PARSONS SITE EXOTICA AND ARCHAEOMETRY

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the importance traditionally assigned to the Parsons site has developed from the assumption that the site represented the development of a populous, highly cosmopolitan community in the Humber watershed during the first half of the sixteenth century in response to rising levels of exchange between the Ontario and St. Lawrence Iroquoians. The St. Lawrence Iroquoians had, in turn, established themselves within the European trade networks emerging on the eastern seaboard, acting as middlemen in supplying furs from Ontario in exchange for European goods. Thus, large Late Iroquoian sites such as Parsons and Draper have been interpreted as important nodes in the exchange systems that arose, during the early to mid-sixteenth century, to link the Old and New Worlds (Finlayson and Pihl 1980; Hayden 1978:112; Mason 1981:375; Ramsden 1977:284-292; 1978).

In addition to the diverse range of ceramic vessel types recovered from the site, the presence of two rolled metal beads, assumed to be manufactured from European copper or brass (Latta 1987:718; Ramsden 1978:102) in the *University* of Toronto collection from Parsons, seemed to lend some credence to this supposition (see Williamson, Cooper and Robertson, this volume). Other "exotic" items attributed to the site (e.g., Latta 1987) also seemed to provide some support to this overall hypothesis.

The results of the 1989-1990 Parsons excavations and their analysis, which included brief examination of material in both the *University of Toronto* and the John Morrison collections, together with the results of recent trace element analysis of metal recovered from numerous Ontario sites (Fox et al. 1995; Hancock et al. 1991), has provided an opportunity to reassess the nature of the relationships between the emergence of a large, complex village at the Parsons site and indirect, long-distance interregional interaction with other native groups and, perhaps, with Europeans.

Four sets of information are considered in this exercise: the origin of the metal artifacts held in the various collections derived from the site; the presence of other exotic, or presumed exotic, items in these collections; the recovery of European plant taxa from two features during the 1989-1990 excavations; and the suite of radiocarbon determinations obtained from five samples of carbonized plant material recovered from the 1989-1990 excavations.

METAL AND OTHER EXOTIC ARTIFACT S

A small number of artifacts recovered from Parsons attest to the existence of contact and exchange, whether direct or indirect, with other groups much further afield.

In total, six pieces of metal have been recovered from the site. Two of these items were rolled tubular beads recovered from the ploughzone during Emerson's excavations (Ramsden 1978:102). The first bead (Figure 32:d) measures 42 mm in length, and 6 mm in diameter. The second (Figure 32:f), which is more crude in form, measures 17 mm in length, and 16 mm in diameter. The remaining four specimens were recovered from the site by John Morrison. A rolled copper bead (Figure 32:b) measuring 35 mm in length, and 6 mm in diameter was recovered from a feature in association with two complete Iroquois Ring type ceramic pipes (Morrison 1979:38-39). Two fragments of beaten sheet copper (scrap) were recovered from midden contexts (Morrison 1979:25). The first of these (Figure 32:e) measures 37 mm in length and 13 mm in width. The second (Figure 32:g) measures 28 mm in length and 10 mm in width. A hammered awl (Figure 32:c) with a flat base or butt and a rounded tip was also collected from a midden

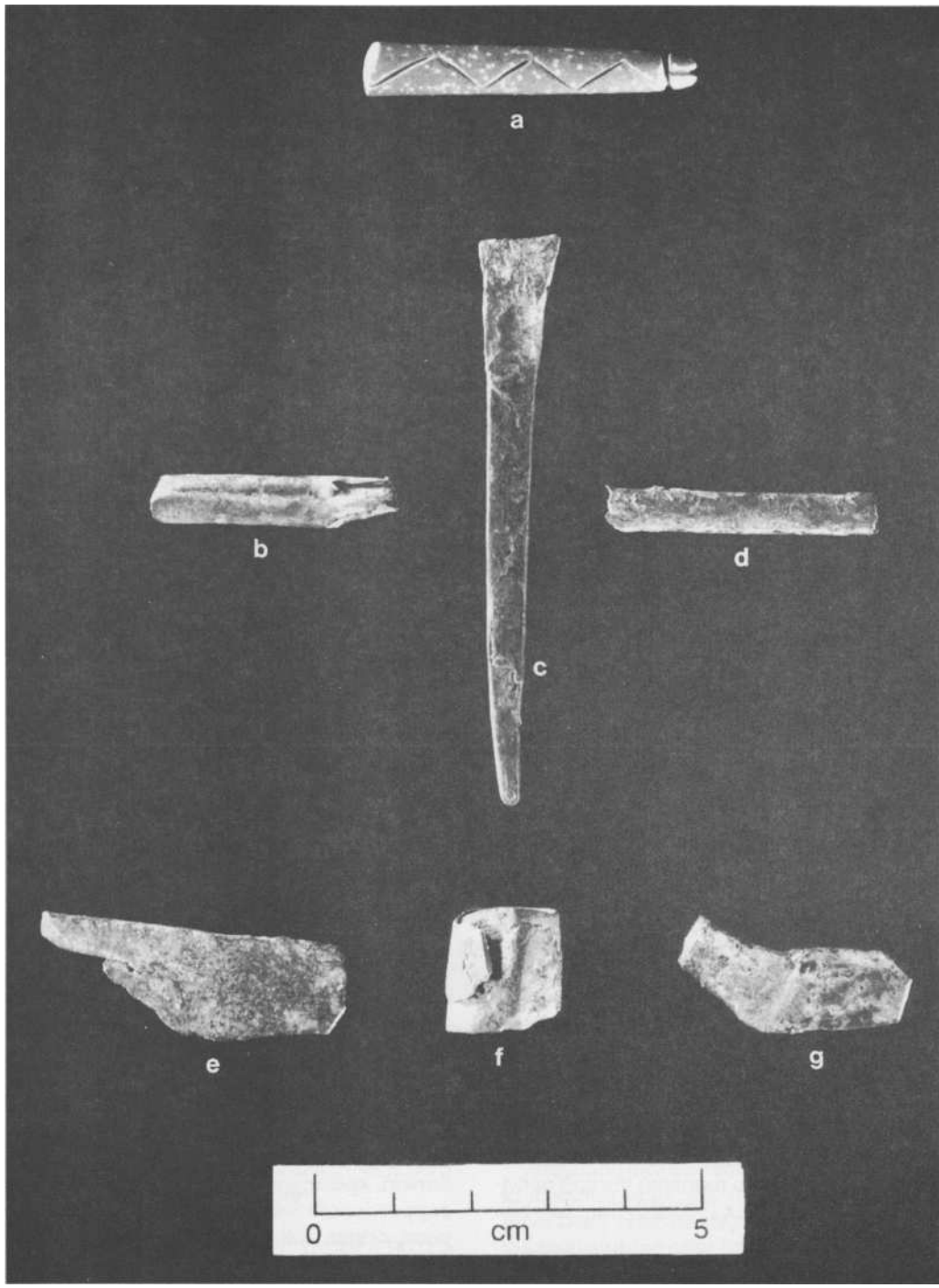

Figure 32. Nonceramic "Exotica" from the Parsons Site: Catlinite Pendant (a), Rolled Copper Beads (b, d, f), Copper Awl (c), Copper Scrap (e, g). Items a, d, and f courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto. Items b, c, e, and g courtesy of John Morrison.

area (Morrison 1979:3). Measuring 69 mm in length, this tool is oval to rectanguloid in cross-section, tapering from a width of 9 mm at the butt to 3 mm at the tip.

All six copper artifacts were subjected to isotope neutron activation analysis at the SLOWPOKE Reactor Facility of the *University* of Toronto, as part of a larger research project aimed at providing new evidence concerning the date of arrival of European metal into Ontario, and also at refining current understandings of the contemporary aboriginal metal working industry (Hancock et al. 1991; Fox et al. 1995). All proved to be manufactured from Native copper rather than smelted European metal (Fox et al. 1995:Tables 1 and 2), in that they exhibited trace element profiles very similar to those of geological specimens from a variety of sources in Michigan, and north of Lake Superior, but quite distinct from those of smelted European material.

In addition to the two rolled copper beads, the *University of Toronto* collection from Parsons also contains a red catlinite pendant (Figure 32:a), which measures 40 mm in length and approximately 6 mm in diameter. It has a roughly cylindrical shape and a scored groove at the proximal end to facilitate suspension. There is also a groove perpendicular to the scoring, which may also be functional. A possible "lightning" or "serpent" motif, in the form of zig-zag line, has been incised along the long axis of the pendant.

Together, the six metal items and the catlinite piece attest to the fact that the Parsons site certainly was integrated within far-reaching exchange systems, but they would appear to indicate that these networks were ultimately directed north and west to the Upper Great Lakes rather than eastward to a nascent, European system. The movement of Lake Superior copper and Minnesota catlinite, as well as cherts from the Huron and Michigan lake basins, into southern Ontario during the late pre-contact and early contact periods has been attributed to the maritime trading activities of the Odawa (Fox 1990:463-465; Fox et al. 1995:269).

The final Parsons artifact that has been considered as an "exotic" item is a small ceramic vessel, originally discussed and illustrated by David Boyle (1888-89a:19; 1888-89b:Figure 1). This piece (Figure 33) was described as:

> a small and plain clay cup.... Although not perfect [i.e., complete], it is sufficiently so to show what it looked like when new. It is three inches [75 mm] in diameter across the mouth, and one inch and a half [37.5 mm] deep, the slope of the sides making the bottom only about two inches [50 mm] in diameter [Boyle 1888-89a:19].

Figure 33. Small Vessel or "Cup" Recovered from the Parsons Site in the Nineteenth Century (Boyle 1888-89b:Figure 1).

Despite the fact that there is no mention of a basal stem, the specimen was more recently cited by Martha Latta (1987:720-721) as an example of a "goblet-like" vessel of a type manufactured by Iroquoian potters in imitation of chalices used in the Roman Catholic Mass. Similar explanations have been proposed for the occurrence of small numbers of such stemmed-ware or pedestal vessels from post-contact sites throughout the Northeast and Midcontinental area (e.g., Griffin 1945:387).

In support of her identification of Boyle's Parson specimen, Latta assumed that the copper recovered from the site was of European origin, indicating that at least some European items were trickling into the region (Latta 1987:719; 1990:164). In the absence of any confirmed European trade goods among the various collections recovered from the site, the presence of such an item would logically require that the village was occupied following

the point by which at least some accounts of the Catholic liturgy, including descriptions of its associated paraphernalia, had reached the area and that these reports were sufficiently evocative to inspire local imitations.

While Latta's basic hypothesis concerning this unique ceramic ware, when it is found on seventeenth century sites, remains tenable (contra Ramsden and Fitzgerald 1990), it would appear that her identification of the nineteenth century Parsons find was in error. Two very similar examples were recovered from the site by Morrison, while a portion of a third flat-bottomed and highly decorated example was recovered during the 1989-1990 excavations. This last item (Figure 34) is clearly derived from a small juvenile pot. Decoration of the neck/shoulder area of the vessel consists of at least four rows of fingernail-incised horizontal lines crossed by punctates, and two horizontal rows of circular punctates over a single row of linear punctates on the shoulder and body. None of these pieces exhibit evidence of a former stem.

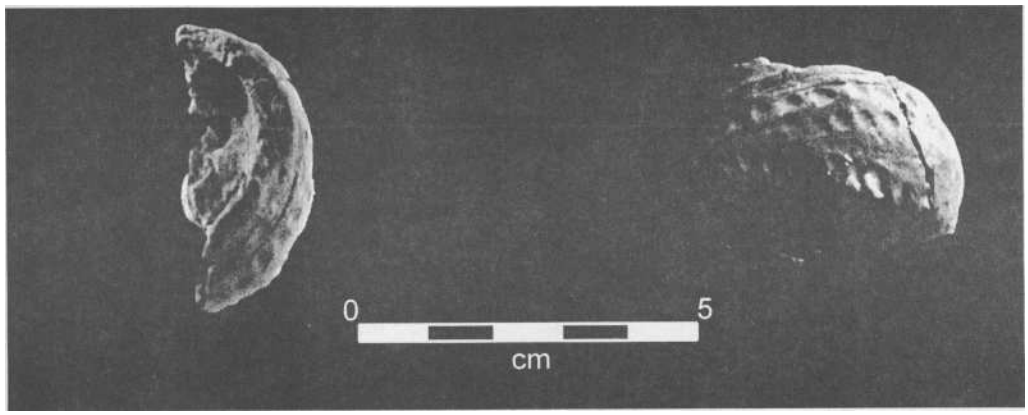

Figure 34. Top and Side Views of Complexly Decorated Neck/Shoulder Body Sherd from Flat-Bottomed Vessel.

In summary, therefore, none of the artifacts recovered over the years from the Parsons site can be attributed to participation within an exchange system arising as a consequence of either direct or indirect interaction with Europeans on the Atlantic seaboard.

EUROPEAN PLANT REMAINS

The 1989-1990 recovery of a wheat seed *(Triticum aestivum/com pactum)* and five foxtail grass seeds (Setaria *glauca)* from Feature 113 (House 3), as well as a second wheat seed from Feature 201 (Exterior Activity Area 9) seemed, at first glance, to support a "protohistoric" date for the site. As noted by Monckton (this volume) foxtail grass is a Eurasian weed commonly associated with cultivation. These Old World taxa pose several questions, not the least of which is whether such remains constitute modern intrusions that have contaminated the archaeological deposits. With the exception of these specimens, the seed and wood charcoal composition of Features 201 and 113 are otherwise typical of the remaining analyzed features. Three conditions would be necessary for such an intrusion to have occurred: wheat must have been grown on the site at some time after the occupation of the village; some of these wheat and associated weed seeds must have been charred; and some of these charred seeds must have been introduced into the underlying archaeological deposits.

The agricultural returns included with the Canada Censuses of 1851 and 1861 for York Township do, in fact, list wheat as one of the crops grown on the property incorporating the site (Archives of Ontario: microfilm #C-11760), as do assessment rolls from the 1880s (Archives of Ontario: microfilm # GS 6467).

Assuming that the recovered seeds do relate to this later land use, they are most likely to have been charred as a result of burning off the field stubble after harvesting. Indeed, this is common practice today in parts of Europe the preindustrial style agriculture of which might compare closely with that of early nineteenth century southern Ontario. However, despite the importance of wheat in the econ-

omy of Upper Canada at this time (Mac Callum 1982), charred seeds of European cultigens or weeds are relatively rare in prehistoric archaeobotanical assemblages. Dawn Wright (1991:14) has documented the occurrence of charred white cockle *(Lychnis* alba) and mallow *(Malvaceae)* seeds at the late fifteenth century Keffer site in Vaughan, which she suggests are modern intrusions. Likewise, Glenna Ounjian (1998:63) has reported charred garden peas (Pisum *sativum)* and rye (Secale cereale) from the Black Kat site and charred rhubarb seeds from the Ronto site, although she interprets these as subsistence remains. Both of these London area sites are estimated to date to circa A.D. 1500 (Arnold and Pearce 1986; Pearce 1983) leading Ounjian (1998:166) to suggest that these taxa were ultimately derived from the Chesepeake Bay or Gulf of St. Lawrence areas, in both of which a sporadic European presence is thought to have been established in the early to mid-sixteenth century.

Nevertheless, there are far more archaeobotanical studies of late Iroquoian villages that do not reflect surface contamination by charred European cultigens (e.g., Crawford 1985; Fecteau 1978; King and Crawford 1979; Lennox et al. 1986; Monckton 1992; Turton 1975), even though uncharred modern European taxa such as chenopod are abundant in many samples. The latter is an example of bioturbation where seeds have been introduced from the surface by rodents, insects, and worms. Moreover, in the Parsons assemblage, charred seeds of these old World taxa were found in only two of the 31 samples, constituting .26 percent of the sample of recovered seeds although the few fragments of stalk and glumes that were recovered may also be related to this material. Such a low rate of occurrence is difficult to reconcile with the idea that they derive from nineteenth century field burning, as this practice results in very large quantities of charred material being present on the ground surface (Monckton and Robertson, personal observation). Should this burnt material have been present, one would expect that rather more of it would have been introduced into subsurface archaeological features and recovered in the floatation samples.

RADIOCARBON DATING

In order to further resolve the questions concerning the chronological placement of the Parsons site, five samples of carbonized plant remains recovered during the 1989-1990 excavations were submitted for radiocarbon dating (Table 51) the results of which were calibrated (Figure 35) using the programme CALIB 3.0.3c (Stuiver and Reimer 1993) with the calibration dataset INTCAL93.14C (Stuiver and Pearson 1993).

Three of the five radiocarbon dates fall comfortably within the Late Iroquoian period. A maize kernel from Feature 183 in House 8 yielded a date of 510±80 B.P. (WAT-2868). Calibration of this result produces a date of A.D. 1424 with ranges of A.D. 1398-1449 at 1δ (68 percent confidence level) and A.D. 1300-1621 at 2δ (95 percent confidence level). Wood charcoal from Feature 89 in House 3 produced a result of 450±65 B.P. (WAT-2869), which calibrates to a date of A.D. 1444 with ranges of A.D. 1423-1481 at 1δ and A.D. 1400-1635 at 2δ. A wood charcoal sample from Feature 113 in House 3 resulted in a date of 460±65 B.P. (WAT-2872), which calibrates to A.D. 1441 with ranges of A.D. 1417-1476 at lb and A.D. 1397-1631 at 2δ.

A return of 860± 110 B.P. for a maize kernel from Feature 170 in House 9 (WAT-2871) would appear to be too early relative to the ceramic data. Calibrating to A.D. 1214 with ranges of A.D. 1032-1282 (lδ) and A.D. 983-1397 (2δ), it does remain possible that the later end of the

Table 51. Radiocarbon Samples and Results.

Provenience	Description	Weight (g)	Lab. No.	Uncalibrated Age (years B.P.)
EA9 F201*	carbonized wheat seed	0.001	TO-2519	240±50
H8 F183	carbonized maize kernel	4.74	WAT-2868	510±80
H3 F89	wood charcoal	6.00	WAT-2869	450±65
H9 F170	carbonized maize kernel	2.58	WAT-2871	860±110
H3 F113	wood charcoal	6.00	WAT-2872	460±65

*dated by accelerator mass spectrometry

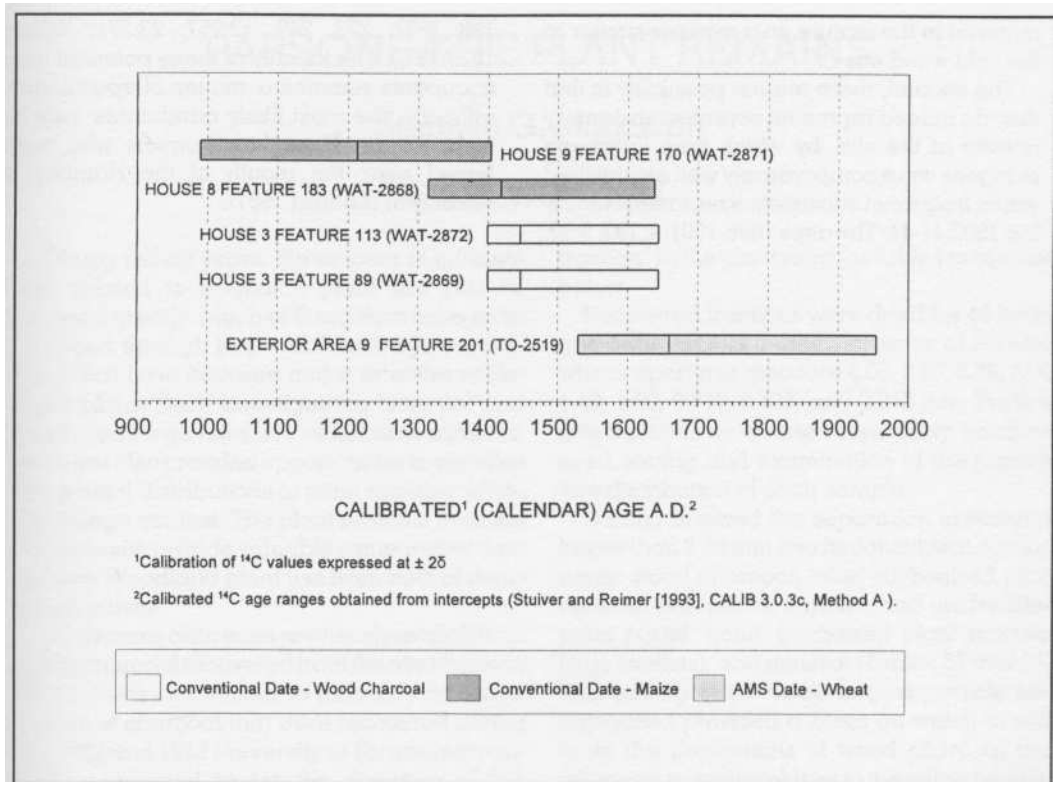

Figure 35. Calibration of the Parsons Site Radiocarbon Dates.

date range at the 95 percent confidence level, could relate to the initial founding of the site. Nevertheless, the available settlement pattern evidence would seem to suggest that House 9 was built at a later date than most of the other house segments uncovered by the 1989-90 excavations (Robertson, Williamson and Welsh, this volume). Likewise, the position of Feature 170 within House 9 would appear to indicate that it was an interior pit associated with the occupation of the house. In any case, the large standard deviation for the return inspires little confidence in its reliability.

The wheat seed from Feature 201 in Exterior Area 9 was submitted to the IsoTrace Radiocarbon Laboratory, of the *University of Toronto*, for radiocarbon dating by accelerator mass spectrometry. The seed provided a date of 240±50 years B.P. (TO-2519), calibrated to A.D. 1660, with ranges of A.D. 1644-1954 at 1δ and A.D. 1520-1954 at 2δ. Even at the 95% confidence interval, there is little overlap between the early end of the date range for this sample and the three fifteenth century dates, even though one of the latter (WAT-2872) was recovered from Feature 113 in House 3, which also contained a wheat seed and five foxtail seeds.

In summary, the Parsons site artifactual assemblage suggests that the village was occupied circa A.D. 1450 (Williamson and Powis, this volume) and all of the "European exotica" that has been reported for the site in the past is actually of aboriginal manufacture. Three of the radiocarbon dates (WAT-2868, 2869 and 2872) lend credence to this general temporal placement, as they produced returns calibrating to the fifteenth century. There are two possible explanations for the presence of the European taxa and the seventeenth century radiocarbon date for one of the specimens. The first and perhaps most likely is that they simply represent nineteenth century intrusions resulting from field burning and subsequent bioturbation, even if such events are not especially well represented in plant remains assemblages from other sites. If this is the case, the seventeenth century radiocarbon return may be a consequence of contamination of the wheat seed by the older carbonized

material in the feature, in a manner similar to the "old wood effect."

The second, more remote possibility is that they do indeed represent seventeenth century activity at the site, by which time European cultigens were comparatively well established within Iroquoian subsistence regimes (Monckton 1992:41-44; Thwaites 1896-1901; 4:193; 5:99, 189; 6:77, 273, 249; 12:257; 23:271; Wrong 1939:197). The identity of these potential later occupants remains a matter of speculation, although the most likely candidates may be some of the New York Iroquois who were based near the mouth of the Humber at Teiaiagon (Konrad 1981).

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