The Power of the Ecotone: Bison, Slavery, and the Rise and Fall of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia

Robert Michael Morrissey

Among the largest population centers in North America toward the end of the seventeenth century was the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia, which, combined with surrounding settlements, enveloped as many as twenty thousand people for approximately two decades. Located at the top of the Illinois River valley, the village is not normally considered a significant part of American history, so it has remained relatively unknown. In many accounts, the location is discussed merely as a refugee center to which desperate, beleaguered Algonquians fled ahead of a series of mid-seventeenth-century Iroquois conquests that were part of the violence known as the Beaver Wars. Reeling from violence and constrained by necessity, the Illinois speakers who predominated in the place belonged to a “fragile, disordered world,” “made of fragments” and dependent on French support. The size of the settlement did not reflect a particular level of native power but was simply proportional to the devastation, suffering, and urgency felt by the people of the pays d’en haut (the Great Lakes area)—and particularly by the Illinois—at the start of the colonial period.1

Robert Michael Morrissey is an assistant professor of history at the University of Illinois. He wishes to thank Aaron Sachs, Gerry Cadava, John White, Jake Lundberg, Fred Hoxie, Antoinette Burton, Kathleen DuVal, Ben Irwin, John Hoffman, the University of Illinois Department of History; members of the History Workshop at the University of Illinois; Edward T. Linenthal, Cynthia Gwynne Yaudes, Nic Champagne, and Alexis Smith of the Journal of American History; and the anonymous readers for the JAH.

Readers may contact Morrissey at morriss@illinois.edu.

This typical story of the village, like the French accounts on which it is based, ignores an important truth. The end of the seventeenth century in this region was a time after initial contact with European cultures but long before the colonial era had begun in any meaningful way. Inhabitants of the Illinois River valley felt the tremendous effect of contact: the Iroquois wars, epidemic disease, and the establishment of new centers of trade. Diverse evidence suggests, however, that the people there were acting according to logics that, while not static or "traditional," had more to do with the native past than the colonial future. The Illinois, a colonizing people, were acting opportunistically and even aggressively rather than desperately. The starkest proof is that many of the Illinois-speaking occupants of the village were actually migrants from the West, not refugees from the East. By moving into the violence, to a zone less secure than their previous one, they were not responding defensively or out of necessity. So what were they doing?2

This essay reconsiders the rise and fall of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia, arguing that it was a center of exploitation—perhaps the most remarkable bid for power in seventeenth-century native North America. Having invaded the tallgrass prairies during a period of climate change, the Illinois went to the village not out of desperation but to continue a power-seeking trajectory begun in the early 1600s. Assembling in great numbers at the top of the valley did provide security, of course, but it also gave the Illinois a unique ability to capitalize on the particular ecological and social advantages of their recently mastered borderlands region. Most important among these were opportunities for bison hunting, slavery, and slave trading—the foundations of an ambitious economy and social strategy that the Illinois speakers sought to maximize in their massive population center. Importantly, the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia and its successor, Pimitéoui, were located where the Illinois could best combine these advantages, with French support, into a powerful, exploitative lifeway.3

Field biologists have coined the term ecotone to characterize the border zones between types of vegetation (such as grasslands and wetlands) where different species and ecological communities meet and interact. According to ecologists, ecotones are special because they often open new configurations of possibility and create “edge effects”: an increase in the variety of plants and animals where the two zones overlap. In the transition zones, certain species—particularly mobile animals—can exploit multiple habitats within a small space. At these edges, highly adaptable and mobile species can specialize to take advantage of the unusual combination of ecological opportunities that emerge in the transition zone.4

At the end of the seventeenth century the upper Illinois Valley was a literal and metaphorical ecotone, an important place of divisions. Ecologically it marked the transition


between the woodlands of the East and the grasslands of the West, and it was the beginning of the distinctive tallgrass prairies in the middle of the continent. In a social and cultural sense, the Illinois Valley was the transition point between two broadly contrasting groups of people—Great Lakes Algonquians and the Siouan and Caddoan speakers of the plains. For reasons rooted in these important divisions, the Illinois Valley provided new opportunities—an edge effect—for the recently arrived Illinois speakers who colonized the region in the 1600s. At the the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia, positioned precisely at the edge of zones, the Illinois became specialists of the ecotone, and briefly dominated.

Even so, the settlement was short-lived. The village complex broke up quickly, over a couple of decades. Its rapid decline, like its rise, was rooted in the dynamics of the borderlands environment and the particular ways the Illinois attempted to exploit it. Ecologically, the inhabitants of this place ran into limits. The massive population center overtaxed resources at the edge. More importantly, the slave economy and slave-based society at the heart of Illinois activities in the village produced specific social tensions. In both its mode of production and reproduction, the society proved unstable. Well before the Iroquois wars ended, the village was already coming apart. A brief moment of power and exploitation for the natives did not last.

Yet neither the rise nor the fall of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia has much to do with the supposedly accommodationist culture of the Illinois, with their victimization by the Iroquois, or with their dependency on the French—all the typical explanations for Illinois history in this period. As is still often true of contact-era history in many regions of North America, historians of the Illinois Country have treated Indian actions in the late seventeenth century as merely reactionary, motivated primarily by “military reversals” and other external factors rather than by strategic and proactive indigenous logics. By reconsidering traditional French sources and other available evidence—archaeology, material culture, linguistics, and the often-ignored ecology of the region—we can recontextualize the village from the Illinois point of view. Focusing on the Illinois’ opportunistic exploitation of bison and slaves, we can see that the settlement of the village complex was not merely reactionary but was most likely a sign of Indian ambition—the climax of an era of Illinois expansion in the postcontact but precolonial period. It was a dramatic bid for power in seventeenth-century America within a geographical and environmental context—the ecotone—that shaped the Illinois strategy.

Newcomers

As Kathleen DuVal has noted, categories such as “natives” and “newcomers” often mask complexity in the history of European-Indian contact. The Illinois during the contact

---

6 The prairie-woodland division is one of the most important regional-scale ecotones in North America. See Anthony M. Davis, “The Prairie-Deciduous Forest Ecotone in the Upper Middle West,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 67 (June 1977), 204–13. Although the categories “Algonquian,” “Siouan,” and “Caddoan” do not imply any internal unity, this essay uses them in combination with regional categories to refer to broadly differentiated cultural, linguistic, subsistence, and kinship groupings among which the Illinois made their lives. See Helen Hornbeck Tanner, ed., *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman, 1987), 14–15, 20–21, 26–27.

7 For challenges to the patronizing myth that past Indian lifeways were always sustainable, see Pekka Hämäläinen, “The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures,” *Journal of American History*, 90 (Dec. 2003), 833–62; and Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, 1999).
The period were recent colonizers of the prairies. As Algonquian farmers struggled through climate change in the East, the proto-Illinois invaded and conquered the grasslands. The invasion was opportunistic.\(^8\)

Agricultural societies in North America faced difficulty in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, thanks to several climate events—the Little Ice Age, most importantly. Many Algonquians in the Ohio River valley were dedicated to farming, but they struggled. For people such as the proto-Illinois, who lived south of Lake Erie and in the Ohio Valley in small-scale villages linked by kinship and a shared language, the new conditions may have produced as many as thirty fewer frost-free days, resulting in “dark” times in their region. Meanwhile, Siouan speakers to the west, known to archaeologists as the Oneota, also struggled as they farmed the river valleys of the Illinois Country. However, the same climate changes that had reduced other agricultural yields brought a new opportunity for the Oneota, allowing them to tap the previously unused prairie uplands to create a new lifeway.\(^9\)

What was the prairie? Although the landscape’s formation was complex, its essence lay in a basic reality: more evaporation than rainfall. Then, as now, the rain shield of the

---

\(^8\) DuVal, Native Ground, 10. I use the term *proto-Illinois* to describe those natives identified by archaeologists as the precontact ancestors of the Illinois.

Rocky Mountains wrung out the moisture from the continent’s prevailing westerly weather patterns, producing a dry region across the middle of the country. Combined with hot summer temperatures, aridity created an environment hostile for trees but ideal for grasses, resulting in the Great Plains. At the eastern edge of this region, the transition zone between grassland and woodland was characterized by a special landscape in the Midwest: the tallgrass prairie. Although evaporation and rainfall were roughly equal, thanks to heavy summer precipitation carried up from the Gulf of Mexico, most trees still could not thrive due to periodic fire, dense grass roots, low winter precipitation, and other factors.

One of the earliest descriptions of this landscape comes from the French explorer Jacques Marquette, who entered the Illinois Valley in the 1670s:

There are prairies three, six, ten, and twenty leagues in length and three in width, surrounded by forests of the same extent; beyond these, the prairies begin again, so that there is as much of one sort of land as of the other. Sometimes we saw grass very short, and, at other times, five or six feet high; hemp, which grows naturally here, reaches a height of eight feet.10

Marquette was not incorrect—in this patchy transition zone, approximately 55 percent of the land was treeless prairie, 40 percent was woodlands, and the rest was wetlands. Much of the prairie region surrounded the Illinois Valley. Under the prairie were tremendous soils, a combination of glacial deposits and loess built up over centuries. If early occupants of this region could have figured a way to farm the prairie, they would have been extremely gifted in their environment because the topsoil was incredibly fertile. But there was no way to do that before the invention of steel plows. The prairie ecosystem seemed largely off limits to humans. Since humans cannot eat grass, they were unable to exploit the calories it afforded—that is, until bison unlocked that prairie ecosystem for exploitation.11

Importantly, the bison populating the region had arrived in large numbers only as recently as the 1500s. The same climate shifts that made farming so difficult around the Great Lakes also likely had brought these new animals. Soon the prairies were full of bison for the first time since the late Pleistocene epoch. This prompted many of the Oneota inhabitants of the prairie peninsula to participate in a “bison revolution”: to focus on bison hunting and, eventually, to move farther west, probably vacating much of the Illinois Valley, in search of larger herds. At the same time, the proto-Illinois began to use long-established trade routes, traveling west across Indiana and into the prairie landscape, learning the bison lifeway. Soon they colonized the region and likely forced out remaining Oneota peoples. Mastering the prairie transition zone, the proto-Illinois entered a region that provided a sudden improvement in their mode of production.12

The prairie ecosystem in the Illinois region in the 1600s was defined by large bison herds. Early Illinois Valley explorers such as Louis Hennepin routinely counted herds numbering between four hundred and five hundred, and estimated that “there must be an
innumerable quantity of wild bulls in that Country.” Robert de La Salle said the typical herd size was between two hundred and four hundred. Sebastien Rasles stated that he saw bison in herds numbering four thousand to five thousand, “as far as the eye can reach.” Of course, there were bison in other areas east of the Mississippi River, in occasional patches of grassland. Even so, in this western region, beginning in modern Illinois, there were large herds, suitable as the foundation for a lifeway.13

Taking advantage of these great animals, the Illinois did base a new lifeway on bison. Their technique of pedestrian bison hunting was complex, probably borrowed from their Oneota predecessors. As historical evidence makes clear, they went on cooperative long-range hunts in large groups. Most characteristically, they set the prairie grasses ablaze to drive bison to a kill zone. By the contact period they were hunting on the prairies during the summer and then again from autumn through winter, killing no fewer than two thousand animals every year, according to one eyewitness. Some regions, particularly around salt licks, were particularly rich with large herds. In any event, the bison hunts transformed the Illinois people. Exploiting these calories in the prairie ecosystem, the newcomers realized the first advantage of the ecotone.14

Transitional Culture

The Illinois made a prosperous new life as bison people, mastering the woodlands-prairie transition. Significantly, they moved well past the actual forest-grasslands border. Like the Oneota before them, many Illinois-speaking groups migrated far into the West. They committed themselves to the bison environment, choosing to leave the Great Lakes watershed to head down the Illinois Valley and into present-day Iowa and the Des Moines River valley. They did not completely abandon their Algonquian roots and did maintain connections to the Great Lakes world, but as the Illinois moved, they clearly transformed their culture to become more like their new plains neighbors than the woodlands kinmen they left behind.

Entering this prairie world required ecological and cultural transformation and negotiation. The Illinois made cultural adaptations beyond their new subsistence strategies.


The Power of the Ecotone

Historical evidence suggests that much of the Illinois invasion of the prairies was accompanied by violence, including war with the Winnebago in the 1630s and with others vaguely identified as Sioux. Most likely they assimilated some of these Siouan speakers, adopting them into their lineages. This action makes sense, since for most plains people and for Illinois newcomers kinship was clearly the most important means of separating “friends” from foreigners. In any event, this was the beginning of a decidedly “western” shift in Illinois culture.15

Illinois material culture tells the clearest story of how they created new relationships and adopted traditions from their new neighbors. Contact-era evidence reveals that bison formed the basis of this important new material culture, reflecting the distinctive Illinois identity. Early French visitors such as Marquette marveled at the idiosyncratic bison products that the Illinois used and gave as gifts. Illinois hosts gave robes, belts, garters,

and “other articles made of the hair of bears and bison.” Prestige goods were “made, with considerable skill, from the hair of bears and wild cattle.” Other eyewitnesses noted the cloth and clothing that Illinois women made from bison hair. Men made tools, such as arrow-shaft wrenches and hoes, out of bison bones. In 1683 Hennepin observed Illinois Indians using bison hides to make canoes and tents. As Marquette said, while Indians on the prairies of Illinois had poor beaver resources, “Their wealth consists in the skins of wild cattle.”

Perhaps the most conspicuous manifestations of the new cultural adaptations were in the highly decorated robes and ceremonial objects of the Illinois. Marquette described this artwork, which he had never seen among other Algonquians: “[Bison hair] . . . falls off in Summer, and the skin becomes as soft as Velvet. At that season, the savages use the hides for making fine Robes, which they paint in various Colors.” Observers of the Illinois noted the similarity between their robe art and the tattoos with which they marked their bodies. Significantly, these artistic traditions, which made the Illinois famous in France during the colonial period, were more characteristic of certain western plains cultures than of Algonquian cultures to the east.

Just as they adopted the technique of bison robe painting, the Illinois seem to have adopted some of the world view of their new neighbors on the grasslands. Iconography on hides painted by the Illinois during the contact period shows important affinities with the Oneota and plains peoples. Perhaps most suggestively, the thunderbird motif on one hide robe supposedly given to Marquette by the Peoria in 1673 echoes the symbolism associated with Siouan-speaking groups such as the Winnebago, and may even have been an important symbol in Oneota ethnogenesis. The appropriation of this western icon by the Illinois might reflect how the newcomers adapted to the new social and ideological world they invaded, making relationships with the people and the nonhumans who inhabited their new land. While there is no way to confirm this speculation, it is clear that the Illinois material culture reflected their transformation into bison people. A tantalizing image on an eighteenth-century robe identified with the Illinois shows people hunting bison and elk on a nearly treeless prairie, and it even shows them dancing in bison costume. Another Illinois hide robe expresses the relationship between people and bison even more directly by including a large depiction of the animal crosshatched into the hide. Assimilating some of the traditions of their hosts, the Illinois became the only “bison Algonquians.”

If the Illinois were picking up foreign influences, they were incorporating them into a distinctive Illinois culture. They did not assimilate, abandon their Algonquin language, or merge with western groups. If anything, they seem to have incorporated and adopted


outsiders into their world, creating a distinctive identity apart from neighbors. Of course, it is impossible to tell how and when the Illinois thought of themselves as a distinct group, shifting from what we might consider the proto-Illinois to the historic Illinois. This is because the Illinois did not organize themselves primarily into a "tribe" or a "nation" or even a "confederacy." Rather, they based most of their identity on kinship and families. For Illinois-speaking newcomers in the 1600s, the world was organized into a8enti8aki (relatives) and ninac8atisi (strangers). Among the Illinois speakers were at least thirteen distinct subgroups—or familles—at the time of contact: Peoria, Kaskaskia, Tamaroa, Coiracoentanon, Chinko, Cahokia, Chepoussa, Amenakoa, Oouka, Acansa, Moingwena, Tapuaro, Maroa, and Ispeminkias. A later French observer would note that these were inclusive units, not necessarily based solely in biological kinship, and included “degrees of kinship that [Europeans] . . . would not even call cousins.” The Illinois speakers, living in as many as sixty separate villages, nonetheless shared kinship connections and a distinct identity.19

By the contact period the Illinois had developed an oppositional identity, positioning themselves against neighbors. As Marquette noted, “When one speaks the word Illinois, it is as if one said in their language ‘the men.’” And though this was a typical feature of many native languages, the Illinois ethnonym contained an implied superiority that was remarkable for newcomers making their way in a diverse borderland. According to Marquette, it was “as if the other savages were looked upon by them merely as animals.” The Illinois showed their oppositional identity also in their performance of the calumet ceremony. Picking up this western diplomatic tradition through trade sometime during the 1600s, the newcomers used it to declare a distinctive history, rooted in military conquest. When the Illinois first showed the calumet dance to Marquette, they clearly performed to demonstrate their prowess, celebrating past battles and routs. Conspicuously, after celebrating the calumet dance for Marquette, they gave him gifts made of bison, and it is possible they gave him four hide robes which today survive in Paris’s Quai Branly Museum. Featuring images of bison crosshatched into the hide, these presents were symbols of the Illinois as colonizers, given in the context of a dance recalling the history of their conquest. Importantly, while some of the Illinois-associated hide art is certainly bison skin, some may be made from deer or even caribou. If that is true, then the robes are not only distinctive as specimens of hide art but are also perfectly symbolic of the Illinois position in the ecotone—woodlands species, decorated in the fashion of western plains cultures.20


Neither fully assimilating into the prairie social world nor fully abandoning their Great Lakes roots, the Illinois became entrepreneurial go-betweens among the diverse Siouan speakers of the West and the Algonquians of the East. Archaeological evidence from Illinois sites on the Mississippi River suggests that the Illinois began trading for European metal as early as the 1620s, likely with Wendats or others in the North. They probably carried these materials south and west, toward modern Missouri, where they traded them for profit and to make alliances. By the mid-seventeenth century the Illinois had become merchants. They did not disappear or assimilate into the world of their Siouan-speaking neighbors; instead they prospered and made a distinctive identity.21

Thus, the Illinois became a “transitional” culture. Part of their identity resembled neighbors in the Great Lakes region. They were patrilineal and patrilocal, like most Al-

gonquians. They spoke an Algonquian language. But they dressed, and lived, like westerners. They were a culture of the edge—bison Algonquians. Indeed, the Illinois in this period might be understood as multicultural and ecological adaptors—chameleons with a high degree of flexibility. And given their successful adaptation, it is possible to imagine an alternative history where the Illinois might have become peacemakers, negotiating and mediating the transition between different cultures during a violent period. That, however, was a road the Illinois did not take.22

Beaver Wars and Slavery

As they advanced to the west, the Illinois must have heard of the Beaver Wars that began in the 1640s. The Iroquois arrived during the next decade, attacking and routing an Illinois village in the Illinois Valley. For many historians, that moment marks the beginning of the Illinois decline. In the typical telling, Iroquois attacks forced the Illinois into a defensive and desperate set of migrations as they “fled to escape.” Too weak to act strategically in the wake of “military reversals,” the Illinois were “disorganized and demoralized.” Only the “increasing presence of the French” and the assistance they provided gave the Illinois “courage to face the Iroquois,” and “encouraged” them...

to return to the Illinois Valley among other “shattered” Algonquians after 1673. As historians have told the story, Illinois contact-era history was a tale of repeated reaction.23

By resting so much of the Illinois story on external factors such as the Iroquois and the French, historians have ignored significant evidence that the Illinois were proactive for their own reasons, beginning after the initial Iroquois attacks. For instance, while it is true that the Illinois were early victims of the Iroquois’ aggressive ventures into the pays d’en haut in the 1650s, Illinois warriors were never as decimated as were other Algonquian groups, and almost certainly were not “demoralized” or “beleaguered.” In fact, immediately after the Beaver Wars began, the Illinois counterattacked a group of Iroquois “who were on their way to hunt beaver in the Illinois Country.” Moreover, far from simply acting defensively, the Illinois soon initiated conflicts. In the 1650s Illinois warriors attacked Winnebago settlements and a Fox village. Before long, they were at war with “seven or eight” different nations. While no sources directly explain why the Illinois launched these violent campaigns, evidence suggests that their motives were strategic rather than mere reactions to external factors.24

An important pattern emerges from the Illinois engagements in this period. The Illinois were routing their enemies but also usually taking large numbers of captives. Attacking the Winnebago, the Illinois took an entire village captive. One French account claimed that “so vigorous was their attack that they killed, wounded, or made prisoners all the Puans, except a few who escaped.” As one Jesuit priest put it, “All the people of this Nation were killed or taken captive by the Illinioeuk.” In 1675 they attacked a Fox village, taking a number of slaves. To understand Illinois efforts to take captives as part of their attacks, we must look at the practice of slavery among eastern Native Americans.25

It is no accident that the best informants on Indian slavery in the contact period were eyewitnesses to the Illinois activity and the importance they placed on captive taking. A Jesuit visitor to the Illinois Country in the seventeenth century expressed the central logic of Indian captivity and slavery: kinship replacement. “If any one of their warriors has been killed, and they think it a duty to replace him in his cabin, they give to this cabin one of their prisoners, who takes the place of the deceased; and this is what they call ‘resuscitating the dead.’” Another priest in the Illinois Country, Jacques Gravier, created a dictionary of the Illinois language for French speakers in the 1690s. The five-hundred-page book contains a virtual primer for understanding the subtleties of Indian slavery in this period, as Brett Rushforth has shown. One telling term for slavery in Gravier’s dictionary expressed the essence of the phenomenon: nirapakerima, meaning “I adopt him in place of the dead.” According to a later French observer, the purpose of Illinois warring

during the contact period was to bring back slaves “to replace . . . those whom the fate of war has taken away.” 26

Replacement was the basic principle of native warfare, not just for the Illinois but also for the Algonquian world in this period. As native populations decreased via disease and violence, the dead needed to be replaced. This was, of course, a complicated business, and certain requirements governed the taking of slaves. Most importantly, a captive could not be kin or the kin of allies. As the French would learn as they began buying and receiving slaves from their native allies, owning a slave antagonized the culture and lineage to which that person belonged. In the Algonquian-speaking world amid the Beaver Wars, many groups had consolidated, uniting kin lines to reestablish their families. In this context, Algonquian-speaking captives were often useless because attempting to enslave or adopt them into a lineage would only upset neighbors in the mixed-up world of the pays d’en haut. Only true strangers, with no kin ties, would do. Therefore, foreigners—Iroquois from the east and especially Siouan speakers or Caddoan speakers from the west—made the best slaves. These people had no kin ties; they were complete strangers. They could, however, become a8enti8aki—relatives.27

Given their preference for strangers in captive adoption and enslavement, the Illinois speakers had a hugely important strategic advantage in slaving: they lived in, and increasingly controlled, the borderlands. From their position along the Siouan-Algonquian divide they could raid among diverse groups in the West—very few with kinsmen among the peoples of the Great Lakes. The Illinois took advantage of this lack of kin as they went to war in the 1660s. When they took an entire Winnebago village captive, the Illinois were enslaving a group of people who would not make them enemies among the other Algonquians in the North. The same goes for their reported raids to the south and west in the 1660s. When the Jesuit priest Claude Allouez reported that the Illinois were engaged in wars with the Iroquois, on one side, and with Siouans, on the other, he thought it was a lamentable situation for the Illinois—but it was the heart of their advantage.28

By the 1660s, through slave raids and adoption, the Illinois had probably begun to replace the people they had lost in early Iroquois attacks. Given these circumstances, the Illinois might have stayed out of further conflicts, aloof in their bison-rich borderlands and remote from the violence. Instead they continued their opportunistic trajectory. Taking advantage of a respite from Iroquois attacks, beginning in the late 1660s the Illinois resumed their trading to the north. Several French accounts from this period report the Illinois making their first visits to newly established French outposts in Green Bay, on the Fox River, and on Lake Superior at St. Esprit. As Allouez wrote in 1669, by this time the Illinois were already well-established merchants, traveling north “from time to time in great numbers . . . to carry away hatchets and kettles, guns, and other articles that they

need." A Jesuit map from the 1660s shows the road taken by Illinois merchants as they headed northward.29

Of course, though, every good merchant requires a commodity to sell. Unfortunately, as French observers disappointedly noted, the Illinois prairie homeland lacked lakes and woods as good beaver habitats, so trade in beaver pelts was impossible. The Illinois did have other advantages, however. Living in the borderlands, they projected power both in the Algonquian world to the northeast and among prairie peoples to the south and west. They were slavers, having restored their own depleted population with Winnebagos, Foxes, and probably others. They took the bold and aggressive step of combining the roles of slaver and merchant, continuing to capture and trade for more slaves—Pawnees, Osages, and Missourias—in the South and the West. Then, following the routes they had established earlier in the contact period for trade with the Wendats, the Illinois brought these slaves north and east. Using a market-oriented logic, they began to “traffic” in slaves, as one French observer later put it. Ambitious merchants who lacked good beaver for the fur trade, the Illinois took advantage of the other available commodity: people. By 1673, when Marquette visited the Illinois, the strategy was consummated: “They are warlike, and make themselves dreaded by the Distant tribes to the south and west, whither they go to procure Slaves; these they barter, selling them at a high price to other Nations, in exchange for other Wares.”30

This strategy was not defensive, but aggressive. For years the Illinois had taken advantage of their unique prairie resources by hunting bison. Now they were taking advantage of the borderlands and trading slaves to the Algonquians, thereby exploiting the power of the ecotone.

Of course, this slaving activity was dangerous—probably just as dangerous as any Iroquois threat, as the Illinois were fighting continual wars. The combination of danger and opportunity set the stage for their next action. Evidence suggests that rather than lessening their aggression, the Illinois increased it. Having founded a mode of production on bison, they began to hunt the animals on a larger scale to support a massive population center near a new French outpost in the heart of the violence. From here, as close to the Algonquian markets as they could get while still remaining in their bison habitat, they not only continued trading slaves but also initiated conflicts down the Illinois Valley, where they traveled to capture huge numbers of slaves for trade. At the same time, they radically refashioned their mode of reproduction around slavery. In almost every respect, they began to push their exploitation of their borderlands environment to the maximum. And they did it all at the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia—a place almost uniquely positioned to yield the advantages of the ecotone.

The 1670s and 1680s witnessed the rise of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia as thousands of Illinois speakers gathered in the Illinois Valley. Missing the significance of this

---


massive consolidation, which had begun years earlier, Frenchmen often misunderstood what was happening as Illinois migrants moved to the top of the river valley. An example of this misunderstanding comes from Father Allouez. As he wrote in 1666, “[The Illinois] used to be a populous nation, divided into ten large Villages; but now they are reduced to two.” Allouez said “reduced,” but the villages he visited at the top of the Illinois Valley were much larger than previous Illinois settlements. Moreover, additional Illinois speakers were constantly arriving from the west. “I found this Village largely increased” Allouez wrote of Kaskaskia in 1675, as the village swelled from seventy-five cabins to approximately 350. Each one housing multiple families, these “cabins” represented a substantial population that only continued to grow. After an attack by the Iroquois in 1680, the Illinois speakers immediately gathered even more people at Kaskaskia, at the center of the violence.\textsuperscript{31}

As Allouez said, the village was a melting pot. “Formerly, it was Composed of but one nation, that of the Kachkachka; at the present time, there are 8 tribes in it, the first having summoned the others, who inhabited the neighborhood of the river Mississippi.” The Illinois were moving eastward during this violent time, even though their previous locations were presumably safer from Iroquois attacks. By 1681, as La Salle reported, Kaskaskia was even more diverse, containing “some of the tribes composing the nation of the

\textsuperscript{31}Thwaites, ed., \textit{Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents}, LI, 106, LX, 158.
Illinois [including] the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Tamaroa, Coiracoentanon, Chinko, Cahokia, Chepoussa, Amonooka, Cahokia, Quapaw, and many others.” Together, these people—many traveling from the west—“form[ed] the village of the Illinois made up of about 400 huts.” Hennepin estimated the number of cabins even higher—450—elaborating that each cabin held four or five fires and one or two families per fire. Soon the huge village added the Tapouero and Maroa, both arriving from the west bank of the Mississippi River. The entire village group was “shape shifting,” adopting the unified identity of “Illinois” even as they preserved their “microlevel” identities as members of what La Salle called their “familles,” or, possibly, doodemag. Kinship, the common ancestry dating back into the precontact period, helped make this shape-shifting possible. La Salle pointed out that “all of these nations are comprised beneath the name Illinois because they are related and because there are a few families of each within the village of Kaskaskia.” A word in Gravier’s dictionary provides an encapsulation: “nipec8capimina. We are together from different villages.” In the 1680s Hennepin observed that the diverse population of the village experienced remarkable “unity” and what he called “brotherly love.”

This consolidation was also facilitated by what Kathleen DuVal has called an inclusivist political strategy. Outsiders were accepted into the village. Chickasaws and Shawnees, who spoke languages foreign to the Illinois majority, were welcomed to the area in the 1680s, as were Miamis, whose language was the same as that of the Illinois. A short distance away, other groups such as the Mascouten and the Wea also settled. In addition to the Illinois speakers, then, there were probably five thousand to ten thousand more people in the complex. The Illinois welcomed these “strangers,” just as they did the French newcomers who arrived at Fort St. Louis. Although the Illinois population declined from precontact numbers, the village—twenty thousand people within walking distance of one another—was now vastly bigger than the small-scale villages they were used to. Another population center of Illinois speakers—roughly three thousand—lived to the southwest. This was a similarly diverse melting pot, concentrated in the village of the Cahokia, an Illinois famille.

The majority of these migrants to the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia came with motives not fully understood by the French. Like many later historians, La Salle thought his support inspired these Indians to come together, and he boasted that he was making them “dependent” by supporting them at his small Fort St. Louis installation. Perhaps this accurately described the situation of groups such as the Shawnees, who arrived at the village from the East, badly weakened after devastating attacks by the Iroquois. For the Illinois speakers, however, La Salle’s boasts about dependency seem exaggerated. Even the benefits of French alliance were probably not great enough to explain the Illinois decision to...
come to the village in such numbers, since French support was neither plentiful nor consistent in the 1680s. Indeed, the Illinois sometimes even felt “abandoned” by the French at the village—especially in 1684, when the French governor failed to follow through on a promised campaign against the Iroquois. Surely the Illinois benefited from donations of guns at La Salle’s installation, as well as trade opportunities, especially after La Salle opened up trade in bison skins. And French support certainly mattered in helping the Illinois and other allies organize successful raids against the Iroquois. Even so, French support against the Iroquois was only part of a much bigger picture at the village—one strategic advantage among many.34

In addition to providing military strength against the Iroquois, the massive size of the village gave the Illinois power to redouble their slaving efforts. Throughout the 1680s Frenchmen frequently noted how the Illinois brought slaves up the Illinois River after raids in the West. As La Salle put it, these captives were people “they force to labor for them,” but La Salle also knew that these captives were the key to the Illinois economy, for they were the “slaves which they are accustomed to traffic” or sell to other groups in need of replacement kin. Setting out from the village, the Illinois slave expeditions grew massive. In 1689, two years after a successful raid on the Iroquois, the Illinois headed west and brought back 130 captives from the Osages. In the 1690s they sent 1,200 warriors against the Osages and Quapaws. By the 1690s, French observers noted that “almost all the village marches, and even many women accompany them.” The results were impressive. In one campaign, they “carried away captive [all] the people of a village”—a result that soon became typical. Slaves brought through the Illinois Country included Osages and Missourias, Caddoans such as Kadohadachos and Pawnees, and, of course, Iroquois. In addition, the Illinois continued their business as merchants, selling French goods to allied groups in the Southwest. The demand for goods there was high, and the Illinois took advantage: “These [western] people not being warlike like themselves and having need of their trade to get axes, knives, awls, and other objects, the Illinois buy these things from us to resell to them.”35


Kaskaskia became a crossroad between worlds. Pierre-Charles de Liette, commandant at the French outpost at Fort St. Louis, noted that it was a “very frequent thing” for “strangers” to appear in the village for business. Because of the village’s location on the edge of the Great Lakes, Algonquian trading partners “such as Miami, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and others,” could conveniently come to trade for captives. Meanwhile, reflecting the tremendous power of the Illinois, southwestern Siouan speakers such as the Osages appeared each year at the village to “come to seek their friendship and recognize [the Illinois] as their chiefs.” As Liette said, this was flattering to the powerful Illinois, for “it even makes them exultant to see strangers come to recognize some of their people as chiefs.” Antoine Denis Raudot echoed Liette: “This honor that they receive makes them believe that all the ground should tremble under them.” By the 1680s, as one French observer wrote, the Illinois were “the Iroquois of this Country here who will make war with all the other nations.” This reputation reflected the success of the proactive Illinois strategy.

Life at the village was organized around frequent warfare. Liette noted how it was “ordinarily in February that they prepare to go to war.” At that time of year chief’s hosted feasts, collecting warriors to persuade them that “the time is approaching to go in search of men.” Since the Illinois warrior tradition was animated by patrilineal kinship lines, male relatives organized raiding parties to replace their lost brothers, uncles, and fathers. Even so, while Illinois warriors urged one another “to go in search of men,” their practice was usually to go in search of women. This preference for female captives was typical of native systems of slavery throughout North America. It was expedient, since women were easier to control and subdue on long marches, and some native people considered female captives better able to transform their identities in the course of adoption. Among the Illinois, the preference for female captives may have also rested on an even more particular logic: the patrilineal kinship systems common to Algonquian peoples of the Great Lakes, which made women better candidates for assimilation. Commenting on the Illinois warriors in battle, then, numerous Frenchmen noted that the Illinois “always spare the lives of women and children,” bringing them back to the village as slaves.

The massive introduction of female slaves shaped life at Kaskaskia. As La Salle said, “many more women than men” were there, and, relatedly, all eyewitnesses noted that the Illinois practiced polygamy. La Salle noted that most Illinois men had multiple wives, as many as ten or twelve, during this period. The French often did not realize that many of these wives were likely slaves. Indeed, a specific logic underlay these slave-based polygamous marriages. In the Illinois patrilineal society, children took the identity of their fathers, regardless of whether their mothers were native Illinois or outsiders married into...
the group, or even were slaves. Thus, marriages with multiple slaves strengthened the Illinois numbers, since all children would be raised as members of Illinois familles. All of this made sense as a mode of reproduction: Illinois families could be reconstituted and sustained by slavery and polygamy.38

Therefore the population of the village swelled with enslaved women. The large number of female slaves in Illinois in this period forces a reconsideration of a notorious episode in Illinois history: the supposedly devastating attack on Kaskaskia by Iroquois in 1680. In many French accounts, this was a decisive blow, as the Illinois sustained hundreds of casualties. A particular detail made this defeat especially pathetic, leading the French—and many later historians—to regard the Iroquois as weak and even desperate. As Iroquois warriors invaded, Illinois men fled, leaving women and children behind with no defenses. To the French, who had seen Illinois men abandon women and children before, this was a sign that the Illinois were terrible victims. The French did not realize, however, that the Kaskaskia village in 1680 was likely full of slaves, almost all of them women. Since the female captives taken by the Iroquois were very likely captives that the Illinois had taken from other peoples, the fact that the men gave up this number of women to the Iroquois might not be a sign of Illinois weakness or timidity. Rather, it is probably better understood as a sign of how many slaves the Illinois had, or how many they could access. The abandonment of these women suggests that they were valued less as kin or as wives and more as commodities. Whether that assessment is accurate or not, there is no question that the 1680 defeat had its roots partly in Illinois activities as slave traders in the borderlands. As one French witness explained, the Iroquois attack was so successful because “more than half” of the Kaskaskia men were away on a slaving mission in the West.39

Thus, much evidence suggests that the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia was less a refugee center or defensive strategy than a center of exploitation—an attempt to take advantage of opportunities. And yet with twenty thousand people at the village complex by 1684, this massive population needed many calories. Importantly, the Illinois supported this great expansion by exploiting bison to the maximum. Hennepin and La Salle noted the huge scale of bison exploitation, but the most important eyewitness was Pierre-Charles de Liette. Recalling a single bison hunt, Liette recounted how the Illinois pursued a “great herd,” killing a “great number of buffalos,” with “an extraordinary number of arrows.” In just a few weeks of work, the Illinois took 1,200 animals.40

It is impossible to overstate the significance of that number. A typical bison produced at least 650 pounds of food. After women—many of them likely enslaved—dressed the animals in the field, the Illinois could theoretically process the bison for 780,000 pounds of meat, or forty pounds for every individual in Kaskaskia at its highest population. Of course, this theoretical scenario masks great complexities in the bison economy, including

---


40 La Salle, Relation of the Discoveries and Voyages of Cavelier De La Salle from 1679 to 1681, 81, 221; Liette, “Memoir concerning the Illinois Country,” 311, 310.
travel (Liette said they ranged as far as seventy miles from home on hunts), the great weight of the animals, challenges of preservation, and the boom-and-bust nature of the mode of production. Because of these complexities, village women, assisted by the influx of slaves, continued to farm along the river bottoms. There is no doubt, however, that bison fundamentally enabled this population center, augmenting agricultural production as a vital secondary food cycle. Reflecting the largesse of the Illinois mode of production, Illinois women even joined men on military expeditions, suggesting that the bison-rich Illinois were wealthy enough to spare surplus farmers for other pursuits. In sum, the Illinois maximized their bison advantage at the village complex to support their massive population.41

If bison were so important to the subsistence of the Illinois, it seems clear that the location of the village was strategic. The French never realized that the village was upriver from a rare salt lick, called Ernat’s marsh today. It is one of only a handful of salt marshes in the region and the farthest to the east in the Illinois Valley. A surprising number of eyewitnesses noted that this area was the edge of the bison range during the contact period. Henri de Tonty passed into the Illinois Valley (near modern Utica) in the 1680s, noting that “here one first finds the wild cattle, called by the Spaniards Sibola.” And Jean St. Cosme, entering the Illinois Valley from the Kankakee in 1698, stated: “On that day we began to see oxen . . . . We afterward saw some nearly every day during our journey as far as the Acansas.” Liette, in the 1690s, noted that at Starved Rock (the site of the village), “you ordinarily begin to see the buffalo.” A little later, Fr. Gabriel Marest, returning to the Illinois Valley from the North, also noted the sudden transition right at the start of the Kankakee River: “At last we perceived our own welcome country; the wild oxen and the herds of deer were roving along the bank of the river.” These Frenchmen were observing an important ecological edge—the more or less precise place where the bison range began. Explorers saw very few, if any, bison east and north of that location, but once they passed into the upper Illinois Valley the animals were suddenly extremely numerous. At that spot the Illinois had settled the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia, combining French support and their unique advantages to build power.42

The Fall of the Grand Village

While the village enabled the Illinois to exploit the power of the ecotone in modes of production and reproduction, the inhabitants quickly ran into trouble during the 1690s.


Bringing thousands of people together, feeding and organizing them, and creating unity were tremendous challenges. The village attempted to exploit specific niches in specific ways, but that attempt soon hit specific limits.

As a social strategy, the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia was premised on a borderlands faith in the possibility of assimilating outsiders and creating unity from diversity. To achieve this, Illinois speakers at the village welcomed outsiders as they had always done—adopting them into patrilineal kinship lines—only now on a much greater scale. As Jacques Gravier knew, the ideal in Illinois society was that fictive kinship and polygamous marriages would allow for complete assimilation and reidentification of newcomers and captives. For instance, one word for relatives in the Illinois language was defined as “relatives who I hardly remember are not my real relatives” (naca8atchi a8emakiki) reflecting the notion that there should be no difference between fictive and biological kin in the village. Liette described how the expansive Illinois kinship system was designed for solidarity and inclusion, noting that “they almost all call each other relatives.” All of the Illinois were supposed to feel connected to powerful men, identifying as “sons and relatives of chiefs.” Adoption was meant to incorporate newcomers and strangers fully as kin.43

Reflecting the importance of assimilation, the Illinois used means other than adoption and marriage to welcome strangers at the village. Most importantly, they used bison hunting to incorporate outsiders, letting the mode of production do some of the social work of assimilation. As they left the villages for the hunt, the Illinois “invite[d] the strangers whom they have among them (a very frequent thing)” to teach them the lifeway. Revealing some of the specifics of this strategy, the Illinois brought Liette on a hunt, encouraging him and condescendingly celebrating when he was able to kill a very small animal. Bison hunting was a communal rite by which the Illinois introduced strangers to their prairie culture, turning outsiders into bison people.44

While the assimilation of outsiders resulted in surprising unity and even brotherly love among the diverse residents of Kaskaskia in the early years, over time it became clear that there were less well-integrated people in this society. As words and phrases in Gravier’s dictionary make clear, not everyone felt assimilated. For instance, one phrase in the dictionary, ninaca8aterima, means “I do not regard him as a relative.” Another Illinois term, ninaca8atchim8i, could express alienation from a family lineage: “I am regarded in my family like a stranger. The others are more beloved.” Gravier’s list of such expressions was extensive: “ninaca8atisi: Here I am like a stranger. I am not the master of anything.” And finally: “niki8si: I am out of my country, of my village. raragi8i niki8si: You do not treat me as a relative.” As this vocabulary list suggests, in the mixed-up, slavery-dominated world of Kaskaskia, many divisions remained. Although adoption and shape-shifting were supposed to turn strangers into relatives, some kinsmen continued to feel like strangers and outsiders. Furthermore, the fictive kin lines created by adoption, and even the real kin lines created by blood, often did not seem to produce strong social unity. As Liette said, “I have got men to agree a hundred times that their fathers, their brothers, and their children were worse than dogs.”45

Even if some brothers felt alienated from their kin lines, the strongest and most important sense of alienation was felt by women. In the Illinois kinship system, polygamous

marriages with multiple enslaved women made sense as a mode of reproduction, but these polygamous relationships had serious consequences for women and did not produce social cohesion. First, according to terms in Gravier’s dictionary, Illinois families contained tension. One wife in a polygamous household was “the best-loved wife” (mikutasata anapemari) and one was “the wife who is the master of all the others” (kitachi8eata). Polygamy produced conflict, such as “she prevents him from going to her rival, to his second wife” (ensam8eata). Many women entered polygamous marriages unwillingly, since brothers at Kaskasia made marriage arrangements for their sisters. Fr. Julien Binneteau put it this way: “According to their customs, [Illinois women] are the slaves of their brothers, who compel them to marry whomsoever they choose, even men already married to another wife.”46

Women were commodified in other ways outside marriage. As Hennepin noted, parents pressured their daughters (possibly slaves) to use their sexuality for material gain. Brothers even used their sisters to cover wagers “after having lost all they had of personal property.” Liette also noted how Illinois women were seduced and abused by powerful medicine men, “who they dare not refuse.”47

In the 1690s Frenchmen witnessed how women in Illinois also suffered violence at the hands of their husbands. This included mutilation, especially the cutting off of noses and ears, inflicted by “jealous” husbands on adulterous women. In the most dramatic account, Liette described the gang rape of a woman who was caught in an extramarital relationship. As one French observer from this period wrote, these patterns of violence made the Illinois distinctive: “Perhaps no nation in the world scorns women as much as these savages usually do.” Liette claimed that one hundred women were scalped in Illinois in the time he lived there.48

These patterns reflect the pervasiveness of slavery in Illinois life, and they probably affected enslaved women primarily. Like in other areas, slave women entered Illinois society with no protective kin ties and were vulnerable to harsh treatment by the men who controlled them. Yet it seems that distinctions between enslaved, adopted, and native-born Illinois women may have eroded in Illinois society. French eyewitnesses never specified that harsh treatments were reserved for slaves but rather described violence and restrictions faced by all women in Illinois. For instance, a Frenchman described the general degradation of Illinois women in polygamous marriages, writing “The husband has full power and authority over his wives, whom he looks upon as his slaves, and with whom he does not eat.” Moreover, specific examples suggest that even high-status women experienced oppression similar to what slaves endured. For instance, when Marie Rouensa, the daughter of a Kaskasia chief, refused the marriage arranged by her father in 1694, she was stripped, beaten, and kicked out of her father’s house. Forcible stripping was an act often associated with slaves, suggesting that the


violence associated with slavery affected native-born women as well as slaves in Illinois culture.\textsuperscript{49}

Why the Illinois took such a distinctive path regarding women, slavery, and sexuality is unclear. Other native cultures placed slaves, including female slaves, in exalted positions during this period, valuing them as diplomats, go-betweens, and \textit{fanemingos} (familial guardians). Moreover, in many matrilineal societies women often controlled the fate of slaves and decided much about their status. In this way, the presence of slaves clearly enhanced the status and power of free-born women, but among the Illinois the situation was different. It seems likely that the large number of slave women in Illinois culture led to a degraded status for women overall—whether slave, adopted, or native-born Illinois—although sources make the reason difficult to understand.\textsuperscript{50}

A possible explanation has to do with the bison economy itself. As bison hunting became more important to the Illinois economy, elevating the importance of male hunting work in Illinois subsistence, women's agricultural work may have lost central importance in certain periods, as it did among plains cultures. Meanwhile, and relatedly, if it is true that much low-status bison processing work was given to female slaves, as sources suggest, this may have lowered the status of female labor in the Illinois culture generally. The bison economy, slavery, and polygamy together may have contributed to a kind of cultural anomic among Illinois women, as a long-established and cooperative division of labor began to stress and even disintegrate.\textsuperscript{51}

Women did resist their treatment in the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia. Famously, many women in Illinois became enthusiastic converts to Christianity in the 1690s, and it seems clear that their attraction to the priests was motivated in large part by their desire to escape polygamous and even abusive marriages. Before long, many Illinois women were using Christianity to battle their male relatives and the gender order in Illinois. They were especially attracted to the parts of Christianity that empowered women to insist on monogamy, endorsed their choices to remain celibate, or helped them leave Illinois society altogether through marriages to Frenchmen. Over time, tensions between men and women over Christianity produced even larger divisions in society, particularly between the \textit{familles} of the Kaskaskia and the Peoria, which began coming apart dramatically in the 1690s. As women rejected polygamy in large numbers, the Illinois' slave-based mode of reproduction proved extremely unstable.\textsuperscript{52}

Meanwhile, if the mode of reproduction at Kaskaskia produced major tension, the mode of production also had problems. La Salle noted a waning bison population


around the village in 1680, and although the animals quickly returned, it is hard to believe that the Illinoi did not deplete their main resource in certain years. Perhaps the bison were like various species of birds, which did decline in number in the 1690s. Birds that had once inhabited the Illinois Valley, according to Liette, had “gone farther off.” Of course, the inhabitants of the village relied on the animals remaining in the region to take advantage of the stored energy of the grasslands, which is what made it possible for the Illinois to remain close to their Algonquian and French trade partners. The animals may not have remained, or at least not in numbers sufficient to sustain the massive population center. There is simply not enough evidence to say whether bison was a limit.53

Trees were a clear ecological limit. The Illinois had invaded a landscape that gave them an advantage relative to their woodland neighbors—bison—but that same landscape contained the liability of thin forest cover, particularly in the Illinois Valley. The area around the village was soon completely denuded. In the early 1690s some of the Illinois left the village, according to Liette, “because their firewood was so remote.” They had to move down to a new settlement near present-day Peoria, where the valley was more forested. This new village, known as Pimitéoui, was not just forested but also known for its abundance of bison, or “fat beasts.” The migration suggests that there were basic ecological limits to the power of a place such as Kaskaskia.54

A final ecological limit was not particular to the Illinois environment but was common to any urban population of this period—disease. Gravier’s 1694 report to his Jesuit superiors in Quebec and Rome makes clear that the quasiurban population center at Pimitéoui had been devastated by an epidemic, probably one of many. Such an epidemic would, of course, have taken fewer victims in the smaller Illinois villages prior to the 1670s. In the large settlement, however, epidemics killed hundreds at a time and further complicated subsistence and unity, as divisions among various families were touched off by incidents of disease. For instance, when some of the residents of the village complex responded to disease by praying to Jesus, others, particularly the Peoria, claimed that Christianity was causing the epidemics in the first place.55

Thus, ecological limits added to social problems. Ultimately, the grand village complex and surrounding settlements broke apart. Of course, in 1701 the “great peace” and the end of the Beaver Wars would reduce the demand for slaves in the Algonquian world anyway. By that time, however, the Kaskasia—the largest contingent of Illinois speakers—had left the formerly united village and moved south for new opportunities to trade slaves and bison skins with partners in Louisiana and Charleston, while the Peoria stayed at Pimitéoui. As Gravier put it, the Illinois “flock [was] divided.” And the grand village was no more.56

Conclusion

The quick demise of the village complex should not blind us to its importance as a center of native power and agency. Available evidence suggests that the Illinois moved to the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia not as suffering refugees but as powerful opportunists. Eschewing safer options, they used their bison resource to support one of the largest population centers in North America. From this spot they could become the region’s most formidable traders of slaves from the western plains to the Algonquian world of the Great Lakes. While we have no direct window onto their logic, evidence drawn from multiple sources indicates that the move to the village was not just a reaction to external imperatives but was a strategy to maximize the unique advantages of their region and to leverage their tentative alliance with the French. Exploiting a literal and metaphorical edge effect of the prairie, the village was the climax of the Illinoi’s long history of opportunism in the 1600s—a true center of power in postcontact but precolonial North America.

A generation of borderlands historians has done much to recenter North American history around places and people often ignored by teleological, state-centered, national, and frontier narratives. And while this history of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia provides a new case study in the larger borderlands project, it also suggests we should reexamine our narrative frameworks as we incorporate this new story. Historians of borderlands usually conceptualize their subjects as the locations and people “at the edges of empires, nations, and world systems.” The drama of many borderlands histories lies in the agency of local people who subverted the hegemonic ambitions of competing states, creating fugitive geographic and social configurations and exercising unexpected power and autonomy at the edge. Since the 1991 publication of The Middle Ground historians have focused on individuals or communities that played imperial powers against each other to realize opportunities and advantages, purposefully entangling themselves and moving into the heart of contested zones to build their power. Such histories have recentered North American history toward the transnational edges of empire, placing “new people and places at the center, on their own terms.”

Even so, historians seeking to recenter North American history should also be reminded that states, nations, and world systems were not the only entities that created zones of division full of opportunity and unexpected power. In the Illinois Valley, ecological realities and sociocultural divisions created a different kind of borderland, but one no less potent. Like a middle ground between competing empires, the transition linking the Midwest’s ecological and cultural zones allowed the Illinois to take advantage of diverse biomes and social worlds, to do the ecological equivalent of playing the one against the other. States and empires had little to do with this—instead, the tension in the “patchy” prairie and woodlands divide, as well as the Algonquian/Siouan–Caddoan division, created the opportunity and the advantages of this borderland. And while even French eyewitnesses never understood the true motivations, the evidence suggests that the village complex was located purposefully to maximize the increased opportunities of this heterogeneous, edgy landscape.

---


Ecotones such as the prairie-woodlands transition provide a new way to recenter North American history, adding a fresh dimension to borderlands conversations. As a zone of opportunity, oppression, and exploitation at the ecological edge, the Illinois Valley was indeed a center of power in North America in the seventeenth century, and it was not alone. So far, archaeologists and other social scientists have explored the ecotone theme more than have historians, but the concept seems to be a fruitful way of reconsidering the significance of many places and people left out of traditional state-centered histories. More research should identify other places where ecological and social divisions at different scales created zones of power, marginalization, and entanglement. This research may lead to a new appreciation for places that have been misunderstood or neglected in previous histories—such as the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia, one of North America’s largest population centers, built on the power of bison and slaves in the ecotone.59