

Rethinking the Dawn of History: The Schedule, Signature, and Agency of European Goods in Protohistoric Illinois

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Abstract

Interpretations of the archaeological record of the seventeenth century Illinois Country have been temporally compressed, and the richly stratified archival, ethnographic, and material records from that era have not been applied to the archaeological information at hand. A muddled view of the remarkable changes that occurred within the cultural landscape of Illinois is the result. European goods first appear in the region between 1580 and 1630 and the pottery of the Illinois Indians—the Danner series—is present in each early Illinois sample that includes these imports. A reexamination of the Zimmerman, Palos, and Oak Forest sites suggests that temporal changes in trade good assemblages can be better understood in the context of historically documented trade schedules. Further, it is argued that the Illinois Indians actively positioned themselves in the political and economic landscape of the fur trade many decades prior to the arrival of the French in the Illinois Country, serving as the principal agents of the great changes that are associated with protohistory in Illinois.

The archaeological literature of Illinois has tended to either compress or ignore the concept of a protohistory in the region, treating this period of interaction and transition as a murky prelude to the actual physical presence of the French. In the 1960s and 1970s, artifacts of European manufacture were thought to postdate the arrival of the French in the region. The acceptance of down-the-line trade has pushed back the potential age of such artifacts, but these goods have still tended to be regarded as the accoutrements of European agents as they acted (however indirectly) upon passive, isolated aboriginal inhabitants of the region. Far less attention has been paid to the