

# EKARENNIONDI AND OSCOTARACH

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## Abstract

The history, location and meaning of the names EKARENNIONDI and OSCOTARACH are examined.

## Résumé

L'histoire, l'emplacement et sens des noms EKARENNIONDI et OSCOTARACH sont examinés.

## INTRODUCTION

The name **EKARENNIONDI** (various spellings) was first recorded in 1636 as the name of a sacred rock in the country of the Petun Indians. Soon after, it was mentioned as also the name of the principal Petun village. Later, versions of the name appear associated with the northern Petun country, and Lake Huron. At the same time, the rock was OSCOTARACH, the head piercer, the Watcher.

In this text the bold rendering **EKARENNIONDI** applies to the rock; upper case EKARENNIONDI to the village; lower case versions to the lake and land, except in quotations.

## FIGURES

Fig. 1. Photographs of the Rock EKARENNIONDI and OSCOTARACH from above and below. Page 7

Fig. 2. Map "Huronum Explicata Tabula", 1657, by Francesco Bressani, the only map to show the Rock (presumably) *eKarinniondi* Page 8

## EKARENNIONDI - the Rock

As part of his classic study of "The Ideas of the Hurons Regarding the Nature of the Soul, both in this Life and after Death", included in the Relation of 1636, the French Jesuit priest Father Jean de Brébeuf recorded several legends concerning the beliefs of the Huron-Petun in the afterlife, and the journey of the Souls of the newly-dead to their new home in the Village of Souls (JR 10:141-157).

### The first legend - EKARENNIONDI the Rock

The first legend was in response to the question "Where is the Village of Souls ?":

*" .. towards the Tobacco Nation (Petun), that is to say, toward the West, eight leagues from us .. that some persons had seen them (the journeying souls) as they were going; that the road they took was broad and well-beaten; that they passed near a rock called ECAREGNIONDI (Ekarenniondi), which has often been found marked with the paint which they use to smear their faces" (JR 10:145).*

The informant in this instance was very probably a Huron, as Brébeuf was writing in the land of the

Hurons, from which the trail towards the Petuns may well have been "broad and well beaten". If the landscape being described is the real landscape, then it can be assumed that the rock **EKARENNIONDI** is real too.

We are told nothing about the appearance of the rock **EKARENNIONDI**, but the name itself is a clue. In the Huron-Wyandot language the word is a contraction of 'Ek-arenda-iondi', meaning "where there is a point of rocks which projects or stands out", or "it is where a stone is standing out" (Jones 1903:108, 1909:232-3; Steckley 1996). The usual modern abbreviation "The Standing Rock" is not entirely satisfactory. The name is not limited to the actual rock, but includes the place where the rock is.

This legend indicates that a trail passes near the place of the rock, and implies that the rock itself is neither too large nor too small to observe "paint" on it. This paint was probably made from hematite (iron oxide), and may have been applied to the rock by the Indians, but also may appear naturally, the patina of the rock permitting, as rust streaks, as iron oxide occurs naturally in the limestone.

The information that the Petun (Tobacco Nation) were eight leagues from the Hurons is not very helpful in saying where either their country, or the rock **EKARENNIONDI**, were located. Father Brébeuf was writing from Ihonatiria, but the measurement may have been from Ossossane (Jones 1909:221), either directly across Nottawasaga Bay, or following the longer land route. Allowing three miles to a French league (which was not of consistent length) places the Petun too imprecisely somewhere between Collingwood and Thornbury.

#### The second legend - OSCOTARACH the skull opener

The second legend was from a different informant who told Brébeuf:

*"... that on the same road, before arriving at the Village (of Souls), one comes to a Cabin where lives one named OSCOTARACH, or "Pierce-head", who draws the brains out of the heads of the dead, and keeps them. You must pass a river, and the only bridge you have is the trunk of a tree .." (JR 10:147).*

The word OSCOTARACH in the Huron-Wyandot-Iroquois language can be translated as meaning to bore, pierce, penetrate or open skulls or heads. The name is known among the modern Iroquois as Hasko-tä'-hrä-raks (He Pierces Heads), usually thought of as an old man.

The concept of a barrier between the living and the dead which is to be crossed, in this instance a river, is widespread, as is the presence of a benevolent helper who aids the dead, in this instance by removing any longing for the life now finished, and the relatives left behind, by removing the brains "so that they can no longer remember anything" (Boucher 1883:60). This idea is very much associated with Algonquin-speaking people and survives among them to this day. In the modern version of the story, recorded by the Ojibwa writer Basil H. Johnston, Pierce-head is called The Watcher (1976:105-6; 1978). It is likely therefore that when the Petun first moved into Odawa territory, the Odawa introduced them to both the rock and the legend.

Because OSCOTARACH is an eternal deity, the substance of which he is made, if he is visible to the human eye, must be eternal. The most eternal substance available in Indian days was rock. It is probable therefore that OSCOTARACH is a rock, and that it and **EKARENNIONDI**, which is also a rock, and both on the same road to the same Village, are both the same rock.

This legend supports the suggestion that **EKARENNIONDI**, as OSCOTARACH, the Watcher, might have some resemblance to a real or imagined human or animal. He will be facing east to see the Souls who

are travelling west, and have eyes to see them, and also a means of piercing skulls, such as a beak, claws or talons. Nearby might be the brains of the Dead which he has kept.

### The third legend - the Journey to the Land of the Dead

The third legend recorded in 1636 by Father Brébeuf is an enlarged and continued version of the second. It concerns a man whose sister has died. He undertakes the journey westward to the Village of Souls to find her soul and bring it home to restore her physical body to life. On the journey he meets a man "he who keeps the brains of the Dead" (JR 10:149-153). In a modern Ojibwa version of the story, the entrance to the Land of the Dead is guarded by "a man, ancient and withered .. (named) the Watcher" (Johnston 1978:28-32). In John York's version of the story, recorded on the Ojibwa Rama Reserve in 1915, the "old man" has become the culture-hero Nanabush (York, J., 1915:82-83).

### The search for **EKARENNIONDI**

The French accounts do not say where in the Petun territory the rock **EKARENNIONDI** is, but in 1648 it was mentioned that there was also a Petun village of the same name, headquarters of the Jesuit Mission of St. Mathias (Charles Garnier, cited in Jones 1909:230). The name appears on two maps, but both are both too distorted to be helpful. On one, the name is placed in the lake. The map by Francesco Bressani shows *eKarinniondi* marked with a dot, a different symbol from that used for villages, and therefore presumably intending the Rock (Fig. 2). It is a reasonable supposition that the rock and village were close, but not too close to intrude on the sacred place.

Many have searched for **EKARENNIONDI** the rock, **EKARENNIONDI** the village, or both. Historian Andrew F. Hunter, when still a student, visited the village site in 1887, and again in 1902, and concluded it "was probably Ekarenniondi" and that a trail ran through it (n.d.).

Also in 1902 the Jesuit archivist Father Arthur E. Jones, S.J., searched for the rock on the assumption that he would then easily find the village. His search party found an impressive rock, then prominent and visible from a distance, overlooking the Pretty River Valley, which he identified as **EKARENNIONDI** (Jones 1903:106-136, 1909:241-8), but he did not locate any village or trail nearby. With new information of a village site some two miles from his rock, he returned in 1903 to continue searching for other villages. Although his search was ineffectual, and he found no villages, he remained convinced he had found the right rock (Jones 1909:249-261).

In 1903, local researcher Fred Birch, less academic but more knowledgeable of the landscape than Father Jones, rejected Jones' selection, and instead chose the rocks at the "Indian Caves", as the Scenic Caves were then known, partly because there was a village, already recorded by Hunter, nearby. However, he credited Father Jones with prompting his interest (1904:98-101).

In 1906, Lt-Col. G. W. Bruce returned the search to the Pretty River Valley, where he identified as **EKARENNIONDI** "a white limestone escarpment, free of vegetation .. striking forty miles away", because it was near both a trail and a village (1915:38).

In 1908, John Lawrence of the Huron Institute, Collingwood, alone, and with colleagues Maurice Gaviller and James Morris, took a new approach to the search. After examining the Jesuit references he concluded "the mission of St. Mathias occupied the stretch of Mountain extending northward to Georgian Bay" (from the Pretty River Valley), and that earlier searchers had mistakenly sought "a secret rock in some impenetrable mountain fastness rather than a sacred rock of easy access from the village with which it was associated". He and his colleagues methodically inspected every known village site in

Collingwood and Nottawasaga Townships, and by process of elimination selected the Scenic Caves village site and rock as **EKARENNIONDI** (Lawrence 1909:62-65; 1916:40-48; Lawrence, Gaviller, Morris 1909:16-17), reaching the same conclusions as Hunter and Birch.

In 1923, William J. Wintemberg of Victoria Memorial (National) Museum in Ottawa conducted an archaeological survey through the Petun area. He visited what is now the Scenic Caves property and described the village site there as "the village of the Standing Rock" (1923).

In the 1940s, Joseph N. Bourrie, Collingwood postmaster, wrote several articles about the Petun. As President of the Collingwood Board of Trade he published a proposal for a "Huronian Sky-Line Drive" to be built by the Province of Ontario to link major Indian village sites in the Collingwood area. Largely quoting John Lawrence, he accepted the village site on the Scenic Caves property as "Ekarenniondi, where 'The Rock Stands Out'", and also as St. Mathias, "headquarters of the missionaries of the Petun Country" (1944:2-5, 10).

In the 1950s, retired teacher Edward H. Thomas, President of the Collingwood Writers' Club, suggested that the Hen rock in Collingwood harbour, one of a cluster of rocks from which Collingwood took its earlier name "Hen and Chickens", was **EKARENNIONDI**. This novel proposal, which gained no acceptance, was based on the legend that placed **OSCOTARACH** the rock beyond a river, which he interpreted as the Nottawasaga (Thomas n.d.). However, Thomas accepted the Scenic Caves village site as **EKARENNIONDI**, and was instrumental in a large collection of Indian artifacts from it being donated to the Royal Ontario Museum.

John "Jay" Allan Blair, a local historian and intellectual, examined all the evidence for himself over many years. He visited the candidate rocks which were then proposed, and in 1915 took a photograph of a search party at Jones' rock (Garrad 1982a:60). He elected for the Rock at the Scenic Caves, as had most others, but at the same time considered that from the point of view of the Hurons across the Nottawasaga Bay, the entire Blue Mountain headland district was a "rock that stands out".

John Lawrence's research demonstrated that the sites chosen by Father Jones and Col. Bruce were too far south to be eligible. Since that time two additional items of evidence confirm his interpretation. Firstly, the reason that Jones' and Bruce's locations were so visible at the time was that in the late 1800s a forest fire had burned over the mountain and destroyed the trees that might have obstructed the views. Jones commented on the total lack of vegetation, and his photograph shows that all the trees near his rock were dead (1909:246-247). A photograph of the same rock published by John Lawrence in 1908(?) shows some but little change (1916:41). Blair's photograph of the same rock in 1915 shows it towering above undergrowth which is slowly growing and recovering (Garrad 1982a:60). Today the scenery has considerably changed. Jones rock is now invisible, lost among the matured trees. Similarly, the escarpment described by Bruce as free of vegetation is now completely covered with it. If mature forest covered the area in Indian days, neither location would have "stood out". The second development is the realization, following years of archaeology on the site, that the village of **EKARENNIONDI** at the Scenic Caves is too early to be the Jesuit St. Matthew. By the time the Jesuits arrived the village had moved to a new location, at Craigeith, keeping the old name (Garrad 1982b). The Jesuits who lived at Craigeith may not even have known of the village's earlier location on the Scenic Caves property.

Today, no-one disputes that the sacred Rock marking the trail to the Village of the Dead, which is at the same time **EKARENNIONDI**, The Watcher and **OSCOTARACH**, the Head-Piercer, is the rock long so identified at the Scenic Caves. It is the only rock which meets all the tests implied in the legends.

**EKARENNIONDI** is also a place, where the rock stands. Behind the rock is "a sort of amphitheatre forty

or fifty feet in diameter" (Birch 1904:99), a bowl-shaped cavity which may be perceived as resembling a huge nest with eggs. This is probably the Thunderbird's Nest believed by the Chippewas of Rama as late as the present century to be on the Blue Mountain (York, P., 1915:72). The principal attribute of the Thunderbird is its ability to affect the weather. It is interesting to wonder if Peter York's story is a distorted memory of a real Thunderbird there (see below). There are also many cracks and cavities leading down into the rock, perceivable as the route to the Underworld below. It is a place where, in the Ojibwa cosmological view, all Three (Upper, Middle and Lower) Worlds meet.

Fortunately, anyone can go to the Rock today for the price of admission to the Scenic Caves, and see all this for oneself.

### EKARENNIONDI and OSCOTARACH - THE ROCK

The appearance of the rock varies. The angle and strength of light, the consequent shadows, the position of the viewer, and the degree of imagination applied, all are factors in determining what the viewer sees. From one minute to another the rock may be perceived to be the petrified figure of a sleepy bear or a tired old man. A "death's-head" effigy sometimes appears. From below it may be a bear rearing up, or a watchful owl. Any of these interpretations would make an acceptable Oscotarach, with claws, teeth, beak, talons. He faces east, watching for journeying Souls. With further imagination, the rounded, weathered boulders strewn at his feet down the talus slope below the Rock look strangely like human brains.

The fact that the reported iron oxide "*paint which they use to smear their faces*", observable at times on the Rock, may not have been applied by Indians because it occurs naturally, does not detract from the Rock's identification. A number of sacred rocks are known in Ontario, some painted (pictographs) or carved (petroglyphs), others not. The paintings or carvings were added in some instances because the rock was first recognized as sacred. For others, no man-made alteration is necessary, the natural character of the rock being sufficient to "provoke ritual and .. myth and .. all sorts of associated symbolic meanings". Especially, in the presence of natural hollows, cracks and crevices in and around the rock the Algonquins would believe the place to be "especially charged with Manitou and regarded as the dwelling place of the spirit .. various supernatural beings or people .." (Molyneaux 1978:11-13). The Rock and its environs at the Scenic Caves have an abundance of hollows, cracks and crevices, such as "Fat Man's Misery", enough to ensure the area was venerated by both the Algonquin Odawa and the Iroquoian Petuns, and probably avoided as a sacred and fearsome place except by the highest shamans.

### EKARENNIONDI - the Early Village - 1616-1636(?)

The village site on the Scenic Caves property about ¼ mile (.4 km) from the Rock, known to Fred. Birch and examined by John Lawrence and other researchers, was more closely archaeologically examined between 1975 and 1982. The conclusions reached is that the remains are actually of two adjacent companion villages, both of which were visited by Samuel de Champlain in 1616, one of which was then EKARENNIONDI (Garrad 1998). As mentioned, some time before the Jesuits took up residence in 1639 both villages had moved to new locations at Craigeith, where, in its new location, the village of EKARENNIONDI retained its old name (Garrad 1982b).

### EKARENNIONDI - the Later Village - 1637(?) - 1650

In 1639 the Jesuits commenced the "Mission surnamed 'Of the Apostles' to the Khionontateronons" (Petun), and recorded the names of Apostles they had assigned to nine Petun and Petun-Odawa villages in the Petun country. The last village but one on the list was St. Matthieu (JR20:43). After the Mission was divided into two districts in 1646, St. Matthieu became the headquarters of the Mission District of St. Matthias, and was at the same time the principal Petun village. Its Petun name was given in 1648 as EKARENNIONDI (Charles Garnier, 1648, cited by Jones 1909:356; Garrad 1997). Thus, the village of EKARENNIONDI is known to have had two locations.

#### Ekarenniondi - the land

As mentioned, from the point of view of the Hurons across the Nottawasaga Bay, the entire Blue Mountain headland district of the Niagara Escarpment might have been seen as a "rock that stands out". Whether this is the reason the district became known as Ekarenniondi, or because of the presence of the Rock or the village of the same name, is not clear. The evidence that the tableland above Craighleith was called Ekarenniondi is the map "Description du Pays des Hurons" 1631-1651, possibly the work of Father Jean de Brébeuf. Two legends, "Nation du Petun" and "Ekarenniondi" seem to both apply to the tableland. Unfortunately, the legend "Ekarenniondi" is placed in the lake for lack of space on the land, where it is so obscured by hachuring indicating shoreline as to be almost illegible and not reproducible. The legend does not apply to the lake, however, which is separately designated "Partie du grand lac des Hurons".

After the Petun-Wyandot people left in 1650 the land lay empty of people until eventually it became occupied by Algonquin Indian bands, a branch of whom, the Ojibwa, ceded it to the British Crown in 1818.

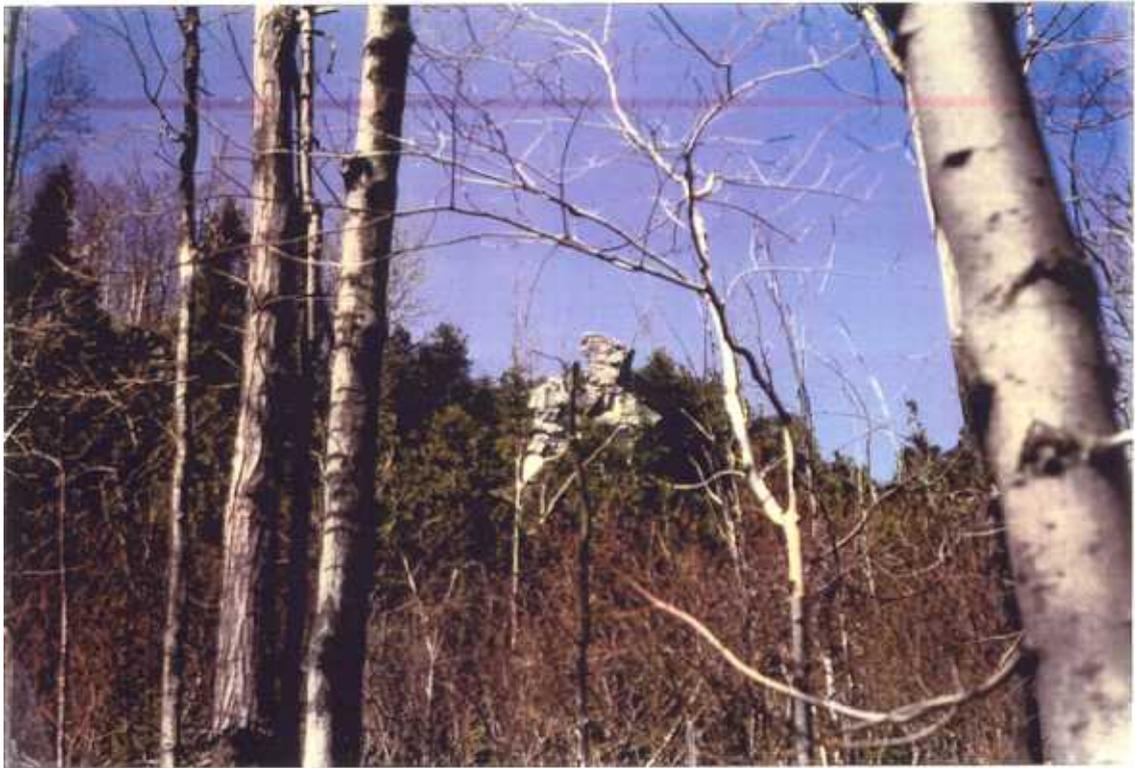
#### Ekarenniondi - the lake

On a number of seventeenth-century French maps, Lake Huron is marked "Karegnondi". Local researchers assumed that this was the Huron name for Georgian Bay (Lawrence, Gaviller & Morris 1909:17), presumably based on the proximity of Ekarenniondi, both rock and village. An alternative possible explanation is that someone misinterpreted the placing of the name "Ekarenniondi" in the lake on the Brébeuf (?) 1631-1651 map as applicable to the lake, and later copyists continued the error. The Huron names for Lake Huron, Georgian Bay or Nottawasaga Bay are not known.

#### Other Standing Rocks

In 1745 Father Pierre Potier, missionary to the Petun descendants then living in the Detroit Valley, recorded the name 'Karindiondi' as the place on the western shore of Lake Erie the French called "Pointe aux Roches" (Potier 1920:155), now anglicized to "Stony Point" near Monroe, Michigan. No legends associated with this place are known to the writer.

The 1670 description of a rock site on the west bank of the Detroit River might well have applied to the **EKARENNIONDI** in Ontario: "a place that is very remarkable, and held in great veneration by all the Indians of these countries, because of a stone idol that nature has formed there .. they propitiate it by sacrifices, presents of skins, provisions, etc. .. The place was full of camps of those who had come to pay their homage to this stone, which had no other resemblance to the figure of a man than what the



**Fig. 1. The Rock EKARENNIONDI and OSCOTARACH, from above and below.**



imagination was pleased to give it. However, it was all painted, and a sort of face had been formed for it with vermilion". The size of the "idol.. god of stone" was such that the Frenchmen were able to break it up with an axe and drop all the pieces into the river (Galinée, cited in Lajeunesse 1960:7-8). The former location of the destroyed stone is a matter of dispute. Galinée's measurements (six leagues up the river, four leagues south of Lake St. Clair) would seem to place it near the River Rouge, but local enthusiasts place it at Gibraltar because it was formerly called Gros Roche (Rahn, per. com.).

Recollet Brother Gabriel Sagard described rocks he saw by the Ottawa River in 1624: "They (the Indians) believe also that there are certain spirits which bear rule over one place, and others over another .. they offer them tobacco and make some kind of prayer .. they showed me (a rock) which had something like a head and two upraised arms, and in the belly or middle of this mighty rock there was a deep cavern very difficult to approach. They tried to persuade me, and make me believe absolutely, as they did, that this rock had been a mortal man like ourselves and that while lifting up his arms and hands he had been transformed into this stone, and in course of time had become a mighty rock, to which they pay respect and offer tobacco when passing .." (Sagard 1939:171). Father Jean de Brébeuf described a rock in such very similar terms that it must have been the same rock (JR10:165-167). This was probably Roche de Oiseau (Bird Rock).

### The Nest and Roost of the Thunderbird

The Standing Rock **EKARENNIONDI** may have two associations with Thunderbirds.

As mentioned above, the bowl-shaped cavity behind the Rock may be the feature described earlier this century as a Thunderbird's Nest, a place of communication with the Other Worlds. However, in 1636 Father Jean de Brébeuf met and interviewed a living Thunderbird, the Petun shaman **ONDITACHIAÉ**, who was famous for being able to control the weather (JR10:195-197), the principal attribute of a Thunderbird.

It is not recorded where **ONDITACHIAÉ** lived, but logically a shaman of such power resided in or near the principal village, **EKARENNIONDI**, perhaps as both its locations (Scenic Caves and Craigleith). From either, he would have had access to the Rock, and from it would have been able to view the weather approaching from the prevailing north-west. He refused to inform the Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf, who interviewed him, how and where he performed his magic, but a reasonable guess is that he did so at the most 'powerful' place available nearby. This would be at **EKARENNIONDI**, the Sacred Rock.

Interestingly, Father Brébeuf complained about the strange weather in his village (JR10:43). This was Ossossané, visible across the Nottawasaga Bay from **EKARENNIONDI**.

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