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978-0-521-44030-1 - A Population History of the Huron-Petun, A.D. 500-1650

Gary Warrick

Excerpt

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I

Native American Population History

The European discovery of America had a profound impact on the historical trajectory of Native peoples. Beginning in A.D. 1519, epidemics of European disease decimated Native populations (Cook 1998; Dobyns 1983; Ramenofsky 1987; Thornton 1987). Yet, it is far from certain how far and how fast these early epidemics spread from the primary centers of infection, and whether Native depopulation occurred prior to face-to-face European contact. The potential impact of sixteenth-century epidemics on the Native North American population has received considerable attention in recent years (Betts 2006; Dobyns 1983; Ramenofsky 1987; Reff 1991; Snow 1995b; Snow and Lanphear 1988; Snow and Starna 1989; Trigger 1985:231-242; Trigger and Swagerty 1996; Upham 1986; Verano and Ubelaker 1992), but there have been few reliable precontact population estimates made for Native groups living far from the coastal areas and early landfalls of Europeans. The only way to reliably and accurately determine the number of Native Americans who were alive before and after the first epidemics of European disease is to count them archaeologically.

Except perhaps for limited areas of the American Southwest (Blake et al. 1986; Plog 1974), the Valley of Mexico (Sanders et al. 1979), and the Northeast (Snow 1995a, 1995b), no scholar has written a population history of a Native group from its recognizable origins to the earliest recorded contact with Europeans and their diseases. The Huron-Petun or Wendat-Tionontaté, an Iroquoian-speaking group who occupied southern Ontario, Canada, until A.D. 1650, offer a unique archaeological and historical context for reconstructing the precontact and early contact demography of Native North America. This book traces and explains change in the Wendat-Tionontaté population from A.D. 500 to A.D. 1650 and determines when depopulation occurred as a result of the introduction of European disease.

The population history of the Wendat-Tionontaté is Native history. Native history is worth writing for its own merits and has direct relevance to living Native peoples (Sioui 1992:99-103, 1999; Trigger 1980:671, 1985). In

fact, the history and archaeology of Native Americans have become highly politicized, and Native academics (Echo-Hawk 2000; Sioui 1999; Watkins 2003) have turned a critical gaze on the traditional practices and research programs of non-Native academics with regard to Native population history. Native academics accept that their ancestors enjoyed good health and large populations prior to the arrival of Europeans. For example, Cherokee historian Russell Thornton (1987) and Wendat historian Georges Sioui (1992, 1999) believe that there were 7 million to 18 million people living in North America, whereas other estimates range from a low of 1.9 million (Ubelaker 1992) to a high of 18 million (Dobyns 1983). Invariably, it is the higher estimates that are cited in popular books on the encounter of Europeans and Native Americans (e.g. Ronald Wright [1992] estimates several hundred thousand Five Nations Iroquois before contact) or by Native people themselves (e.g. Douglas George-Kanentiio [1995], a Mohawk writer, estimates hundreds of thousands of Iroquoians and 100,000 Five Nations Iroquois [George-Kanentiio 2000:176–178] at contact), presumably to play on Euro-American guilt about the depopulation and dispossession of Native lands and to dispel colonialist notions that precontact North America was a “howling wilderness” populated by dispersed groups of “nomads” (Krech 1999:83–85). However, archaeological and historical data for at least one of the Five Nations Iroquois (i.e. Mohawk) do not support high Iroquoian population numbers at European contact (Snow 1995b, 1996a). Historians and archaeologists who study Native history have a responsibility to establish accurate population estimates, not through speculation and pyramiding arithmetic but through diligence and data compilation for individual Native groups. Russell Thornton (1987:35–36), a demographic historian of Cherokee ancestry, reminds us that: “Larger numbers of pre-European American Indians do not necessarily indicate a better life here at that time or a ‘darker’ subsequent history; small numbers do not necessarily indicate the converse. What scholars need to do is to concentrate on trying to establish what was, not what should have been.”

Although the primary goal of this book is to present the population history of a group of Native North Americans, it will be obvious to the reader that the Wendat-Tionontaté population history contains several features that can be employed, if so desired, as a case study in broader historical and demographic generalizations. On a regional level, archaeologists and ethnohistorians working in northeastern North America, particularly with Iroquoian peoples, will hopefully find methods and data directly applicable to their research problems, particularly those dealing with the demographic consequences of the adoption of maize agriculture and first contacts with Europeans. On a hemispheric level, researchers interested in the depopulation of the Americas as a result of European contact will find this an interesting case study because it fails to support the hypothesis of sixteenth-century pandemics sweeping the continent north of Mexico

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(cf. Dobyns 1983). Finally, on a global scale, scholars studying trends in world population will see the obvious advantage of incorporating into their models the population histories of Indigenous peoples, often overlooked because of an absence of historical documents. Much current demographic theory (e.g. Malthusian, Boserupian, European demographic transition) relies almost exclusively on studies of population trends in historical societies, predominantly Europe (Livi-Bacci 1992; Wrigley 1969). The applicability of demographic theory to precontact Indigenous societies has yet to be conclusively demonstrated.

IROQUOIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Recent research in Iroquoian archaeology has attempted to trace and explain cultural change by studying key causal factors, such as subsistence (Williamson 1985), settlement (MacDonald 2002; Timmins 1997), and sociopolitical organization (Kuhn 2004; Pearce 1996; Warrick 1984). Unfortunately, virtually nothing is known about one of the potentially most important factors in Iroquoian culture change: alterations in population. The lack of research on population seriously hampers our ability to address some of the most fascinating problems of Iroquoian history (Trigger 1985:231–242). For example, did the adoption of maize agriculture in the sixth century A.D. result from population growth (Smith 1972), cause population growth (Stothers 1977:164–167), or not affect population to any remarkable degree (Trigger 1985:86–87)? Was there a “population explosion” during the fourteenth century (Noble 1975:44; Sykes 1981:29; Wright 1972:78)? Did the rapid decline of Iroquoian populations begin in the sixteenth (Brasser 1978a; Dickinson 1980; Dobyns 1983:313–327; Ramenofsky 1987) or in the seventeenth century (Snow and Lanphear 1988) as a result of European diseases? Fortunately, solutions to these problems are not difficult to extract from the Wendat-Tionontaté archaeological record because certain features of that record make it relatively easy to transform the traces of ancient Wendat-Tionontaté settlements into population numbers. First, unlike the situation in most other regions of the world, Wendat-Tionontaté settlements were compact and occupied for only a brief period of time, 30 years or less. Consequently, the contemporaneity problem that plagues demographic archaeology (Schacht 1984), when population totals are inflated as a result of “double-counting” archaeological remains that are in fact not contemporary, is substantially reduced by the “snapshot” nature of Iroquoian occupations. Second, the Wendat-Tionontaté chronological sequence is well understood, enabling the archaeologist, on the basis of ceramic or European trade item seriation, to assign precontact sites to 50-year periods and contact sites to ones whose lengths roughly correspond to actual village durations (Warrick 1988b). Finally, more than a century of archaeological survey and excavations in the predominantly ploughed lands of south-central Ontario have

located a substantial proportion of all Wendat-Tionontaté villages that ever existed, one of the most conspicuous types of archaeological sites in the agricultural areas of northeastern North America.

NATIVE AMERICAN DEPOPULATION

The biological impact of European exploration and colonization on Native America has been known for years (Crosby 1976, 1986; Dobyns 1966, 1983). Massive depopulation rapidly followed the first encounter that Native Americans had with European infectious disease. The main controversy surrounding this depopulation concerns the timing: did European disease precede Europeans themselves, diffusing into interior North America far in advance of the first explorers? Academic opinion has polarized into two camps. The first camp, led by Henry Dobyns (1966, 1983, 1989) and others (Crosby 1986; Ramenofsky 1987; Upham 1986, 1992), believe that hemispheric pandemics swept the New World shortly after A.D. 1519, the first documented outbreak of smallpox among Native Americans. Specifically, archaeological evidence suggests that the Native peoples of the southeastern United States (Ramenofsky 1987; Smith 1987), and perhaps the southwestern United States (Upham 1992) and midwestern United States (Betts 2006), experienced local depopulation prior to direct European contact, possibly from outbreaks of European disease. The other camp, consisting of Dean Snow (1980:32–33, 1995b, 1996a; Snow and Lanphear 1988; Snow and Starna 1989) and others (Milner 1992; Reff 1991; Thornton et al. 1992), maintains that European disease did not spread far inland prior to actual European presence and the establishment of transportation networks and permanent colonies that included children. Certain scholars have not yet joined either camp and are wisely waiting for an empirically based resolution of the controversy (Trigger 1985:242; Trigger and Swagerty 1996; Ubelaker 1992).

Resolution entails the compilation of precontact populations of interior Native American groups, using a combination of archaeological and historical data. The answer should be clear. If the Dobyns camp is right, massive depopulation was widespread and occurred soon after A.D. 1519. If the Snow camp is correct, depopulation was local and occurred only after sustained European contact, particularly with settlements containing European children. Case studies, such as this one, are the only means of resolving the problem of Native American depopulation.

The depopulation issue has far-reaching implications. For anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians, the verification of Dobyns' hypothesis would mean that most first descriptions of Native Americans by Europeans are ethnographies of disease-shattered survivors of formerly complex and vastly more numerous Native societies and cannot be used as direct historic analogs for their precontact ancestors (Dunnell 1991). For historians and

demographers of Native American ancestry (Sioui 1992, 1999; Stiffarm and Lane 1992), confirmation of the Dobyns claim for high estimates of precontact Native American population would vitiate the popular myth that the New World of the sixteenth century was a wilderness, populated by only a few tribes of wandering nomads. Political groupings of some First Nations and the outcome of some contemporary Native land claims might be affected by empirical support for, and wide acceptance of, the Dobyns hypothesis. Books for a general audience on Native history and demography (Crosby 1986; Stannard 1992; Wright 1992) have accepted as valid that most of Native America was catastrophically depopulated by European disease in the sixteenth century. Although it cannot be denied that certain regions of Native North America, Mesoamerica, and Peru were utterly devastated by European disease in the early sixteenth century (Cook 1998), for the rest of the Americas, no matter how popular and politically correct the Dobyns position is, it is a hypothesis and not a validated historical truth. It will become a historical truth only after compilation of several case studies from disparate regions of the Americas offer empirical evidence of massive depopulation in the sixteenth century (e.g. Denevan 1992). Until then, the jury is out.

POPULATION CHANGE

As a specific case study of the causes and consequences of population change, Wendat-Tionontaté population history can be used, like Western historical demographic studies (e.g. Skipp 1978), to test general theories of population change. For example, recent archaeological and paleodemographic research has revealed that population growth was both a cause and a consequence of the global transition to agriculture in Neolithic times (Bandy 2005; Bocquet-Appel 2002; Bocquet-Appel and Naji 2006; Eshed et al. 2004; McCaa 2002). Understanding human population change, especially growth, is one of the most pressing problems of the contemporary world (e.g. World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). It is also a truly interdisciplinary topic, encouraging cooperation among archaeologists, anthropologists, demographers, economists, geographers, and historians (Paine 1997; Zubrow 1975:1–2). Because of its long-term perspective, archaeology can provide unique empirical insights into the complexities of population change.

The book traces the population history of the Wendat-Tionontaté from A.D. 500 to A.D. 1650. Chapter 2 sets the stage and introduces the non-specialist to the Wendat-Tionontaté. Archaeology, historical accounts, and ethnohistory are combined to portray the Wendat-Tionontaté at the time of contact. This is followed in Chapter 3 by a presentation of the theoretical orientation of the study. It is argued that a historical-ecological approach, similar to that employed by most historical demographers (Livi-Bacci 1992; Wrigley 1969), is perhaps the least biased theoretical stance to adopt for dealing with specific Native American populations. Key concepts of human

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demography in a preindustrial world are presented, with special emphasis on life and death in precontact northeastern North America. In Chapter 4, the archaeological methods available for estimating past population numbers are summarized. According to middle-range theory in archaeology, settlement patterns are the best preserved archaeological indices of past population size and change. Chapter 5 presents a method for generating population figures from archaeological settlements and burial populations and provides population estimates. This chapter summarizes the difficulties of transforming archaeological site data into absolute population numbers and offers methods for estimating representativeness of site data, site duration, residential density, and family size that are widely applicable in archaeology. Chapter 6 presents a population history of the Wendat-Tionontaté from the fifth century to the close of the fifteenth century, with special attention to causes of population growth in the fourteenth century. Chapter 7 summarizes the population history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, highlighting the disappearance of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians and migrations of Wendat-Tionontaté tribes in the sixteenth century and the massive depopulation of Native northeastern North America in the seventeenth century as a result of epidemics of European disease. An attempt is made to link the population decline of the Wendat-Tionontaté to the relationship between New France and the Five Nations Iroquois. Chapter 8 offers a set of conclusions and directions for future research.

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The Wendat-Tionontaté

The Wendat-Tionontaté (Huron-Petun) were two of several Iroquoian-speaking nations who inhabited the deciduous forests of northeastern North America (Figure 2.1). The first recorded contact between the Wendat-Tionontaté and the Europeans occurred in June 1609, on St. Eloi Island in the St. Lawrence River, about 100 km west of Quebec. A few dozen Wendat of the Arendahronon tribe led by Ochasteguain, allied with Algonkians and Montagnais, met with Samuel de Champlain to plan and carry out a successful raid on the Mohawk (Trigger 1976:248). The French forged an alliance with the Wendat-Tionontaté that lasted only 40 years, terminating abruptly in 1650 with the destruction and dispersal of the Wendat-Tionontaté. Abundant historical accounts, written between 1615 and 1650 of Wendat-Tionontaté daily life, politics, and spiritual beliefs, provide perhaps the best “ethnographic” description of a Native American group in a first contact situation. The principal seventeenth-century accounts were written by French visitors to the Wendat-Tionontaté country: Samuel de Champlain in the winter of 1615–1616 (Biggar 1922–1936), Gabriel Sagard in the winter of 1623–1624 (Wrong 1939), and various Jesuit priests from 1626 to 1650 (Thwaites 1896–1901). These documents have been examined in minute detail and interpreted by a number of scholars, and the serious reader is strongly advised to consult the essential works of Conrad Heidenreich (1971, 1978), Conrad Heidenreich and Charles Garrad (1978), Georges Sioui (1992, 1999), Elisabeth Tooker (1964), and Bruce Trigger (1976, 1985, 1990) to gain a full understanding of Wendat-Tionontaté culture and history.

The detailed seventeenth-century accounts have enabled archaeologists to flesh out the origins and development of the Wendat-Tionontaté. Employing direct historic analogy and “upstreaming” from seventeenth-century sites, it is possible to archaeologically trace a continuous, identifiable Wendat-Tionontaté presence in southern Ontario as far back as A.D. 1100 (and by

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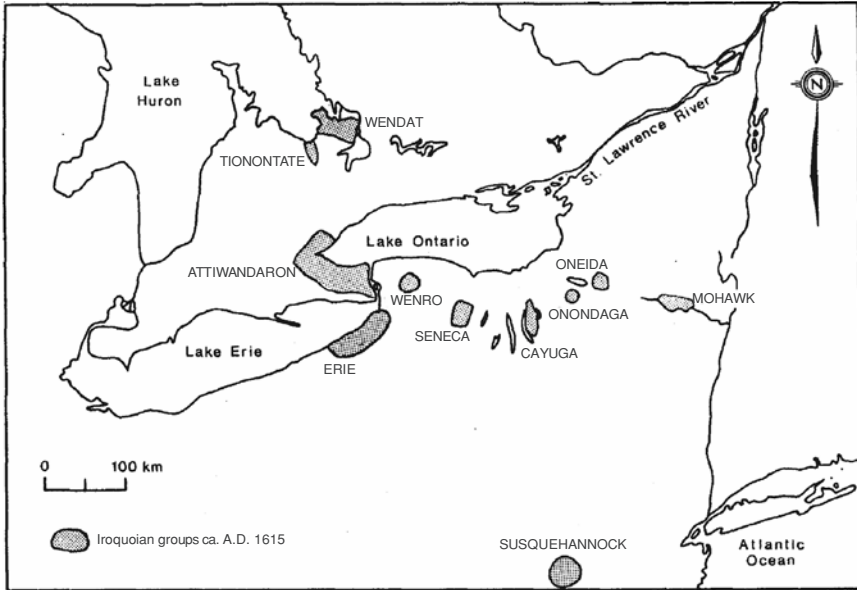
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FIGURE 2.1. Distribution of Northern Iroquoians, ca. 1615.

inference back to A.D. 500). This chapter presents a thumbnail sketch of the Wendat-Tionontaté on the eve of European contact, which has been distilled from the ethnohistorical and archaeological literature.

NAMES

“Huron-Petun” is a familiar name to anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and other scholars who study Indigenous peoples of North America. In recognition of this and to avoid confusion in bibliographic searches, the title of this book maintains conventional use of the name “Huron-Petun”. However, the descendants of the “Huron-Petun” find the latter appellation offensive and prefer to be called “Wendat” or “Wendat-Tionontaté” (Sioui 1999). Consequently, “Wendat-Tionontaté” is used throughout the book instead of “Huron-Petun” out of respect for Indigenous readers. In this book, the names “Wendat” and “Tionontaté” are combined under one name, Wendat-Tionontaté, because it is virtually impossible to distinguish ancestral Wendat and Tionontaté sites located outside their respective historic homelands. In agreement with Georges Sioui (1992:16), a Wendat historian, “Huron” and “Petun” have a European etymology and have derogatory connotations that may offend some Native readers. He prefers to use the Iroquoian name Wendat-Tionontaté to refer to the Huron-Petun. “Huron” is from the Old French word *hure*, which means either a wild boar (perhaps ridiculing

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Wendat hair styles) or rustic, ruffian, lout, or hillbilly (referring to the unacculturated or “peasant” ways of the early seventeenth-century Wendat; Heidenreich 1971:20–21; Sioui 1992:16; Trigger 1976:27). Neither meaning is especially flattering to the Wendat. Champlain and Sagard first used the name “Huron” in print in 1623 (Biggar 1922–1936, 5:100; Wrong 1939). “Petun” has a Brazilian origin meaning “Tobacco People” and was applied by Champlain in 1632 (Biggar 1922–1936, 6:248) because this group grew and traded tobacco. “St. Lawrence Iroquoian” is an archaeological construct and was coined by Bruce Trigger (1972). Sioui (1992:82–83) used the term “Laurentian Nadoueks” in place of St. Lawrence Iroquoians – many Algonkian groups referred to their Iroquoian neighbors as Nadoueks or Naudoways. The word “Iroquois” may have a Basque origin that translates as “Killer People” (Bakker 1990). However, French names for the Mohawk and Seneca tribes of the Five Nations Iroquois conform with tribal self-appellation (Tasse 1992). Although ethnohistorians and archaeologists should review the European names for Iroquoian groups and, in consultation with living members of the various tribes or nations, assign names that conform with current Native usage and self-image, for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusing the nonspecialist reader, this book uses the conventional names for the Five Nations Iroquois and St. Lawrence Iroquoians.

THE PEOPLE

The name “Wendat” translates as “Islanders” (Heidenreich 1971:300–301; Sioui 1992:16; Trigger 1990:12) or “they of the floating island” (Steckley 1992). Although there is some uncertainty over the precise translation, the association of Wendat and island is the only one that makes any sense linguistically (Steckley 1992). It may refer to Wendat geography because the seventeenth-century Wendat homeland was virtually surrounded by the waters of Georgian Bay to the west and north, Lake Simcoe to the east, and large swamps to the south (Heidenreich 1971:21–22; Figure 2.2), or Wendat cosmology, which placed the Wendat on the back of a giant turtle (Sioui 1992:17; Trigger 1990:12).

The Wendat confederacy consisted of four tribes in the 1620s and 1630s, with a possible fifth formally recognized in 1640 (Heidenreich 1971:84–86; Tooker 1964:9–11; Trigger 1976:30; 1990:19–20). Proceeding west to east (Figure 2.2), the Attignawantan or Bear People occupied approximately fourteen villages on the Penetang Peninsula, a maple-beech upland bordered by the waters of Georgian Bay (Heidenreich 1971:82; Thwaites 1896–1901, 15–39). This nation had been living in this area for at least 200 years prior to 1639 (Thwaites 1896–1901, 16:227). The principal village was Ossossané, located at the southern border of Wendat territory (Heidenreich 1971:82). Due east in the cedar lowlands surrounding the Wye River lived the Ataronchronon or Swamp Dwellers who occupied at least five villages,

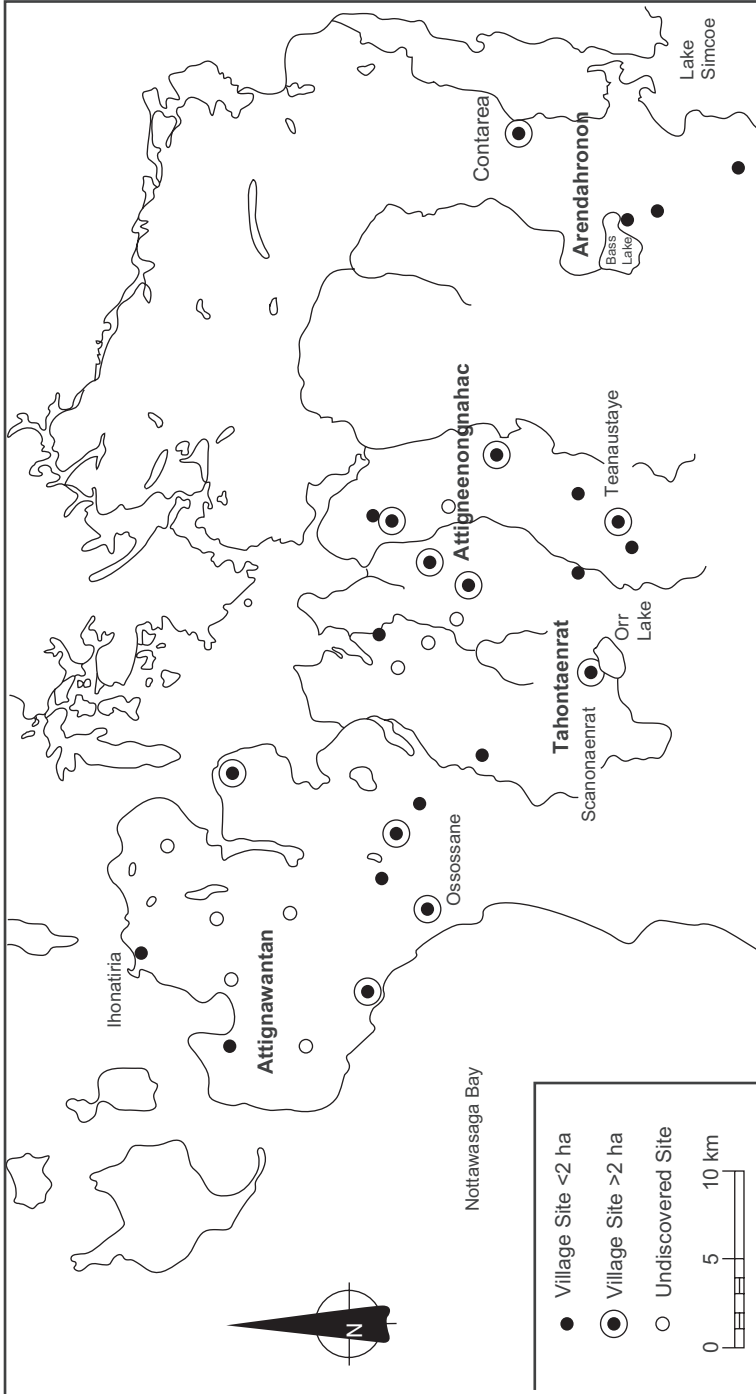


FIGURE 2.2. Wendat homeland, ca. A.D. 1634.