



Figure 14.1. Broken pots on a burned house floor at the Crable site in the central Illinois River valley.

Incinerated Villages in the North

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It is summer in the central Illinois River valley in the year 1238 CE. A small, bluff-top village is under attack by an overwhelming force gathered from allied enemy villages. Archers man the palisade wall, and men, women, and children scramble in all directions as the attackers' first flaming arrows hit the thatched roofs of the villagers' homes.

Life in this valley during the 1200s meant living with the threat of assault always just over the horizon. The archaeological discovery of burned villages all over the region tells us that organized attacks were real concerns. At the peak of hostilities, a village might have suffered devastating assaults several times in a generation. Many of the valley's inhabitants must have lost friends or family members to the violence. The looming threat of attack appears to have affected everything from chiefly leaders' political relationships with Cahokians to the way commoners fished, farmed, and hunted.

The central Illinois River valley is a 130-mile segment of the Illinois River running from the modern town of Meredosia, in Morgan County, Illinois, northeastward to Hennepin, in Putnam County. Mississippianized people lived in the valley from around 1100 CE until about 1450, when the whole region was abandoned. During the decades of violence that started around 1200, Mississippians in this area built most of their villages on defensible bluff crests on the western side of the valley. There, the bluffs usually rise well over a hundred feet

above the valley floor and in places are cut into sharp ridges by the valleys of small streams draining the adjacent country.

From their bluff-top redoubts, villagers would have been able to keep watch over great swathes of the valley floor, hindering their enemies' attempts to launch surprise offensives. And any assault force approaching a fortified town from the valley below would have faced a precarious charge up a steep incline while dodging volleys of arrows fired by archers positioned strategically along wooden palisade walls. Yet despite the high risks associated with attack, many offensives succeeded. At least five and perhaps as many as ten fortified Mississippian settlements in the central Illinois River valley ended in flames, apparently having been set ablaze during large-scale, direct assaults or after sudden, strategic abandonments.

For archaeologists, these catastrophic burnings created a rare "Pompeii-like" snapshot of ancient life in the region, a well-preserved picture of settlements where fleeing residents left whole pots, stone tools, and ritual objects in place on dwelling floors. Much about the hostilities that produced such a record of devastation remains a mystery. The story of what we do know begins just before violence escalated in the region.

In the centuries before Cahokia and the appearance of the first Mississippians in the central Illinois River valley, at least two Late Woodland groups



Figure 14.2. Selected Mississippian archaeological sites in the central Illinois River valley.

lived there, making different styles of pottery and erecting their villages in different kinds of places. Increasingly at the time, groups throughout the American midcontinent were becoming more permanently settled, staking claims to their own pieces of the landscape and investing more heavily in growing seed crops. Violence must have erupted among them occasionally, for archaeologists sometimes find graves holding group burials and skeletons with

arrow or spear points embedded in the bones. But no valley residents of this era fortified their settlements, so hostilities must have been small-scale and relatively rare.

In the mid-1000s, the founding and expansion of Cahokia more than a hundred river miles to the south sent political and religious shock waves through tribal societies in the Midwest, South, and Great Plains. People of the central Illinois River



Figure 14.3. Burned cross-shaped temple at the Eveland site.

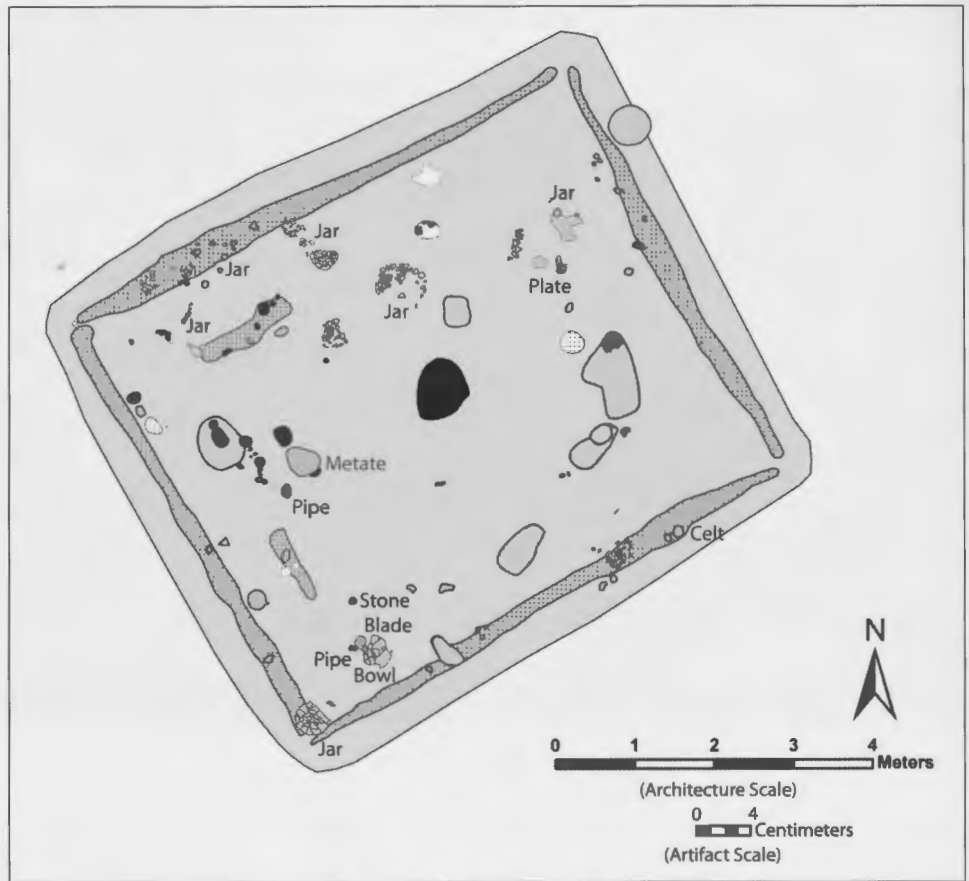
valley almost immediately began emulating Cahokian ways of making and decorating pots and building houses.

A second pulse of Cahokian influence and emulation began around 1100, corresponding to the beginning of Cahokia's "classic" period. Mississippianized residents of the central Illinois Valley now erected Cahokia-style temples in at least two small ceremonial sites. The better understood of these is Eveland, where excavators uncovered seven Mississippian structures. Four of the structures were Cahokia-style temples—a cross-shaped building built over an earlier rectangular one, a large T-shaped building, and a circular sweat lodge. The Eveland site stood adjacent to the other ceremonial site, Dickson Mounds mortuary complex, where 250 people were interred during the early 1100s. Among the burials were four decapitated adult men, buried together with pottery vessels positioned in place of their heads. Their ritual execution and burial were nearly identical to an earlier sacrificial event at Cahokia, in which four adult men whose heads and hands had been severed were collectively buried under the ridge-top Mound 72.

The Cahokia-style human sacrifice and the well-developed temple and mortuary complex at Eveland and Dickson Mounds imply that Cahokian religion played an important part in the Mississippianization of the central Illinois River valley in the early 1100s. People of the valley also emulated Cahokian material culture more pervasively at this time. Although traces of Woodland-style living persisted, visitors to any settlement in the central valley would have met people living in Cahokia-style wall-trench houses, cooking and storing food in Cahokia-style pots, and hunting with Cahokia-style arrowheads. Perhaps by adopting a relatively uniform array of Cahokian material forms, groups in the region downplayed their long-standing ethnic divisions.

In any event, this period of Cahokian influence and emulation lasted no more than fifty years before people dramatically scaled back their connections to Cahokia or even severed them entirely. Marking this transition was the planned and complete abandonment of the Eveland site: all ritual items were removed from its temples, and its buildings were burned. The deliberate termination of Eveland corresponded

Figure 14.4. Artifacts left on a burned house floor at the Orendorf site, including pottery vessels used for cooking, storage, and serving; a large sandstone *metate*, or corn-grinding stone; and two stone tobacco pipes.



roughly to a series of burning events at Cahokia-affiliated Mississippian sites in the lower Illinois River valley and in Cahokia's East St. Louis precinct. Political turmoil was roiling the greater Cahokia area and quickly spilled over into neighboring regions. The result was village-against-village violence.

Following the ritual burning of Eveland in the mid-1100s, people in the central valley began for the first time to establish compact villages set on defensible bluff edges and protected by wooden palisades. By 1200, much of the regional populace had settled into and around such villages. The best understood of them is the Orendorf site. From this bluff-top perch, residents of five sequentially occupied villages, spanning the final century of the Woodland era through the Mississippian period, looked down over the western valley floor.

Orendorf's last manifestation consisted of a twelve-acre palisaded settlement with an estimated four hundred to five hundred inhabitants. This village underwent two episodes of expansion; each time, the palisade wall was rebuilt. Designed for military purposes, the wall featured bastions regularly



Figure 14.5. Aerial view of Star Bridges, a burned Mississippian village in the central Illinois River valley dating to the 1200s. The striations visible in this photo and figure 14.6 are plow furrows.

spaced at intervals corresponding to the effective range of a bow and arrow.

Finally, around 1250, this final Orendorf village burned to the ground. Residents left rapidly and without planning, abandoning whole pots, valuable

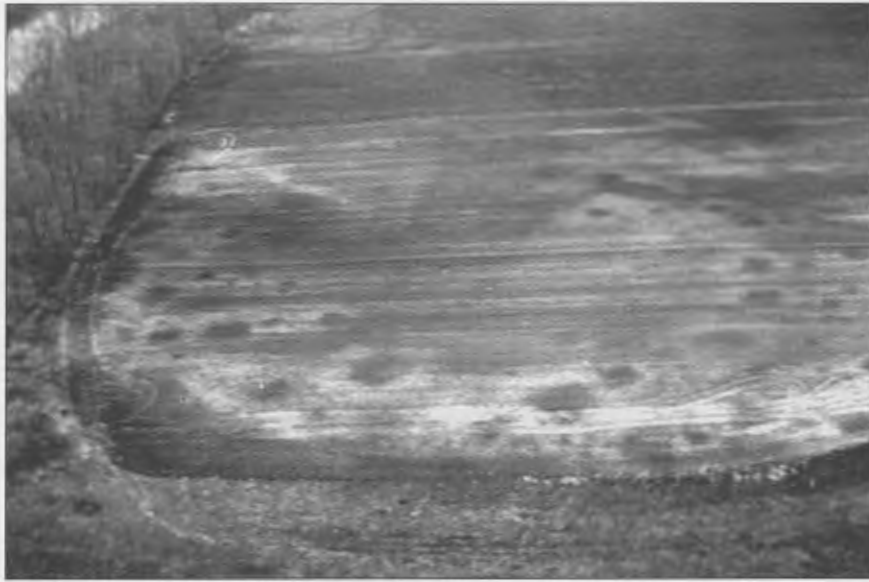


Figure 14.6. Aerial view of Buckeye Bend, a burned Mississippian village in the central Illinois River valley dating to the 1200s.

tools, and ritual paraphernalia intact where they sat on house floors. They even left behind the body of a recently deceased man, unburied in a burned house. And Orendorf was not alone; widespread burning razed other villages in the central valley in the late 1200s. Aerial photographs of two such sites—Buckeye Bend and Star Bridges—reveal rows of densely packed, burned houses arranged around rectangular central plazas. The thoroughness of the burning and the abandonment of intact domestic possessions declare the most likely cause to have been warfare.

Certainly, the palisades surrounding villages in the 1200s were designed to keep unwanted persons out. Ironically, the risk of attack appears also to have kept people inside the walls. Life in the fortified villages was crowded. People who had once moved easily about the countryside, traveling to distant fields and hunting grounds, now found their movement constrained, and the transformation proved costly. For example, recent research on skeletal remains from the central valley shows that the move into fortified villages damaged women's health and lowered their life expectancy. During pregnancy and shortly afterward, women are especially susceptible to harmful viruses and bacteria, which would have flourished and been easily transmitted from person to person in densely packed villages.

Chronic warfare also obstructed the daily food quest. Community members had to reorganize their diet in order to minimize the risk of attack while fishing, farming, and hunting. Archaeological studies of Mississippian foodways are revealing that community members in the central Illinois Valley coped by concentrating on growing maize at the expense of pursuits such as gathering wild plants and fishing, which required frequent or lengthy trips away from home. The result of these violence-induced changes was a narrower, less nutritious diet that was more vulnerable to shortfalls.

Of course the most obvious cost of living with chronic warfare—whether one was victim or attacker—was injury or death. Orendorf saw an adult trauma rate higher than that known for any other Mississippian territory in eastern North America. Violence-related deaths there included more than fifteen people buried in a mass grave and numerous others with embedded arrow points, scalping cuts, and blunt force trauma to the skull. Males and females above the age of twelve appear to have been targeted equally.

Into this hornet's nest of fortified, warring settlements came a cultural group known archaeologically as the Oneota people, relocating from somewhere in the northern Midwest around 1300. The precise genetic or blood relationships between

the Oneota immigrants and local Mississippians are unclear. But coinciding with the Oneotas' arrival, some Mississippian villagers shifted their settlements ten to twenty miles southward, abandoning the area around the confluence of the Spoon River and the Illinois River. Their relocation intimates antagonism between the two groups, yet archaeologists have uncovered a mixture of Oneota and Mississippian ceramic vessels in household refuse at Oneota and Mississippian sites dating to the 1300s, which might hint at alliances. Alternatively, the intermixture of pottery might mean that captive women and children were held in rival villages. In this scenario, captives taken in raids continued to make cooking and serving containers using their own stylistic conventions, even while living among the opposing group.

Adopting captives to replace deceased family members was a common practice among American Indians in parts of the war-torn Midwest and South from the 1500s through the 1800s. Sometimes these captives had low status or lived socially marginalized lives. Evidence tentatively suggesting captive-taking in the central Illinois River valley comes from the Crable site. There, people normally laid their dead to rest with great care in spacious cemeteries, sometimes placing elaborate artifacts with them. In the residential portion of the site, however, excavators uncovered the skeleton of a woman in her early twenties who, in the early 1400s, had been haphazardly dumped into an abandoned storage pit and covered with household trash. The callous manner in which this young woman's body was treated tells us that she was of exceedingly low social status in the Crable community, perhaps because of her identity as a captive.

Like captive-taking, with its scant evidence, much else that we would like to know about late Mississippian life in the central Illinois Valley remains sketchy. We cannot yet answer fundamental

questions such as who, exactly, allied with whom and fought with whom—and why they fought in the first place. What can be said with certainty is that these people, at the very end of the Medieval Warm Period, lived with and were fundamentally changed by war.

During the 1400s and into the 1500s, a string of decade-long droughts in the central valley ravaged villagers' maize harvests. Food shortages must have been severe for the inhabitants of fortified villages, who had to farm within running distance of their palisade walls. Skeletal evidence shows unambiguously that the risk of venturing away from home surged after 1300. Excavations in fortified villages have revealed the remains of many bodies that, after lying exposed to the elements for some time, were finally found and brought home for burial.

When a particularly catastrophic drought struck around 1450, family after family began streaming out of the central valley. Indeed, the severity of this drought may also have been a reason for the nearly contemporaneous abandonment of parts of the greater Cahokia region and of the area around the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to the south. The Mississippian and Oneota inhabitants of the central Illinois River valley left, their descendants becoming members of Indian tribes such as the Omaha, Osage, and Iowa. Today, their homelands lie to the south and west of Illinois.

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