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ERA OF THE FORMATION

OF THE

HISTORIC LEAGUE OF THE IROQUOIS

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J. N. B. HEWITT

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(REPRINTED FROM THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST, JANUARY, 1894)

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WASHINGTON, D. C.  
JUDD & DETWEILER, PRINTERS

1894







ERA OF THE FORMATION OF THE HISTORIC LEAGUE  
OF THE IROQUOIS.

BY J. N. B. HEWITT.

In his "Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family," page 151, Mr. Lewis H. Morgan, speaking of the league of the Iroquois, says: "As near as can now be ascertained the league had been established about one hundred and fifty years when Champlain, in 1609, first encountered the Mohawks within their own territories on the west shore of Lake George. This would place the epoch of its formation about A. D. 1459. . . . According to their traditions, which are confirmed to some extent by other evidence, they had resided in this area [the present limits of the state of New York] for a long period of time before the league was formed, and had at times made war upon each other."

This deduction is based mainly on traditions obtained from the Senecas and the Tuskaroras. In 1875 Mr. Horatio Hale\* was informed by the Onondaga chiefs resident in New York state that "it was their belief that the confederacy was formed about six generations before the white people came to these parts;" they had met to explain to Mr. Hale their wampum strings and belts. Reckoning twenty-five years to a "generation" and assuming the "white people" to have been Hudson's men, in 1609, Mr. Hale reaches the identical date obtained by Mr. Morgan. Considering, however, how untrustworthy tradition is in matters of chronology, such exact accordance in results unsupported by historic records does not materially strengthen the probability that the date reached thereby is the correct one.

It is very doubtful that "twenty-five" years were ever considered as a "generation" by the Iroquois in computing time, but it is certain that they did reckon by the "length of a man's life," which may be assumed to be about 60 or 70 years; and it is not unlikely that the Onondaga chiefs in 1875 put forth a mere conjecture, not wishing to be thought ignorant of their past history;

\*Iroquois Book of Rites, page 178.

so that 360 or 420 years more nearly meet the requirements of the Onondagan statement than does Mr. Hale's 150, and of course an epoch for the formation of the league antedating 1609 by 360 to 420 years is not to be considered. It was evidently a blind guess of the genial chiefs.

David Cusick, the so-called historian of the Iroquois, who was undoubtedly conversant with the traditions of the Iroquois as well as with the so-called wampum records, says, in his "Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations," that the confederacy was formed "perhaps one thousand years before Columbus discovered America;" but of course his reasons for this belief, as Mr. Hale aptly says, "do not bear examination."

It may be worthy of remark that the linguistic evidence found in Cusick's work shows conclusively that practically all the historical and traditional information put forth by him had come from the mouths of the annalists of the Five Nations or Iroquois proper, and not from Tuskarora sources. This is what would be expected, for the reason that the Tuskaroras, being an extralimital people with regard to the Iroquois proper, could have had only a very general idea of the genesis and history of the league and its constitution and of the post-ethnic, mythologic, and legendary lore of the northern branches of the Iroquoian linguistic family.

Events which are known to have occurred between 1650 and 1656 appeared to Cusick and his informants to have been synchronous with the discovery of America, for he tells us that the Eries were conquered "about this time." Cusick wrote in 1825 and the defeat of the Eries occurred in 1656, or 169 years before; hence, Cusick by making the latter date synchronous with the discovery of America in 1492 places it 164 years too early. Here tradition with its wampum records is more than 160 years astray regarding an event so recent, comparatively speaking, as the overthrow of the Eries. In other words, the defeat of the Eries occurred 169 years before the time Cusick wrote, and yet he and his co-annalists err by 160 years regarding the date of that event. What then must be the confusion in tradition concerning a transaction which occurred perhaps 75 years earlier than the defeat and dispersion of the Eries?

It is thus seen that the dates of the formation of the league deduced by Morgan and Hale from oral tradition alone are un-



trustworthy. Tradition alone cannot fix it with any degree of probability. The so-called wampum records are mnemonic but not chronologic, and so are not to be trusted to establish dates.

In considering traditional statements a distinction must be made between the tradition relating to fact or doctrine and the tradition relating to rites and ceremonies; the tradition concerning fact or doctrine, being handed down by word of mouth, is oral, and the tradition of rite and ceremony, depending largely upon observation for its preservation, is ocular. The relation of the most simple fact, as it passes from mouth to mouth, is distorted, and after a time becomes so changed that it has scarcely any semblance to its first form. But it is different with ceremonial observances. These are seized and retained by the sight, the most faithful and accurate of our senses. They are imitated until imitation becomes habitual; and habits when once formed are changed or eradicated with difficulty. Nothing is more certain than that many customs prevail among nations and communities for which they are wholly unable to account, their prevalence being due solely to traditional observance which does not concern itself with matters of chronology. This, then, is the difference between oral and ocular tradition. The fact or doctrine may be obscured or lost in the current of time, while the ceremony or outward observance of it is transmitted nearly or quite unimpaired.

The first mention of the Five Nations or Iroquois proper is probably that made by Jacques Cartier in 1535, when he mentions in some manuscripts the "Trudamani" or "Toudamani," and "Trudamans," who were evidently no other people than the well-known "Tsonnontowanens" of later writers. The latter was one of the names given the Iroquois by Huronian tribes in later times. Of the "Trudamani," Cartier asserts (in 1535) not only that they "do war continually among themselves," but also that "they showed us the skins of five men's heads spread upon boards as we do use parchment. Donnacona told us that they were skins of Toudamani, a people dwelling toward the south, who continually do war against them. Moreover, they told us that it was two years past that those Toudamans came to assault them; yea, even into the said river." Again, at Hochelaga, he was informed that "there be Agouionda, that is as much as to say, evil people, who go all armed even to their

finger ends. . . . They gave us also to understand that those Agouionda do continually war one against another." The word "Agouionda" is evidently the Iroquois "oñkhiyo<sup>a</sup>thä'," which signifies *they strike us*; hence *our assailants*. It is probable that one and the same people was designated by the words "Toudamani" and "Agouionda," and that this people was the Iroquois. He describes a state of desultory warfare between the people living on the St. Lawrence and the "Toudamani, a people dwelling toward the south." There is, however, no hint given of the existence of a league.

No league or confederation of peoples was perhaps ever formed without a sufficient motive in the nature of outside pressure. That the Hurons were in possession of the St. Lawrence watershed above and below the Saguenay river is evident from Cartier's narrative, for he met two hundred persons speaking Huron-Iroquois fishing at Gaspey. It is probable that the Iroquois were constrained to form the league to withstand the assaults of the Hurons and their Algonkin allies, for it is more than likely that such raids of the Iroquois as that mentioned by Cartier would provoke and incense the Hurons and their allies to seek means to avenge their wrongs; and we should find evidence of the existence of the league in a more aggressive policy of the Iroquois consequent upon their political union for self-preservation.

In 1622 Champlain was informed at a peace convention composed of Hurons, Algonkins, and Iroquois that these people were tired and fatigued by the war which had then lasted for "more than fifty years." Lescarbot, believing that "the change of language in Canada" was due to "a destruction of people," says, on page 170 of his *Nova Francia* (London, 1609), "For it is some eight years since the Iroquois did assemble themselves to the number of 8,000 (eight thousand) men, and discomfited all their enemies, whom they surprised in their enclosures;" and again, on page 290: "By such surprises the Iroquois, being in number eight thousand men, have heretofore exterminated the Algoumequins, them of Hochelaga, and others bordering upon the great river."

Thus it appears by the quotation from Champlain that in 1622 the war of extermination had then lasted for more than fifty years, going back to 1572 and perhaps 1560 as the date of its commencement.

The exaggeration as to the numbers of the Iroquoian warriors recorded by Lescaurbot was evidently put forth by the vanquished peoples, who consoled their vanity by assigning the cause of their defeat to the overwhelming numbers of their enemies rather than to a lack of courage on their part.

The foregoing citations, denoting a serious state of war, it seems to me, are indicative of a newly formed league, and make it probable that its formation was subsequent to the middle of the sixteenth century (1550). This inference is supported by tradition, and, small as is the value of tradition as a basis of scientific research, it is by no means to be despised as an adjunct. The Rev. C. Pyrlaeus, who was formerly (about 1744-1750) a missionary among the Mohawks, who lived long with the Iroquois, and who was well acquainted with their language, is quoted by Heckewelder, in his "Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations," as follows: "The Rev. C. Pyrlaeus, in his manuscript book, page 234, says: 'The alliance or confederacy of the Five Nations was established, as near as can be conjectured, one age (or the length of a man's life) before the white people (the Dutch) came into the country. Thannawage was the name of the aged Indian, a Mohawk, who first proposed such an alliance.'" It is not an easy matter to assign a definite number of years to the expression "one age" in the foregoing citation, but, taking all things into consideration, I think that 60 years will be within ten years, one way or the other, of the historical value of the mooted expression, and we may assume, I think, 1609, in which year both French and Dutch were met by the Iroquois, as the probable date when the "white people came into the country," and by this reckoning we obtain 1559 as the most probable date of the formation of the league, which is deducible from the precarious factors now at hand.

Commenting on the identification with the Dutch of the "white people" mentioned in the citation from Pyrlaeus, Mr. Hale (Book of Rites, page 179), says that this "is probably wrong. The white people who first 'came into the country' of the Huron-Iroquois nations were the French under Cartier. . . . The presence of this expedition, with its soldiers and sailors of strange complexion and armed with terrible weapons, must have been known to all the tribes dwelling along the river,

and would naturally make an epoch in their chronology." But it is doubtful whether the Five Nations knew anything definite about the Cartier expedition which had visited the territories only of their mortal enemies, for such knowledge could have come to them only by the vague hearsay of captives, and it is not probable that such precarious information "would naturally make an epoch in their chronology."

The inference from the presumptive evidence in our possession is that the "white people" mentioned by Pyrlaeus and either by him or by Heekewelder identified with the Dutch, were only a part of the "white people" who were first met during the year 1609.

Again, on page 180 of the volume cited, Mr. Hale says: "If when the Dutch first came among the Iroquois the confederacy had existed for only about eighty years, there must have been many persons then living who had personally known some of its founders." But we have no proof that there were *not* "many" such persons "then living," for the early Dutch were far more solicitous about profits of barter than for ethnologic data, and so it is not in the least strange that they have left us scarcely any trustworthy evidence regarding the institutions of the people with whom they traded.

"It is," he further says, "quite inconceivable that the cloud of mythological legends which has gathered around the names of these founders . . . should have arisen in so short a term as that suggested by Pyrlaeus." But, in the first place, it is overlooked that the founders of the league were all men reputed to be skilled in the arts of sorcery and the supernatural, and, secondly, that their language of statecraft dealt very largely in metaphor, allegory, and in striking symbolism, and, lastly, that common tradition, unhampered by written records, would, in attempting to eulogize the achievements of their heroes, in a short time transform such material into confused mythologic legends by confounding the acts and sayings of their heroes with those attributed to their gods.

Mr. Hale believes it improbable that in the brief period which has elapsed since the date suggested by the tradition recorded by Pyrlaeus "a fourth part of the names of the fifty [original, forty-eight] chiefs" forming the first council would have become "unintelligible or at least doubtful in meaning."

In the first place, there is no evidence that many, much less a "fourth" part of the names mentioned have come to be unintelligible or doubtful in meaning, and, in the second place, it is very unlikely, though upon this point direct evidence is wanting, that a single name was specially coined at the time of the establishment of the league; so that it is quite probable that all the names may have long antedated the constitution of the confederacy, and they may have also inherited the prestige and tales springing from the heroic or other acts of their former possessors.

Lastly, in the legend reciting the events contemporary with the constitution of the league and leading up to its formation, the different tribes of the Iroquois are represented as dwelling in the same relative local positions which they held one to another when they first became known to transatlantic people. It does not seem probable that they could have held these same relative positions had the league existed since the middle of the fifteenth century. Successive migrations necessitated by their environment would have changed much the relative situation of tribal habitats one to another.

This examination of the arguments for and against the date of the constitution of the league suggested by the tradition recorded by Pyrlæus makes it probable that this date was between 1559 and 1570.

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