifacts from the Kirche, Benson, and Coulter sites. (a, c, d) clay pipes from the Benson site; (b) steatite pipe from the Benson site; (e) miniature ceramic vessel from the Benson site; (f, g) clay pipes from the Kirche site; (h) (inset) bone bead with carved human face on two sides from the Benson site; (i) iron awl in antler handle from the Benson site; (j) rolled brass bead from the Coulter site; (k) ceramic gaming discs from the Benson site; (l) stone disc from the Benson site.*

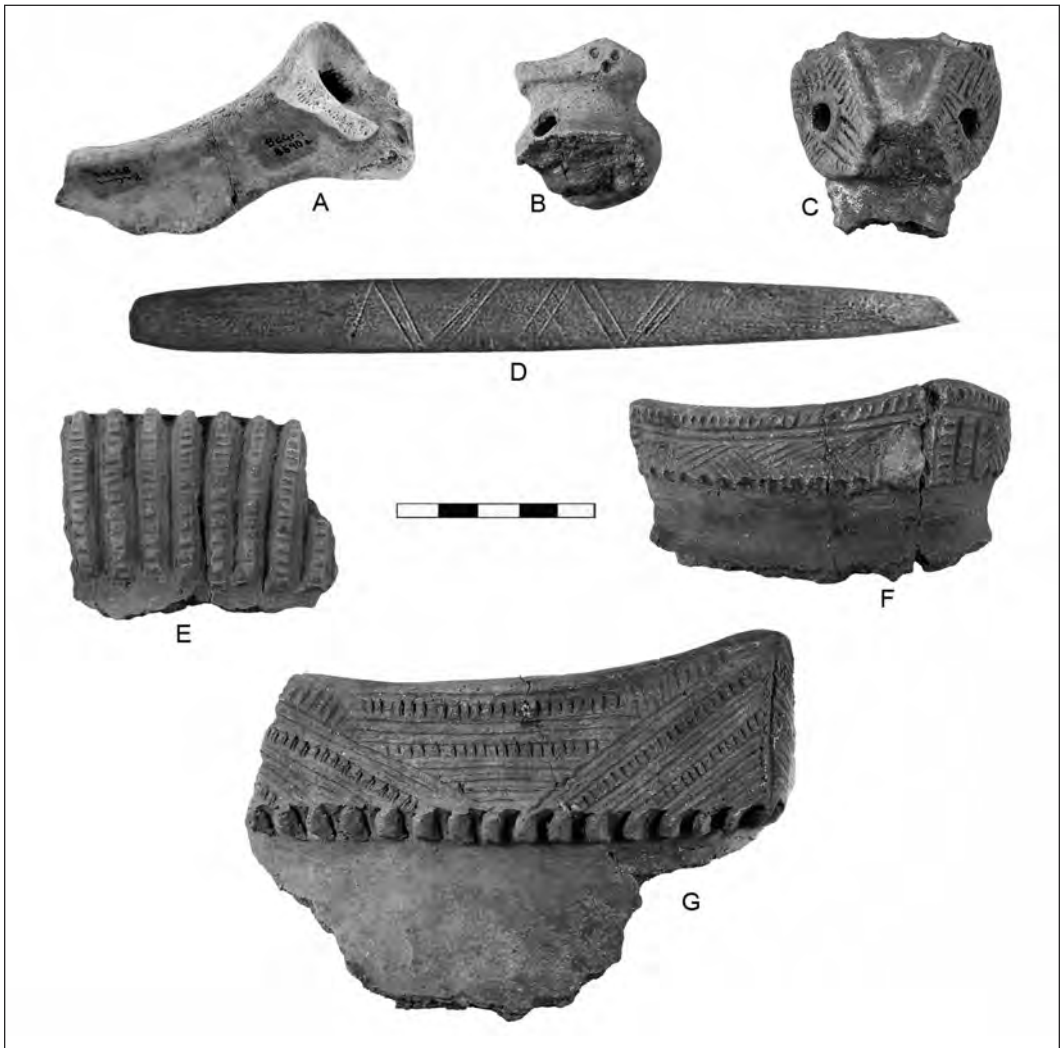
sites in the area increased. One of the earliest settlements of this second Huron-Wendat group is the Kirche village (Nasmith 2008), located less than 1 km to the west of Jamieson (Figure 1). These immigrants' arrival may be marked by an event revealed in our excavations at Jamieson. The Jamieson village was originally enclosed by a simple palisade, in the typical style of Huron-Wendat villages of the time. At some point during the village's occupation, however, part of the palisade was taken down and replaced by an

earthen embankment with an outer ditch and a new palisade on top. The section of the palisade that was reinforced in this way faced west – towards Kirche. An equally early settlement of the newcomers was probably the original core village at Coulter (Figure 1), which subsequently expanded over time to accommodate several additional groups of longhouses (Damkjar 2009).

One of the noteworthy things about these newcomers was that they also had ties to the St. Lawrence River valley, established while they were

still living south of the Balsam Lake region. In fact, it appears that there were St. Lawrence Iroquoian people among them when they arrived (Figure 5). Moreover, combined populations of Huron-Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquois continued to move into the area and either establish new villages, or move into existing ones. At Kirche, for example (Figure 6), in addition to a small expansion to the northeast to accommodate one house, there is a group of houses outside of the

palisaded village that have produced a high frequency of St. Lawrence Iroquoian pottery as well as a small scrap of European copper cut from a trade kettle. It seems most likely that these houses were occupied by a newly arrived group hoping to amalgamate with the Kirche community (Nasmith 2008). The previously mentioned Coulter site may show a similar pattern (Damkjar 2009): the small, original village was expanded several times over the course of



**Figure 5.** St. Lawrence Iroquoian-style artifacts from sixteenth-century Balsam Lake sites. (a) deer scapula pipe from the Kirche site; (b) pipe bowl in the form of a miniature St. Lawrence Iroquoian pot from the Benson site; (c) owl effigy pipe from the Kirche site; (d) incised artifact of sea mammal bone from the Coulter site; (e–g) rim sherds from the Benson site.

several decades to accommodate additional groups of longhouses (Figure 7), and with each successive expansion the frequency of St. Lawrence Iroquoian artifacts and European metal increased.

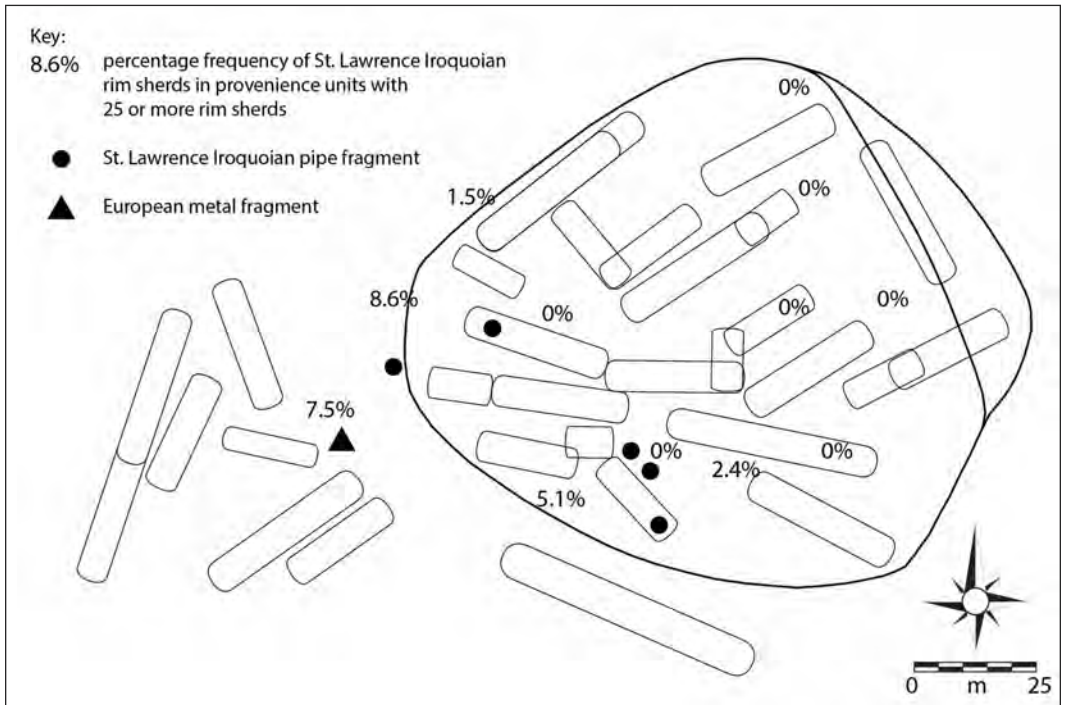
So by the mid-sixteenth century, three distinct groups of Iroquoian people were living together in the Balsam Lake area: the first were descendants of the first (fifteenth-century) Huron-Wendat colonizers of the area; the second were the later (early sixteenth-century) Huron-Wendat immigrants; the third group, who were embedded within the second group, were St. Lawrence Iroquoians who were probably in effect refugees from turbulent events happening in the St. Lawrence River valley. At the same time as these events, the northern part of the Balsam Lake area continued to be home for most or all of the year to Algonquians, whose camps and hamlets in the later period are represented, for example, by Corsons, Wet Back, and Brohm (Figure 1).

### Coalescence: A.D. 1550–1590

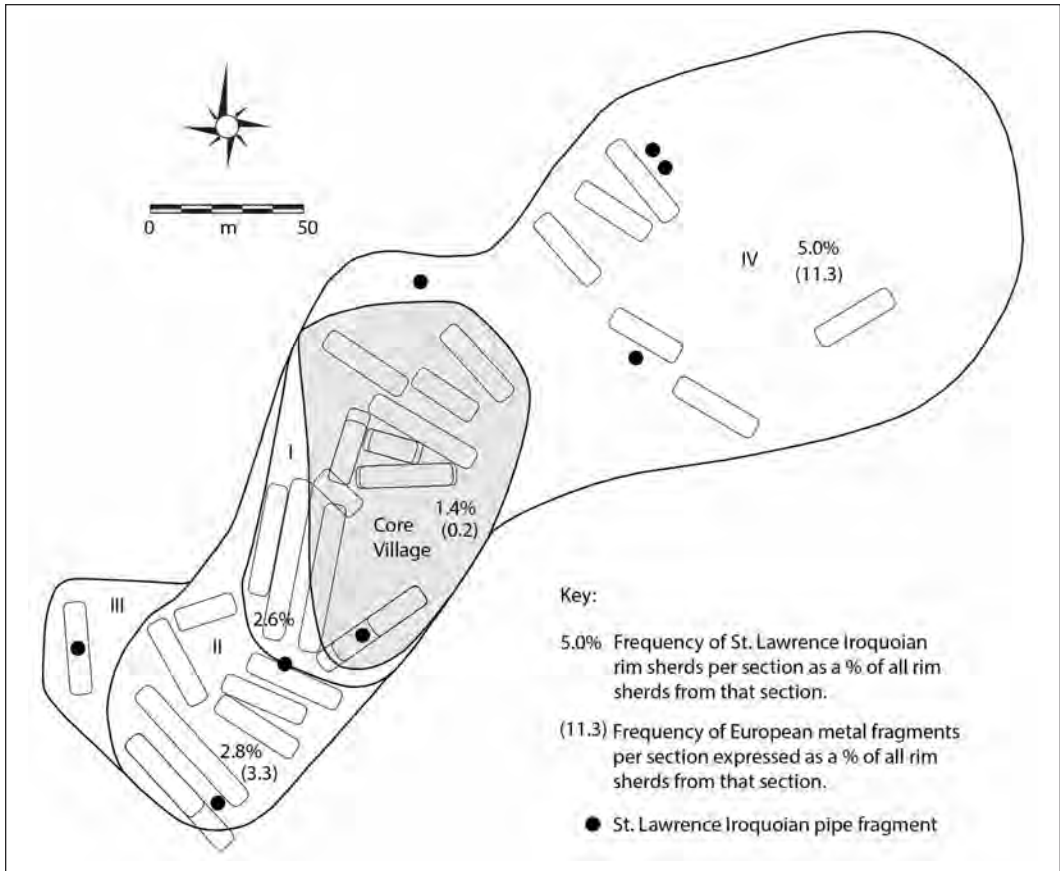
Over the course of the second half of the sixteenth century, these disparate ethnic and linguistic groups worked out new ways of living together, and of managing the conflicts and tensions that inevitably arose from the daily interaction of people with differing origins, aims, and allegiances. In the process, they forged new political and social structures and, ultimately, a new common identity. We can view two different scales and aspects of this process in two communities, Coulter and Benson (Figure 1).

#### *The Coulter Site*

The Coulter settlement (Figure 7) was established, probably in the early to mid-sixteenth century, as a small, simple village of about six or eight houses surrounded by a palisade (Damkjar 2009:9). At least one of these houses was extended to accommodate a few families of new immigrants,



**Figure 6.** Map of the Kirche site showing the houses and palisade lines encountered during excavation, with the locations of St. Lawrence Iroquoian pipes (black dots), percentage frequencies of St. Lawrence Iroquoian rims in provenience units with 25 or more rim sherds, and the location of a fragment of a European copper kettle. Map and data modified from Nasmith (2008).



**Figure 7.** Map of the Coulter site showing successive outward expansions of the palisade from a core village, with locations of St. Lawrence Iroquoian pipes (black dots), percentage frequencies of St. Lawrence Iroquoian pottery by village section, and frequencies of European metal fragments by village section expressed as a percentage of total rim sherds. Map and data modified from Damkjar (2009).

and shortly afterwards the palisade was extended outwards, to the southwest, in order to extend that house even farther and build three houses for even more new arrivals (Figure 7, area I). Subsequently, the palisade was expanded three more times to accommodate additional houses (Figure 7, areas II to IV). From the evidence at the extreme southern edge of the site, it appears that the houses in the second expansion (area II) were probably originally built outside the village (like the exterior group of houses at the Kirche site), and that when the palisade was extended to surround them, the southernmost house was shortened. The largest expansion (area IV) is unexpectedly quite empty; while the additional area enclosed would have

been sufficient to fit dozens of new houses, it appears that most of this space was never used, and our excavations indicate that only six or eight houses were ever built there.

This complex settlement history shows that over the life of the village, which conceivably spanned several decades, more and more immigrants – families, households, groups of households – periodically moved in to join with the Coulter community. Although the nature of the evidence makes it hard to be certain, it is likely that this involved both new immigrants from outside the area and people who moved here from nearby villages, suggesting a coalescence of the Balsam Lake population into one or two very large

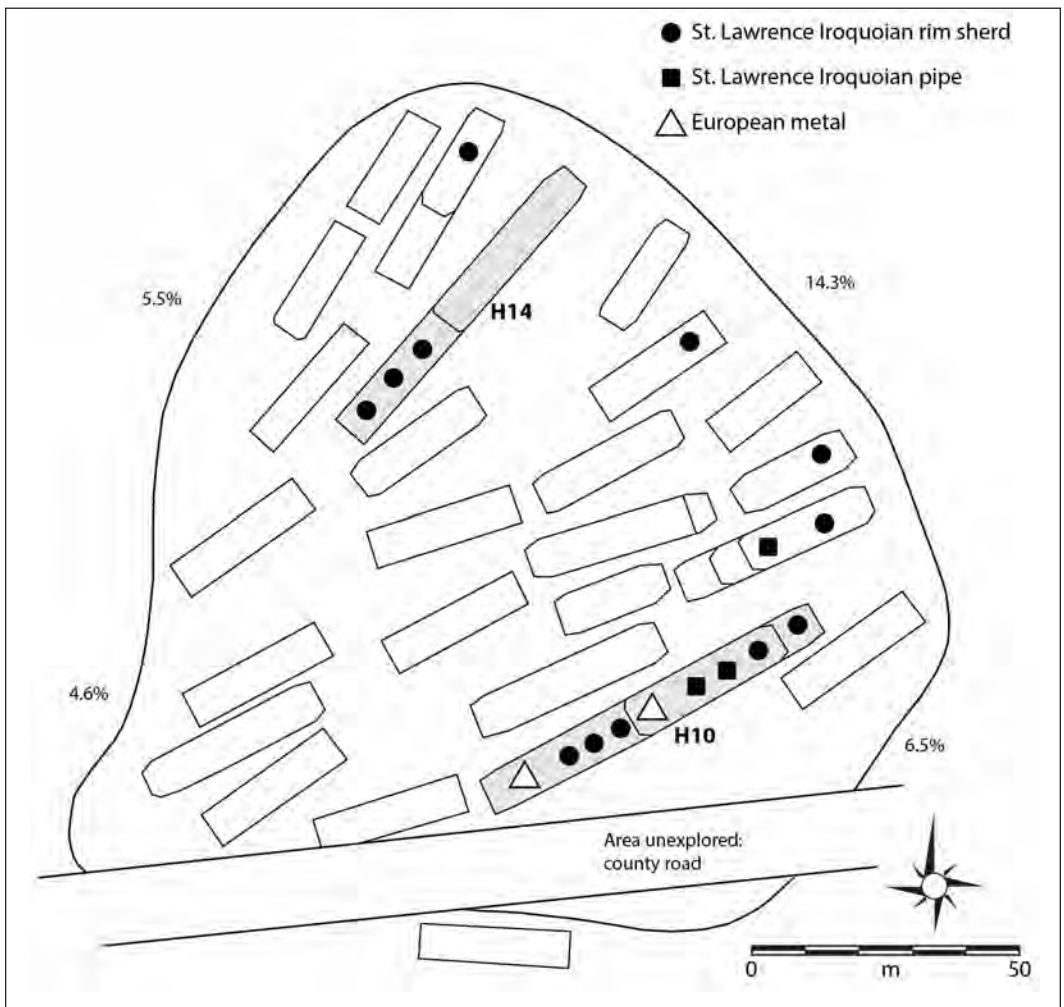


communities in the late sixteenth century. Moreover, as shown in Figure 7, each group of new arrivals included greater numbers of St. Lawrence Iroquoians, and each group had more access to pieces of European metal derived ultimately from the St. Lawrence River valley, possibly along with other, perishable European items. So the archaeological history of the Coulter community reflects three long-term trends in this area: the continual arrival in the Balsam Lake area of diverse groups of ancestral Huron-Wendat

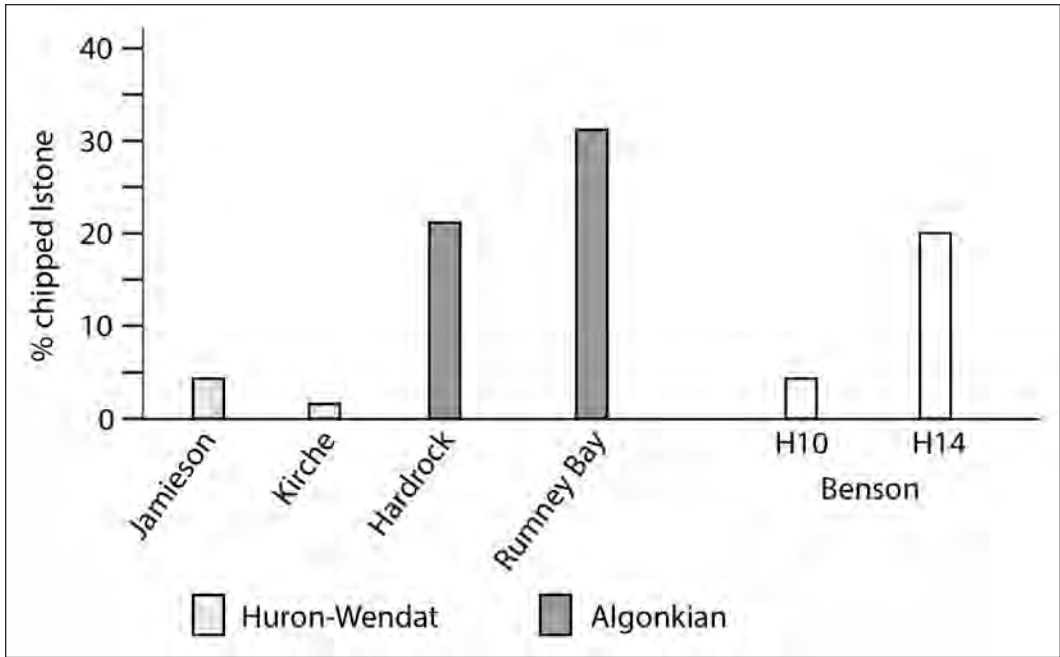
people, the increasingly large component of St. Lawrence Iroquoians in the population, and the coalescence of villages or village segments into larger and larger communities.

*The Benson Site*

At first glance, the Benson village (Figure 8) has a simpler occupational history than the Coulter village. There is no evidence of village expansions that would suggest the addition of other villages or village segments. There is one house outside the



**Figure 8.** Map of the Benson site showing palisade and houses encountered during excavation, with the two longest houses of the competing factions highlighted and with average percentage frequencies of St. Lawrence Iroquoian rim sherds from provenience units in four quadrants of the village and symbols representing artifacts found in features within houses.



**Figure 9.** Comparisons of lithic assemblages between Huron-Wendat and Algonquian sites, and between Houses 10 and 14 at the Benson site.

palisade on the south side (although there could conceivably be others we did not locate), but there is no way to tell whether the occupants of this house eventually moved inside the village or moved away – and if the latter, what became of them. But on the other hand, there is lots of evidence of extensions to houses, which does seem to suggest that families or groups of families from time to time moved into the community and joined already existing households. Two of these houses, Houses 10 and 14 (Figure 8), have large extensions that doubled the size of the original house, and in both cases there is evidence that people making St. Lawrence Iroquoian pottery were among those who moved into those extensions.

I have argued elsewhere (Ramsden 2009) that these two houses were the centres of two competing factions within the community, with House 10 representing a progressive, fur trade-oriented group with strong ties to the St. Lawrence River valley, and House 14 representing a more conservative faction favouring the retention of traditional Huron-Wendat economic and cultural

values. There is, however, another possible dimension to the tensions between these two houses and the factions that supported them. Among the artifact differences between them is a difference in the frequency of chipped stone (arguably a traditional technological and economic pursuit) in the overall assemblage from each structure (Ramsden 2009:312). In House 10, the frequency of chipped stone is about 5 percent of all artifacts, whereas in House 14, by contrast, it is approximately 20 percent (Figure 9). While it may be true that chipped stone technology is an expression of traditionalism, a 20 percent frequency is unusually high for even early period Huron-Wendat sites, which tend to be closer to the House 10 value (Figure 9). On the other hand, it approaches the range of the frequency of chipped stone on Algonquian sites in the Balsam Lake area (Figure 9). So it is equally reasonable to suggest that the traditionalist House 14 included among its residents a significant number of Algonquian men, and presumably also women and children, who had moved into the Benson community. I think it is likely that part or all of

the Benson community moved to join the latest phase of Coulter – and there, too, the latest expansion contains significantly higher frequencies of chipped stone than do the earlier expansions.

Variation in artifact style and frequency is thus attributable to a variety of factors, including ethnicity, economic orientation, and ideology, or combinations of these factors, as outlined above. In fact, the situation can become even more complex, since it appears that the Benson villagers intentionally fashioned artifacts to be ethnically and politically ambiguous in order to create doubt about their allegiance among their neighbours, not to mention among archaeologists (Ramsden 2016b). Suffice it to say that sorting out these complexities is a continuing process, in which we offer a best approximation based on the available evidence.

Based on archaeological evidence, it appears that the Balsam Lake area was abandoned shortly before the beginning of the seventeenth century, after the population had amalgamated into one or more large, cosmopolitan communities. One such community was certainly Coulter; others may have been the poorly known Trent site, south of Balsam Lake (Burger and Pratt 1973), and the Dawn site, east of Cameron Lake (Figure 1). Historical evidence indicates that the Arendahronon, or “Rock Nation,” were adopted into the Wendat confederacy in about 1590, being new arrivals (Tooker 1991:11), which coincides very nicely with the archaeological estimate for the date of the abandonment of the Balsam Lake area. This evidence, along with some ceramic similarities, makes it seem likely that the Balsam Lake population moved westwards to the area of present-day Orillia, to become some or all of the Arendahronon of the Wendat confederacy.

It is important to reiterate and emphasize that this Arendahronon population, while predominantly Wendat ethnically and linguistically, also included significant numbers of people whose origins were St. Lawrence Iroquoian and Algonquian. As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., Ramsden 2006:28), this ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous society presented itself to outsiders, and became known to history, as a

Wendat society, consolidated within a Wendat Confederacy. There must inevitably have been tensions and conflicts within the ethnically mixed Balsam Lake communities, even in small ones, such as Benson, and undoubtedly much more so in larger ones, such as Coulter. The evidence from Benson suggests that these conflicts occasionally flared to the point where some people felt compelled to leave a community to properly realize their goals and aspirations (Ramsden 2009) – in other words, there was the constant possibility that this heterogeneous society would fragment and become non-functional.

I suggest that, as a strategy to forestall this eventuality, and as a way of promoting economic and social well-being for everyone, the Balsam Lake people elected to adopt a new, common identity, in which, rather than seeing themselves as traditional Trent River valley Huron-Wendat, or progressive Trent River valley Huron-Wendat, or St. Lawrence Iroquoian, or Algonquian, they all agreed to regard themselves as Arendahronon: The People of the Rocky Country. And I would also suggest that it may be this process that we can see unfolding in the complex settlement history of the Coulter site. Furthermore, seeking membership in the newly formed Wendat confederacy may have been a further strategy for cementing their new identity. First, moving to a new country might mean that they had no history, no “baggage” there, and their past conflicts could be left behind in the graves and abandoned villages of their parents and grandparents. But perhaps even more, being strangers in a strange land could place them in the position of being perceived by other members of the confederacy as a single, foreign group, who would be treated as such, and who would therefore need to act accordingly. They would, out of necessity as much as out of desire, have to present themselves to the world as a unified people, with common aims; a common history; a common language; and a single, unifying identity.

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*À la fin du seizième siècle, des peuples de quatre groupes ethniques différents sont venus qu'à habiter la région de Balsam Lake, dans la vallée de la rivière supérieure Trent. Ces derniers étaient deux groupes ancestraux de Hurons-Wendats ayant des origines géographiques différentes, des Iroquoiens du Saint-Laurent ayant trouvé refuge au sein de ces derniers, et des Algonquins ancestraux liés au Bouclier canadien au nord et à la vallée de la rivière des Outaouais. Ces peuples ont appris à vivre ensemble au sein de mêmes communautés et de mêmes ménages et, malgré des conflits et des tensions, se sont forgé une identité commune en tant que nouveau groupe de Hurons-Wendats.*

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