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Dating the Emergence of the League of the Iroquois: A Reconsideration of the Documentary Evidence

Dean R. Snow
The University at Albany, SUNY

The title I originally chose for this paper focused on the confrontation of Indian and European cultures in the contact period. As the paper evolved, however, I discovered that there was emerging scholarly agreement about the general nature of this historic confrontation, but continuing disagreement on some key specifics. There is general agreement that indirect trade with Europeans began as early as the middle sixteenth century for the Iroquois.¹ There is also general agreement that nucleation of small Iroquois villages into fewer but larger villages took place prior to this time. However, general uncertainty persists with regard to when in the context of these other processes the League of the Iroquois formed.

The emergence of the League of the Iroquois was a process that might have occurred in the twilight period when scraps of European artifacts were making their way into the interior, but before direct contact. It might also have occurred prior to 1492, when the context would have been rising internecine warfare. The League was initially a nonaggression pact between the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. Later it took on a more formal political structure and came to operate as a political confederacy. European trade goods were apparently reaching the Five Nations as this political evolution advanced. Mohawk villages were not visited by Dutch chroniclers until 1634, but European goods preceded that event for as much as a century.

Whether the League preceded and conditioned these interactions, or followed and was shaped by them is an issue of major importance to many scholars. The issue of the formation of the League of the Iroquois is central to many ethnohistorical and archaeological problems in this region. For example, Bradley's work has pointed out the need to determine whether it preceded or followed village nucleation.² Engelbrecht's work has been directed at whether or not it was accompanied by changes in material culture.³ My own work has been directed at the discovery of demographic changes that might have accompanied emergence of the League. There are as yet fewer answers to these problems than people outside professional anthropology generally appreciate. The Iro-

quois are part of our secondary school curricula, part of our museum establishment, and part of our local tradition. Compared to many other Indian nations, those called the Iroquois are relatively well known and well understood, but the truth is that even for the Iroquois much work still needs to be done and we still know less than we sometimes pretend.

The formation of the League of the Iroquois is a problem having many pieces. The formation was, first of all, probably not so much an event as a process, and the result not so much a concrete thing as an activity. To detect its emergence, we have essentially two avenues of inquiry open to us, archaeology and ethnohistory.

William Engelbrecht attempted to approach the problem archaeologically.⁴ He assumed that on ethnohistorical grounds we could conclude that the League emerged sometime between AD 1500 and 1640. He then hypothesized that the emergence could be detected through a detailed analysis of pottery. Pottery was made by women in Iroquois society and the Iroquois practiced matrilineal residence (men moved in with their wives and their wives' female relatives after marriage). Consequently one should expect that residential groups of females, who lived with each other all their lives, would constitute *de facto* potters guilds. One should expect that differences could be detected between pottery produced in different households of the same village. Collectively the pottery of a particular village would differ from that of another.

Engelbrecht hypothesized further that the pattern of these contrasts would have been different before the emergence of the League than it was after that emergence. Here, however, we run into some difficulties. While one might expect that differences between say the Mohawk and the Oneida would have decreased after they came together in the League, that assumption can be easily challenged. Perhaps there was more peaceful interaction and intermarriage after formation of the League, but the practice of wife capture during prolonged conflicts prior to that time might have

produced an equivalent level of interaction between residential guilds of female potters. There are other complicating possibilities as well, and the upshot was that Engelbrecht could not predict what changes in pottery design might have accompanied the formation of the League, and could only hope that he would be able to detect relatively abrupt change of some kind during the AD 1500–1640 period.

Unfortunately, he did not. From that we must conclude either that the League emerged sometime before or after the period studied, or that something is wrong with the use of pottery for this purpose. If something is wrong with the use of pottery for this purpose, then either Engelbrecht did not carry out the analysis in a proper way or pottery is simply not a class of remains sensitive to the political process he wished to study. I have examined his research design and procedures through several publications, and I have to conclude that he did the job as well as one could. That means that either the League arose outside the period 1500–1640, or pottery remains are simply not appropriate for its detection.

To choose between these two options, I returned to the ethnohistorical literature. I found that some of the ethnohistorical evidence has been a bit abused in the past, some of the rest of it has not been fully exploited. Elisabeth Tooker summarizes the efforts up to the date of her publication.⁵ It seems clear that the League was in existence by AD 1630, and that it had been around for some decades by that time. Richter distinguishes between the League and the political confederacy that was later built upon its structure, noting that the confederacy emerged many years after the League.⁶ Many of the various traditions regarding the time of the League's founding use the first coming of Europeans as a reference point. Consequently, it is necessary to eliminate any possibility that this key reference date might be any other than Dutch and French visits around 1609. In this year Hudson ascended his river as far as Albany, and Champlain began probing Iroquoia from the north.

A few very recent sources, such as McEneny, have followed older sources such as Weise in suggesting that there were French traders on the upper Hudson as early as 1540.⁷ Their evidence comes in part from the journal of Jasper Danckaerts, who visited the ruins of Fort Nassau near Albany in 1680 and later repeated a story that it had been built long before by the Spanish. To this is added a misreading of the journals of Jean Alfonse, a pilot who explored around the Maritimes in the 1540s.

Alfonse's "Grand River" is assumed to be the Hudson by these writers, and statements by him and Andre Thevet about an earlier French attempt to establish a trading post on the river is taken to mean that there was a French site on the upper Hudson in 1540. Maps are misread in support of the argument too, and even the Norumbega myth gets transferred to the Hudson by some authors. However, in the end it is clear that the Penobscot is the river referred to by Alfonse and Thevet. This and other permutations of the Norumbega myth are discussed extensively by Morison.⁸

If the Iroquois, specifically the Mohawk, were not contacted by Europeans from the Hudson Valley in the early sixteenth century, they might still have been aware of Cartier's visits to the St. Lawrence beginning in 1534. Indeed, there were Europeans touching the American coast or making more extensive incursions in more than half the years of the sixteenth century. Even if news did not travel as far or as fast as it did a century later, we must not omit the possibility that the Iroquois might have been aware of at least some of the closer contacts. Thus, 1609 might be appropriate key date to use when assessing native traditions about the origin of the League. But it remains possible that the reference date lies elsewhere within the century preceding that date.

Assuming for the moment that 1609 is the key reference date, it is worth noting that the legend of a very early French or Spanish presence on the upper Hudson is usually tossed out without much criticism by historians eager to get on to the firmer ground of seventeenth century history. For them the issue is not really very important, and I do not really blame them for treating the issue as they do. For my research, however, the issue is crucial, because several of the traditions regarding the emergence of the League refer to it as an event that occurred lifetimes or generations before the first coming of Europeans. Tooker summarizes those worthy of close examination.⁹ Some of the estimates couch the date in terms of lifetimes prior to first contact, while others of them speak in terms of generations before that. I have assigned a range of 50–100 years for a lifetime and 20–40 years for a generation, both of them generously broad I think. Heckewelder cites a Moravian source from the 1740s that Iroquois confederacy (he probably means the League) formed one lifetime before the coming of Europeans, specifically the Dutch.¹⁰ An Onondaga source specifies that the League formed two generations before Europeans came to trade,¹¹ or a lifetime before then.¹² Schoolcraft also uncovered a Seneca source in-

dicating that the League formed four years before the arrival of Hudson.¹³ Parker was told at Six Nations Reserve that the founding date was around 1390, but Beauchamp was told at Onondaga that the date was around 1600.¹⁴ The later dates are supported by another statement in Heckwelder to the effect that the League formed about a century before the Tuscarora joined the confederacy, that is, around 1610.¹⁵ The Onondaga told Hale that the League formed 6 generations (120–240 years) before the coming of Europeans.¹⁶

I have not inventoried all of the estimates, which are adequately detailed by Tooker.¹⁷ It is worth pointing out that several sources cite each other quite selectively, often ignoring those that do not contribute to a favored argument. Some, like Hale, attempt to rectify conflicting estimates by referencing short estimates of elapsed time from early key dates (eg. Cartier), and longer ones from late key dates (eg. Hudson). Tooker leaves the issue open, as one should if a set of contradictory assertions is all one has to go on.

There is, however, a source that might provide a means to choose between the many options. Of several ethnohistorical accounts of the emergence of the League, one is quite remarkable for its specificity and its independence from a 1609 (or any other) reference date. The evidence is a Seneca legend that an eclipse coincided with their decision to join the League. There have been two attempts to pinpoint the date of League formation on the basis of the legend. William Canfield and Paul Wallace both attempted to identify this eclipse from the list produced by modern astronomers, and both came to the conclusion that the total eclipse of June 28, 1451 (Julian) was most likely the one observed by the Seneca.¹⁸ However, I have studied both arguments, and find them to be seriously flawed. In both cases, the investigators used questionable criteria to reduce a large list of possibilities to a short list of five options, four of which were so clearly unlikely that the exercise to each case strikes a critical reader as contrived.

Canfield refers to the tradition that “placed the formation of the confederacy at a time when there occurred a total eclipse of the sun— ‘a darkening of the Great Spirit’s smiling face’— that took place when the corn was receiving its last tillage, long before events that could be reliably ascribed to the year 1540.”¹⁹ He does not tell us what the reliably ascribed events are, and in fact eliminates all eclipses that occurred after 1530 from further consideration. Two eclipses, which occurred in

1531 and 1536 respectively, are not mentioned. He lists five eclipses, including both total and annular ones, for the period 1400–1530, leaving out three (1442, 1464 and 1508) that might have reached at least 80% totality in central New York. He then notes that the eclipse occurred at the time of last corn tilling, or around the end of June, and omits all but the 1451 eclipse on the basis of that criterion. Canfield seems to acknowledge that the eclipse need not have been total by including three annular cases, yet the previously omitted 1442 eclipse occurred on July 7th (Julian calendar,) and probably reached 80% totality in central New York. The Julian date would be about July 17th in the Gregorian calendar we use now, but still close enough to the end of June to require some consideration. Two even better possibilities in the sixteenth century were, of course, omitted from consideration at the very beginning.

Paul Wallace’s attempt to use the eclipse tradition has its own faults.²⁰ In his version of the tradition, “the sun went out and for a little while it was complete darkness,” and “this happened when the grass was knee high, I think or when the corn was getting ripe.” Again a date around the end of June seems indicated, but the idea that it was a total eclipse seems stronger. Accordingly, Wallace turned to Oppolzer’s 1887 Canon of Eclipses and cites five total eclipses whose paths crossed central New York within the Christian era. The dates for these are given as AD 258, 664, 1451, 1806, and 1925. Of course, two are hopelessly ancient and two much too recent, so Wallace has led us to the preferred 1451 eclipse again. The problem here is that having consulted Oppolzer myself, I have found that at the level of precision he achieved on his maps, no fewer than 36 total eclipses must be considered for the Christian era.²¹ A much larger number must be considered if we allow for annular and partial eclipses. Like Canfield, Wallace seems to have decided for other reasons that the League was founded in 1451, and then developed an argument designed to lead to that conclusion.

One can improve upon the attempts of Canfield and Wallace, but a number of conditions are required. First, an effort must be made to assess the degree of totality that would have to be reached before an eclipse would be noticed and taken seriously by untrained people not anticipating such an event. Second, one must develop a list of possible eclipses that allows for both the imprecision of the source data and the magnitude threshold just mentioned. Third, the list should not exclude any possibilities after AD 1350 and before 1650. Archaeology

and oral tradition indicate that the League did not exist before 1350 and documents assure us of its existence by 1650. Fourth, a short list of probable eclipses should be developed on the basis of seasonal indicators in both versions of the eclipse story. Fifth, if more than one possible eclipse remains after the first four steps, each should be examined in detail and ranked as to probability.

I have found 21 eclipses between AD 1350 and 1650 that might have been visible at 80% totality or greater in central New York (see Table). I have omitted a few that might have been briefly visible just after dawn or just before sunset if one were looking for them. There were no eclipses for several decades after 1585, about the time calendrical reference shifts from Julian to Gregorian. In fact, the next eclipse visible in central New York did not occur until 1659.

According to Parker, maize received its second and final hoeing when it was knee high.²² Conventional wisdom puts this around the first week of July, however, in the Julian calendar it would have been about ten days earlier. Allowing for reasonable variation in growing seasons, we should search for an eclipse that occurred sometime between June 15 and July 6 on the Julian calendar, a generous period of three weeks within the growing season. It turns out that three of the 21 eclipses fall within this period, and a fourth misses by only a day. To be safe, all four must be considered on the short list:

1. July 7, 1442
2. June 28, 1451 (preferred by both Canfield and Wallace)
3. June 18, 1536
4. June 29, 1554.

At the beginning of this paper I discussed oral traditions placing the emergence of the league in terms of lifetimes or generations before the coming of the first Europeans. If one looks for the common ground shared by various oral traditions as time ranges, one quickly focuses on the period 1500 to 1530 when the reference date of 1609 is used. If Cartier rather than Hudson was the reference point, then the critical period shifts to 65 years earlier, or 1435 to 1465. Thus any but the last date (1554) listed remains possible.

Looking at the four possible eclipses in terms of Oppolzer's paths of totality, those of 1442 and 1554 probably did not come very close to totality anywhere in New York. Further, the 1536 eclipse was annular, not total even in its direct path. If the Seneca traditions are interpreted narrowly as meaning that there was a total eclipse, then we are left with only the eclipse of 1451 as the most likely. If we allow for the possibility of an annular eclipse, that of 1536 becomes the second most likely. According to current evidence, the 1451 date precedes Iroquois settlement nucleation while 1536 appears to follow it.

Whether or not any of this holds up through future testing remains to be seen. At least for the moment, however, it appears that the League of the Iroquois was complete by 1536 at the latest. Indirect trade contacts with Europeans did not begin in Iroquoia until the middle of the century.²³ Thus, the confrontation of Iroquois and European culture in the seventeenth century was preceded by internecine confrontations that had preadapted the Iroquois for colonial warfare. The League did not arise because of European contact, but it certainly positioned the Iroquois to better withstand the devastating effects of the later confrontation.

Notes

¹Bradley, J. W. *Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois: Accommodating Change, 1500–1655* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

²*Ibid.*, 81–112.

³Engelbrecht, W. E. "A Stylistic Analysis of New York Iroquois Pottery." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1971; "The Reflection of Patterned Behavior in Iroquois Pottery." *Pennsylvania Archaeologist*, 42 (1972): 1–15; "Cluster Analysis: A Method for Studying Iroquois Prehistory." *Man in the Northeast*, 7 (1974): 57–70.

⁴See previous note.

⁵Tooker, E. "The League of the Iroquois: Its History, Politics, and Ritual." In *Handbook of North American Indians*, 15, Edited by B.G. Trigger. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 418–22.

⁶Richter, D. "League and Confederacy in the Colonial Period." Paper read to the Annual Conference on Iroquois Research, Rensselaerville, October 12, 1985.

⁷McEneny, J. J. *Albany, Capital City on the Hudson*. (Albany: Windsor Publications, 1981); Weise, A. J. *History of the City of Albany*. (Albany: Bender, 1884), 344–63; Danckaerts, J. *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts [1679–1680]* B. B. James and J. F. Jameson, eds. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1959).

⁸Morison, S. E. *The European Discovery of America, The Northern Voyages A.D. 500–1600*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 464–79, 488–91.

⁹Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois," 420–22.

¹⁰Heckwelder, J. G. E. "An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations, Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States." *Transactions of the Committee of History, Moral Science and General Literature of the American Philosophical Society*, 1. (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1819), 38.

¹¹Clark, J. V. H. *Onondaga; or, Reminiscences of Earlier and Later Times; Being a Series of Historical Sketches Relative to Onondaga; with Notes on the*

Several Towns in the Country, and Oswego. 2 vols. (Syracuse: Stoddard and Babcock, 1849), 262.

¹²Schoolcraft, H.R. *Notes on the Iroquois; Or, Contributions to the Statistics, Aboriginal History, Antiquities, and General Ethnology of Western New York*. (Albany: Erastus H. Pease, 1847), 120.

¹³*Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴Parker, A.C. "The Constitution of the Five Nations." *New York State Museum Bulletin*, 184:7–158 (Albany: New York State Museum, 1916), 61; Beauchamp, W. M. "A History of the New York Iroquois, Now Commonly Called the Six Nations." *New York State Museum Bulletin*, 78 (Albany: New York State Museum, 1905), 148–49; "The Founders of the New York Iroquois League and its Probable Date" *Researches and Transactions of the New York State Archaeological Association*, 3(1) (Rochester: New York State Archaeological Association, 1921), 29.

¹⁵Heckwelder, J. G. E. "An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations..." 30.

¹⁶Hale, H.E. "Indian Migrations, as Evidenced by Language." *American Antiquarian*, 5 (1883): 177–80.

¹⁷Tooker, "The League of the Iroquois," 420–22.

¹⁸Canfield, W. W. *The Legends of the Iroquois, Told by "The Cornplanter"*. (New York: A. Wessels, 1902), 23–40, 197–99; Wallace, P. A. W. "The Return of Hiawatha." *New York History*, 29 (1948): 399–400.

¹⁹Canfield, W. W. *The Legends of the Iroquois . . .*, 198.

²⁰Wallace, P. A. W. "The Return of Hiawatha," 385–403.

²¹Oppolzer, T.R. von *Canon of Eclipses* Translated by O. Gingerich. (New York: Dover Publications, 1961).

²²Parker, A.C. "Iroquois Uses of Maize and Other Food Plants." *New York State Museum Bulletin* 144 (482) (Albany: New York State Museum, 1910), 29.

²³Bradley, J. W. *Evolution of the Onondaga Iroquois*, 102.